



LIME KILN CHRONICLES

Newsletter of the Friends of the Cowell Lime Works Historic District
University of California, Santa Cruz

The Curious Case of A. S. T. Johnson

By Frank Perry

Close friends called him Ted, but Albanus Sydney Theodore Johnson was better known by his initials: A. S. T. From 1910 to 1924, A. S. T. Johnson was the manager of Cowell's operations in Santa Cruz—or was he? His job description would be called into question in later years, for Johnson had a secret, one that would eventually lead to his abrupt departure from Santa Cruz County.

A. S. T. Johnson was born in Washington D.C. in 1877. He attended D.C. schools and eventually landed a job as an attorney and notary public. He left Washington around 1906, and in about 1910 landed the job in Santa Cruz with the Henry Cowell Lime and Cement Company.

Some of the story of Johnson comes from the Adalbert Wolff oral history done by UCSC's Regional History Project in 1972. When Wolff first arrived in Santa Cruz in 1915 to work for Cowell, he was met by Johnson at the railroad station. "Johnson was a rather tall man and sort of easy-going," said Wolff. "He took my grip and so on and was very nice, and I thought it was quite pleasant." After Wolff settled in, however, he had little to do with Johnson, working under Frank George instead. Wolff had "some sort of feeling" about Johnson, but said he was nice enough in the beginning.

In another oral history, Frank Blaisedale, who played under Johnson on the Cowell baseball team, painted a different picture of the man. He described Johnson as "hot-headed" and "quick to get riled up." Of course, that was under the influence of baseball.

Partly because of Johnson's position in one of Santa Cruz's most important industries, he and his wife, Harriet, quickly moved into Santa Cruz's higher social circles. He became a member of the Knights of Pythias (a very popular lodge back then) and later the Elks Club, Rotary Club, and International Order of Odd Fellows. Through

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Photo by Mark Holsapple

Students Dig Into History

A 1902 nickel, a couple bottle base fragments, the top of a lamp chimney, buttons, jeans rivets, ball clay pipe fragments, a piece of a cast iron stove, beef and chicken bones, and boot fragments—while these relics might not generate the same excitement as those of the ancient Incas, Greeks, or Egyptians, they provided valuable experience to students in UCSC's field archaeology course. This past spring, under the expert tutelage of local archaeologist Pat Paramoure and TA David Ingleman, the students conducted excavations at the site of one of the workers' cabins in the Cowell Lime Works Historic District.

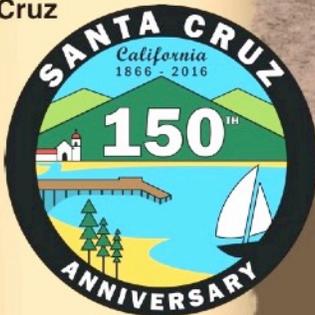
The students excavated, screened, and recovered artifacts from over 200 square feet of soil. In the lab, the artifacts were cleaned, sorted, and bagged in preparation for cataloging and more detailed study. Little by little, such excavations add to the growing body of knowledge about the people and operations at the lime works.

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The Carriage House weathervane, before (left) and after repairs.



Friends Help Save Historic Weathervane

It is not known for how many years the copper horse galloped across the sky above the carriage house, but it was a long time.

Several years ago, the weathervane toppled in a storm, landing in a crumpled heap on the ground. Earlier this year Ron Dillehay of the UCSC Physical Plant decided something needed to be done. "I have many memories of seeing the wind vane up on the Carriage House," he said, "especially in the winter when we would get a strong rain storm from the south (Monterey) direction. When the horse would look at Monterey, you knew we were in for a bad storm. When it fell from the roof, I missed it being there to let me know when the southerly's were coming. I am a sailor too, so I am keen on the wind always."

The weathervane was handmade out of pounded copper, with a zinc head to weight it. "This particular horse was probably made by the Fiske Co. circa 1880s," according to Ken Manko of Manko Antiques and American Folk Art in Maine, and an authority on weathervanes. "The Cushing Co. circa 1880s, was also known to use zinc heads." Both were well-known weathervane makers in the late 1800s. J. W. Fiske was in New York, while L. W. Cushing was in Waltham, Massachusetts. One can't help but wonder if the latter might be the more likely maker. Henry Cowell was from Wrentham, Massachusetts, which is just 20 miles south of Waltham.

In Memory of Edith Bell

It is with sadness that we report the passing of Edith Bell. We interviewed Edith and wrote about her family history in the last issue of the *Lime Kiln Chronicles*. She enjoyed the article, and we were able to provide her with some additional background research. We send our sincere condolences to her family.

