

Fading History: Forgotten town of Drawbridge is slowly sinking into the South Bay marsh

by Shannon Barry, Milpitas Post The Milpitas Post

Posted:

MercuryNews.com

Those wishing to visit remnants of the past converging in the present need not look far for relics of a once-thriving forgotten town.

My journey begins at the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge Environmental Education Center, located more than five miles west of Milpitas in Alviso.

The center is part of the first urban National Wildlife Refuge established in the United States, which is dedicated to preserving and enhancing wildlife habitat, protecting migratory birds and threatened and endangered species, and providing opportunities for wildlife-oriented recreation and nature study for the surrounding communities.

Volunteers and staff at the center offer a variety of weekend programs at no charge, which is where I meet Ceal Craig, San Francisco Bay Wildlife Society board president.

Longtime volunteer Craig, 59, has been leading regular tours of Drawbridge for small groups since 2007.

"My favorite part of the tour is helping people visualize what life was like 100 years ago and even earlier in this unusual place in the marsh," she says. "Helping the public understand what types of people lived there, why, their differences and similarities, the history of the place, and the environmental and cultural influences that occurred over Drawbridge's almost century of life."

Just like the program's regular excursion, Craig kicks off my visit with a slideshow including photos and details of the history, people and future of Drawbridge before making the trip to view it across Coyote Creek.

The town's start

Seven-eighths of a mile long and 80 acres in size situated on Station Island in the salt marshes of South San Francisco Bay, the town of Drawbridge was born in 1876.

"Many of the stories I have learned are true; some are likely urban myth at some level," Craig says.

Three sail and steam lines ran out of Alviso at that time, landings dotting the bay, with railroads soon entering the landscape.

Two people, James Fair and Alfred Davis, had a vision of building a narrow gauge railroad between Alameda and Santa Cruz but the problem was keeping the two waterways (Mud Creek Slough and Coyote Creek) open to boat traffic.

"They couldn't just build a bridge that was stationary," Craig says.

So drawbridges were erected, which she explains were more like a swing bridge that rotated on a pier.

"Now somebody had to monitor that because you had to be able to put the bridges across the waterways for trains to go and then move it when the boats were there," Craig says. "So they had a bridge tender who lived there ... and so this is how Drawbridge was formed."

The first bridge tender who lived on Station Island was George Mundershietz. He was followed by William Carrera, chief tender, Lewis Holden and Jim Hardy, and Leslie Salt.

When the first bridge tender came to Drawbridge, it wasn't long before word got out it was a "perfect spot to hunt and fish," Craig says, with wildlife abounding in the salt marshes circling the bay, and other people built cabins on stilts above shifting tides on the island.

"Up to that point there were five regular stops plus some," Craig says of the trains that would pass through Drawbridge.

By 1926, the population peaked with nearly 90 structures including many hunting clubs and family homes landing along the railway that served as "Main Street."

"There is no other spot in the bay I know of where there actually was a town inside the marsh," Craig says.

She explains there were vast differences between the two sides of Drawbridge.

"South Drawbridge has a history of being the permanent residence," she said. "It was closest to Alviso so you could walk three miles ... and catch a street car and go to work or school."

North Drawbridge, another mile north, was "much further away from the Newark and Fremont areas of schools," Craig says.

As such, it was more seasonal, housing duck hunting clubs and vacation cabins.

"The gun clubs were really big in the north," Craig says.

No matter what side of town you resided, Craig says for "life at Drawbridge, one of the things that stands out was independent spirits."

There was no police, history of any village group and no services.

"There was no plumbing. There was no sewage, no sanitation, no septic tanks, anything like that," Craig says. "It was strictly outhouses and they would use the tide to flush twice a day."

It was, at the very least, a far cry from city life.

Wooden walkways served as streets, Main Street was the railroad track, everyone had a boat and there were reeds everywhere for children to play in among friends.

Life was just out and out different than those living in nearby cities.

Because of the vastly different lifestyle found in Drawbridge, Craig says women also felt the freedom to dress non-traditionally in men's clothing and slacks.

Characters and history

This included one of the popular characters rich in the town's history, Nellie Dollin, now known as the "Belle of Drawbridge."

"She is the most well known," Craig says. "...She lived a lot of her life there."

Moving there at the age of 10 in 1910, Dollin bought her first house in Drawbridge in 1926 and later moved to a two-bedroom houseboat. Dollin remained at Drawbridge well into the 1960s, at which time she was one of the only remaining permanent residents. She sustained three marriages and raised two sons there, growing alongside the town's rich history.

Boat builders Billy Robinson, E. H. Adams and Cornelius Reinhardt also join the town's history along with John and Ann Byrns and Joe and Hedwig Sprung, who opened the first hotel there around 1903.

There were an unknown amount of small bedrooms and bathrooms at the Sprung Hotel along with kerosene lamps and a wood stove.

"She would even rent her own bedroom and sleep in the tub," Craig says.

It was also known for supplying all residents with water from the nearby well at \$3 a year. Remnants of the tower can be seen today.

When Hedwig died, there are records showing her nephew who took over raised the cost to \$6 a year.

"And that actually was a contributor to why people started to leave," Craig says.

Another major factor was the people that moved there itself.

