

“PORT COSTA,” CALIFORNIA WHEAT CENTER*

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Less than a century ago, California ranked among the world's leading wheat producers. Enormous harvests from the Central Valley were loaded for export at San Francisco Bay, and sailing ships carried the greater part of this wheat around Cape Horn to Great Britain. At first the grain was handled at San Francisco and lesser Bay ports, but in the 1880's a new warehousing and loading complex arose to become the shipping center for the state's wheat. An interesting combination of geographical and economic factors brought this unique center, "Port Costa," into being on an unlikely site, entirely removed from previous development.¹

Wheat exporting from California began in earnest in the last 1860's and continued until just after the turn of the century. Its most profitable years were the 1880's, and "Port Costa" grew up in answer to the demands of that decade. Five times between 1872 and 1884 the state was the nation's leading wheat producer. The largest annual wheat export ever made from California was some thirty-nine million bushels dispatched to Europe in the crop year 1881-82. By 1884, the state's wheat lands had reached their maximum extent of more than three million acres. During this era, California's agriculture was concerned almost exclusively with wheat growing.

Today the town of Port Costa is a tiny, half-deserted community on the south shore of Carquinez Strait, midway between Crockett and Martinez. The present cluster of buildings standing near the railroad tracks gives no indication of the bustle of former years. Its name was once well known wherever California wheat was traded—English grain dealers spoke of their ships leaving "Port Costa," not San Francisco. At its greatest extent the wheat shipping center consisted of several vast wharves and warehouses hugging the shore for some four miles, from Crockett to a point just east of Port Costa. In common parlance, "Port Costa" referred to them all. Though narrow, the warehouses measured up to one thousand feet in length, and the largest wharf covered some two-thirds of a mile of shoreline. Their great size provided storage for several hundred thousand tons of grain. Both warehouses and wharves were built out over the water, and the complex assumed a strip pattern due to the location. The hills rise steeply from the water's edge to heights of five hundred to seven hundred feet, and even today there has been little development of this region due to its relief. Indeed, a contemporary wrote that the "Port Costa" warehouses appeared to be clinging to these hillsides, seemingly in constant danger of falling.²

* This paper was originally submitted for last year's publication honoring Dr. John E. Kesseli. Space limitations prevented its inclusion in that issue.

¹ This paper is based on information drawn from the *Pacific Rural Press* for the decade 1880-1890, and miscellaneous pamphlets on Contra Costa County in the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. Another excellent source is *Wheat, An Illustrated Description of California's Leading Industry*, (San Francisco: 1887), p. 48.

² *Wheat . . . op. cit.*, p. 77.

"Port Costa" was successful from the outset, quickly becoming the focal point for the export of California's wheat. During the crop year 1880-81, when only the first warehousing company was complete, it captured almost one-quarter of all wheat loadings at California ports, and three years later the complex was serving over one-half of the wheat carriers leaving San Francisco Bay. By 1887 four-fifths of all the wheat shipped reputedly passed over these wharves.³ There were two basic reasons for this success and for the choice of the awkward shoreline location. First, from 1880 onward, the state's main arteries of transportation converged at the narrow channel of Carquinez Strait. Second, a number of factors tended to make wheat loading cheaper at "Port Costa" than elsewhere.

Carquinez Strait is the single natural opening connecting California's great interior valley with the sea. This ancient canyon cuts the final barrier of the Coast Range, allowing the waters of the Sacramento and San Joaquin Rivers to reach San Francisco Bay. Prior to the advent of the railroad, these rivers carried most of the state's traffic. Carquinez Strait was so busy that there was even talk of the emergence on its shores of a city rivaling San Francisco. However, with the 1870's and widespread construction, the railroads largely took the place of the rivers. Nevertheless, river traffic continued to move considerable amounts of produce, especially in the Sacramento Valley, and Carquinez Strait assumed renewed importance when main rail lines joined the river traffic along its shores. In 1877-78, a track connecting Oakland and the San Joaquin Valley was built along the south side of the strait. The following year an already existent line to the north was shortened to a new terminus at Benicia, and a rail ferry began operation to a new landing on the south shore, Port Costa. Consequently, virtually all of California's wheat harvest was brought together enroute to market. Not only did rail and river traffic converge at this point, but deep water close to shore allowed the easy approach of ocean-going vessels. Here, where river, rail, and ocean shipping could lie side by side, was an ideal site for a port, with one exception: the relief was an obvious obstacle to building. However, the extensive waterfront available and the saving of many other expenses were to offset the cost and inconvenience engendered by the terrain.

