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From Natural Bridges to Bird Rock: An Exploration Through Vintage Postcards and Photographs

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In the early 1900s, Charles Leon Aydelotte photographed a natural bridge carved by wave erosion into the cliffs near the foot of what is now Columbia Avenue in Santa Cruz, California. Over the next decade or so, several postcard publishers used the photograph, colorizing it and changing it in various ways during the “Golden Age” of the picture postcard. A doctored photograph by publisher Edward H. Mitchell shows how the image was altered and also demonstrates the shortcomings of using postcards in documenting history.

Background

The first two decades of the twentieth century witnessed the widespread adoption of many technological advancements: airplanes, automobiles, motion pictures, electric lights, telephones, and radios. Not often included on this list, but especially important from a social and communications standpoint, was the picture postcard. The decade before World War I is widely regarded as the “Golden Age” of the picture postcard.

There were several reasons for the proliferation of postcards during this time. In 1898 Congress changed postal regulations, enabling privately printed cards to be mailed at the same rate (half the letter rate) as the pre-stamped postal cards sold by the post office.¹ Within a few years hundreds of publishing companies sprung up across the country, publishing birthday and holiday postcards, street scenes, tourist attractions, train depots, businesses, cartoons—nearly every subject imaginable.

Many cards only cost a penny, and postage was also just one cent. Consumers found the brightly colored postcards irresistible, especially since the pictures in newspapers and magazines were still in

black and white, and books with color plates were very expensive. Many people did not yet have a residential telephone, so postcards were a cheap way to send someone a short message and have it arrive the next day or even the same day if the address was nearby. Some urban areas had mail delivery twice a day.²

To say that postcards were popular during this period would be an understatement. During fiscal year 1907-1908, the post office reported that 667,777,798 postcards were mailed in the United States.³ This was for a nation of 88 million people.

The words most often used at the time were “fad” and “craze.” “The post card craze shows no signs of abating, even in the winter season,” said *Santa Cruz Sentinel* of Nov. 21, 1905. “The summer cards have now given way to Christmas postals.”

In mid August of the same year, Santa Cruz’s Big Curio Store reported selling 200,000 postcards so far that season, up from 73,000 the year before.⁴ Even the tiny “Free Cliff Museum” near the foot of what is now Woodrow Avenue on West Cliff Drive sold postcards by the thousands. “Just arrived, 10,000 new postcards,” said a notice in September 1906.⁵

Vintage postcards can be an important source of historical information, often preserving images not found elsewhere. However, scenic postcards are generally biased towards subjects popular with tourists. In the Santa Cruz area the most popular subjects were the beach, Cliff Drive (now West Cliff Drive), Big Trees, Big Basin, and occasionally businesses and scenes along the main streets. Residential areas and industries were less likely to be portrayed. In nearby Capitola the most popular were the hotel and beach.

Postcard publishers designed their cards to sell and were not above altering images to make them more appealing. They would delete signs and power lines, change day scenes into night, add or delete people, and even add an airplane or two to liven up the sky. Many of the early postcards were black and white halftone images of photographs, with colors added during the printing process. The colors were usually whatever an artist thought looked good and were not necessarily accurate. Many of the early cards were printed in Germany.

Natural Bridges Postcards

A number of natural stone bridges have come and gone along the shoreline paralleling West Cliff Drive in Santa Cruz, and some were popular subjects on postcards. Best known are the ones at what is now Natural Bridges State Beach, but there have been over a dozen such features between there and Lighthouse Point since the latter 1800s. Some of these were illustrated and their locations mapped in the author's previous article.⁶

The subject of this study is a site near the foot of Columbia Avenue that was once the location of two natural bridges. Today it is the site of "Bird Rock." This rock is a frequent resting site for flocks of Brown Pelicans, cormorants, and other seabirds.

Early photographs and the postcards made from those photographs of this natural feature show the varying ways that it was portrayed and how the image was altered.