As luck would have it, Ron lives in Bonny Doon, not far from West Coast Weathervanes, which manufactures new weathervanes out of copper. "I contacted LizAnne and Ken there about repairing it. They said bring it by and we will take a look. They got all excited at seeing it and took it to their shop foreman to see if repairs were possible."

It was in bad shape. The body was cracking, the legs splitting, and the zinc head partly detached. It was unclear the extent to which it could be forced back into its original shape without breaking. After receiving an estimate of the costs, the Friends agreed to fund the project. As it turned out, the cost was more than estimated, but West Coast Weathervanes generously covered the extra expense. The proprietors, Ken and LizAnne Jensen, attended UCSC and were later employed by the campus.

The weathervane remains too fragile to face the wind, but will be put in a glass case and mounted on a wall in a prominent location. "Cherish it," says Ken Manko, "it's a true piece of American history."

The *Lime Kiln Chronicles* is published twice each year (Spring and Fall) by the Friends of the Cowell Lime Works Historic District



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these lodges, he regularly rubbed shoulders with the town's leading businessmen, civic leaders, doctors, and lawyers.

Only a year after Johnson's arrival, Ernest Cowell died suddenly, leaving management of the company to his younger brother, Samuel Henry "Harry" Cowell. At that time, the Henry Cowell Lime and Cement Company had property in many parts of northern and central California, including a cement plant in Contra Costa County in addition to three lime-making facilities in Santa Cruz County. Over the succeeding years, Johnson helped promote the company name and kept watch over the company's interests in Santa Cruz.

Johnson loved hunting and baseball—especially baseball. When the new Santa Cruz City League was started in the spring of 1912, Johnson became manager of the Henry Cowell "Lime Burners." There were only four teams in the league, the others being the Santa Cruz Portland Cement Company "Cementers" or "Cement Eaters," the Southern Pacific "Railroaders" or "Bumpers," and the Holy Cross team, which seems not to have had a nickname. Few if any members of the Lime Burners actually worked for Cowell, other than the team manager, but Harry Cowell sponsored the team.

The semi-professional City League was only around for a few years, and the Lime Burners for just two—the 1912 and 1913 seasons. They got good coverage in the newspapers, and the games usually drew large crowds.



Special Collections, University Library, UCSC

The Henry Cowell "Lime Burners" in 1913. Back row (l to r): Harvey Bradley, Victor Trotts, Herb Manners, A. S. T. Johnson (manager), Earl Jones, Fred Quirstorf, and Earl Gouin; front row: Amos Feeley, Manuel Silva, Edwin Wilson, and Frank Tabacchi. The makeup of the team varied from game to game as did the positions of the players.



Elks Club program, 1921

A. S. T. Johnson in about 1921.

Although the four teams mostly played each other, occasionally they played teams from other cities, such as Watsonville and San Jose. In October of 1912, though the season was over and the Lime Burners had taken second place behind the Cementers, Johnson decided to have his team challenge the J. U. Winnigers of San Jose. The J. U. Winnigers had one of the best semi-pro teams in Northern California, and most experts thought the Lime Burners didn't have a chance. The J. U. Winnigers got off to a good start and by scoring a run in the first inning, but the Lime Burners scored two runs later in the game and won 2 to 1.

After the win, a gloating Johnson treated the players and their wives to a grand dinner at San Jose's St. James Hotel. Frank Blaisdale was one of the team members. "Oh, what a spread he gave us," he recalled. "It was a grand meal with sparkling burgundy and everything with it. . . . Some of Cowell's money I guess."

Harry Cowell had been quite athletic in his younger years and apparently enjoyed the national pastime. In July of 1912, Mr. Cowell organized a game on the Cowell Ranch between the Lime Burners and his employees from San Francisco. The Santa Cruzans won, 9 to 6. After the game, Cowell hosted a barbecue in the abandoned quarry behind the lime kilns at Pogonip. The meal was



On Sunday, July 21, 1912, Harry Cowell hosted a baseball game on his Santa Cruz ranch between the “Lime Burners” and his company employees from San Francisco. A great feast was held afterwards in the old quarry behind the lime kilns at Pogonip (just east of today’s Merrill College). A. S. T. Johnson is standing in the back, second from right (with a white shirt). Harry Cowell is seated at the left table, right side, 6th from the front (with black hat).

described as “the finest thing of its kind ever held at this end of the county.”

Johnson’s involvement in civic affairs continued to grow, from judging pie eating contests on the 4th of July to helping organize a summer pageant on the San Lorenzo River.

