

# ONLINE HISTORY JOURNAL OF SANTA CRUZ COUNTY

## Woodsman Immortalized on Historic Postcards

By Frank Perry



Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History  
705 Front Street  
Santa Cruz, CA 95060  
[www.santacruzmah.org](http://www.santacruzmah.org)

November, 2021

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# Woodsmen Immortalized on Historic Postcards

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When in the late 1800s woodsman James K. Holcraft of Santa Cruz, California, posed in the notch of a giant redwood tree, little did he know that the resulting photograph would attract so much attention. During the picture postcard craze of the early 1900s, postcards of the photograph were printed and sold by the thousands. Tourists mailed them to destinations throughout the United States, giving Holcraft's picture wider distribution than that of any other Santa Cruzan of that era.

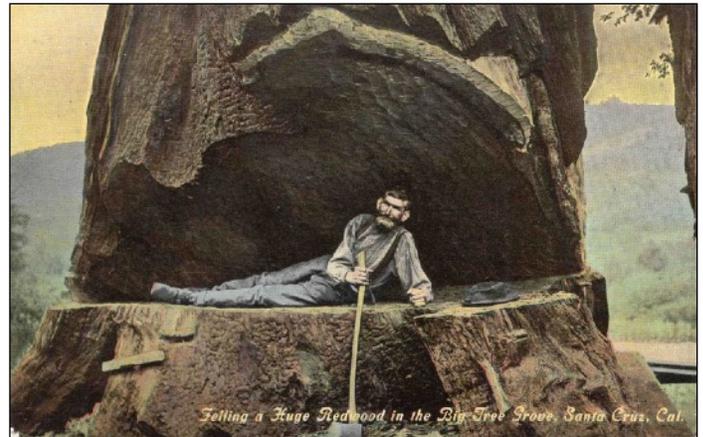
## Introduction

It would be difficult to come up with a definitive list of the most iconic photographs from Santa Cruz County history. So many come to mind. But the picture of the man reclining in the notch of a giant redwood tree would surely be one of them. There is something captivating about the image. Perhaps it is because the man appears so relaxed, leaning on his left arm, staring directly at us with neither a smile nor frown. He wears long sleeves and suspenders and has removed his disheveled black hat, which sits close by. He clutches his trusty ax as it leans front and center against the trunk.



I never gave much thought to the identity of the man in this picture, even though in the 1990s I put him on the covers of the first three issues of the *Santa Cruz County History Journal*. He stares out from inside the “T” in “SANTA.”

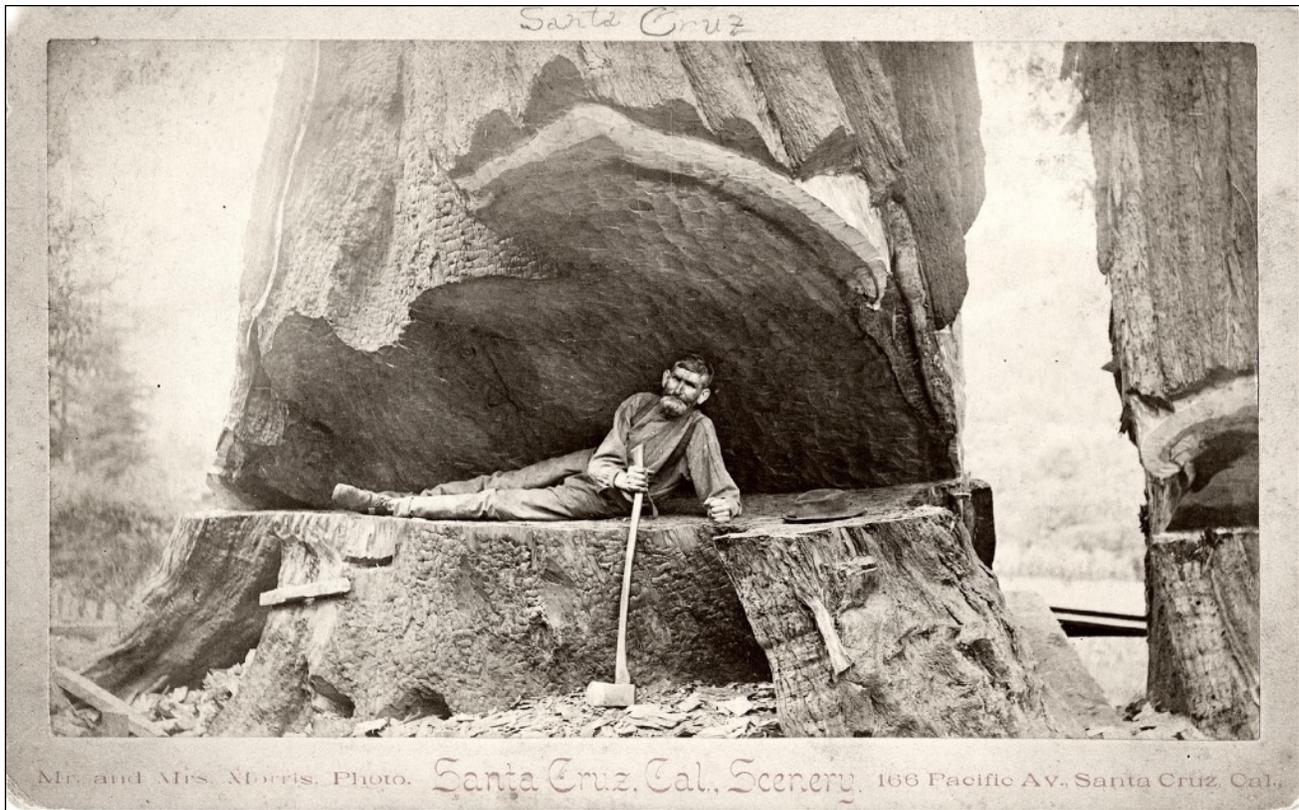
Then, a few years ago—purely by accident—I came across his obituary in the *Santa Cruz Sentinel*. Dated October 12, 1909, the caption said, “Was Subject in Post Card.” The article explained that, “People who have been ‘post card’ collectors have no doubt the picture of Mr. Holcraft in the half redwood in their collection, as that one was quite popular.”<sup>1</sup> I knew immediately which postcard they were writing about.



