

BILL HILFIKER

# Early Humboldt Companies

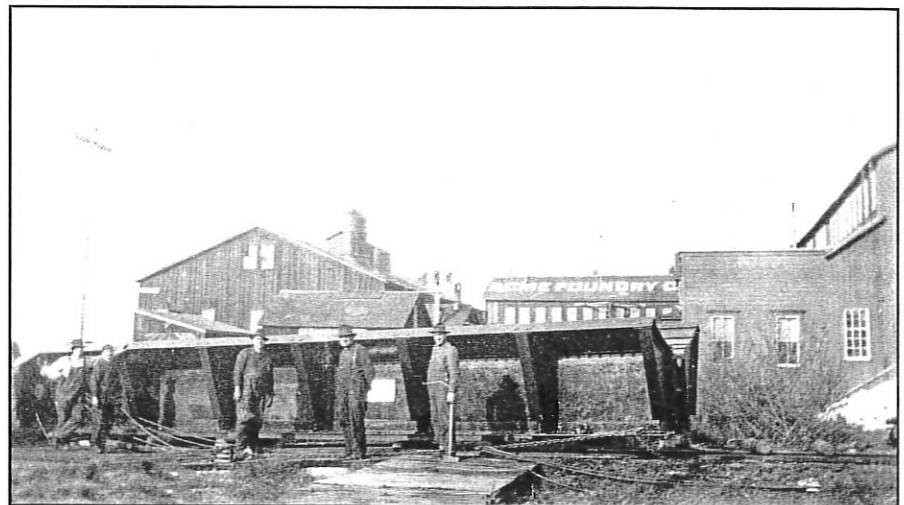
*By William (Bill) Hilfiker*

Early Humboldt County was isolated by the surrounding mountains; supplies had to come in by ship, making resupply slow and expensive. The huge redwood logs required specialized equipment, requiring Humboldters to be self-sufficient and build and repair most of their own logging and sawmill equipment.

I was born in 1931, as times were changing. The railroad and highways broke Humboldt's isolation, and outside supplies now competed with local products. My father, Harold O. Hilfiker, operated the Hilfiker Concrete Tile Works, and wanted me to see the local businesses before they also changed with the times. Unfortunately the Humboldt Brewery closed before I was born, but I got to see most of the rest. I will give you a tour as seen through a small boy's eyes.

The Acme Foundry and Eureka Boiler Works were owned by Lynn Vietor, one of my dad's friends. The foundry and boiler works steel warehouses were located east of the present Samoa Bridge, on the bay. This location allowed them to receive

shipments by water. The foundry and warehouse were torn down, and the property now stands vacant. The boiler works manufacturing plant is further inland on the same site. The Eureka Boiler Works moved to a smaller more modern building in



HUMBOLDT COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

*Acme Foundry*

Arcata and still operates as a steel fabrication shop, with different owners.

When my father needed steel he would sometimes take me with him to the boiler works. My father would back his 1934 Ford flat bed truck down the center aisle of the Eureka Boiler Works warehouse to load it. The warehouse was a big wooden building, kind of like a barn. Steel was stacked neatly on either side of the aisle and it seemed to me they had every size and shape that I could imagine: bars, angles, channels, and flat plate. A warehouseman would load the steel we needed with a bridge crane. The boiler works manufacturing plant was a large steel building with more equipment for fabricating steel than I could imagine. They made the Dolbeer Steam Donkeys (that yarded the big logs and put the oxen out of business) and boilers for the early steam-powered saw mills. The foreman showed me a steam boiler that they were building, and I was convinced they could build anything out of steel, and probably had.

When we visited the Acme Foundry the first thing I saw was a pile of old engine blocks and miscellaneous cast iron scrap waiting to be melted. We went into the pattern shop and they had patterns hanging everywhere on the walls and ceiling. The pattern makers took time to explain to me how they made the patterns and how they were used. The measuring tools were slightly larger than standard to compensate for the shrinkage of the molten iron as it cooled. The patterns were very accurately made of wood, and in such a way that they could be removed after the sand was compacted in the mold box. In a simple pattern of a wheel or gear, where the sides are symmetrical, the pattern maker would make a half pattern of the part to be cast. The mold boxes came in two parts, top and bottom. The half pattern was placed in the bottom mold box and the sand