Before the early 1900s when postcards became widely available, people would purchase as souvenirs larger photographs mounted on cardboard. The photographer who took the photograph in figure 1 was down on the beach, looking west. It shows the two bridges, though the one closer to shore is not as conspicuous from this angle. Although undated, this style of photograph is typical of the 1880s and 1890s.

Based on the lack of differences in the amount of cliff erosion, it probably only slightly predates the image in figure 2.



Figure 1. Photograph: "No. 15 Santa Cruz Views. Rocks at Low Tide." Photographer unknown.



Figure 2. Photograph: "27. Bridge Point. Santa Cruz. Aydelotte Photo." Photographer: Charles Leon Aydelotte.

Figure 2 shows the same two natural bridges as in figure 1, but was taken by photographer C. L. Aydelotte from the top of the cliff looking downward.

Natural bridges such as this can form when wave energy gets focused to the sides of sandstone points. Erosion occurs along cracks and softer areas in the rock, eventually cutting all the way through.

This and the photograph in figure 5 could well have been taken on the same day. They were taken from slightly different locations, but the size of the swell and breakers are similar.

Bridge or Arch?

Purists argue that to be a natural rock “bridge,” it must be connected to something. “Arches,” on the other hand, stand alone. According to this definition, Natural Bridges State Beach originally had three bridges. Then the outer one broke, leaving two bridges. When the inner one broke, this left an arch. Many people, however, use the terms interchangeably when describing nature’s handiwork along the coastline.

About Photographer C. L. Aydelotte

The photograph in figure 2 was taken by Charles Leon Aydelotte (pronounced with a long a sound: AYE-da-lot⁷). Aydelotte was born in Indiana in 1868 and in about 1900 settled in Santa Cruz where he immediately went into the photography business.⁸ The Santa Cruz City Directory for 1902 lists his residence as 27 Locust Street and says that he was the proprietor of “Aydelotte’s Photographic Studio.” His wife, Etta, a native of Missouri, was very active in Santa Cruz’s social circles and was a member of the Saturday Afternoon Club and the Daughters of the American Revolution (D.A.R.)⁹ She counted among her close friends famed writer Josephine Clifford McCrackin, also a Santa Cruz resident.¹⁰ Their son, Jack L. Aydelotte, graduated from Santa Cruz High School in 1919 and worked in Los Angeles and then Chicago as a sales manager for Hills Brothers Coffee.¹¹

Aydelotte took a number of photographs along the Cliff Drive and around Santa Cruz that were reproduced on postcards. Newspaper accounts also mention him photographing various events including the Santa Cruz Beach on July 4th, 1904, and the ruins of San Francisco after the 1906 earthquake and fire.¹² Aydelotte also acquired the rights to and sold photographs that had been taken by others.¹³

C. L. Aydelotte died December 21, 1924 and was described by the newspaper as a “most valued citizen.” The paper went on to say, “While Mr. Aydelotte was a quiet, retiring man, those who know him best recognized his true worth, his high ideals, his honesty and integrity, and valued his friendship for its warmth and depth.”¹⁴

Figure 4. Postcard: “Old Man of the Sea.” Publisher by the Detroit Publishing Company, No. 9603.



Figure 3. Postcard: “Natural Bridge, along Cliff Drive, Santa Cruz, Cal.” Published by Britton & Rey, San Francisco, 577.

This postcard (figure 3) published by Britton & Rey dates from about 1906 and uses the Aydelotte photograph from figure 2, although he is not credited on the card.

Old Man of the Sea

In early 1902, Aydelotte captured one of his most famous images. The outline of the spray from a breaker bouncing off Lighthouse Point formed the profile of a face. Aydelotte seemed especially pleased with the photograph and showed it to the newspaper a few days after he took it. “Mr. Aydelotte has presented us with a photograph of spray at Light-House Point, formed so that the spray resembles a face. Mr. Aydelotte has wisely named the picture “The Old Man of the Sea.”¹⁵ At least two postcard publishers reproduced this image: Detroit Publishing Co. and Edward H. Mitchell. Some cards say E. P. Charlton & Co., which was a distributor for Mitchell.¹⁶ All say, “Copyright 1902 C. L. Aydelotte.”

