Our Ocean Backyard

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Naming Local Beaches

No story of local beaches would be complete without mention of Hooper Beach. The stretch of shoreline on the western side of the Capitola Wharf was originally owned by the Hooper family who settled in Capitola in 1906. One son, Harry Hooper, is perhaps one of the area’s most famous athletes. Although he wasn’t a great student at Saint Mary’s College, he was excited about playing college baseball

After playing for some minor league teams in Oakland and Sacramento, he moved up to the big leagues in 1909 and played for the next 16 years for the Boston Red Sox and then the Chicago White Sox. Between 1910 and 1915, he teamed with Tris Speaker and Duffy Lewis to form the Golden Outfield, recognized as one of the finest outfield trios in baseball history. Although a tough competitor on the field, he became known for his likable personality and sense of humor.

On May 30, 1913, Hooper became the first player to hit a home run to lead off both games of a double header, not matched until 80 years later. On October 13, 1915, in game five of the 1915 World Series, he became the second player to hit two home runs in a single World Series game. He holds the Red Sox franchise records for the most triples (130) and stolen bases (300).

He retired to Capitola where he became involved in a number of businesses that mostly lost money, insurance, oil drilling and juice processing. He was postmaster of Capitola from 1933 until 1957 and was among the village’s most prominent and active citizens. Somewhat sadly, most people are not aware of Hooper Beach and how it got its name.

Pot Belly Beach, which is extends southeast from New Brighton State Beach to Borregas Gulch, has at least two different accounts on how it got its name. The area was known for years and still today by some, as China Beach, because of the small Chinese fishing village that was built at the base of the bluff over a century ago. One story holds that the fishermen burned driftwood in their potbelly stoves to heat their cabins. When the area was later developed for beach front homes, the residents adopted the old name.

Another source claims that the name came from the pot belly stoves that were installed in the beachside cabins that were built beginning in the 1930s. According to Donald Clark, both of the individuals who wrote these accounts insist that the name has nothing to do with the waistline of the residents.

About three miles further to the southeast lies a beach with a name that has a very clear origin. It is the person who gave Beer Can Beach its name who wrote me two weeks ago after reading my first beach names column to explain the history. I am indebted to long-time resident, Arturo DeCordoba, for filling in this bit of local history, which is the same story told in Donald Clark’s Santa Cruz County Place Names.

There was a golf course on the bluff, but no Aptos Seascape development in 1960 when Arturo arrived with his family in 1960. There were also no paved roads out there or stairways or gates… just strawberry and Brussels Sprouts fields. Arturo and his friends would haul their heavy surfboards down an existing trail, which got to be a long walk, so decided to make their own trail closer to their homes. They would borrow a shovel, hoe, or rake to pull down the bluff with their boards or return on days with no waves and gradually built a more convenient trail to the beach.

One summer day, the 12-13 year-old boys decided to clean up “their” beach, which was littered with beer cans that the high school kids would leave after their parties. After a long afternoon of gathering up rusty old beer cans (this was before aluminum cans), they had accumulated a pile about five feet high at the base of the cliff. And as all red-blooded teenagers would do, they decided to name "their beach." The seven or eight boys started coming up with names for the beach and Arturo, in what he describes as his undeniable brilliance, suggested that they call it "Beer Can." The name stuck and even appears on some maps today.