Postcard of James Holcraft posing with a giant redwood. Published by the Pacific Novelty Company and postmarked 1911. (Author's collection)

The next day, the *Santa Cruz Evening News* also reported on his passing. “Mr. Holcraft's picture has probably had a wider circulation than that of any other Santa Cruzan. Mr. Holcraft posed for the original photograph of the man lying in the cleft of a Santa Cruz big tree, which has gone all over the world on picture postals and booklets.”<sup>2</sup>

Knowing the name of the man in the picture, I decided to try to find out more about him. He did not disappoint.



The original photograph was taken by Mr. & Mrs. Morris, Photographers, Santa Cruz, probably in the 1880s or early 1890s. Note that the redwood tree had a large fire scar. (Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History collection)

### James K. Holcraft

James Kimbrough Holcraft was born in Ohio in February of 1829 and settled in Santa Cruz County sometime in the 1860s.<sup>3</sup> He first registered to vote here in 1866.<sup>4</sup>

James's wife, Charlotte Freeman Holcraft, was a native of Nova Scotia and emigrated to the United States in 1859, when she would have been around age eighteen.<sup>5</sup> She settled in Santa Cruz in about 1867 and married James the following year.<sup>6</sup>

As is so often the case with historical figures, sources used a variety of spellings for the family name. These include Hollcraft, Halcraft, Holcroft, and Hollcroft.<sup>7</sup>

Looking at the photographs, it is easy to envision Mr. Holcraft living as a woodsman in a remote cabin deep in the forests of the San Lorenzo Valley. In fact, he and his wife lived in downtown Santa Cruz where they were well-known members of the citizenry. He was a member of the Odd Fellows lodge.<sup>8</sup> Charlotte hosted meetings of the Universalist Ladies Union and the Bouquet Social Club.<sup>9</sup>

The Holcrafts had two children: Eleanor (known as Ella and born in 1869) and Charles (born in 1870).<sup>10</sup> Eleanor eventually became a captain with the Salvation Army and in about 1901 married Charles Moore, whose family had a ranch up the coast.<sup>11</sup> She died in 1958.<sup>12</sup> Her brother attended Chesnutwoods Business College and died in 1913.<sup>13</sup>

The Holcraft family lived at several different locations, but seem mostly to have been in the downtown area of Santa Cruz, including on Ocean Street, Locust Street, Garfield Street, Center Street, and Elm Street.