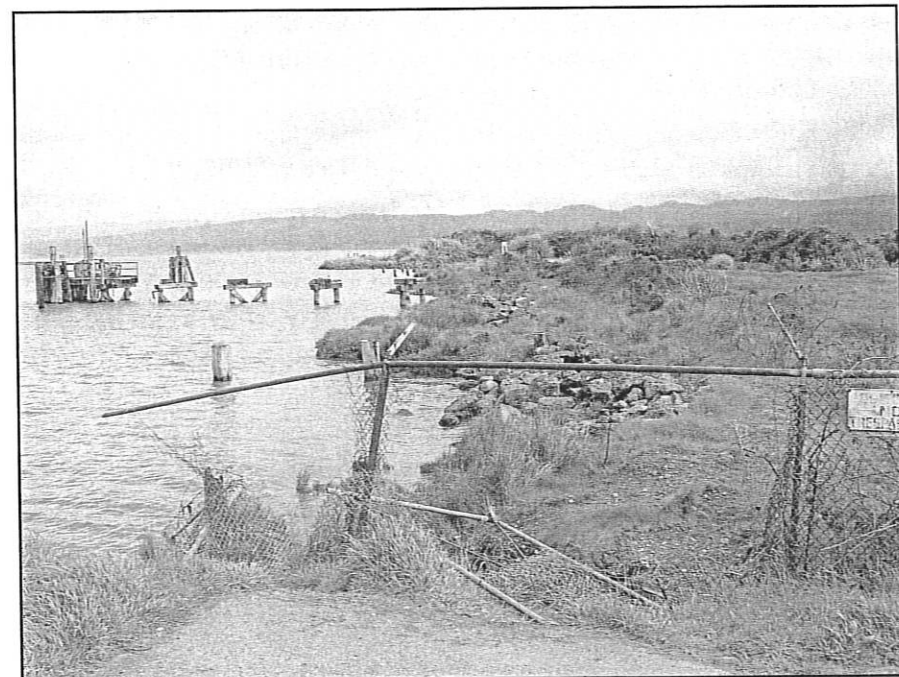
BILL HILFIKER

*Opposite page: The Hilfiker Concrete Tile Works in the 1920s. Above: The author's father, Harold Hilfiker, front, unloading a shipment of corrugated pipe roll.*

compacted, then the pattern was removed and the process was repeated in the top mold box. The top mold box had the channels for the molten iron and vents to allow the air to escape. For a more complex casting, the pattern might have to be taken apart in order to remove it from the sand. The scrap iron was melted in

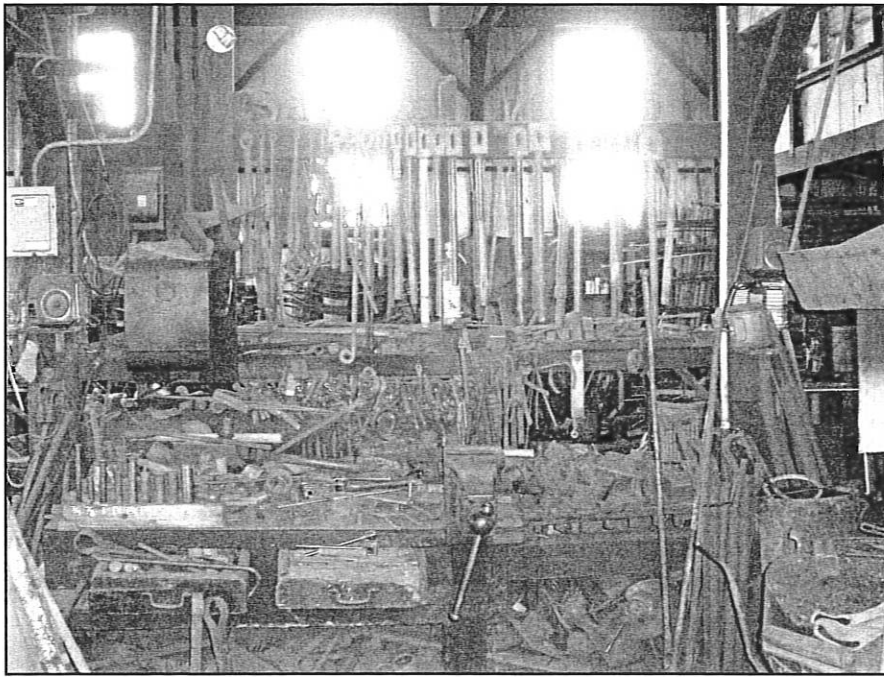
a cupola using coke for heat. When the iron was molten it was poured into a large ladle on a bridge crane which brought it to the mold boxes. The next day the sand was cleaned from the castings and the process was started over again.

When my grandfather, John Hilfiker, needed a wheelbarrow, he



BILL HILFIKER

*Site of the Acme Foundry and Eureka Boiler Works as it appears today, east of the bridge to Samoa.*



*Today the blacksmith shop, now Eureka Spring & Iron, is just as the author remembers it from seventy years ago. The forge is on the right. Tony Liska made many of the tools.*

bought a cast iron wheel from the foundry, a piece of shafting from the boiler works, and built the rest with wood. My father was more modern: he used imported pneumatic wheels on his wheelbarrow.

