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Vera Pierce

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Vera Pierce

Interview With Vera Pierce

Former Owner of the Pier Café in Cayucos

Vera Pierce was born in Berkeley, California. She cooked at the Harbor Hut in Morro Bay in the 1960s and '70s, where Vera originals are still on the menu. She owned and cooked at the Pier Café in Cayucos from 1984 to 2005.

Moebius: A great deal has been written about the Pierce family in local history books. There are stories about Bill Pierce, the founder of the abalone industry on the central California coast, and the Pierce Brothers deep sea diving for abalone during the Depression. Vera, will you share something about yourself. Where were you born? Who were your parents?

VP: My father was an Italian from Sicily, Sebastian DiMartini. He met my mother, an Irish and English immigrant, Hattie Elizabeth Smith, in San Francisco in the early 1900s. I was born in Berkeley, California.

Moebius: How long have you lived in San Luis Obispo County?

VP: We came here in '41, when I was fourteen-years-old, about when the Second World War broke out. My mother was a widow with three children; my father died in the Depression. She was a domestic all of her life, cleaning other people's houses, as well as churches, rectories and nun's homes. When my one sister married and moved to Morro Bay, my mother came here to be with her. She found work at Camp San Luis in the laundry. It was much more money than she was able to make as a domestic.

Moebius: Were you the original owner of the Pier Café in Cayucos?

VP: Yes. Before opening the Pier Café, I worked for my sister and her husband, who owned the Harbor Hut Restaurant on the waterfront in Morro Bay. By1964, my husband and I had seven children, and with one old enough to sit for the rest of them, I went to work. I worked there for thirteen years in the kitchen as a cook. I never felt comfortable in the front end of the restaurant. Through the years, I learned a great deal about the fishing industry because my husband was an abalone diver. Basically, when raising seven children in the abalone or fishing industry, it was "chickens one day and feathers the next," depending on the weather. Mother Nature!

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Moebius: Which of the Pierces was your husband?

VP: My husband's name was Ernest Pierce, but everyone knew him as "Skinner." In the Pierce family, there were quite a few boys, and they were all nicknamed. My husband was the youngest of all the Pierces. Skinner's dad, Edward Pierce, married two Salinan Indian ladies, and had five children by the first and five by the second. My husband was the last of Edward Pierce's children. My daughters have done the genealogy, tracing the Salinan Indian part back eleven generations to the San Antonio Mission. Their eleventh grandmother, actually the ninth grandmother because the two generations before her were still alive, was the first recorded marriage in California, in 1773. The padres married her to a Spanish soldier. Marriages between neophytes are found in mission records, but it was the first marriage recorded in California. Her plaque is on the wall at Mission San Antonio. And from mission records and the stories that the padres wrote, we can trace our bloodlines back to our oldest grandmother, the eleventh removed, who was the very first neophyte to come in when Father Serra rang the bell in 1771, when the mission was being built.

Moebius: How long were you at the Pier Café in Cayucos?

VP: We were twenty-one years at the Pier Café, from 1984 until 2005, when our lease gave out. When my husband was killed up at Big Sur in 1983, it was time to take the assets we had and put them into something I could make a living at. He went over the bank at Big Sur with a tractor in 1983, opening Highway 1 after a bad storm.

Moebius: I've read a great deal about the Pierce Brothers.

VP: The Japanese started the abalone business, and my husband's oldest brother, Bill Pierce, watched and learned from them about diving for abalone. My husband, Skinner, was the only one of the Pierce Brothers to go all the way from walking gear with a heavy helmet and 45 pounds on each foot, to a dry suit with a full face mask, and then graduating to the skin gear that's still being used commercially, which consists of a wet suit, mask and a hookah for breathing. That's the new wave style. He was the only one of the brothers that went through all of the phases to the modern day. He graduated to keep up with the industry and make a living. When he began, the abalone were plentiful and you could use walking gear. That was before there was competition with the sea otters.

Moebius: ***I would like to return to the Pierce Brothers later. Tell me more about the Pier Café.***

VP: You can see the connection between the abalone and fishing industry, and the restaurant business. A lot of people came to eat fish in Morro Bay, but there wasn't a seafood restaurant up in Cayucos. We had a lot of friends, local people, who would support us if we put out some decent food, and my husband was such a well-known

person in the county. I was fifty-six at the time and thought, "Vera, go for it!" My oldest daughter, Pam, had been raised in the restaurant business, and all my children's first jobs were on the waterfront in Morro Bay, so they were a great help to me. We were used to hard work. When the children and grandchildren got big enough, we put them to work, too. They started dusting under the table, then cleaning the top of the table, and pretty soon they were serving the table.

