
A Town Is Born, 1866-1872

In 1850, when San Luis Obispo County was organized as one of California's original counties, it was an enormous, sparsely settled county encompassing 1.5 million acres. Its only settlement of any size was San Luis Obispo, with a population of 1000. Fifteen years later, at the end of the Civil War in 1865, a long parade of settlers began trekking West seeking new homes. These settlers sought a mild climate and inexpensive land with good soil, streams, and lumber. Available land seldom offered all these amenities. Land in the area that was to become Cambria had fertile land, streams, and virgin pine forests and was, for many, a dream come true.

Settlers first looked for free or inexpensive government land. The lucky ones found some and began to cultivate it. **Jeffrey Phelan** was among the first of many to arrive to settle in this lovely and lush coastal area by acquiring government land to cultivate. Originally from Waterford, Ireland, he arrived in the area in 1857, soon after the completion of the survey of Rancho de la Piedra Blanca. He was able to purchase 160 acres of unclaimed government land two miles north of Cambria. Laws gave land to those who promised to build schools, so Phelan soon acquired an additional 320 acres and built Cambria's first school. In addition to his dairying and school-building activities, he is credited with providing the site (for \$100) for today's landmark Santa Rosa Chapel, and allowing seasonal use of his land for a community picnic area/rodeo grounds, known as "Phelan's Grove."

William Leffingwell was another one of the lucky ones who found unclaimed government land. In 1859, he brought his wife and some of his seven adult children to settle on public lands adjacent to Rancho de la Piedra Blanca. As soon as he had secured the land by building a home, cultivating the land, and stocking it, he acquired some coastal land at the north end of Moonstone Beach. He established several businesses there, including a lumber mill, a forge, a landing and, eventually, a wharf.

Those who could not identify government land, but who had some money, purchased plots as soon as the huge land grants were subdivided and offered for sale. Within a decade, the land on which wild Mexican cattle had roamed was dotted with neat farms. According to Myron Angel's 1883 *History of San Luis Obispo County*:

Here, in this favored spot, began to rise the household fires of a new population. From every civilized quarter of the earth's broad surface came one or more to help build up a new community, and their efforts succeeded. Upon the fertile waste, where but lately roamed the wild manada (undomesticated horses), now thrifty farmers . . . live, and business thrives apace.

While settlers in other regions had to buy lumber or learn to love adobe dwellings, Cambria settlers were blessed with plentiful pine. Soon buildings constructed of rough pine, with bark still attached, were so prevalent that early Cambria was disdainfully called "Slab Town," the first of its many names. Unfortunately, though cheap and convenient, this pine tended to rot far more easily than harder woods, such as redwood and fir.

The first industries in the area were lumbering and land speculation. John Myers and William Gillespie, Pujol's first customers when he subdivided Rancho Santa Rosa, pursued both of these industries. They purchased 195 acres of heavily timbered land on the northwest corner of the rancho in 1866 and established a sawmill. They cleared the land to increase its value, offered it for sale, and then sold the lumber from the land back to the settlers. They were successful and, within three months, Myers and Gillespie had sold all their land. They then sold their mill to **F. F. Letcher** and **J. W. Ford**.

While most came to ranch, a variety of entrepreneurs followed and opened service and supply enterprises to support them. The small stretch of level land at the junction of the private road serving upper Santa Rosa Creek and the coastal route from San Luis Obispo was the natural choice for these businesses. The first to settle there, in 1865, was **Philip Kaetzel**, a skilled wheelwright, who was lucky enough to identify 160 acres of unclaimed government land at this

junction. Convinced that he had found the perfect location for a thriving community, he built a home, acquired some cattle, established a business as a wheelwright, and waited for others to arrive.