**S**inclair's Machine Shop, owned by Bill Sinclair and his father, was behind a parking garage they owned on Hillsdale and E Street. If you didn't know it was there you would never find it. They didn't bother to advertise and apparently didn't have to. There was a line shaft that ran along the rafters and supplied power to all the machines, with long flat belts running down to the lathes, shapers, drill press, etc. Bill would flip the belts on and off the machines with a stick. My dad told me to stay away from those belts, as there were not any guards on the machines. Of course, there was no OSHA in those days. I took his advice and still have all my fingers.

When Bill Sinclair's father died, Bill didn't want to do the paper work to operate the machine shop, so my father bought it and moved the equipment and Bill to his plant. Bill's

customers followed him, so things worked out fine until Bill came down with cancer and had to retire. We didn't have a substitute machinist with Bill's knowledge, so we shut the machine shop down.

Hanson had a larger machine shop on Broadway that my father used when he had something to machine that didn't fit Sinclair's equipment. Hanson's is also gone today.

**T**ony Liska started his blacksmith shop in 1935. Tony was the blacksmith, a huge man with a big leather apron covered with soot from the forge. He was very friendly and showed me the art of blacksmithing. My father had a pick and mattock that were worn down, and he wanted to extend the pick points and mattock blade as new. To refurbish such a tool, Tony would place the pick head and a piece of steel the right size in his forge and when it was hot enough to suit him (I can't remember if the pick heads were red or white hot, but they were hot) he would pound them together with his hammer on the anvil, or else with his mechanical hammer. The

mechanical hammer fascinated me as it was operated off the line shaft by a long belt. He could bring the hammer down for just a gentle tap or as hard as the work would take. He would reheat and keep pounding until he was satisfied he had a good weld and the correct shape, then cut any excess material off the end with a tool that looked like a large chisel with a handle on its side. He would place it on the end of the pick and whack it with his hammer, cut the excess off, and finish the point. Tony would do the same with the other end of the pick and then lengthen the blades on the mattock. When he was satisfied, he would stamp them with his sun brand. Look at an old tool and if it has a sun branded on it you will know Tony made it. Tony wasn't through yet: he still had to harden and temper the steel. When this was accomplished, my Dad had a pick and mattock as good as or better than new. Tony Liska, Jr. took over the shop from his dad in 1956 and sold it to Jock McMillan in 1983. Jock is the last industrial blacksmith in Humboldt County, and he is ready to retire.



*The author's father, Harold O. Hilfiker (1902-1980), designed and built the Eureka Concrete Pipe machines.*

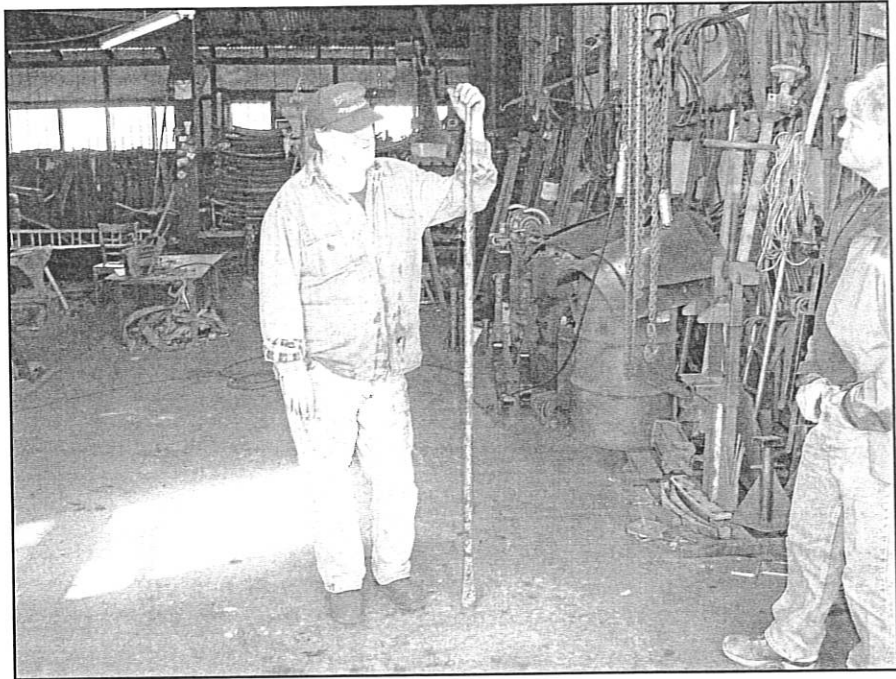
I visited the old blacksmith shop in March 2010 and it was like a time warp. It looked the same to me as it did about seventy-three years ago. All of Tony's tools are next to the forge, the mechanical hammer and drill press still hooked to the line shaft with long flat belts.