Johnson also concerned himself with some more serious matters. In 1914 he spoke before the Board of Supervisors in opposition to a proposed county road that would have taken away some of Cowell’s land without monetary compensation. Johnson was a persuasive speaker, and the road was never built. He also served on the welcoming committee for the United States Board of River and Harbor Engineers, which came to view progress on the new Municipal Wharf and determine if the area merited other improvements. Santa Cruzans hoped that the government would give Santa Cruz a better harbor by funding a breakwater out into the bay from Lighthouse Point. Of course, massive amounts of rock would be needed for such a project, something Cowell had plenty of.

Only a few days after helping host the engineers, Johnson was elected president of the Santa Cruz Chamber of Commerce. As such, it was his duty to promote local businesses and encourage activities that would boost the region’s economy. He helped attract conventions to the area, promoted products manufactured here, and encouraged film companies to shoot movies in Santa Cruz.

His tenure with the Chamber was not without controversy. The Santa Cruz Portland Cement Company accused him of improperly promoting Cowell cement (Mt. Diablo brand) over their product. An investigation by others on the Chamber board, however, fully exonerated him. Johnson subsequently retired from the Chamber board of directors, but later returned as treasurer.

Often, Johnson simply wanted to do good things for the community. During the 1915 Panama Pacific Exposition in San Francisco, he helped arrange a trip to the fair by Felton area orphans. Following America’s

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entrance into World War I, Johnson organized a baseball game to raise money to supply "bats, balls, and tobacco" to the Santa Cruz "boys" stationed at Camp Lewis, Washington. In 1918 he organized a baseball game to raise money for the Red Cross. He served on the city Parks Commission and arranged for the Cowell company to donate a town Christmas tree for 1921.

Frank George, the other Cowell Ranch "manager," lived with his wife, Evelyn, in the modest ranch house near the lime kilns (today's Cardiff House at UCSC). In contrast, A. S. T. and Harriet Johnson lived in a grand home on High Street that had been acquired a few years earlier by Harry Cowell. The story goes that Cowell had planned to marry and bought the house for his future bride. The wedding was called off and Cowell never lived in it. The Johnsons enjoyed entertaining there, and the society pages described the house as "beautiful" and with "spacious drawing rooms."

Suddenly, in the Spring of 1924, the Johnsons left Santa Cruz. Adalbert Wolff shared what he knew of the story. "Mr. Cowell one day found out that Johnson had been defrauding him," he explained. "George Cardiff said when Cowell found out about it, he came down here and he told Johnson, 'I say, now, I'll tell you what you do. You take my car, you can have it, and go way back East, go as far as you can, and I never want to see you again.'" Wolff emphasized that he heard the story secondhand from Cardiff. "But that rings true, because Cowell was a man of few words, and what he said, he meant, so that could easily have been."

Johnson's name, mentioned several times per month in Santa Cruz papers, suddenly disappeared in April of 1924. At the end of August, details of the story began to filter into the press. The Henry Cowell Lime and Cement Company filed a lawsuit against three Santa Cruz banks to recover money they had paid to A. S. T. Johnson during the year 1923. Johnson, the suit alleged, had cashed checks made out to the Cowell company totaling \$3,338.22 (the equivalent of about \$45,000 today). He endorsed them "Henry Cowell Lime & Cement Co., by A. S. T. Johnson, Mgr." According to the plaintiff, these monies were "kept by Johnson for his own use and benefit" without the knowledge or consent of the company.

Cowell's attorney filed the complaint against the First National Bank, the Farmers and Merchants National Bank, and the Santa Cruz County National Bank. In January, 1925, the suit against the First National Bank was dropped. In late March, the suits against the other two banks were consolidated for the purpose of the trial.



Santa Cruz County National Bank, later known as the County Bank, was located on the corner of Pacific Avenue and Cooper Street. The outer walls of the building were saved after the 1989 earthquake and incorporated into the present building, now home to Pacific Wave.

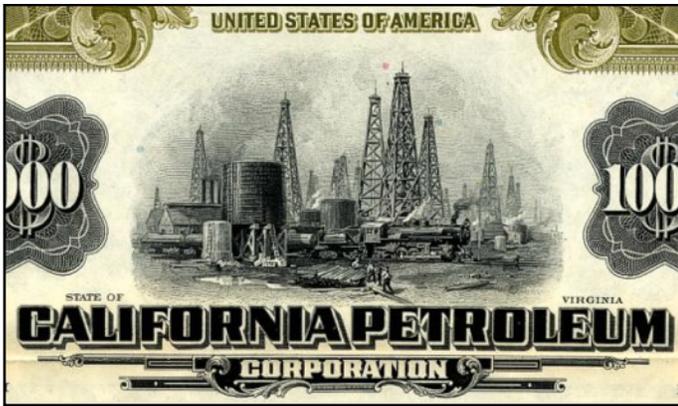
Harry Cowell, in his testimony, explained that he was the only manager of the company interests in Santa Cruz. Johnson was employed solely as a timekeeper, bookkeeper, and collector of accounts, and was not authorized to endorse checks for cash.