He was right. Before long, entrepreneurs **George Grant** and **George Lull** arrived. They wanted to lease a small portion of Kaetzel's land along Santa Rosa Creek, with an option to buy. Grant, the financier, returned to San Francisco, while Lull remained to establish a business and seek local investors. By 1865, Lull had found local investors, purchased the land, and completed a small two-story building near what was to become downtown Cambria. Grant, Lull and Company, a general merchandise store, was on the ground floor, while his home was on the second floor.

By October 1866, the adjacent land was subdivided and offered for sale when speculators **George Long** and **Samuel Pollard** purchased just over 2000 acres from Pujol and divided it into smaller parcels to sell. Although Pollard lived in San Luis Obispo, he kept enough of this land to build a general store that competed with Grant and Lull's store. Long and Pollard sold 150 of their acres to **Rufus Rigdon**, who brought his family and became Cambria's notary and justice of the peace. **George Proctor**, a blacksmith and **George Davis**, an engineer, also purchased land from Long and Pollard. They established the town's first hotel, The Davis House, later enlarged to become the county's first three-story building and renamed the Proctor House. Proctor continued to buy land until he owned many lots, as evidenced by the frequency his name appears in town records as the early owner of key downtown buildings.

These downtown land acquisitions by Kaetzel, Lull, Long, Pollard, Rigdon, Proctor, and Davis—Cambria's founding fathers — established the roots of a promising new town. Downtown streets were platted, businesses opened, and it was clear that enthusiasm for the young town was growing rapidly. By the end of 1866, they united, calling themselves "the Citizens of Santa Rosa," when they petitioned the San Luis Obispo Board of Supervisors for better roads. This began the first of many transportation battles they would wage—and established a long-standing tradition of community involvement with the Supervisors.

New England Look-Alike

The settlement immediately became the focal point of the area by supplying services and products to the outlying mines and ranches. It was also the social and political center of the region, replete with the largest assembly hall in the county. A livery stable opened, a second wheelwright arrived, several new stores were established, and, before long, Cambria could offer the services of a carriagemaker, a shoemaker, and a doctor, who also served as the local news correspondent for the *San Luis Obispo Tribune*.

As the town grew, property gained value, and lots were divided and subdivided. Before long, downtown lots had been divided so often that they were only 25 by 50 feet. An engineer, **Peter A. Forrester**, the son-in-law of ranchero Jose Pico, and the man who suggested the name "Cambria," surveyed the town. Referred to as "Forrester's Plat," this survey established Cambria's legal boundaries. Unfortunately, "Forrester's Plat" was destined to be incorrect, for it used Santa Rosa Creek as the boundary of many lots. As the creek changed course, the survey was rendered inaccurate. As a result, in subsequent years, many owners were disappointed to find that the property they thought they owned differed markedly from its legal boundaries.

Very different from California's more traditional Spanish-style adobe settlements, Cambria, with its wooden buildings, looked more like New England than California. According to the August 14, 1869 *San Luis Obispo Tribune*:

We have two towns in our flourishing county, each the antipodes of the other. One, San Luis Obispo with its old mission building and church, and its prevailing adobe style of architecture reminds us of the past—slow but solid.

Cambria with its brand new brightness, and its rapid growth, marks the advancement hither of American improvement. Three years ago the name of Cambria was unknown to the county; not a house stood where now here can be collected together on any important occasion, an assembly of one thousand souls; and only Nature's sounds were heard, where now the air resounds with the whir of the steam-saw, the heavy pounding of the blacksmith's

*sledge, and the briskerappings of the carpenter's hammer.
. . . It can boast today of one first class country hotel and
several restaurants of a less imposing appearance.*

During these early years, many settlers turned to dairying as their focus, and Cambria was soon supporting large and productive dairy farms. On the way to replacing lumber and land sales as Cambria's premier industry, by 1869, the San Luis Obispo Board of Equalization ordered that all property be assessed using the following values:

<i>American milch cows.</i>	<i>.\$25 each</i>
<i>Stock cattle.</i>	<i>\$15 each</i>
<i>Mixed dairy cows.</i>	<i>.\$22.50</i>
<i>Spanish dairy cows.</i>	<i>\$20</i>
<i>American work horses.</i>	<i>.\$45</i>
<i>Spanish work horses.</i>	<i>\$25</i>
<i>Sheep, first class.</i>	<i>.\$2</i>
<i>Sheep, fourth class.</i>	<i>.\$1</i>

By 1869, Cambria had emerged as a promising town with untold potential for growth. Citizens knew that it was only a matter of time before Cambria would outgrow other towns to become the second largest in the county.