Santa Cruz in the late 1800s only had a population of a few thousand people, which might sound idyllic, but there was crime back then just as there is now. This account is from December, 1871:

James Holcroft, who lives on Branciforte Creek, near Bausch's brewery, had about ten dollars worth of clothes taken from his clothes line last Monday night. There are plenty of prowlers about now, who will relieve your lines without charge if you are foolish enough to run the risk of leaving your clothes out during the night.<sup>14</sup>



In this second photograph, also by Mr. & Mrs. Morris, Holcraft is joined by an audience of eighteen men, women, and children, plus one dog. (Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History collection)

Although the family lived in Santa Cruz, Holcraft's work often took him up into the mountains. He was variously described as a woodsman, woodchopper, or lumberman, but he worked other jobs too. He built storm drains and helped survey the route to bring water to Santa Cruz from Laguna Creek in 1889, though this mostly involved clearing the path.<sup>15</sup>

For a time, Charlotte Holcraft also worked, being the proprietor of a boarding house on Walnut Avenue. "Board by Day, Week or Month, Furnished Rooms," said the advertisements.<sup>16</sup> Called the Avenue House, Mrs. Holcraft took out a one-year lease in March, 1886.<sup>17</sup>

In the meantime, her husband continued felling trees. An article from 1893 reported:

J. K. Holcraft, now sixty-four years of age, is in from felling big redwoods for the Grover saw-mill, located near Boulder. He does not complain of being too old to work, or of having no work to do, or of being sick, but on the other hand he says he is full of employment and can throw trees with the best of the woodsmen, which he is doing for the coming winter's run.<sup>18</sup>

Not all of the tree-cutting jobs were in remote areas. In spring 1889, he had the job of cutting down old shade trees on Union Street.<sup>19</sup>

Some of his tree cutting jobs were for specific construction projects. Perhaps the largest of these was construction of bridges over Aptos and Soquel Creeks in 1874 for the narrow gauge Santa Cruz Railroad:

The bridge across the Soquel Creek is nearly completed, and the workmen will probably soon commence on the Aptos Bridge. Mr. James Holcraft has charge of a number of men who are now at work in the redwoods near here getting out the hewed timbers for these bridges, and Nichols' saw mill is busy in getting out the sawed lumber.<sup>20</sup>

In 1887, Holcraft downed his largest tree yet:

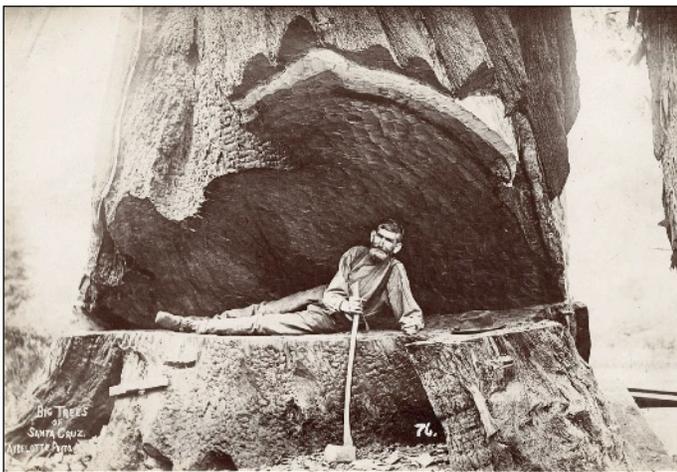
Mr. J. K. Holcraft has been engaged since Monday morning in felling a redwood tree on the ranch of Mr. J. H. Reynolds in Blackburn Gulch about three miles from town. Mr. Holcraft, who is a veteran in the business, says that this is the largest tree he has ever cut down in Santa Cruz county. It stands 250 feet high and is 22 feet in diameter at the base. At the point where the cutting is being done it will measure 16 feet through. Mr. Holcraft expects to get through to-night, and if any of our readers care to witness the fall of one of these giants of the forest they will have a good opportunity of doing so by taking a short drive out to the gulch this afternoon.<sup>21</sup>