Any reduction in expense is of utmost importance to a low-priced, bulky commodity such as wheat. Consequently, facilities offering maximum savings were attractive to the trade. San Francisco, the state's commercial center and the original wheat exporter, was one of the most expensive ports in the world, due to large fees collected for financing harbor improvements. At other Bay ports there were no such charges, and for this reason Oakland and Vallejo took over considerable wheat loading once they were reached by railroads. However, it became evident that there were still greater potential savings at the "Port Costa" site. Rail freight charges were fifty cents per ton less to Port Costa than to either San Francisco and Oakland, while Vallejo was simply cut off from mainline traffic. Then, too, the proximity of rail and river to deep water shipping possible at "Port

³ For activity at "Port Costa" see: *Pacific Rural Press*, July 30, 1881, p. 72; *Report on Internal Commerce of the United States*, House Exec. Docs., 48th Cong., 2nd Sess., No. 7, pt. 3, 1885, p. 440; Contra Costa Board of Trade, *Contra Costa County, California: Its Situation . . . and Productions* (Martinez, 1887), p. 8.

Costa" was advantageous in saving both expense and time in loading. Extra hauling, which had been a particular problem at San Francisco, was unnecessary. At "Port Costa" ships could be loaded simultaneously from barges on one side and railroad cars on the other. The economies possible easily outweighed the cost of the necessary towage of empty vessels from San Francisco to Carquinez.⁴ Under these circumstances, as the wheat trade was booming and further business was anticipated, there was incentive for the construction of large loading facilities. Once success touched the first "Port Costa" enterprise, warehouse followed warehouse, forming a center for the wheat trade.

The first warehousing concern was under construction by the middle of 1880, following by a few months the opening of the Benicia-Port Costa railroad ferry. This concern, the Port Costa Warehouse and Dock Company, was located just to the west of the ferry landing and the small valley which provides room for the few buildings of the town. The next year the facilities of the Granger's Business Association were begun still further west, and beyond them the townsite of Crockett was surveyed on a relatively subdued portion of the hills. In 1883 the largest warehousing facility on the Pacific Coast, the Nevada Warehouse and Dock Company, was under construction on the other side of Port Costa. Its buildings, which were capable of holding one hundred thousand tons of wheat, marked the easternmost limit of the port. Other concerns were constructed in quick succession, giving the complex its greatest extent by the early 1890's. The additions were a Crockett branch of Vallejo's long-established Starr Mill, the California Wharf and Warehouse Company, and, finally, Heald's agricultural machinery factory at Crockett, which was converted for wheat storage. Nine major buildings serving the port stretched along the water's edge.

"Port Costa's" life was brief. It shipped wheat for some twenty years, then began to disintegrate, together with the state's grain trade. With the fall of international prices and the rise of vast new producing areas, the wheat trade had virtually disappeared by 1910, and California was turning to a variety of other and more profitable crops. Before the end of the century the Starr Mill had closed. Ultimately, its buildings and Heald's became Crockett's California and Hawaiian Sugar Refining Corporation. In 1910 the Nevada Docks burned. For a number of years produce other than wheat, chiefly barley, passed through the warehouses. Fire claimed another company in the 1920's and yet another at the end of the next decade. Only a portion of the Granger's Business Association has continued to stand, sagging and unused. However, at low tide the outlines of some of the other structures are still visible, marked by hundreds of charred pilings. Although the ferry was abandoned long ago, railroading has kept the now desolate community of Port Costa alive. The "Port Costa" known to the world was created by wheat, and, having no further reason for being, it disappeared in the wake of the trade.

⁴ *Commerce and Industries of the Pacific Coast of North America* (San Francisco: A. L. Bancroft, 1882), p. 204.