

Scandinavian Oystermen of Alvarado

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Introduction

I research and write on the history of Union City (formerly the towns of Alvarado and Decoto). In my research I look through census records. In the 1900 census for Alvarado, I ran across a single building occupied by mostly Swedes. Alvarado is not known for having a population of Scandinavians. The census records from different years show a small smattering of Swedes and other Scandinavians. The men in this building, most of them listed as boarders, all have the same occupation, oysterman. In 1900, it was common to have a boarding house occupied with men working the same trade and probably working for the same company.

Since I am part Swedish, this hot spot of Swedes and other Scandinavians in Alvarado stood out and piqued my interest. I wanted to know more about what these men were doing. Why were they all in the oyster industry? This paper covers my research and my findings.

The 1900 Census

The census is organized by building or dwelling. The first building surveyed is building #1, then #2 and so on. If you know where a particular family is located, you can determine location of other buildings based on the known family. The building in question is #293, but it is not near other buildings with families that have homes documented. It is unclear from the order of the buildings as to where the building is located. The census for Alvarado lists its boundaries, so it is certain that the building was in that boundary.

The census lists a total of 28 men as living in the building. There is a foreman listed as the head of household. There is a cook and waiter listed. It is possible that the cook handled the cooking needs of the boarding house. The waiter more likely worked outside of the boarding house. The rest of the men in the house are listed as boarders and for occupation, oysterman. A list of all of the men, their age and nationality is below:

Anderson, John	50	Swedish	Foreman
Anderson, Andreas	40	Swedish	
Anderson, Chas R	26	Swedish	
Anderson, Conrad	36	Swedish	
Anderson, Gust	25	Swedish	
Anderson, Moritz	19	Swedish	
Anderson, Nels	28	Swedish	
Anderson, Wm A	20	Swedish	
Borjison, Andreas	26	Swedish	
Danielson, Ivan	43	Swedish	Cook
Ewig, Ernest E	19	German	
Foster, Joseph M	17	German	Waiter
Hultberg, James	30	Swedish	
Jackson, John A	45	Swedish	
Johnson, Fred	22	Swedish	

Johnson, John A	38	Swedish
Larsen, Hans	42	Swedish
Linstrom, John	43	Swedish
Nelson, Arvid	22	Swedish
Nelson, Chas	33	Swedish
Nelson, John	19	Swedish
Nelson, Martin	25	Swedish
Olsen, Peter E	25	Danish
Peterson, Chas	32	Swedish
Peterson, John R	20	Swedish
Quist, Neils C	33	Norwegian/Swedish
Sevenson, Chas	33	Swedish
Swanson, Fred B	48	Norwegian

There are 23 Swedes, two Germans, one Danish, one Norwegian and one Norwegian/Swedish mix. The men vary in age from 50 to 17. The longest had been in the United States for 30 years, the shortest are recent immigrants, and the average is about 10 years. All are immigrants, except Ewig, who was born in the United States.

The Oyster Industry

The commercial oyster industry in the San Francisco Bay area started in 1869 with the importation of eastern oysters and the establishment of oyster beds on the bay. Oyster seedlings (young oysters) were imported from the East Coast and planted in shallow water beds in San Francisco Bay. Production of oysters reached its peak between 1889 and 1904. The industry was having trouble by 1908 when pollutants in the bay affected the quality of the oysters.

Year	Pounds of Oysters Harvested (in thousands)
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1888	910
1889	1,023
1890	1,059
1891	1,107
1892	1,249
1895	1,149
1899	2,730
1904	1,321
1908	728
1912	475