My dad took me to the Eureka Woolen Mill following one of my family's many pleasant weekends with our good friends Hugh and Fannie Slater, who had a ranch at the base of Iaqua Buttes. My brother and I loved the ranch, and the barnyard was full of tame animals—you might say Hugh and Fannie made pets out of all their animals. This particular weekend was spring and sheep shearing time. The sheepshearer would go from ranch to ranch shearing the sheep. It was up to the rancher to have the sheep ready for them. This wasn't much of a problem for Hugh, as the dogs did the work. Hugh was wonderful with animals, he didn't yell and holler at his dogs, he just talked to them and motioned, and the dogs knew what he wanted and were happy to do it. The dogs brought the sheep into the corral without any fuss and all Hugh had to do was shut the gate. The sheep-



BILL HILFIKER

*The author, Bill Hilfiker, in boyhood. He became the third generation Hilfiker to operate the Hilfiker Company.*



BILL HILFIKER

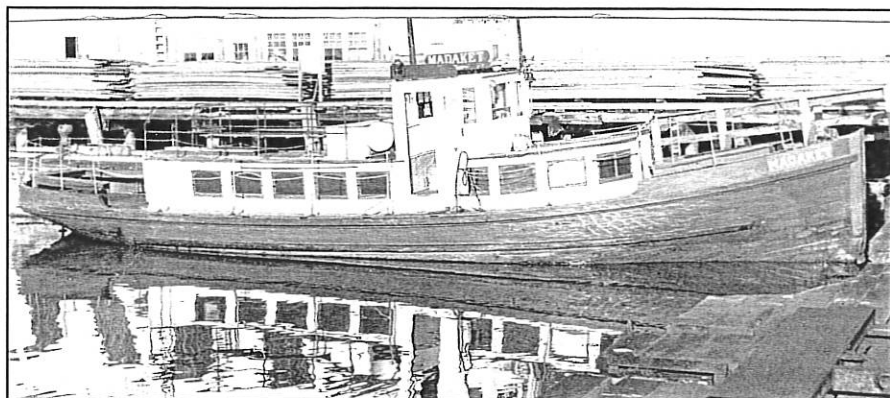
*Jock McMillan, left, and the author's son, William Brent Hilfiker, at Eureka Spring & Iron. McMillan is holding a steel redwood bark peeling bar, which he made to order. Tony Liska first started the blacksmith shop in 1935.*

shearer brought his own tools. He had an electric motor that he hung up in the barn with a long drive shaft with a lot of universal joints that drove the powerful shears that cut through the wool. The poor sheep got handled rough, as he would grab them and quickly flop them on their backs. I think it may have intimidated the sheep so they wouldn't kick so much. Then he would start shearing on the legs and finish up on the back. It didn't take the sheepshearer long to finish shearing them. I think he must have been paid piecework. My father thought that I should see what happened to the wool after it was put in those huge sacks. So, off to the Eureka Woolen Mill we went. At the mill they took the wool, cleaned it, spun it into thread, and wove it into cloth on big looms. There was a showroom that sold wool blankets and wool cloth. The woolen mill closed in the late 1940s, and the building was demolished in 1987.

Sometimes I would go with my father to the DC McDonald Company to buy cement. The DC McDonald

Company sold all kinds of building material. The cement came in cloth sacks that needed to be returned after they were emptied. The DC McDonald Company is no longer in business and the building is now a shoe store.

It was a treat for me to go to work with my father on Saturdays at Hilfiker Concrete Tile Works. Dad would explain how the equipment worked and what the men did. If he was busy with a customer I would go exploring. My grandfather, John Hilfiker, built the old plant. It was an old unpainted wooden building at the railroad track and Fifth Street, in Bucksport (now Hilfiker Lane). I liked to climb up on the top of the plant where the gravel screens were. The mechanics of the equipment fascinated me. There was a small bin in the ground where the McLaughlin brothers emptied their stick wagons. A stick wagon had 2 x 4 slats for the wagon bed that could be turned sideways to allow the sand and gravel to fall out the bottom of the wagon. The bin fed a bucket elevator, which



*The Madaket in its working days, circa 1935.*

consisted of a long endless belt with cast iron buckets riveted to it. I think the buckets were probably cast at the Acme Foundry. The buckets dumped the sand and gravel into a large rotary screen that was set at an angle so the large gravel would run to the far end of the screen as it rotated. The screen had small holes at the front that let the sand fall into the first storage bin; the second screen was larger and allowed the small gravel to fall into the second bin; and the last screen was the largest for the large rock for the last bin. Dad said not to walk on the sand as it could cave in and bury me, but that it was

okay to walk on the gravel. It was fun to walk on the gravel and make small landslides. Dad would have been in big trouble with Mom if she knew what I was doing.