William H. George of San Francisco, company secretary, stated that Johnson was subject to orders and directions from the San Francisco headquarters. George explained that he personally supervised the issuance of pay checks for Santa Cruz labor claims and railroad bills for Cowell shipments from Santa Cruz.

Attorneys for the banks, however, brought in a number of local business people to testify that Johnson was far more than a bookkeeper. Surveyor Lloyd Bowman related details of construction work for the lime kilns at Rincon, done by order of Johnson. Other businessmen who had had extensive dealings with the company also stated that these were almost always through Johnson rather than through Harry Cowell. City directories were entered as evidence, each listing A. S. T. Johnson as "manager" for the Cowell Lime and Cement Company. The co-owner of the *Evening News* brought in copies of the paper from years past that further referenced Johnson as "manager." The County Assessor stated that it was with Johnson whom he had discussed tax-assessment matters for the Cowell lands.

The nine-member jury, selected from throughout the county, sided with the banks, and the company lost the case. Cowell sought to have the decision reversed by an Appellate Court, but it upheld the lower court's decision.

As it turned out, Johnson did not head east as far as he could go, but instead headed south to the Los Angeles



Part of a stock certificate for the California Petroleum Corporation, which employed Johnson as a clerk after he left Santa Cruz. In 1928 the company was purchased by what would later become Texaco.

area. There he took a job as an office manager and later chief clerk with the California Petroleum Corporation. This was still the heyday of the California Oil Boom. While it is unlikely Johnson ever crossed paths with Cowell again, he and Harriet occasionally returned to the Santa Cruz area for visits with friends and relatives of Harriet. A.S.T. and Harriet had no children, and Harriet died in 1938. Johnson remarried and died in Long Beach in 1947 at age 79.

That should have been the end of the story, but it turns out that Johnson had another secret, one that was most assuredly unknown to Santa Cruzans a century ago. Back in 1914, while he was helping organize the river pageant and fighting to keep Cowell's land from being seized for a road, Johnson's other wife, yes that's right, his OTHER wife, was hiring an attorney in Washington D.C. to have him declared dead.

It seems that in about 1900 Johnson had married Edith Yadis, also a native of the nation's capital. They had two sons. Johnson made considerable money as a land office attorney, but then ran into financial trouble. He left Washington and headed west. The last time his wife, Edith, heard from him was in 1906, shortly before the great earthquake. He had supposedly taken a job with the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Eventually, rumor filtered back to Washington that he had died in a mine collapse in either Arizona or Nevada.

According to Edith's attorney, every effort was made by Johnson's family to determine his whereabouts, if living, but without success. It seems odd today that he could not be located. He certainly was not keeping a low profile in Santa Cruz. But this was in the days before driver's licenses, social security numbers, and, of course, the internet. It is also possible that Edith, having not heard

from him in seven years, was hoping to formally sever the relationship and start over. Edith filed Johnson's handwritten will in probate court, and the *Washington Post*, May 13, 1914, duly reported the curious case of A. S. T. Johnson.

Student Dig (continued from page 1)

Archaeology is more than just digging up stuff. It is really just one of many tools for investigating the past. Everything that is collected needs to be placed in its historic context so that it can be better understood. The students also read about the history of the Cowell Lime Works and the Santa Cruz lime industry in general so as to better understand this context.

The students got to further their own interests by researching and reporting on particular aspects of the history. They gained valuable experience writing technical reports in the style of a typical cultural resources management (CRM) report.

Student Benjamin Akey found that the class provided plenty of valuable lessons: "This experience allowed me to hone and expand skills necessary for employment and success in the field of archaeology, under the supervision of experienced, helpful, and friendly mentors . . . There's no better way to get to know someone than when breaking a sweat digging holes together."

"While I had been set on pursuing archaeology before this quarter, watching a group of students, mostly fresh to fieldwork, discover their own interest in the discipline was particularly rewarding," he said. "There are not many classes or opportunities that would make me, or many other college students, give up Friday nights and Saturdays for a whole quarter, but I have no doubt that this experience was well worth every day and I will look back on it as one of my favorite classes at UC Santa Cruz."

This badly corroded nickel was unearthed during the excavations and clearly shows the year 1902. This design was minted between 1883 and 1912 before the famous buffalo nickel was introduced in 1913.



Photo by Mark Holsapple



Originally there were five workers' cabins on the east hillside across from the Cook House. Photographer Vester Dick took this photo in May, 1958, a few years before the University acquired the land. Today, only the two cabins nearest the camera remain. (Courtesy of Special Collections, University Library, UCSC)

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