Aydelotte took another photograph of ocean spray titled “Maid of the Mist.” This was also reproduced on many early-day postcards.¹⁷



The “Old Man of the Sea” postcard (figure 4) is especially interesting because the message says, “Happened March 2, 1902, Santa Cruz, Cal.” Indeed, the newspaper story about the photograph was only a few days after this. The photograph confirms that Aydelotte was taking photographs along Cliff Drive in 1902 and opens the possibility that his natural bridges photographs were taken around the same time. This postcard was mailed August 21, 1906, from San Jose to Berkeley, California.

Natural Bridge: Another View



Figure 5. Photograph: “Natural Bridge. Santa Cruz, Cal.” Photographer: Charles Leon Aydelotte.

Although Aydelotte did not put his name on the photograph in figure 5, the style of the hand-printed lettering for the caption is identical to others on which he included his name. This photograph only shows the outer of the two arches. Although the photograph is undated, it may have been taken around the same time as the “Old Man of the Sea.” Both photographs were reproduced in a special Easter edition, 1902, of the *Santa Cruz Surf*. Easter was on March 30 that year. By 1904 this image was being reproduced on a postcard (figure 6).¹⁸

This was one of Aydelotte’s very popular images, judging by the number of different publishers who reproduced it on postcards. Below are some examples. All are based on Aydelotte’s photograph as revealed by the details of the ocean spray, waterfalls, and unique pattern in the water, but color has been added and other slight changes made. Note especially the clouds in figures 7 and 8. Some have more than one version by the same publisher, indicating more than one printing.

Figure 12



Figure 6. Postcard: “Surf at Natural Bridge, Santa Cruz, Cal.” Published by Detroit Photographic Co., No. 6980. Postmarked: 1904.

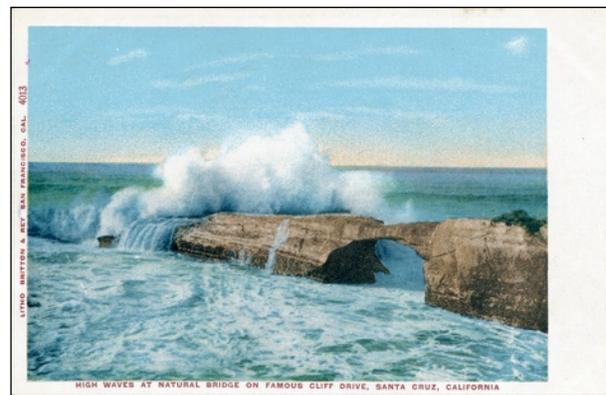


Figure 7. Postcard: “High Waves at Natural Bridge on Famous Cliff Drive, Santa Cruz, California.” Published by Britton & Rey, San Francisco, No. 4013. Unmailed.



Figure 8. Postcard: “Natural Bridge, Santa Cruz, California.” Published by Chas. Weidner, Photographer, San Francisco, No. 296. Unmailed.



Figure 9. Postcard: “Natural Bridge, Santa Cruz, Cal.” Published by Richard Behrendt, San Francisco, No. 161. Unmailed. (Courtesy of the Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History)



Figure 10. Postcard: “Natural Bridge, Santa Cruz, California.” Published by Edward H. Mitchell, San Francisco, No. 355. Postmarked: 1906.

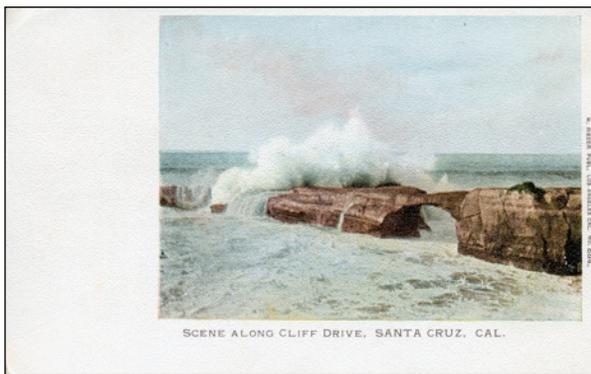


Figure 11. Postcard: “Scene Along Cliff Drive, Santa Cruz, Cal.” Published by M. Rieder, Los Angeles. No. 554. Unmailed, but style is pre-1907.