When I got bored exploring around the plant, I would walk down Fifth Street across the railroad track, past Sid's house on the right. I think Sid was some sort of a watchman for the Elk River Lumber Company and lived in a company house. He was a nice guy and would wave at me if he saw me walking by. There was a beach with nice clean sand on the bay, now called "stinky beach." I made sand castles and watched as

the waves took them away. My shoes usually got wet in the process. Dad bought me a pair of black rubber boots to wear at the beach. He glued a star and crescent that he cut out of a red inner tube on them. Boy was I proud of my new boots. Now I could go wading. The new boots worked fine until a big wave came along and knocked me down. I thought I was a goner. Fortunately, Jerry Falor saw my predicament and pulled me out of the bay. Now both Dad and I were in big trouble with Mom when he brought me home. The beach was next to Elk River Lumber Company's wharf. Sometimes I would get curious and wander over to the wharf to see what was happening (the men didn't seem to mind a small boy watching them). Elk River Lumber Company had a railroad to bring lumber from their sawmill at Falk to their wharf at Bucksport. Stevedores took the lumber from the railroad flat cars and loaded it by hand onto wooden carts. The carts had cast iron wheels, probably cast by the Acme Foundry. The stevedores pushed the loaded carts to the end of the wharf where a ship would load the lumber via a hoist on board a waiting ship. There was a very efficient restroom on the wharf. It consisted of an out-house cantilevered over the edge of the dock and a hole with a straight shot to the bay. Nothing is left of the railroad or wharf, except for a few forlorn pilings today.

The neighborhood kids and I called ourselves the Brett Street Gang (Brett Street is now 15<sup>th</sup>) and we would ride our bicycles down to the fish docks to go fishing. We could leave our bikes unlocked at the bay end of C Street in Lazio's Restaurant parking lot, without worrying about them being stolen. Lazio had a very popular restaurant and a fish processing plant, but we weren't interested in the restaurant, we were going fishing. The only thing that would stop us for a while was if they



*The Madaket today, refurbished and ready to take you for a cruise.*

were unloading a fishing boat. The fishermen loaded a net with the fish they had caught. The net was hoisted up to the dock and dumped into a tub with two wheels and a handle, kind of like an overgrown wheelbarrow, that was pushed into the processing plant. Now we could get to fishing. At the end of the commercial dock a ramp went down to a floating dock which was part of the small boat basin. We pulled tubeworms off the piling for bait. We were fishing for smelt, but also caught some perch and a few small sharks. We kept the smelt and threw the others back. The smelt were very good to eat. My mother especially liked them because she didn't have to spend ration stamps for them (this was during the war) and she would fry them like a trout. The only problem with them was they were full of parasites, so when the fish got hot from the frying pan they would come crawling out. The trick was to turn them over quickly and they would brown nicely like the rest of the fish. If the cook didn't tell, no one would know.

Lazio's closed during the thirteen-year litigation of *Lazio v. Eureka*,



*The foot of F Street was once a busy transportation center: Coggeshall's launches, like the Madaket, foreground, were once the only way to get across the bay from Eureka.*

filed when Lawrence Lazio found a cloud on the waterfront property's title, dating back fifty-five years to the *California Fish* case of 1912. That's another story that needs telling.

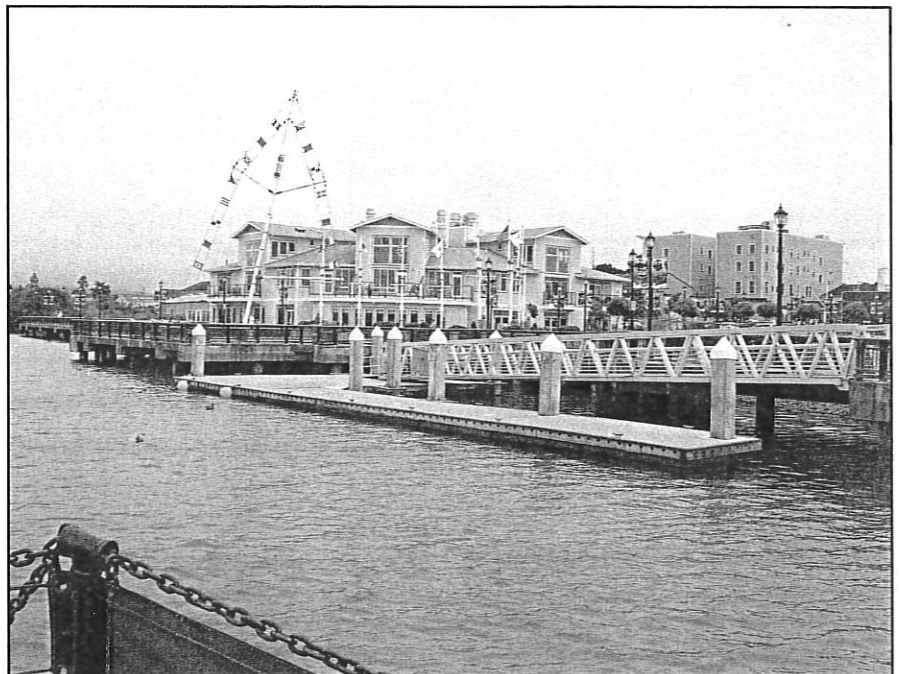
On a nice summer day, the Brett Street Gang would ride our bikes down to the foot of F Street to the Coggeshall dock. The Coggeshall

