

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

# Drawbridge, CA

*Re-turning the tide*

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To find out how you can become  
involved in the South Bay restoration  
project, visit the project website at  
[www.southbayrestoration.org](http://www.southbayrestoration.org).

For volunteer opportunities at Bay Area  
Refuges, contact the Volunteer  
Coordinator at 510/792 0222.

**References:**

Dewey, O.L. Drawbridge, California: A  
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New York City: Walker & Co., 2002.

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Many thanks to: San Francisco Bay  
Wildlife Society

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*“My mother was the marsh.  
My father was the railroad. I  
was born on Station Island.  
Some now say that I am a ghost  
town, sinking in the mud.  
Maybe I am, but I hate the  
name.*

*So do the people who remember.  
They remember the independent  
spirit, the close friendships, the  
happy days and their paradise  
that was lost.”*

*- Drawbridge*

*(from O.L. Dewey's Drawbridge,  
California: A hand-me-down history)*



The beauty, the isolation and the intimate bond with humans that defined the life of Drawbridge are reflected in the 9,000 acres of South Bay salt ponds recently acquired by the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge. Like this old town, they are true children of both the surrounding wetlands and of human innovation and impact. But as mother marsh slowly reclaims her child, Drawbridge, we are reminded that she just may need some help with these new lands, which will soon become the focus of the largest wetland restoration ever attempted on the West coast.



## They met on Station Island.

South San Francisco Bay Tidal Marsh, ca. 1880



San Francisco Estuary Institute

South San Francisco Bay Tidal Marsh, ca. 1880



San Francisco Estuary Institute

*In the 1800's, tidal marsh abounded throughout the San Francisco Bay area.*

*Today, over 85 percent of those marshes have been filled, diked or otherwise changed.*

*What will this map look like in another 100 years?*

They named me Drawbridge. I was born in 1876 when a small bridgetender's cabin appeared on Station Island, tucked away in the far southeast corner of the San Francisco Bay.

My first resident arrived shortly thereafter, a lone man charged with opening the bridges to boats passing through the briny shipping channels of Coyote and Warm Springs Sloughs. Slowly but surely, a crew of curious and inventive settlers followed, people who forsook the comforts of nearby towns and chose instead to live amongst solitary stilted cabins fashioned to withstand the daily tides. The railroad, taken over by Southern Pacific in 1887, brought a growing community to my shores. By 1926, nearly 90 structures, including many hunting clubs and family homes, dotted the railway that served as "Main Street".

This growth, mirrored throughout the South Bay, was not without a price. As the marsh became the primary area for sewage disposal, her waters became saturated with waste, and she could no longer sustain such lush wildlife populations. Communities began pumping groundwater from deep freshwater wells, causing her surfaces to sink. Along with the growing population came an increased need for land. The marsh shrank in size as the surrounding towns began filling in her shores, pushing ever closer to the bay.

During this time, salt production became a lucrative business in the area. Ohlone settlers had been harvesting salt through evaporation of Bay water for thousands of years, a process later adopted by the Spanish and finally the fortune-seeking California immigrants in the mid 1800's. In 1859, the largest vein of silver ore in the country was discovered in Nevada and demanded vast amounts of California salt to fuel the purification process. Natural salt ponds were soon exhausted and a new process, involving solar evaporation through a series of diked pools, spread artificial salt ponds throughout the Bay Area and onto my shores at Station Island. These man-made pools cut into 30,000 acres of marshland as the salt industry boomed well into the late 1940's.

These changes affected my community greatly. Though my residents loved my solitude, others rode the Southern Pacific through town, never stopping to know me. They saw only a secluded town, surrounded by polluted waters, in constant struggle to rebuild homes lost to the sinking shores. They saw my father's ruggedness reflected in the people who lived here, and listened to the rumors of gaming, guns and violence that plagued my southern shores. They decided I was wily and strange and pronounced me an outcast. Vandalism drove away my last resident in 1979. Only then did I truly become what I am now: a ghost town.