Figure 12. Postcard: “Natural Bridge, Santa Cruz, California.” Published by M. Rieder, Los Angeles, No. 9148. Postmarked: 1908.

The postcards in figures 11 and 12 were both published by Rieder. The latter one, while clearly based on the same photograph by Aydelotte, has been extensively altered (especially the water) to look more like a painting.

Altering the Image

A doctored version (figure 13) of Aydelotte’s original photograph provides a firsthand look at some of the ways artists working for postcard publishers modified black and white photographs. This original came from the files of the Edward H. Mitchell Company, San Francisco.¹⁹

First, a photographic print was made, slightly larger than the postcard. This one is 4.25 x 6.15 inches (postcards were typically 3.5 x 4.5 inches). It was glued onto cardboard, and crop marks were placed to show what part would be used in the postcard. As shown in figure 13, many alterations were made, with both a brush and airbrush.

The most dramatic change is that the natural bridge was painted over to show it collapsed. While the author cannot say with one hundred percent certainty when the real bridge disappeared, it was quite possibly during a storm in mid March, 1905.

Clearly, the bridge was very thin and at a point of near collapse when the original photograph was taken. On March 12 and 13, 1905, the worst storm in twenty-seven years struck the coast.²⁰ Extensive damage was done to local piers and to the hotel in Capitola.²¹ Along Cliff Drive, spectators witnessed spray “twenty to thirty feet” high.²²

On March 15, the following appeared in the *Santa Cruz Sentinel*: “Considerable damage along the Cliff Drive is apparent after Sunday’s storm. The second arch between Light-house point and Vue de l’Eau caved in on Sunday night and formed an

