

**Our Ocean Backyard — *Santa Cruz Sentinel* columns by Gary Griggs, Distinguished Professor of Earth and Planetary Sciences, UC Santa Cruz.**

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Our First Marine “Museum”**



*The Free Museum on West Cliff Drive at the end of Garfield Street 1890s*



*The Vue de L'eau on West Cliff at the end of Garfield Street (now Woodrow)*

Santa Cruz has drawn visitors from over the hill and from as far away as the Central Valley for well over a century. The city did all they could to entice them to come, entertain them once they got here, and lighten their wallets in the process. While the over-the-hill summer visitors of today come looking for sun, 50 or 100 years ago those valley folks were looking for relief from the heat and welcomed the coastal fog.

There were also lots of entrepreneurs looking to sell stuff to those early visitors, even coastal property. Take a walk, bike or drive around the Natural Bridges neighborhood and you will notice streets with names like Modesto, Auburn, Coalinga, Sacramento, Stockton and Merced. This was an effort by the early developers to enhance the appeal of the lots to those valley folks.

What is probably clear to anyone who spends much time on the far west side, west of Swift Street for example, is that the wind can be a little more intense out there and the temperatures typically lower. It's not exactly the city's banana belt. The earliest residents of Santa Cruz picked the warmest and least windy locations to settle, and even as late as the early 1970s, the lots on the streets closest to Natural Bridges named after those valley towns, were undeveloped.

The early developers of the Depot Hill area in Capitola tried a similar approach, with Sacramento, Livermore, Hollister and Oakland Avenues gracing the cliff top terrace. They apparently were more successful, however, and most of these lots were developed by the early 1960s.

Certainly Main Beach and the Boardwalk were always popular destinations, but there were also wagon rides along West Cliff (known as The Cliffs at the time, or

The Road of a Thousand Wonders) to see the blowhole, arches and natural bridges. Many of these rock formations had their own names to make them more enticing to visitors: The Old Shoe, The Sphinx of the Pacific, Crown Arch, and the Vue de L'eau (local pronunciation, "view – duh – loo" – thanks to our resident historian, Sandy Lydon).

While today's residents and visitors are fortunate to have several local nature/discovery/exploration centers focused on the coast, ocean and natural history (the Seymour Marine Discovery Center, Sanctuary Exploration Center, and the Natural History Museum), way back then, the science side of things was a little sparse.

But by the 1880s there was a "Free Museum", which had several different names over the years depending upon who owned it, and that had its origins on the Main Beach. It was one of the first two buildings and was located right next to Leibbrant's Bath House.

Sandy Lydon, who is the guy I know I can go to for an answer to any local history question, was kind enough to provide the history of what appears to be our first marine "museum", and I'm using this term a bit loosely.

Sandy commented that it is a bit of a stretch to call a curio shop that displayed dead things that washed up on the beach from time to time, and had a shop that sold sea moss and shells, a marine biological museum.

Mr. Parker, who founded this first souvenir shop/museum, relocated his enterprise to the end of Garfield Street (now Woodrow) in 1891-92. He built a two-story

residence/curio shop building at the same time that the Vue de L'eau gazebo/pagoda was built across West Cliff Drive on the edge of the bluff.

The gazebo was a cute little building and was built at the time in an attempt to give the Garfield streetcar line a destination. There was also a casino built nearby and a bit farther north, a baseball field. There's more to the Free Museum story however.