Our Ocean Backyard

Gary Griggs

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Streetcars on the Sand

Most of us who walk along West Cliff Drive are understandably looking seaward, which is actually south, although it intuitively seems like it ought to be west. And I’ve heard stories of visitors who look across the bay on a clear day and see land and ask if that’s Hawai’i.

The next time you are out walking on West Cliff and you get to Woodrow Avenue, which used to be named Garfield Street, and after looking carefully both ways, cross West Cliff. On the northwest corner, there is a small display of some early public transportation history of Santa Cruz. Two sets of iron wheels and axles mounted on rails, which are about all that remains other than a lot of old photographs, of one of the city’s early streetcar systems. The information available on these wheels indicates that they were uncovered in 2005 when the Public Works Department was repairing a water main somewhere on Laurel Street.

Several different early Santa Cruz entrepreneurs realized almost 150 years ago that the growing population of Santa Cruz would be well served by a public transportation system. The first streetcar line was constructed in 1875 by Frederick Hihn and used actual horse power. Known as the Santa Cruz Railroad or Red Line, it connected the St. Charles Hotel at the intersection of Mission Street with Pacific Avenue to the beach. The horse-drawn streetcar proceeded down Chestnut Street and then passed through the enlarged Neary Lagoon outlet as the train tracks do now, just behind the Sanctuary Exploration Center. The streetcar then continued along Beach Street to the old Neptune Baths where the Boardwalk is today, where they came to a sudden stop, at least initially.

Hihn’s streetcar company and route was the beginning of a system of horse-drawn streetcars, as he soon had competition in the person of Mr. James P. Pierce of the Pacific Manufacturing Company in Ben Lomond. Pierce was from New York, had made money during the Gold Rush and had become a banker and manufacturer. He began to invest in and expand the local streetcar system and developed his own Yellow Line, to compete with Hihn’s Red Line. In the mid-1870s, Pierce was also building a large lumber empire with the timber land above Ben Lomond and along Love and Newell Creeks.

Streetcar service was soon extended up to Mission Street and eventually down Garfield (now Woodrow Avenue) to the old Victorian Vue de l’eau station on the bluff at the end of Garfield. Streetcars at one point also crossed the San Lorenzo River on a bridge at Soquel Avenue. In 1889, the East Santa Cruz Horse Railroad extended the streetcar system across the San Lorenzo River through the Seabright area.

Many of the wider streets we still drive along in Santa Cruz today are a legacy of the old streetcar system from over a century ago. Streets such as Woodrow Avenue, Cayuga Street and later, Morrissey Boulevard, were originally constructed with center median strips for streetcar tracks. Today, the tracks are gone, but some of these wider streets still retain these medians.

Between 1905 and 1926, a streetcar line connected Santa Cruz with Capitola. A major change took place in 1891, however, when the streetcars were electrified. The Santa Cruz, Garfield Park & Capitola Electric Railway Company formed and the era of horse-drawn streetcars came to an end.

The streetcar line connecting Santa Cruz to Capitola was actually built across Twin Lakes Beach in front of Schwan Lake. The tracks were elevated on pilings well above beach level so when they reached the bluff at Twelfth Avenue, they were level with the top of the bluff and the streetcar then continued down Twelfth Avenue and on to Capitola. Twin Lakes Beach was much wider a century ago as indicated by the photograph showing vegetated sand dunes on the left side of the photograph. Many of you have probably observed the old pilings, which are still visible over a hundred years later during major winter storms when sand levels have dropped.