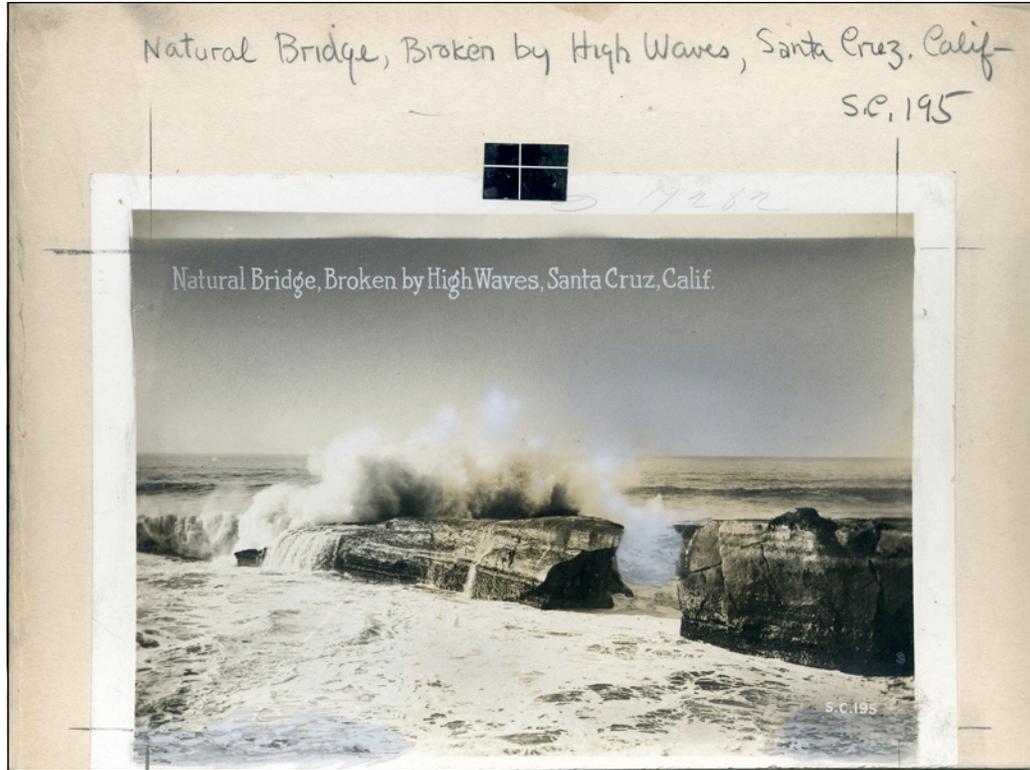


Figure 13. Photograph (altered with paint): “Natural Bridge, Broken by High Waves, Santa Cruz, Calif.” Photographer: Charles Leon Aydelotte.

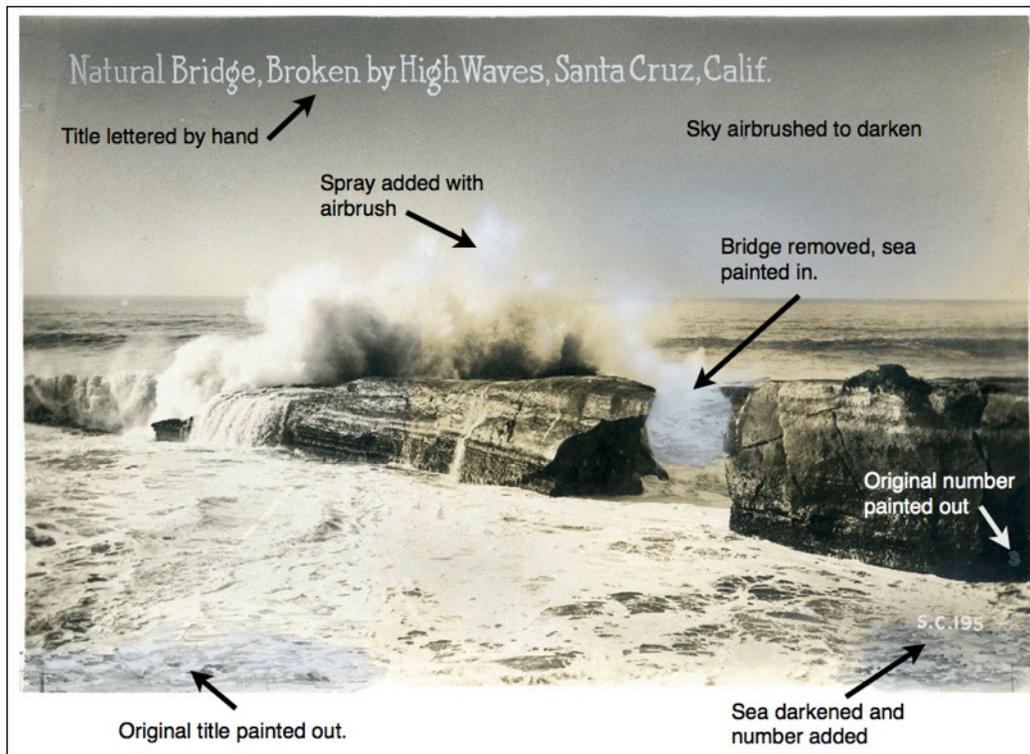


Figure 14. Alterations to the photograph in Figure 13.

island of rock. Part of the arch near the light-house also suffered from the storm and at several points along the roadway cave-ins have occurred.”²³

While this description is open to a certain degree of interpretation, it seems to describe the “arch” photographed by Aydelotte. That arch/bridge was located between the Lighthouse and Vue de l’Eau (the latter at the foot of Woodrow Avenue) and was the second of a double bridge extending out from the shore. Its collapse resulted in an offshore island of rock (today’s Bird Rock).