Company operated ferryboats on Humboldt Bay. They had two ferries, the *Madaket* and the *Antelope*. The *Madaket* was the smaller one that we took to Samoa. The larger boat, called the *Antelope*, was propelled by a stern paddle wheel and was used to transport the workers when the shifts changed at the Hammond Lumber Company in Samoa.

HUMBOLDT BAY MARITIME MUSEUM

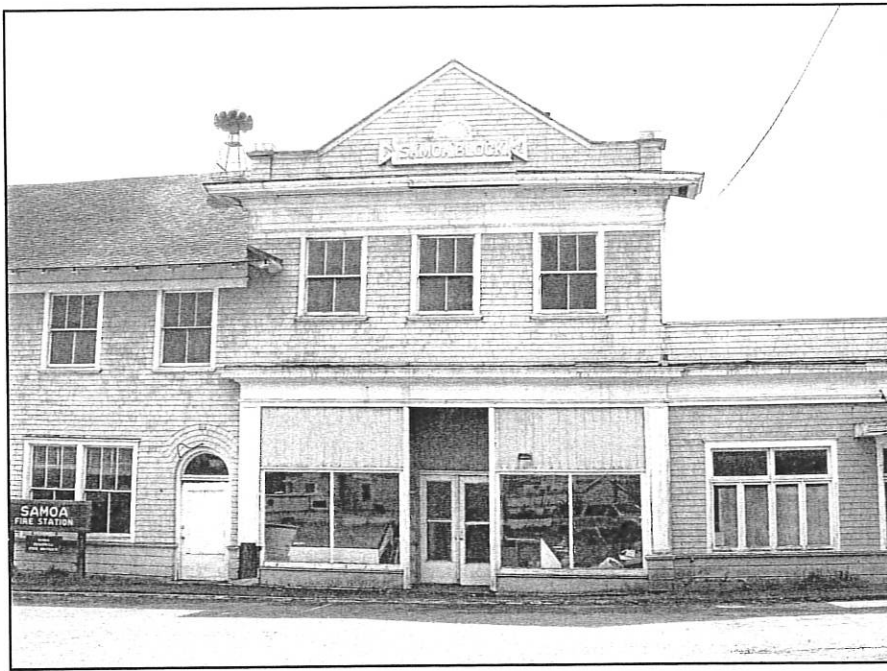


*The author, Bill Hilfiker, left, and Albert Dutton of the Brett Street Gang.*



*The foot of F Street today. There is now a bridge across the bay, but one can still catch a pleasure ride on the Madaket from the new wharf.*

BILL HILFIKER



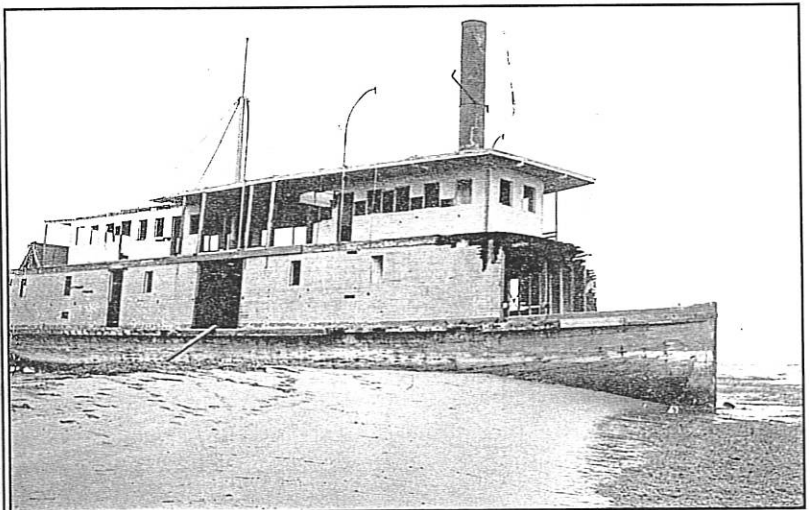
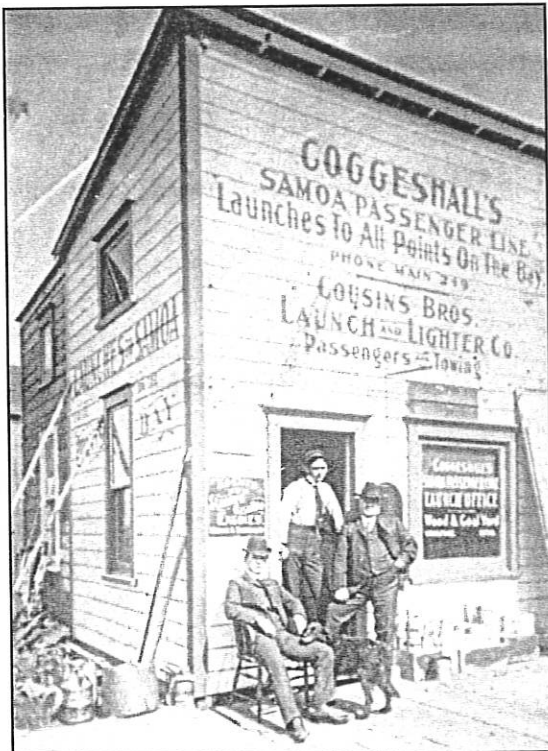
*The old Hammond Lumber Company store in Samoa as it appears today.*