## The Famous Photograph

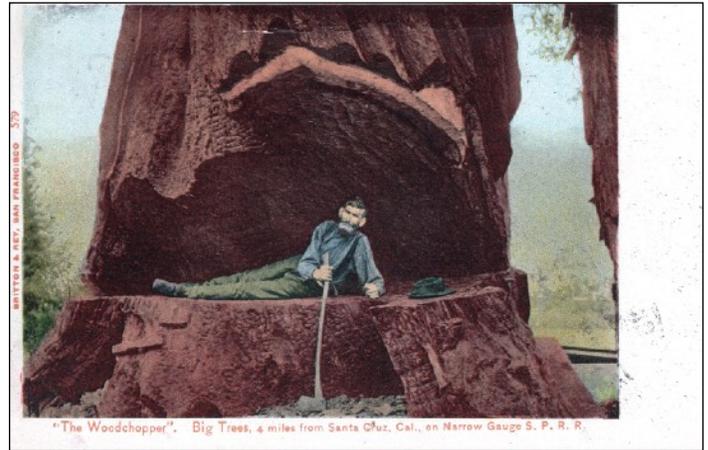
Sometime in the 1880s or 1890s, Holcraft posed for the picture in the cut of the redwood tree. The original mounted picture (page 2) bears the imprint of “Mr. and Mrs. Morris . . . 166 Pacific Av., Santa Cruz.” According to research by Stanley D. Stevens, Samuel Isaac Morris and Ella M. Morris worked as photographers in Santa Cruz between 1877 and 1897.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, the photograph must have been taken between those years. Could this be the tree described in the 1887 article? Certainly an article like that could have attracted photographers. Unfortunately, the dimensions don’t match. Using Mr. Holcraft for scale, the tree in the photograph would be between 10 and 12 feet in diameter, certainly not 16 feet as described in the article. Of course, it is possible the “16 feet” was incorrect or that the tree measured 16 feet perpendicular to the camera.

A second photograph (page 3), taken at the same time, shows a crowd of eighteen men, women, and children (and one dog) surrounding Holcraft. This certainly suggests there had been publicity for this felling.

Another version of the photograph (below) says “Big Trees of Santa Cruz, Aydelotte Photo.” Charles Leon Aydelotte opened his photography business in Santa Cruz in 1901 and was especially well known for capturing the spectacular ocean waves and cliffs along West Cliff Drive in Santa



This version was published and sold by C. L. Aydelotte, probably around 1901 or 1902. Four-by-five-inch souvenir photographs such as this were soon replaced by picture postcards which were less expensive to produce and could be printed in greater quantities. (Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History collection)



The postcard published by Britton & Rey notes that the Big Trees are 4 miles north of Santa Cruz on the narrow gauge line of the Southern Pacific Railroad. The picture is titled “The Woodchopper.” (Author’s collection)

Cruz.<sup>23</sup> It seems likely Aydelotte purchased the rights to the image from the Morris.

Aydelotte sold some of his images to postcard publishers, and this may be how the picture of Holcraft came to be reproduced on postcards. The period from about 1905 to 1912 was the heyday of the picture postcard. Collecting them was then a new “craze.”

At least four publishers issued postcards with the photograph of Holcraft: M. Rieder of Los Angeles;<sup>24</sup> Edward Mitchell, the Pacific Novelty Company, and Britton & Rey of San Francisco. The latter did their own lithography, but the other publishers had their postcards printed in Germany, which at that time was renowned for high quality work.

Since the process began with a black and white photograph, the colors had to be added by the printers. Careful examination of the photograph reveals that there was a large fire scar on the side of the tree facing the camera. Although this would have been black, the printers colored the entire exterior of the tree brown to look like bark.

The subject of the postcard—logging—was unusual for Santa Cruz County. By the early 1900s, many of the region’s redwoods had already been cut. Most postcards of trees showed living redwoods that were tourist attractions, such as those at the Big Trees Grove or Big Basin.

The photographs by Mr. & Mrs. Morris do not give a location, other than “Santa Cruz, Cal.” Aydelotte put on his version, “Big Trees of Santa Cruz.” It is unclear if this was intended as a generic

description, or was referring to the Big Trees Grove. The postcard captions say that it was taken at the Big Tree (or Big Trees) Grove. This was a private grove of giant redwoods north of Santa Cruz which had been preserved by the Welch family in 1867.<sup>25</sup> The grove is now part of Henry Cowell Redwoods State Park.

Was this actually taken at the Big Trees Grove or was it just advertised as such to promote the popular tourist attraction and help sell postcards? It seems unlikely that the Welches would have cut one of their cherished redwoods. It is possible the tree was located nearby, but outside of the Welch's property. The photograph on page 3 shows that the tree was on a hillside, looking down on a building and fence in the distance. Unfortunately, these details are not much help in finding the location.

### Lived to See Fame

One of the postcards by Britton & Rey is postmarked 1905, which would be around the time it was first issued. Holcraft, having died in 1909, lived long enough to see his picture on postcards and maybe realized that he had become "famous."