With the collapse, the photograph and postcards were now out of date. Re-taking the photograph and capturing such a spectacular crashing wave would have been difficult. So, the postcard publishing company had an artist doctor Aydelotte’s image to show a collapsed natural bridge.



Figure 15. Postcard: “Natural Bridge, Broken by High Waves, Santa Cruz, Calif.” Published by Pacific Novelty Co., San Francisco, No. S.C. 195. Postmarked: 1917. (Courtesy of the Capitola Historical Museum)

This published version of the card (figure 15) shows how colors were added with multiple passes through the printing press to create a full color image. It is cropped more tightly than shown by the marks in figure 12. The quality of the colors is not as good as earlier cards that were printed in Germany (no longer an option because of World War I). The message is dated July 11, 1917, and the card is postmarked Capitola.

An almost identical postcard (figure 16), with a different number, was published by Edward H. Mitchell under his own name. (Mitchell also owned the Pacific Novelty Company.)

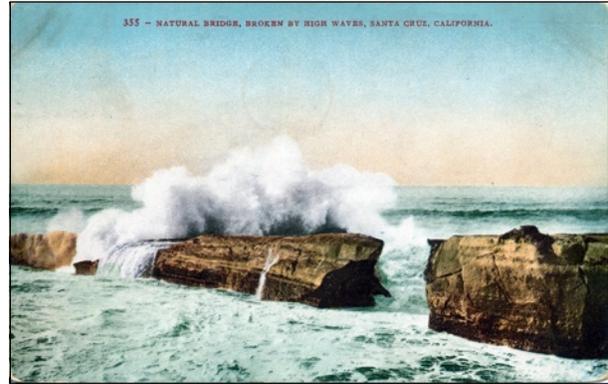


Figure 16. Postcard: “Natural Bridge, Broke by High Waves, Santa Cruz, Calif.” Published by Edward H. Mitchell, San Francisco. No. 355. Postmarked: 1910.



Figure 17. Postcard: “View from Cliff Drive, Santa Cruz, Cal.” Distributed by Pacific Distributors. Photograph by the Santa Cruz County Advertising Committee. Unmailed

Recent Changes

Probably published in the 1960s or 1970s, the postcard in figure 17 was still being sold in gift shops in the 1980s. It is essentially the same scene as in figures 5 through 16, but both the natural bridges have long since collapsed. Bird rock is on the far left with birds on it.



Figure 18. Photograph: “Bird Rock.” Photographer: Frank Perry, August 1994.



Figure 19. Digital photograph: “Bird Rock.” Photographer: Frank Perry, December 9, 2014.



Figure 20. Digital photograph: “Cormorants on Bird Rock.” Photographer: Frank Perry, May 10, 2015.

Figure 19 shows the scene as photographed by the author in 2014. Large waves were crashing over the rock that morning, much as they did when C. L. Aydelotte took his famous photograph 112 years earlier. When the sea is calm, Bird Rock earns its name. In the last image, cormorants and a gull perch on its flat top. Pelicans also commonly gather here.

Concluding Remarks

The photographs and postcards of the natural bridges at the foot of Columbia Avenue help illustrate how one image was used by several different postcard publishers and the varying ways that color was added. The doctored photograph from the Edward H. Mitchell files serves as a reminder that long before digital image manipulation, photographs could nevertheless be cleverly altered. While there are many examples of blatant modifications, this example shows that they could also be changed in less obvious ways—ways unknowable from the postcard without background research of the image. It is important for historical researchers to be aware of this practice and to know that it was especially prevalent on postcards.

Acknowledgments

Most of the images in this essay were collected by the author over a period of thirty years. Others are individually credited. The author thanks Stanley D. Stevens, Marla Novo, Jill Perry, and Clancy Gehrke, and for their help.

About the Author

Frank Perry has been studying and writing about natural sciences and regional history topics for over thirty-five years. He is the author of ten books, including several on California lighthouses. In 2007, he co-authored *Lime Kiln Legacies: The History of the Lime Industry in Santa Cruz County*, published by the Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History. Since 2013 he has served as curator of the Capitola Historical Museum.