you haven't been on a bay cruise, I highly recommend it.

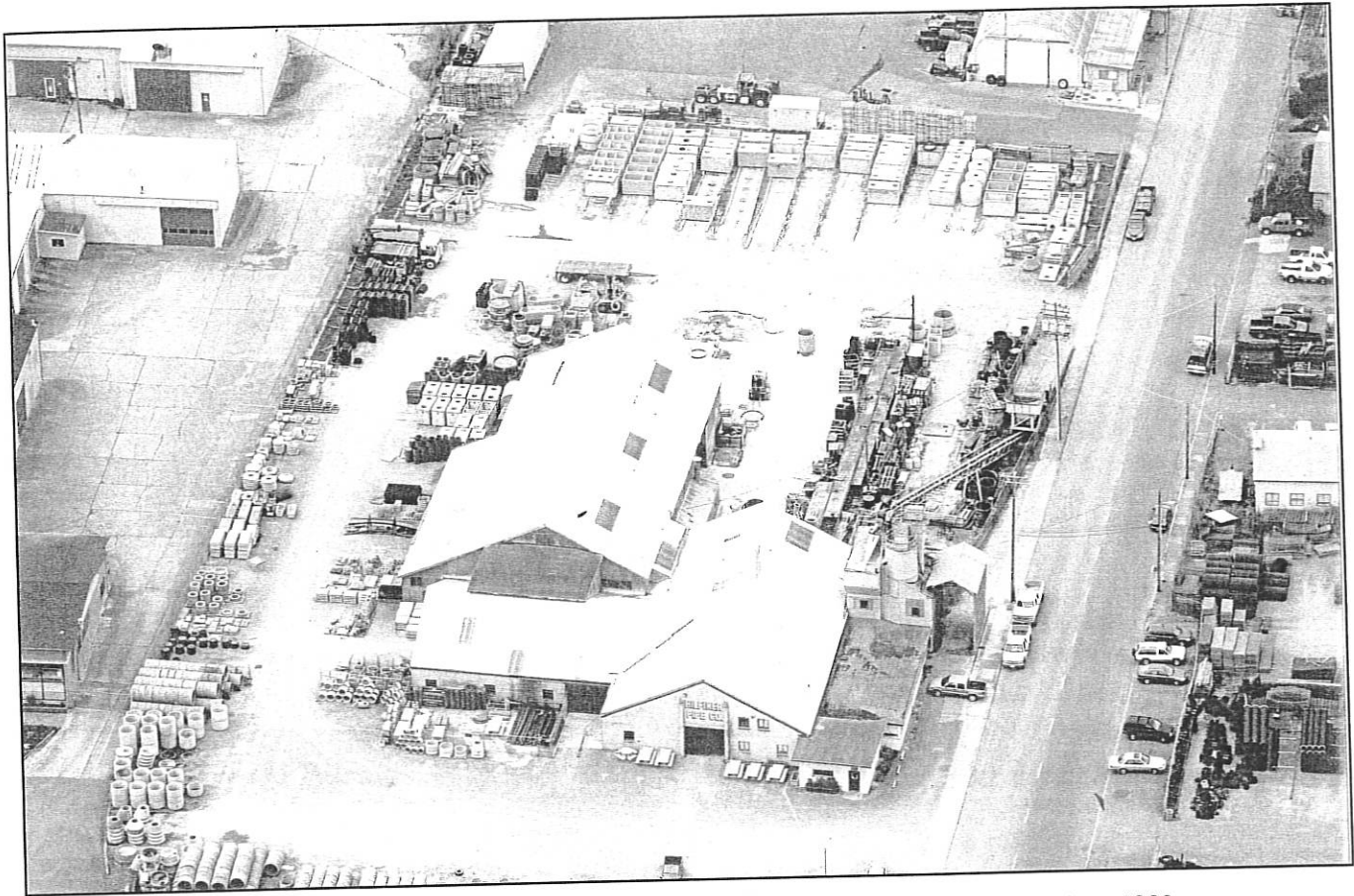
Only two of the early companies have survived with the same family ownership and management. The McLaughlin brothers, John and Ben, were teamsters that started hauling gravel off the beach near the mouth of Elk River in the early 1900s. The gravel was in small deposits that could be shoveled onto their stick wagon at low tide. Elk River gravel wasn't very satisfactory; it had too much sand. The gravel had to be loaded by hand and transported by horse and wagon, because the sand on the beach was too soft for trucks. The McLaughlins built a gravel processing plant on the Mad River near Giuntoli Lane, and called the company Eureka Sand and Gravel. They later moved the operation to Glendale, near Blue Lake, and added ready mix concrete. They built a concrete batch plant for ready mix trucks at Bucksport and called it Eureka Ready Mix Concrete Co. They also now have a sand and gravel and ready mix operation on the Eel River near Alton. The company is now the predominant sand and gravel

