Our Ocean Backyard

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The Early Waterfront in Santa Cruz

Although West Cliff Drive has been the focus of considerable attention since the winter storm damage of last January, historically it has been the Santa Cruz Main Beach that was the attraction that brought visitors to the shoreline as early as the 1860s. A wide sandy beach protected from the large waves during the summer months by the sheltering effect provided by Lighthouse Point, combined with generally good summer weather – morning overcast burning off by noon – made Main Beach a popular attraction.

Significant tourism began about 1868 when John Leibbrandt built “a bathhouse, swimming tank, and entertainment house” on the back beach. The Santa Cruz Sentinel soon announced the presence of “a dwelling house for the accommodation of bathers on the beach”. There were actually two John Leibbrandts who were involved in the early development of what was to become Beach Street. John Sr., the father, purchased thirty acres of land along the waterfront which years later eventually housed the casino and Casa del Rey.

Captain C.F. Miller opened the Neptune Baths on the shoreline in 1884, which was so successful that he added 50 additional rooms the next year. These two early entrepreneurs subsequently joined forces and built a bathhouse with an indoor seawater pool on the beachfront area.

The photograph of Main Beach in about 1893 provides a good glimpse of what the area looked like in those early days. This photo was taken from the old and majestic Sea Beach Hotel, which opened in 1888 and was known nationally as one of the great hotels on the Pacific Coast. Sadly, it burned to the ground in 1912, which ended an era of elegance and high society for Santa Cruz tourism. Today the Casablanca Inn and Restaurant occupy the site.

Look carefully at this picture from 130 years ago to see what you can recognize. There are a few things that have remained the same, but a lot more that have changed. In the background in the middle of the photograph on the right side you can see San Lorenzo Point at the river mouth. The point persists today, although I have to admit that it isn’t at all obvious from the geology why it is so resistant to wave attack and extends so far across the shoreline. Because of the damming effect of San Lorenzo Point on littoral drift or sand transport from upcoast, the Main Beach is very wide then as it is today, at least in all but stormy winter months. It is interesting to contemplate how the city’s waterfront might have evolved without San Lorenzo Point, and therefore without a wide beach.

The bluffs and flat terrace on the opposite side of the San Lorenzo River did have a few buildings but none of them were remotely close to the bluff edge, as is the case today. While there are a few scattered trees on the terrace, there aren’t many. The uplifted marine terraces in their natural condition never supported much natural vegetation beyond coastal scrub and grasses.

There is a sign on one building in nearly the center of the photo indicating Museum Free, which was apparently the same museum that was subsequently relocated to West Cliff near Woodrow where it became Moore’s Free Museum that I wrote about two weeks ago.

To the left of that building and sign you can see Neptune Baths on the side of a tall white building, built by Captain C. F. Miller in 1884. Charles Frederick Miller was a native of England, seaman, rancher, grain dealer, and later the organizer of the Neptune Baths. In 1855 he purchased a large segment of Rancho San Andreas, one of the original eight Santa Cruz County land grants given to members of the Castro family. This rancho totaled about 15,254 acres or 24 square miles and extended along Monterey Bay from today’s Manresa Beach to Sunset Beach and Beach Road. Captain Miller, like a number of other early Santa Cruz entrepreneurs also developed a shipping point, Miller’s Landing, about 3.5 miles northwest of the Pajaro River mouth about where Sunset Beach Road meets Sunset State Beach today. The landing was used in the 1870s for beach landings, as it had no wharf.

One of the most obvious features of this old photograph are the two horse-drawn trolley cars visible running just inland from the train track. There is also a large concentration of horses and buggies on the beach in front of the buildings that existed in the 1890s. It is hard to know if these buggies were for rent to take people along the shoreline or if this was the 1890s equivalent of Woodies on the Wharf, with the well-to-do people showing off their horses and buggies. Whatever the case, I’m certain today that the California Coastal Commission probably wouldn’t look favorably on this activity.

What is also interesting are the outfits of the early visitors to the shoreline, quite formal to say the least. White shirts, coats and top hats for the men, and long dresses, hats and umbrellas for the ladies.

The entire beachfront area changed, however, with the 1903 arrival of an energetic and imaginative entrepreneur, Fred Swanton, when he and partner John Martin bought out Miller and Leibbrandt and formed the Santa Cruz Beach, Cottage and Tent City Corporation. In 1904, they opened the brightly colored, Moorish inspired, Neptune Casino along what is now Beach Street. Just two years later, the ornate and uninsured structure burned down at a loss of $500,000. Before the smoke had even settled, Swanton convinced his partner Martin to put up $1 million and rebuild the casino. Three years later on June 15, 1907, it opened on schedule with great fanfare.

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