

Our Ocean Backyard — *Santa Cruz Sentinel* columns by Gary Griggs, Director, Institute of Marine Sciences, UC Santa Cruz.

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West Cliff—A Local Treasure



The streetcar and gazebo at the end of Woodrow Avenue (formerly Garfield).

Whether walking, jogging, biking, pushing a baby stroller, or a century ago, bouncing along in a wagon, West Cliff Drive has always been one of those places that make Santa Cruz special. Much of the oceanfront along East and Opal Cliffs are covered with homes, leaving only a few areas where you can walk along the edge. We are fortunate that the earliest wagon road on Santa Cruz' west side followed the bluff edge for virtually its entire three-mile length from Cowell's to Natural Bridges. Often called the Cliff Road, this was one of the city's earliest attractions.

It's probably a good thing that only a single house was ever built on the ocean side of West Cliff, simply because waves have gradually moved the cliff edge back over the years. Those who walk along the path regularly will notice changes from year to year. New sea stacks form where bridges and arches have collapsed, with Natural Bridges being perhaps the most photographed example; but there have been many others.

The winter storms, particularly in big El Niño years like 1982-83 and 1997-98, wreak the most havoc. Erosion and damage are the greatest when large waves arrive at times of high tides and elevated sea levels from warmer El Niño waters.

During January, February and March of the 1983 winter, the coast of California sustained about \$215 million in losses to private and public property (in 2010 dollars), and waves overtopping the bluff along West Cliff took their toll on Lighthouse Point, the bike path, and also closed some of the parking areas. Collapse and failure of the cliffs is an episodic process, however, and you might have to stand out there a long time to actually see a large chunk of cliff fall or an arch collapse.

The end of Woodrow Avenue (formerly Garfield) has seen some dramatic changes over the past century or so. Woodrow has a distinct median strip, which accommodated one of the city's original streetcar routes. The tracks ended on West Cliff Drive at a picturesque Victorian gazebo known as the Vue de L'eau, or view of the water. The Santa Cruz, Garfield Park and Capitola Electric Railway built it in 1891 as an observatory, waiting station and depot.

In 1905, the Norris and Rowe Circus bought the Vue de L'eau and the surrounding six acres for use as its winter quarters. For a short time in the early part of the last century there was also a marine museum on the opposite side of West Cliff Drive. Sadly, the gazebo burned to the ground in 1925. Although the streetcar tracks are long gone, the city recently put some of the original streetcar wheels on display on the corner of Woodrow and West Cliff along with some historic photographs.

In front of the gazebo was an often-photographed arch, variously known as Arch Rock and also Crown Arch (for a while it had a cap or crown of weaker terrace deposits). Lots of old photographs and postcards of Crown Arch remain, and as the years progress you can see the crown disappear, the arch gradually thin, and finally sometime in the 1920's, it all collapsed. This also looks to be the site of a unique double arch, which was also a common site for photographs at the turn of the last century.

As we put the old photographs together for the "Santa Cruz Coast-Then and Now" book a few years ago, finding the exact location of Crown Arch gave us as much trouble as any other West Cliff Drive images. There are some fingers of rock that extend out into the water near the end of Woodrow, which seem to be the most obvious locations for the base of the old arch. But looking at the photographs with

Woodrow Avenue and the gazebo, and then comparing these with photographs with the gazebo and Crown Arch, the location that seemed the closest were always difficult to match up with the old photos.

So we went back a dozen or more times, always thinking that on the next visit it would all become clear. We did our best in the book but we were never completely sure we were standing in the right place. And in fact, the right place may have been eroded away in the intervening years.

Stop here on your next walk with the old photograph in hand (you could use the one in this article, or if worse comes to worse, you could borrow the book from someone) and try to find it yourself. Let me know when you feel you have figured it out.