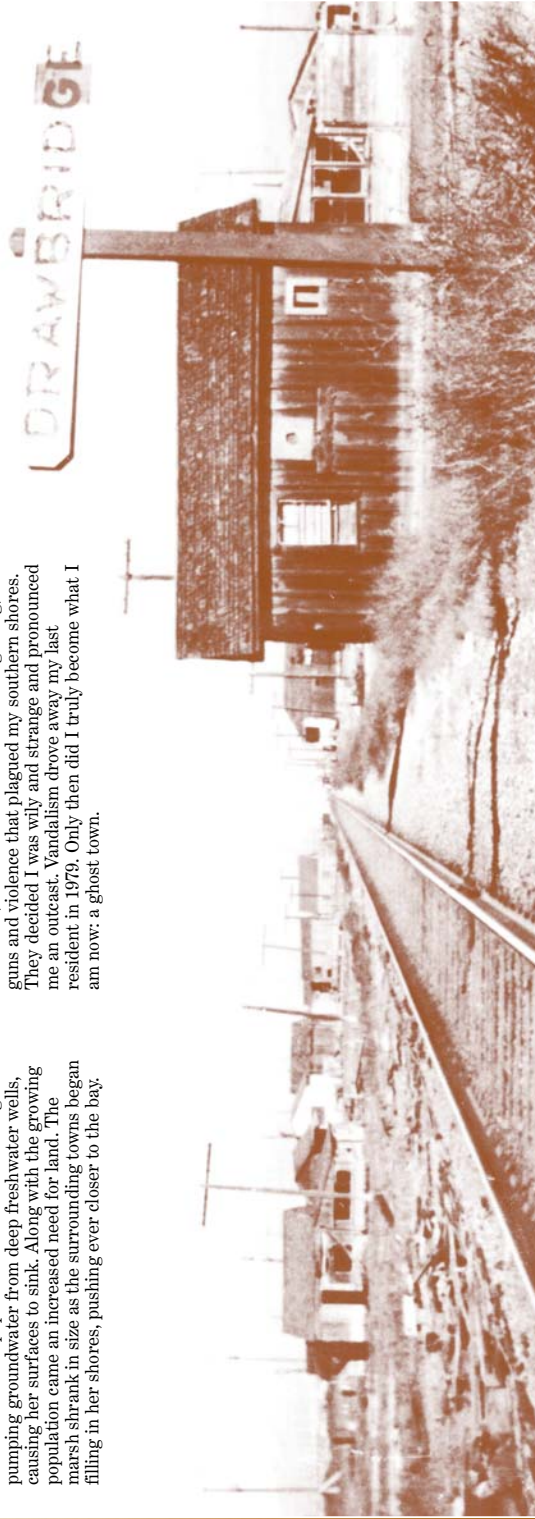
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**Above:** Weekend hunters pose in front of a gun club.  
**Right:** Neltie Dolfin, one of the last residents of Drawbridge, after a hunt.  
**Below:** A family enjoys a stroll on the marsh.

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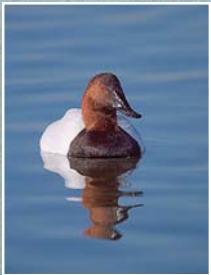


## My mother was the marsh.



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*A great egret finds abundant food in the marsh.*



© Peter La Tourette

*Canvasback were once plentiful in the South Bay.*

In her youth she enfolded the Bay generously. She stretched lazily from San Pablo to the south San Francisco Bay, a vast carpet of pickleweed and cord grass, glossy mud and briny water that blurred into the hills beyond. Within her deceptively barren flats,

wildlife flourished. Harvest mice nestled in the fiery orange dodder as hungry hawks scanned the horizon. Migrating waterfowl swarmed the sky, casting deep shadows on the fish below. The ebb of her tides revealed abundant crabs, oysters, mussels and a host of tiny creatures teeming in the mudflats. Seals navigated the turns of her watery veins alongside boats made of tule, crafted by Ohlone fishermen.

## My father was the railroad.

He was born of the desire to unite the workers in the north to the rising commercial areas and windswept beaches of the south. He made his way slowly at first, cradling the marshy expanses of the East Bay, then gathered momentum and blasted through the southern mountains. Four years and six million dollars later, his steel fingers stretched from Alameda, through the town of Newark, and on to Santa Cruz. In his outstretched palm lay tiny Station Island, a speck on the map of the South Pacific Coast Railroad.



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*South Pacific Coast Railroad ca. 1890.*



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## Looking to the Future.

Another transformation now awaits Station Island, as part of a large-scale restoration project planned for the San Francisco Bay area. In early 2003, the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge acquired an additional 9,000 acres of South Bay salt ponds. Like Drawbridge, these salt ponds boast a curious past, shaped by both human and environmental forces. Unlike Drawbridge, it will take much more time and work for the marsh to reclaim them.



*Non-native plant removal on a Refuge marsh.*

Imagine looking through the window of one of the first trains that passed through Drawbridge and the surrounding wetlands along the South Pacific rails. What would you have seen? A few growing towns nestled in a vast, lush marsh painted with sloughs and vibrant with wildlife. Look through the window of a modern train and the view is much different. How has it changed? What will we see in another 100 years?

The Refuge's acquisition is part of a larger 16,500 acre South Bay salt pond purchase, with the remaining lands to be managed by the California Department of Fish and Game. The South Bay acquisition, funded by the State of California, the Hewlett, Packard, Goldman and Moore Foundations and the US Fish & Wildlife Service, offers a chance to recapture a part of the original landscape. Though the acquisition is an exciting victory for environmental advocates, the proposed restoration is a massive endeavor, requiring cooperative efforts by the California State Coastal Conservancy, the California Department of Fish and Game and the US Fish & Wildlife Service.



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*The endangered California clapper rail will benefit from the proposed South Bay restoration project.*

The long-term mission of the restoration is to create a more natural, self-sustaining ecosystem and watershed that will have lasting benefits for the Bay Area and beyond. Restored marshes will expand the ranges of endangered California clapper rails and salt marsh harvest mice. Pocketed in fields of pickleweed, some areas will remain salt ponds, sustaining abundant populations of brine shrimp that many birds rely on. Fish and other aquatic life will be able to enter areas long cut off from the tides.

Migratory birds will take advantage of more space and food as they rest on their yearly journey from Alaska to South America along the Pacific Flyway. Amidst all this, people will wind their way through the wetlands, enjoying the many opportunities for wildlife recreation as they discover the beauty of these important lands.

### South Bay Restoration Project



California State Coastal Conservancy