

Tanneries played important roles in early California

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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Leather products played an important role in 19th-century lifestyles. Horses needed harnesses and saddles, furniture was upholstered in leather, people wore riding gear, boots, shoes, gloves - everything required a steady supply of high-quality tanned leather.

California's earliest marketable exports included the dried cowhides supplied by Spanish ranches.

The main preservation method consisted of soaking hides in saltwater for up to 48 hours. This softened the skin and allowed workers to scrape off meat, hair and other decomposable remnants. The cleaned hides were stretched and dried, before stacked into bundles for transport. While transportable, this tanning method did not yield a soft, pliable leather.

Commercial production also included scraping the hides, followed by a bath in a large vat containing either water and pieces of tan bark or a "liquor." This liquor was concocted of water and ground-up tanning bark which leached tannic acid.

Tan bark was stripped off tanbark oak trees. In later years, Humboldt County became the major producer of this crop.

Once the hides had cured, they needed to be washed, dried and graded. Besides access to a steady supply of tanbark, tanneries needed large amounts of fresh water.

During the late 19th century and well into the 20th century, Benicia developed a thriving cluster of tanneries. It all started with the founding of the aptly named Pioneer Tannery.

The "History of Solano County," compiled in 1879 by Munro J. P. Fraser, includes lengthy discussions on the early development of the tannery industry in Benicia:

In 1864, "J. R. Brown and Thomas McKay decided to try the experiment of running a tannery at this place. They started in with four tan vats, and only a few hundred dollars in money, but with a whole fortune of pluck. By hard work, superior skill, and close attention to business, they made the enterprise a success from the start, when failure was prophesied from all quarters; and now the Pioneer tannery is one of the most important in the State. It has a reputation that extends to Boston."

The tannery included “two currying shops that are 35x45 feet in size; a beam house that is 75 feet long by forty wide; a splendid wharf, with a building on it, 75 feet long and two stories high, that is used as a warehouse, drying-room, and bark-shed. They have other buildings, consisting of numerous barksheds, bark-mill, engine house, boarding house, etc. The machinery of the establishment is run by a 15-horse power engine (high technology in 1879). They have here all the latest improved machinery, consisting of a glassing jack, roller, slicking-off machine, etc.”

Over the next years, J. R. Brown and Thomas McKay invested a sizable amount of capital into this venture. “Some idea of the amount of capital required to run this place may be formed from the fact that they have on hand between eight and ten thousand dollars’ worth of tan bark alone.”

In 1869, Mr. Alexander Chisholm joined the company as another partner. A few years later, in July, 1878, Chisholm and McKay bought out Mr. Brown’s interest. The Pioneer Tannery changed its name to McKay and Chisholm Tannery. The two men were certainly skilled at running the operation, as “both [were] almost raised tanners.”

A fire destroyed the McKay and Chisholm Tannery in 1890, and the partners rebuilt the complex.

I will continue my story in my next column.

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