Great Name Debate

Despite all this progress, Cambria had one problem: it had no name. On October 2, 1867, a Post Office was established in the Grant, Lull and Company's second store at the southwest corner of Main and Bridge Streets. Required by the Post Office to submit three names, citizens selected Santa Rosa, Rosaville, and San Simeon. Expecting to be assigned one of their first choices, Santa Rosa or Rosaville, they were dismayed to be assigned San Simeon as their official name. They all knew that Hearst's settlement 8 miles to the north had already unofficially claimed that name.

At that time, George Hearst was busy subdividing his San Simeon lots and applying for a franchise to build a pier there. Watching his progress, citizens knew that they could not share their name with him, but made no progress in agreeing on another name. Before

long, Hearst and his partner, **Captain Joseph Clark**, a whaler from the Azores, who ran the San Simeon Whaling Station, were granted permission to build a wharf. By the summer of 1869, their pier was under construction, and the pressure to agree on a new name was high.

A meeting was called and the commitment was made that the meeting would not adjourn until consensus on a name had been reached. The meeting went on and on into the night. Finally, when all were tired and frustrated, Peter Forrester, the town's surveyor and engineer, casually suggested the name of "Cambria," after the city in Pennsylvania. After a very brief discussion, the name was endorsed. Derived from the Latin word for Wales, the new name surprised many. Myron Angel, in his 1883 *History of San Luis Obispo County*, captured some of the amused and bemused reactions to the town's new name:

Its derivation is obvious, but its application incomprehensible. To a town full of Welshmen, it might seem applicable, but to a place mostly made up of American people, and presumably of the severely practical and unimaginative sort, it would seem an unmeaning designation.

Despite this reaction, on January 10, 1870, the Post Office officially accepted the name change, and the young town finally had a name.

Transportation Challenges

For years, many believed that a major seaport could thrive in the area, and most recognized that San Simeon was the logical location for this port. Having been used by smugglers during Spanish and Mexican years, entrepreneurs predicted dramatically increased commercial activity as the population swelled. Leffingwell Landing, although closer and more convenient, was less protected and, without a wharf, its utility was limited, for everything had to be rowed or floated in over the surf. When Hearst and Clark partnered to build their wharf at San Simeon, the days when the landing could compete with the wharf were numbered.

What residents had not bargained for was Hearst's charges. When the wharf was completed in 1869, Hearst began collecting fees for everything brought to or taken from San Simeon Bay. Some tried to avoid these charges by going over the beach. Although a rough and difficult way to get to the wharf, it worked for too many, and Hearst decided that it must stop. To accomplish this, he began proceedings in 1870 to secure title to the tidelands at San Simeon. By 1871, he had been awarded control of 100 acres of tidelands for \$1 an acre under the Tidelands Act. He was now able to legally control the movement of all goods on the bay's sandy beach and raise rates at will. Most area settlers paid Hearst's continually accelerating wharfage. Their only other choices were rowing freight ashore at Leffingwell's, or transporting goods by road to other more distant wharfs, such as Cayucos.

