



Source: Steve Rebuck via HSMB.

## **Abalone in Morro Bay**

*This is the first in a two-part series on the history of Abalone in Morro Bay.  
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Local native American tribes ate abalone they were able to find in the intertidal zone along rocky shores. In the nineteenth century, Asian immigrants—first the Chinese in roughly 1850 – 1920, and then the Japanese 1897 – 1941—brought a taste for abalone with them and they also fished for abalone.

The Chinese fished the intertidal zone, like the Native Americans before them, using rods or poles to knock the abalone from the rock. They sent most of the catch back to China, where the demand for it was strong. There was no competition for the abalone at that time because the European Americans had no taste for it!

In 1897, a Japanese university sent Gennosuke Kodani to research the potential of the abalone near Monterey. He recognized that the fishery could support a big industry which led to the formation of several Japanese companies to pursue the abalone in about 1900. As these companies expanded Cayucos became one of several places along the coast where abalone could be landed and processed.

The Japanese had heavy diving gear that used surface-based compressed air for the diver—the big helmets of these suits are the iconic image of deepsea divers. This style of suit allowed fishermen to dive more deeply and take more abalone and was the method used into the 1960s.

The commercial abalone fishery grew steadily during the early decades of the twentieth century. Morro Bay was a natural fit for the business because of the somewhat sheltered harbor and proximity of rich abalone beds. Native and European American families shared this business with the Japanese until the advent of World War II, when the Japanese were frozen out.

One of Morro Bay's best known abalone fishing families, the Pierces, got their start in 1928 when Bill Pierce put on his Japanese-style heavy dive gear and walked into the ocean from the beach. Soon the family had bought a boat and opened a processing plant at 580 Monterey Street.

Most of the work out of Morro Bay was done by small scale operations similar to the Pierces that used open boats as diving platforms with the air compressor on the surface feeding an airline down to the diver. Divers spent long hours in the intensely cold Pacific, protected only by their vulnerable suits and warmed by layers of woolen clothes. This was not a job for the faint of heart.

The industry inherited a much-improved harbor infrastructure after WWII thanks to the U.S. Navy, which had built the Embarcadero in the early 1940s to support a Navy base. Commercial fishing in general, including abalone, grew rapidly in the postwar years.

From these small beginnings grew a prosperous industry that made Morro Bay one of the leading sources of abalone on the West Coast.