We explored the sand dunes and ocean beach. If it was one of those rare hot days, we would swim in the bay near Fairhaven. On the way back we would stop for an ice cream at the Hammond company store. Times have changed. Hammond's sawmill is long gone, and the store is an empty building. Coggeshall's dock and building have been replaced by

a concrete boardwalk with a restaurant and condominium complex. The *Antelope* ended its usefulness and was beached near Fairhaven, where it burned in a suspicious fire. The *Madaket* was one hundred years old in 2010 and is still cruising on the bay. It is operated by the Humboldt Bay Maritime Museum, and if



*Left: Coggeshall's opened for business on the Eureka waterfront in 1903. Coggeshall's paddlewheel boat Antelope transported Hammond workers back and forth to Samoa, and passengers to "all points on the bay." Above: After almost fifty years of service, the Antelope was towed to the beach near Fairhaven and abandoned.*



BILL HILFIKER

*The Hilfiker Pipe Company, dba Hilfiker Retaining Walls, a family business since 1902.*

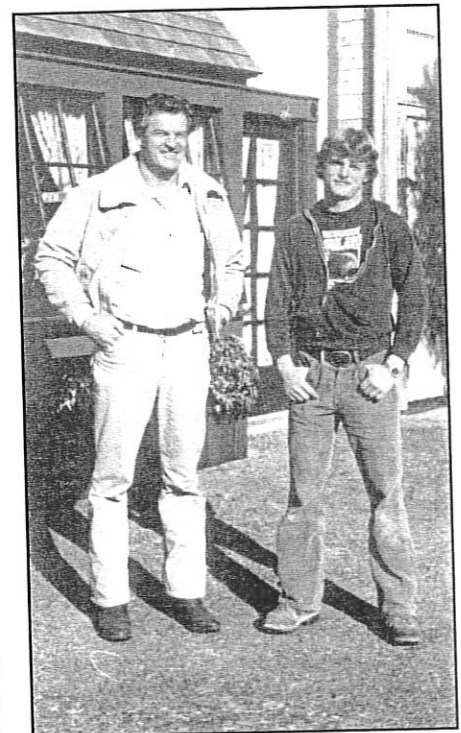
and ready mix concrete company in Humboldt County. The company is approximately one hundred years old and owned and operated by Robert McLaughlin and his son Michael and daughter Katy, the third and fourth generation descendants of the McLaughlin Brothers. My grandfather, father, myself, and my sons have bought sand and gravel from the McLaughlins for over a century.

The other survivor is the Hilfiker Pipe Company, doing business as Hilfiker Retaining Walls. My grandfather, John Hilfiker, started the company in 1902, making well casing and burial vaults for the Myrtle Grove Cemetery in his back yard on Tydd Street. He moved the plant to Bucksport to be closer to the gravel supply. In 1938, my father, Harold O. Hilfiker, built a new plant at Highway 101 and Hilfiker Lane, its present location. The plant was much more efficient, as sand and gravel was brought

in by trucks and cement came by the railcar load. It is now owned and operated by fourth generation Hilfikers Harold K. Hilfiker and William B. Hilfiker. They still make concrete pipe, septic tanks, concrete cribbing, and other concrete products, along with selling plastic and corrugated steel pipe. The outlook for concrete pipe and products in Humboldt County is bleak. They now sell more plastic pipe than concrete pipe. Hilfiker's main business is mechanically stabilized embankments (MSE) retaining walls, Artweld gabions, and spiral soil nails, which are sold internationally.

Today Humboldt County has changed considerably from the 1930s. Whether the change is good or bad depends on your perspective. Humboldt County is still a wonderful place to live.

HH



BILL HILFIKER

*The author with his son, Harold, who is the fourth generation Hilfiker to run the company, in the 1960s.*