Despite the wet landings at Leffingwell's and the rising costs at San Simeon, the sea continued to offer the only efficient form of transporting goods in and out of Cambria for many years. Those who had to travel by land to San Luis Obispo, or another more distant wharf, faced a rough and tedious journey. Despite the difficulties, stagecoach service to San Luis Obispo came early to Cambria. By 1867, stages regularly served Cambria and, by 1869, stagecoach travel was available every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday for \$3 each way for



Off-loading Lumber at Leffingwell Landing



Hearst's Pier, 1880s

passengers and additional charges for freight. Leaving at 7 a.m. from Cambria, it was due to arrive in San Luis Obispo by 3 p.m. In the summer months, though deep ruts and thick dust abounded, the stage usually took 8 to 9 hours and arrived close to the scheduled time. In the winter, however, mud and floods could completely prevent travel or prolong the journey to 12 or more hours.

Quicksilver!

Although its fertile land, streams, and lumber would draw settlers to the area, it was the whispered tales of riches in the hills that turned the small settlement into a boomtown. Fueling these rumors was the 1862 discovery of cinnabar, the mineral in which quicksilver (mercury) is found, in the headwaters of Santa Rosa Creek. Many of the local settlers were 1849 Gold Rush prospectors-turned-farmers, so mining fever was easily re-sparked. The timing for this discovery was good as the Civil War raged in the East. Wartime needs had increased both the price and demand for mercury, used to process the silver that financed the Union Army and also used in the percussion caps for soldiers' rifles. Adding to the excitement was the discovery of smaller veins of gold and copper.

By January 1864, 40 Californios (descendents of the Spanish and Mexican-era settlers in California) and American hopefuls had incorporated to form the Josephine Quicksilver Mining District. Many acquired a share of this promising mine, among them, partners **C. B. Rutherford** and **Walter Murray**. Within a few years it became clear that little progress was being made and Rutherford and Murray decided to take action. Rutherford went to San Francisco to raise money by selling shares, many of which neither he nor Murray owned. He was successful and sold a majority of the Josephine Quicksilver Mining District shares for \$25,000, also negotiating an additional bonus of \$20,000 for himself and Murray.

Before that illegal deal could be completed, word leaked out, and the large San Francisco-based Bolton, Barron, & Company cut them out by purchasing a controlling interest. When Bolton, Barron, & Company acquired ownership of the Josephine Mine in 1867, things began to happen, and, in the next three years, the company shipped \$280,000 worth of quicksilver out of San Simeon. In the midst of the boom, while prices were still high, the Josephine began to experience hard times and, by 1874, production had dwindled. Owners were forced to dig more expensive tunnels. Before long, these tunnels had cost \$100,000, but had yielded no rich veins. In desperation, Bolton, Barron and Company tried unsuccessfully to acquire other more profitable mines to offset their losses. Surrounded by profitable mines, the Josephine languished.

In 1871, when **Orzo Haskins** was looking for a sawmill site in Pine Mountain, eight miles north of the Josephine Mine and 11 miles from Cambria, he found a sample rich with mercury. According to the November 18, 1871 edition of the *San Luis Obispo Tribune*:

Our neighbors in the usually quiet town of Cambria are in the midst of an intense mining excitement. . . . Last week (Haskins) . . . returned to town with quite a large number of rich specimens. His discovery created a furor, and a rush was incontinently made to the Pine Bluffs, and locations have been staked out all along the line of the lead for a great distance.

Today (Saturday) there will be a meeting in Cambria for the purpose of organizing a mining district, and adopting such laws and rules and regulations as are usual in like cases. By the next steamer, a trusty agent will be dispatched to San Francisco with samples of the ore for thorough assay, and arrangements [for] machinery and retorts. . . . Quicksilver prospects in our county are certainly looking up finely.

Almost immediately, more than 150 claims were filed. Intense mining operations began, and results were promising, yielding 2-8% quicksilver. Despite these promising yields, Pine Mountain claim holders faced challenges. Haskins was never successful. He bonded and rebonded his claim and allowed his mines to be mismanaged. Eventually, all his bonds had to be surrendered. Two other Pine Mountain claimholders were also unsuccessful: They invested more than \$200,000 in machinery and a furnace but, due to a drop in quicksilver prices, were forced to offer their claim for \$70,000.