Because the marsh was the primary area for sewage disposal, the waters became saturated with waste leaving it impossible to sustain the lush wildlife populations that drew people there. Communities were pumping groundwater from deep freshwater wells, causing Drawbridge's surfaces to sink along with the homes that rested there.

The marsh shrank in size as the surrounding towns began filling the shores. At the same time, salt production was becoming a lucrative business and a new process began once natural salt ponds were exhausted.

"...solar evaporation through a series of diked pools spread artificial salt ponds throughout the bay area and onto my shores at Station Island," reads a Drawbridge program distributed by the refuge. "These man-made pools cut into 30,000 acres of marshland as the salt industry boomed well into the 1940s."

All of these changes caused the community to change greatly with outsiders riding "the Southern Pacific through town, never stopping to know me," the program continues. "They saw only a secluded town, surrounded by polluted waters, in constant struggle to rebuild homes lost to the sinking shores."

The last known resident of the town was Charlie Luce, leaving in October 1979, just over a century after the town began.

"He was asked to leave when Drawbridge became part of the National Wildlife Refuge," Craig says. "...So in less than just 100 years a small village grew and then died. Ninety percent of the wetlands was gone over 100 years, over the same time in chronology of Drawbridge's life."

Even before Dollin and Luce's departure, Craig says what remained of the town was quickly fading.

"In the sixties we started to see vandalism because there weren't as many people out there," Craig says. "...People would talk about it was (a) ghost town. People would come out with guns and drink and party and shoot thinking it was abandoned when it wasn't. There were people still living there."

Fires were destroying building after building, which Craig says still occurs when people illegally step foot in the town. Her last known instance of this was in the 1990s.

"There are still houses there but a lot of them have burned or are gone into the marsh," she says.

Back to the future

After the intimate presentation about Drawbridge, I anxiously await getting to see the town I feel I already know so much about.

"At the refuge we are not doing anything to restore it or arrest it," Craig says of the town's disappearance. "It's just quietly going away."

Craig and I board a small open-window tram for a three-mile drive to the closest spot one can legally view the town of Drawbridge, about half a mile away and a 45-degree angle from the previous route.

"For now, that is the likely van tour," Craig says. "I understand a trail will be developed (gold line) with some interpretive panels near where the prior route used to stop."

Program attendees until last year could view Drawbridge about 260 meters away, roughly 0.2 miles.

"The new route was caused by the construction and restoration of the A17 into salt marsh," Craig says.

A17 stands for Alviso salt pond 17, which has been reclaimed by the refuge as part of a larger 16,500-acre South Bay salt pond purchase that will be turned back to salt marsh over 50 years.

"Like Drawbridge, these salt ponds boast a curious past, shaped by both human and environmental forces," the program reads. "Unlike Drawbridge, it will take much more time and work for the marsh to reclaim them. ... The long-term mission of the restoration is to create a more natural, self-sustaining ecosystem and watershed that will have lasting benefits for the Bay Area and beyond."

Along the short journey to Drawbridge, Craig stops frequently to share facts about the breathtaking landscape and point out wildlife that joins us.

"Well, I'm a birder too and since I can't walk very far anymore, the van tour is the easiest way for me to be out farther away from the EEC and see birds who might be a little shy," Craig says. "White pelicans on the island in the northeast corner of A17, mingled with cormorants, avocets, stilts: I could watch them for hours. Flying up into the air, and then circling around, settling down, and all their chatting."

She says she looks forward to seeing acreage reclaimed through the years, bringing more birds and wildlife growing their families.

"However, this reclamation and restoration project will last well beyond my lifetime," Craig says. "We need to help the younger generations see the value of a National Wildlife Refuge and how it helps them and how it needs their support."

When we make it to our final stop, a spotting scope and binoculars are needed to make out the buildings in the distance. Today, the only way to view the town up close is aboard one of the Amtrak or freight trains that pass through daily with no stops, giving riders a chance to quickly look at the town's remains.

While it is disappointing to view Drawbridge from so far, it seems only fitting given its history that still remains, although often forgotten, in today's world.

This remains the case for Craig, who believes the journey to Drawbridge has much to offer onlookers.

"In the past, people enjoyed the marshes as a place to be independent, live a frugal life, connect with the environment around them and get away from a growing Santa Clara Valley," Craig says. "Today, we can still do all those things. Learning about Drawbridge can teach us that. ... In particular, what kind of environment is around us that can bring us a sense of peace and fellowship with our past and the living beings in the marsh still present."

Drawbridge excursion

The Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge will hold its next van excursion to view Drawbridge from 2 to 4:30 p.m. Saturday, Aug. 25. Attendees will meet at the Environmental Education Center, 1751 Grand Blvd. in Alviso, to start with a slideshow of the town's history before making the trip to view it across Coyote Creek. The program is intended for adults and space is very limited. Reservations are essential. For more information or to reserve a spot, call Debra King at 262-5513, extension 102. Note: You will not visit the town itself. Tour guide Ceal Craig will take attendees to the closest spot that one can legally view Drawbridge.

* * *

Shannon Barry is an education and feature writer for Milpitas Post. This is part of an ongoing series of profiles about activities and places of interest in the greater Silicon Valley.

Contact Shannon Barry at sbarry@themilpitaspost.com or 408-262-2454. Visit us on our social media sites at [facebook.com/milpitaspost](https://www.facebook.com/milpitaspost) and twitter.com/milpitaspost.