OUR OCEAN BACKYARD

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ELIHU ANTHONY – SANTA CRUZ PIONEER

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The journals of the 1769 Portola expedition, now 250 years ago, were the beginning of the written history of the Santa Cruz and Monterey Bay region. While there are bits and pieces of that early history that some residents are aware of, there is a whole lot more that takes some digging to uncover. Stanley Stevens is a local treasure who served for many years as the map and aerial photo librarian at UCSC, and who has compiled some interesting stories of that old history. I am indebted to Stan for his years of assistance and advice, and for much of the following history.

I often find myself wondering as I drive around town, why do streets have the names they do, and is there some history here? There are the more or less generic geographic names, Pacific Avenue, West Cliff Drive, Western Drive and Natural Bridges Drive, and then the tree streets downtown: Cedar, Chesnutt, Spruce, Laurel and Walnut, for example, that don’t actually seem to have any of these trees along their edges. This always struck me as a little bit odd. And then the presidential streets that every town seems to have, Washington, Lincoln and Cleveland.

Then on the far west side, next to Natural Bridges State Beach, there are the Central Valley town streets: Chico, Auburn, Sacramento, Modesto, Stockton, Merced and Coalinga. This was an early real estate ploy to sell the lots of a subdivision there by making them more appealing to the visitors from the valley towns. Despite the street names, it took many years before the windy west side lots sold and homes were built.

There are a lot of street that were clearly named after people, in many cases early residents; but in most cases we don’t know who they were or why they got to have streets named after them. One good example is Anthony Street on the west side, which crosses Bay Street just above King.

This street is all about Elihu Anthony, who played a major role in early Santa Cruz, with a lot of history dug out by my friend Stan Stevens. A 1889 Santa Cruz Surf article, Anthony is described as the oldest American resident and most prominent pioneer of Santa Cruz. I think that merits a street naming.

None of the early white residents were born here. Elihu Anthony was born in New York in 1818 and migrated progressively westward with his family, first to Michigan, then Ohio and finally Indiana. In 1847, with his wife Sarah, he joined a wagon train and a group of about 150 pioneers in Iowa heading for the Oregon Territory. Like all such journeys, the wagon train had their share of hardships, scarcity of water and food for the cattle, although the major one was a stampede of the group’s cattle when they reached the North Platte River.

The survived and after a journey of six months the emigrants arrived at Fort Hall, in northern California, where Anthony and a few others decided to head south into California rather than continue on to Oregon. They reached Mission Santa Clara in October 1847, where they spent three months recuperating from their journey and considering what they were going to do next.

Elihu had heard from a friend in Santa Cruz that the U.S. Government was cutting timber in the local mountains and hauling it by oxen to Monterey to build a fort. He reckoned that there would be work for a good blacksmith, which was a trade that Anthony had become skilled in back home. His first trip over the mountains revealed Santa Cruz at that time to be a green grassy valley with just a few houses.

The family made their way over the mountains in early 1848 and Elihu quickly became involved in developing many of the first businesses of the small and developing community of Santa Cruz. The earliest was a foundry built in 1848, which was located on what is now upper Pacific Avenue, beneath the bluff. His foundry was one of the earliest on the west coast, and among his initial products were the first iron plows every constructed in California.

The California Gold Rush was soon underway and Elihu realized that miner’s picks were in short supply so he began to produce lightweight picks, weighing just three pounds. A friend delivered the first batch to the mines in the Sierra Nevada, where he sold nearly all 90 of them to miners at 3 ounces of gold each. At today’s gold price of $1400/ounce, each of these Anthony picks would have brought over $4000. However, this was 1848 and gold was closer to $20/oz. so this was still a price of $60.

What became clear during the Gold Rush was that those enterprising individuals who sold supplies to the miners were usually far more successful financially than the typical hardscrabble miners. More to come on Elihu Anthony.