Others were more successful. Owners of the Keystone Mine worked for three years to install furnaces and condensers. When they finally began mining operations in 1874, this mine became the first Pine Mountain claim to be profitable. It was sold in 1874 for \$22,000. Soon afterward, a much larger and richer vein was discovered, and it was mined whenever mercury prices rose.

The Oceanic

Closer to Cambria, three-quarters of a mile north of Santa Rosa Creek and five miles from downtown, **Ben Phillips** and **George Morss** discovered a rich lode in 1872 when a horse kicked up a rock with bright red streaks. Knowing these streaks indicated cinnabar, they staked a claim immediately. Other claims followed.

By 1874, these claims were sold for \$36,000 to San Francisco capitalists, who formed the Oceanic Quicksilver Mining Company. Capital stock was fixed at \$6 million and 60,000 shares at \$25 a share were offered. Owners worked to expand their claim by buying adjacent property, or trading Oceanic stock to acquire surround-

ing land. A number of landowners were willing to sell or trade and, before long, the boundaries of the claim had been significantly expanded. Employing 300, it was soon the biggest quicksilver mine in the area.

No expense was spared on the Oceanic—hoped to be the richest quicksilver mine on the continent. (Although it never surpassed production of the New Alameden in Santa Clara, it did become the 6th largest quicksilver mine in the world.) Three furnaces of the latest, most modern design were built, and 7 tunnels were completed. Stock prices jumped to \$30 per share, and hopes were high. At that time, mercury prices were still good, the mine was relatively easy to work, and the quality of the ore was high. Cambrians dreamed of the many ways they would spend the fortunes they were about to make. Unfortunately, soon after the Oceanic began to produce significant quantities, the price of mercury had fallen, and Cambria's first quicksilver boom was over.

By 1878, with expenditures high and mercury prices falling, the once-profitable Oceanic had amassed judgments against it that totaled \$110,000. Although the owners continued to manage the mine, the property, mineral rights, and equipment were sold to the Bank of San Francisco for \$50,000. By 1901, the Oceanic had accumulated enough capital to buy back the mineral rights and equipment from the bank. It produced well until 1908, when the ore petered out, and mining stopped until prices began to go up. By 1914, full operations began again and employment reached between 60 and 70 young Cambria men and 200 Chinese laborers who worked as miners, cooks, and general laborers. By December 1918, many new tunnels had been completed, but their cost challenged the financial well-being of the mine. With World War I drawing to a close and mercury prices falling, within a year, it had closed once again.

Booms

Cambria's mining history is characterized by cycles of prosperity and poverty, as mercury prices and production fluctuated wildly. Unlike some more easily mined minerals, quicksilver mining was

expensive, requiring extensive tunneling and furnaces, and could not withstand price declines. During a boom in 1876, \$282,832 in quicksilver was produced; four years later, production totaled only \$6760 in value. Although mining came to a virtual standstill from 1888 until 1900, many abandoned mines were reopened between 1901 and 1918 when prices rose. As recently as 1963, another mining flurry began when prices for quicksilver reached almost \$12 per pound. Today, the flamboyant dreams of mineral wealth that swept the area are only distant memories.

During boom times, Cambria grew and prospered by providing supplies and entertainment to the miners, many of whom were earning as much as \$5 a day. These mining years accelerated Cambria's growth enormously. The population swelled during boom times. When the mines closed, many who had come to work in them found other occupations and stayed.

Those who predicted that Cambria's future would be to support the mines were wrong. Instead, as each boom faded, residents again focused their attention on establishing a vibrant supply and service center and a good place to live. They were successful, and, before long, many would agree with a visitor who described Cambria as: "A very American looking town, and her people have a brisk, pushing appearance. The stores and storekeepers look busy and prosperous; the houses have a neat New England appearance."