Perhaps this provided at least some comfort to Holcraft in later years. In the late 1890s, he suffered a fractured skull in an accident. By the fall of 1898, he began suffering serious mental problems, which were attributed at that time to the accident. "A few days ago he became violently insane. He tried to commit suicide by means of poison, but each time his attempt was frustrated. He imagines that his property has been taken away from him, and some one wants to kill him and his wife."<sup>26</sup> Sadly, the "old and most highly respected citizen" had to be taken to Agnews State Mental Hospital.<sup>27</sup>

He seems to have recovered, however, for by the time of the 1900 census, he was listed as living back in Santa Cruz with his wife, Charlotte, and two grown children. Over the next few years, however, Charlotte was often the one taking care of legal matters, including real estate dealings.<sup>28</sup>

Interestingly, in 1907 the Holcrafts sold a lot on Center Street to the Ocean Shore Railroad.<sup>29</sup> The railroad, which was building a coastal line between San Francisco and Santa Cruz, had begun condemnation proceedings against thirteen property owners in downtown Santa Cruz. This was in preparation for bringing the line through Santa Cruz and eventually to Watsonville. This never happened.

Holcraft died near Santa Clara in October, 1909. He was described by the *Sentinel* as "a contractor

and woodsman, and a former resident of this city" and, of course, as subject of the famous postcard.<sup>30</sup>

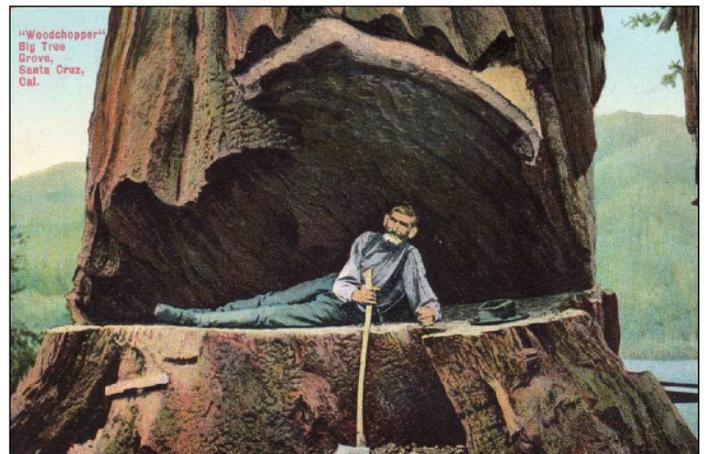
In 1916, Charlotte died and was described as "one of the pioneer residents of Santa Cruz and a woman who was most highly respected by all who know her."<sup>31</sup> She was said to have lived in Santa Cruz for forty-nine years. The obituary reminded readers that "she was the widow of the late Jas. Holcraft, a well-known woodsman of this county, whose picture on post cards in connection with the giant redwoods has gone all over the country."<sup>32</sup>

### Acknowledgments

My thanks to my fellow members of the Museum of Art & History publications committee: Carey Casey, Morgan Gates, Emmy Mitchell-Lynn, Debbie Muth, Marla Novo, Stephen Payne, and Lisa Robinson. Thanks also to Jessie Durant, Stanley D. Stevens, and Deborah Osterberg for their help.

### About the Author

Frank Perry was born and raised in Santa Cruz County and has long been interested in the region's natural features and cultural history. He is the author of several books and numerous articles on these subjects. From 2013 to 2021, he served as curator of the Capitola Historical Museum.



Postcard published by M. Rieder, Los Angeles. (Author's collection)