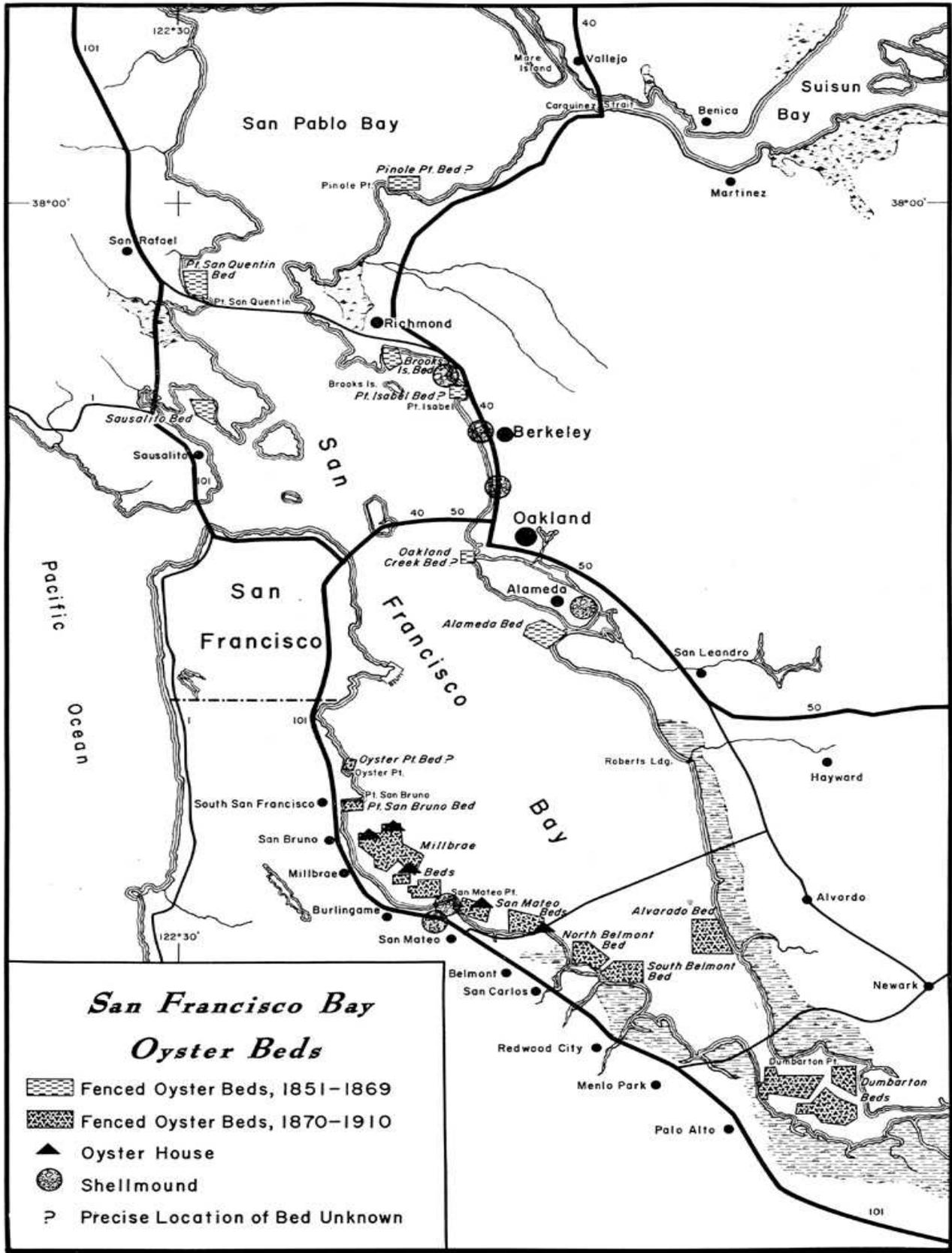
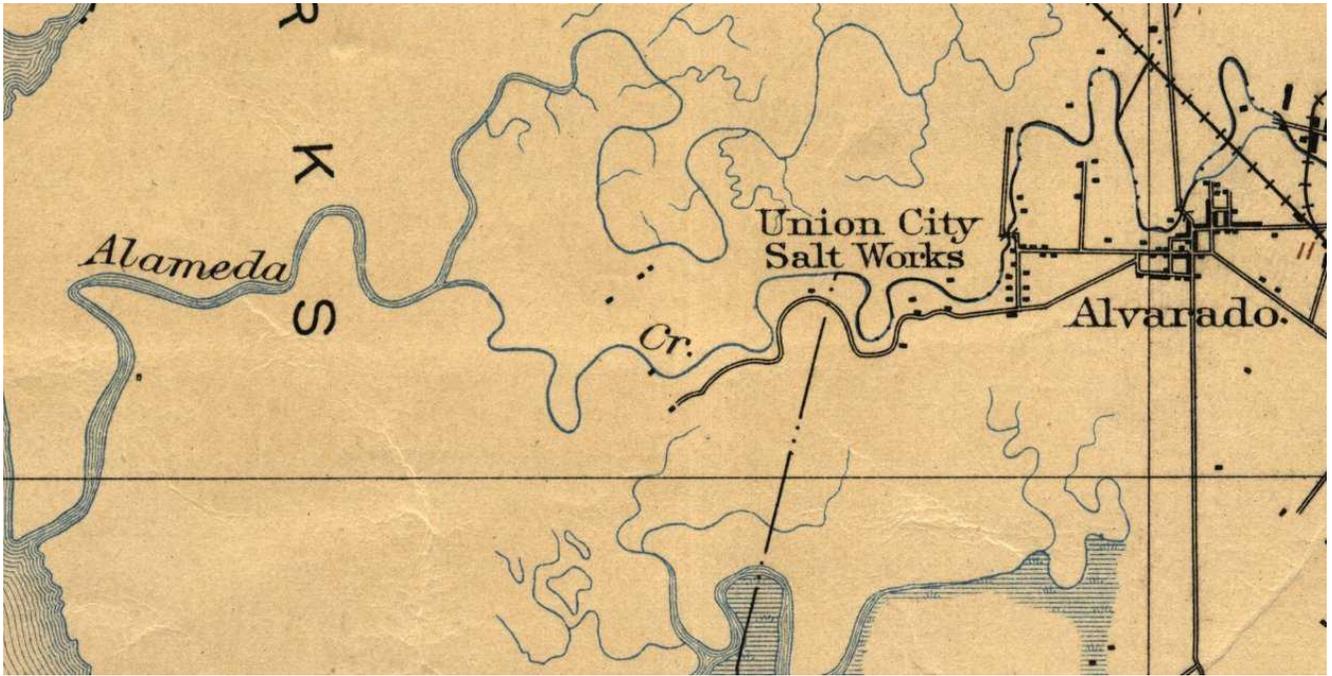