Moebius: I visited the restaurant recently. I really like those big windows.

VP: You want to have the beach view. The windows have always gone around the restaurant, but it's been remodeled since the Dorns took over. Now it's Duckie's. The Dorns knew the way things were going and made it into more of a take-out. When it was the Pier Café, you came in, sat down, and got waited on. I'd never been a front person. In all of those years I cooked in Morro Bay, I never saw who I was cooking for. The waitress would come back with the orders. When my son-in-law did the construction on the Pier Cafe, I told him I wanted a lot of windows so people could look out and people could look in, and that I wanted a hole in the wall so I could see who I was cooking for. I had always been in the background throughout my life. From then on, I started socializing with the people who came in. I knew that I was cooking a dish for them. It changed my world. I could look out and they could look in. Exhibition cooking! Not only did I have my seven children, I had a business that I was really happy with socially. It was a wonderful experience.

Moebius: Do you have a recipe for success?

VP: When it came to opening a restaurant in Cayucos, there were a lot of doubting Thomases. It takes an intuitive feeling about what will work and where it will work. If something is good enough, people will go out of their way to go there. Like Jocko's. It takes great ideas. We served what a lot of people now call California cuisine. You didn't see a lot of fish in dishes, like fish burritos. Our unusual suggestions for a menu worked. They were Vera originals.

Moebius: It is said that you inspired A.L. "Scrap" Lundy's fine and valuable, out-of-print book,* The California Abalone Industry: A Pictorial History*?

VP: Scrap came in one day while I was sitting out at the front table. He started looking at the pictures that were up on the wall of the restaurant, and we talked. I gave him a history of the Pierces. He's from Santa Barbara and skin diving is a hobby for him. Funny thing, when we went into business, Pam, my oldest daughter and partner, insisted that we put up the family photos on the wall. I was concerned that some people and environmentalists in the area might object to the pictures of piles of abalones with all of the Pierce family around them.

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Moebius: I understand that Bill Pierce had by 1930 bought a boat, equipment, and opened the Pierce Brothers Abalone Shop in Morro Bay. Do you remember Bill Pierce?

VP: Bill, the oldest of the brothers, was an eccentric fellow. He was very conservative with his money, never gambled, or drank, which was kind of unusual back then. He didn't throw his money around. He owned two houses and a couple of buildings. He took his money and invested it in Morro Bay. As a young girl, when I worked at the grocery store, he would walk in and buy a head of lettuce. He wouldn't take a bag, and would eat it like an apple as he walked from the middle of town back to his home, which was over by the golf course. He owned quite a bit of land there, and had a dock for his boat. When I worked as a soda jerk at the Recreation Center, where Legends Bar is now, he would order ice cream in a chowder bowl and peek around the counter, watching me as I filled it, telling me to pile it higher and higher. When he ate something, he ate the whole thing. If it was a watermelon, he ate the whole thing.

Moebius: That's amazing.

VP: Every Saturday night he would get dressed up in a suit and go dancing. When I was a girl, we went dancing over at Atascadero Lake. That's where everyone in the county went dancing to Bill Watson and his band. Bill Pierce was an older man then, but he'd do the two-step around the floor. There would be a line of girls, and he would ask any and all to dance. Maybe the third one would get up and dance with him.

Moebius: There are vivid stories of the Pierce Brothers in Lundy's book, and other books such as* Morro Bay's Yesterdays *and Jesperson's* History of San Luis Obispo County. *You see photographs of them diving for abalone in helmets and breast plates. It makes one wonder how they got their nicknames. How did your husband get the name "Skinner?"