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> “Was Subject In Post Card,” *Santa Cruz Morning Sentinel*, October 12, 1909, 5:3.
- <sup>2</sup> “His Picture Went All Over The World,” *Santa Cruz Evening News*, October 13, 1909, 6:5.
- <sup>3</sup> This is according to the United States Census for 1900. Most accounts place his year of birth around 1829 or 1830.
- <sup>4</sup> *Great Register of Santa Cruz County for 1873*, page 21. This says he registered to vote on July 24, 1866 and was a laborer, age 35.
- <sup>5</sup> United States Census for 1900. Usually Charlotte’s middle initial was “F.” In a real estate transfer, her middle name is given as Freeman. See “Real Estate Transfers,” *Santa Cruz Evening Sentinel*, July 26, 1900, 3:5. However, her obituary lists her middle name as “Paige.” See “Passes Away At Advanced Age,” *Santa Cruz Evening Sentinel*, August 9, 1916, 1:1. Her daughter’s death certificate says that her mother’s maiden name was “Page.” Mrs. Holcraft’s brother’s name was Walter H. Page. See “Personal Splashes,” *Santa Cruz Surf*, February 4, 1892, 3:2.
- <sup>6</sup> “Passes Away At Advanced Age,” *Santa Cruz Evening Sentinel*, August 9, 1916, 1:1. This obituary states that she had lived in Santa Cruz 49 years, which would mean that she arrived in 1867. The couple married in 1868 according the United States Census for 1900.
- <sup>7</sup> A search of Santa Cruz County newspapers between 1860 and 1910 found “Holcraft” to be the most common spelling, so that is what is used for this article. The next most common was “Hollcraft,” followed by “Holcroft” and “Hollcroft.” “Halcraft” was only found in the California Death Index.
- <sup>8</sup> “Was Subject In Post Card,” *Santa Cruz Morning Sentinel*, October 12, 1909, 5:3.
- <sup>9</sup> “Shifting Sands,” *Santa Cruz Surf*, November 16, 1993, 3:1; “The Bouquet Social Club,” *Santa Cruz Surf*, November 29, 1890, 6:6.
- <sup>10</sup> United States Census for 1900.
- <sup>11</sup> “Personal Splashes,” *Santa Cruz Surf*, May 10, 1889, 3:2. See also “Eleanor Moore, Pioneer Family Member, Dies,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, March 10, 1958, 1:8.
- <sup>12</sup> “Eleanor Moore, Pioneer Family Member, Dies,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, March 10, 1958, 1:8.
- <sup>13</sup> “Shifting Sands,” *Santa Cruz Daily Surf*, January 5, 1886, 3:1; “Died,” *Santa Cruz Evening News*, October 24, 1913, 5:5.
- <sup>14</sup> “Stolen,” *Santa Cruz Weekly Sentinel*, December 16, 1871, 2:3.
- <sup>15</sup> “Common Council,” *Santa Cruz Surf*, June 10, 1890, 1:4; “The Laguna Creek Survey,” *Santa Cruz Surf*, July 16, 1889, 3:4; “The Survey Finished,” *Santa Cruz Surf*, July 22, 1889, 3:6.
- <sup>16</sup> “Avenue House,” *Santa Cruz Surf*, May 24, 1886, 4:2. These ads only ran in 1886.
- <sup>17</sup> “Social and Personal,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, March 19, 1886, 5:2.
- <sup>18</sup> “Social and Personal,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, October 5, 1893, 3:2. “Boulder” was Boulder Creek.
- <sup>19</sup> “Shifting Sands,” *Santa Cruz Surf*, March 1, 1889, 3:2.
- <sup>20</sup> “Letter From Aptos,” *Santa Cruz Weekly Sentinel*, October 17, 1874, 3:3.
- <sup>21</sup> “Felling A Monarch,” *Santa Cruz Daily Surf*, July 27, 1887, 3:4. This date is a Tuesday, which means it took two days to fell the tree.
- <sup>22</sup> Stanley D. Stevens, “Photographers of Santa Cruz County,” *Pathways to the Past* (Santa Cruz: Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History, 2009), 200. (This is also *Santa Cruz County History Journal*, Number 6)
- <sup>23</sup> Frank Perry, “From Natural Bridges to Bird Rock,” *Online History Journal of Santa Cruz County*, 2015, 3. <https://santacruzmah-craftcms.s3-us-west-1.amazonaws.com/uploads/Natural-Bridges-to-Bird-Rock-pages.pdf>. Accessed October 5, 2021.

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<sup>24</sup> Michael Rieder was a pioneer publisher of scenic postcards in California. “Rieder Rites Set for Today,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 18, 1949, 24:4.

<sup>25</sup> Deborah Osterberg, *Historic Tales of Henry Covell Redwoods State Park* (Charleston: The History Press, 2020), 35.

<sup>26</sup> “Committed to Agnews,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, September 24, 1898, 3:2.

<sup>27</sup> “James K. Holcraft Committed For Insanity,” *Santa Cruz Surf*, September 29, 1898, 1:4.

<sup>28</sup> See for example, “Real Estate Transfers,” *Santa Cruz Evening Sentinel*, July 26, 1900, 3:5.

<sup>29</sup> “Personal,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, March 26, 1907, 6:2. The 1904-1905 *Santa Cruz City Directory* lists the Holcrafts as residing at 107 Center Street.

<sup>30</sup> “Was Subject In Post Card,” *Santa Cruz Morning Sentinel*, October 12, 1909, 5:3.

<sup>31</sup> Passes Away At Advanced Age,” *Santa Cruz Evening Sentinel*, August 9, 1916, 1:1.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.