FIGURE 6. San Francisco Bay oyster beds.



(USGS Map of Alvarado from 1899. Note single building on far left near mouth of Alameda Creek)



(Men working oysterbeds – San Francisco Call Newspaper - 1898)

The largest company, Morgan Oyster Company, had a number of oyster beds in the south end of the Bay, including San Bruno, Millbrae, Dumbarton, south Belmont, north Belmont, San Mateo and Alvarado. Each of these locations had a building for housing the oystermen working the local beds. As the needs of each oyster bed changed, the oystermen would move from location to location.

The oyster beds in Alvarado were described as "in a very exposed situation" and exposed to heavy seas caused by winter winds. The Alvarado oysterbeds were abandoned in 1890 because of the heavy seas. The men hired into the oyster industry were "recruited from the ranks of the sea-going class, nearly always numerous about the wharves of San Francisco, and are constantly changing, none of them developing into regular oystermen. About 90 per cent of them are of Scandinavian origin."

A newspaper report from "San Francisco Call", October 3, 1903, details the overturning of a schooner working for Morgan Oyster, and listed four men on board. Three of them (Gustavsen, Larsen, and Mikkelsen) were Scandinavian. In the August 1, 1909 edition of the same newspaper, there is a listing for the employment firm of Murray and Ready, a "leading employment agency", which lists a need for "2 Scandinavian oystermen".

Conclusions

The building

Since Morgan Oyster Company did have an oyster bed near Alvarado and it is documented that each bed was associated with a building to house the oystermen, it is quite possible that the building documented in the census was this building and the men worked for Morgan Oyster Company. At the time of the census, the Alvarado beds were no longer in production, but it is possible that Morgan Oyster Company was using the Alvarado building and having the men travel to the oyster beds, like the Belmont beds, just across the bay from Alvarado. A USGS map from 1899 shows a single building close to the entrance of Alameda Creek. This might be the building for the oystermen.

The census for 1880 does not list any building with oystermen in Alvarado. The 1910 census does not list any building with oystermen in Alvarado. The 1890 census was destroyed by fire and bad data retention policy, so information from that census is not available. This means that the building was in use for a relatively short time and probably was disused when the oyster industry declined about 1908.

The Men

Various sources point out the fact that the whole seafaring industry was dominated by Scandinavians. An article in "The World" newspaper from 1990 says that "in 1900, Scandinavians made up 5 percent of the city's work force but 38 percent of the sailors and boatmen. A survey by the Sailors' Union of the Pacific at the turn of the century showed its members to be 40 percent Scandinavian..."

There was fleet of boats that hauled goods up and down the West Coast and the same newspaper article said, "It is estimated that 90 percent of the seamen in the coastwise trade were Scandinavians. The coastwise fleet of about 300 steam schooners,....., became known as the 'Scandinavian Navy'."

From other sources, it appears that most of the Scandinavians who emigrated to California were seamen. They worked in the only trade that they knew, working with boats and on the water. If the early workers in the oyster industry were Scandinavians, then it might be likely that this demographic would be kept with future hires because of a common language and common heritage.

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