Notes

¹ Dorothy B. Ryan, *Picture Postcards in the United States, 1893-1918*, (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1982), 2.

² There are examples of this among various collections of postcards mailed from Santa Cruz County in the early 1900s. In those days post offices stamped cards at both the sending and receiving end. One example is a postcard postmarked Capitola, 10 a.m. and received at Alameda,

5:30 p.m., the same day. The message says, “see you tonight.”

³ Dorothy B. Ryan, *Picture Postcards in the United States, 1893-1918*, (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1982), 22.

⁴ “J. W. Dickinson of the Big Curio. . .,” *Evening Sentinel*, August 15, 1905, 5:1

⁵ “Just received. . .,” *Evening Sentinel*, Sept. 1, 1906, 7:2.

⁶ Frank Perry, “Ephemeral Features—West Cliff Drive Photo Parade,” *Santa Cruz County History Journal*, Number 1, 1994, 99-104.

⁷ Pronunciation according an interview by the author on May 12, 1997, with the late Harold van Gorder, who grew up in Santa Cruz and attended Santa Cruz High School with Aydelotte’s son, Jack.

⁸ “Chas. P. [sic] Aydelotte Passes Away Sunday After Long Illness,” *Santa Cruz Evening News*, Dec. 22, 1924, 8:3. The middle initial should be “L.”

⁹ “The ladies. . .,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, October 6, 1909, 4:3.

¹⁰ “In Honor of Mrs. M’Crackin,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, Nov. 9, 1915, 2:7.

¹¹ “J. Aydelotte, Former S. C. Boy, Elevated,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, Dec. 8, 1936, 2:1.

¹² “Two Professional Photographers. . .,” *Santa Cruz Surf*, July 5, 1904, 1:1, 7:2. See also: “Quite superior to any view on sale. . .,” *Santa Cruz Surf*, June 25, 1906, 2:1.

¹³ An example is a photograph of John C. Frémont visiting the Big Trees, May 4, 1888. The photograph says “Aydelotte Photo” at the bottom in his characteristic white lettering, yet this photograph would have been taken by either Reese, McKean, or Morris. These were the photographers listed by the *Sentinel* (May 5, 1888, p. 3) and *Surf* (May 5, 1888, p. 4) as covering the event. Aydelotte did not arrive in the area until around 1900.

Presumably Aydelotte purchased or otherwise acquired the negative.

¹⁴ “Chas. P. [sic] Aydelotte Passes Away Sunday After Long Illness,” *Santa Cruz Evening News*, Dec. 22, 1924, 8:3.

¹⁵ “Mr. Aydelotte. . .,” *Evening Sentinel*, March 11, 1902, 3:1.

¹⁶ Sam Stark, “Edward H. Mitchell and his Postcard Company,” Part III, (*Santa Cruz Postcard Club Newsletter*, October, 1995), 6. This article was earlier published in the *Bulletin of the Golden Gate Postcard Club*, and in *American Postcard Journal* (1979).

¹⁷ A copy of the photograph “Maid of the Mist” is in the California Historical Society library: <http://digitallibrary.usc.edu/cdm/ref/collection/p15799coll65/id/19366>. Postcards of the “Maid of the Mist” can be viewed online in the Santa Cruz Public Library collection. See also Preston Sawyer, “Santa Cruz Yesterdays: ‘Old Man of the Sea’ A Half Century Ago,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, August 14, 1955, 24:1.

¹⁸ Postcard published by Detroit Photographic Co., postmarked and dated June 26, 1904. Author’s collection. See figure 6. There could be earlier ones, but this is the earliest known to the author at the time of this writing.

¹⁹ This is according to the antique dealer from whom the photograph was acquired in 2014. It was one of a large quantity of Mitchell postcard original photographs acquired by the dealer.

²⁰ “Worst Storm for 27 Years Visits Monterey Bay,” *Evening Sentinel*, March 14, 1905, 1:4.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ “Considerable damage. . .,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, March 15, 1905, 3:1.