VP: The Pierce boys were sons of a German, Edward Romeo Pierce, who, as I have said, came to California and married two Salinan Indian women. He was a miner, always looking for gold. He had a mining claim near Pozo, the Queen Bee, which is still there. They lived off the land, in the mountains and hills of Jolon and San Antonio Mission, near Fort Hunter Liggett. Edward Pierce met Skinner's mother Kate there after the death of his first wife. She was a lot younger than he was, about sixteen or seventeen years old. He never had what you would call a real job. The family was raised on venison and wild game, and when they came here along the coast, they lived off what the sea and mountains produced. My husband, Skinner, was the youngest of the ten of them; he was seven years old when his father passed away in 1933. Living in the hills, they sold the deer, quail and hides that they hunted to a big company, B.F. Skinner, out of San Francisco. When a representative came to the homestead to pick up the hides, they shouted, "Here comes

Skinner!" When my husband was three or four years old, he picked up on the chanting, and that's how he acquired the moniker, "Skinner."

Moebius: That's beautiful country.

VP: After doing our genealogy, the kids consider the Hunter Liggett area near San Antonio Mission their homeland. And raising seven children, our vacations consisted of going camping out in the homeland. That was in the 1950s and '60s.

Moebius: And "Cougar," "Tutor," "Dutch," and "Whimpy?"

VP: The name "Cougar" was given to Feree for some reason because of a wild cougar that they had trapped and caged. Understand, this was the 1920s. Bill, who looked exactly like his Indian mother, didn't have a nickname, and his second brother, Adrian, unlike the rest of them, was born lighter and with pale blue eyes, looking more like the German side, so they called him "Dutch." Frank, or "Tutor," who was Skinner's cousin, was sickly, so they had a tutor come up to teach him his lessons. William, another cousin, got the name "Whimpy" because he loved hamburgers. Whenever he got a dime, he'd buy a hamburger. Skinner also had two full sisters, Gertrude "Girlie" and June.

Moebius: You have been a part of the abalone and fishing industry on the Central Coast. You have witnessed the cycles of history and nature, legislation, and El Niño. With tourism replacing fishing as the major industry in Morro Bay and Cayucos, is there a future for diving, fishing, harvesting and processing seafood in Morro Bay and Cayucos?

VP: I would doubt it. All of the money is in tourism. If we were in the restaurant today, we would be buying all of our fish frozen. It seems to me that the government doesn't want fishermen to make a living off the ocean. Fishermen now have to go so far away that everything coming back into port's going to be frozen.

Moebius: In general, do you have any wisdom to impart?

Basically, the fishing industry is a wonderful, wonderful way to make a living, and for a man who has made a living in the ocean, it's hard to come on land and make a living in another occupation. My son, Ed, loved that life. He really loved being on the ocean with his dad, and once you're out there, you feel so healthy. He really liked being an abalone diver, but I told him when he graduated from high school that if he didn't go to college, he would need a job. It's too hard a life for fisherman and their families. Like I said, in the fishing industry there were too many days of "chicken one day and feathers the next." Ed worked for PG&E until he was twenty-eight, and then decided that he wanted to do what his dad had done, and put up $50,000 just for an abalone license. These licenses were far and in-between, and not worth the paper that they were printed on. After five years,

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he got out of it went back into welding. Even Skinner, his dad, went back into construction, and his brothers left abalone diving to go into different trades. Les went into the turkey business. Only Dutch wound up making money as a processor in Santa Barbara in the 1950s and '60s. He owned all of the shells. He crushed and marketed them. All my children have abalone shells. The Japanese divers were originally after the shells, and dried the abalone.

Moebius: A 1938 San Luis Obispo County directory lists: Pierce, William, diver, A Paladini Inc., Morro & 3rd Morro Bay. What happened to the abalone shop, which was located at what is now 580 Monterey Street?

VP: It was torn down about five years ago. They were going to try and preserve it, but it was torn down. The property once belonged to Bill Pierce's family, but now it's owned by Ed Pierce's family.

Moebius: Did the Pierce Brothers really recruit crews out of Happy Jack's Saloon.

VP: Yes. Happy Jack's is now called the Fuel Dock, which is a good name for it because the abalone men would end up there discussing the conditions. How big's the swells? Is it flat out there? What's the weather? How's the wind blowing. A lot of these discussion took place at Happy Jack's.

Moebius: Did you ever meet John "Happy Jack" Williams?

VP: No, he was before my time, but I've heard a lot of stories, most of them probably true.

Notes

I wish to acknowledge and thank Vera's children, Dee Dee Perry and Ed Pierce for their contribution and asides. It was an exciting and spontaneous interview, with everyone speaking up at times. There was enough information gathered for three interviews.

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