Our Ocean Backyard

Column No. 407

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The Influence of Fred Swanton on Early Santa Cruz

Fred Wilder Swanton probably had more influence on the early development of Santa Cruz, including Main Beach, and was involved in more enterprises than any other individual in the city’s early history- so much influence that some early residents referred to the town as Swanta Cruz. His name appears on both the road and the community up the coast along Scott Creek, and on Swanton Boulevard that connects Delaware Avenue with West Cliff Drive and that marks the west end of the city’s urban development. And there were also some earlier places named after Fred Swanton that no longer exist or retain that name, Swanton Beach (now Natural Bridges State Beach), Swanton Post Office, and Swanton Fish Hatchery.

So who was this guy and what did he do for early Santa Cruz that deserved such recognition?

Swanton was actually born 3,000 miles away in Brooklyn, New York, on April 11, 1862. Like many others, young Fred Swanton and his parents headed west and originally settled in Pescadero in 1866. This little village must have been too small for the family, however, as they moved to Santa Cruz a year later where Fred went to public schools. He graduated from Heald Business College in San Francisco in 1881 and then worked for two years as a bookkeeper for several lumber companies. Fred traveled east with his mother to visit relatives and returned to Santa Cruz with the patent license for the first telephone, which he then sold throughout California. He was just 21 years old at the time. This seemed to be his first successful venture into business and was followed by a long succession of developments and businesses.

In 1883 he went into partnership with his father to build a hotel on Front Street, the Swanton House, located where the Main Post Office is today. This was the first three-story hotel in the city. Next door they built and operated livery stables about where the Veteran’s Hall is today. Both burned down on Memorial Day in 1887. Fred then opened the Palace of Pharmacy, but soon sold the store and then briefly owned a billboard business. He was also the manager of the old Santa Cruz Opera House for a while.

After having traveled in the east and being impressed with the streetlights, he decided that the time was right for electric lights in the city of Santa Cruz. The idea wasn’t met with much acceptance, however, and the city council thought it was a poor idea as did the company which provided the city’s gas lights. A local battle ensued (does this sound familiar?) after Swanton joined forces with a local doctor (H.H. Clark). But they weren’t deterred and in 1890 they formed the Santa Cruz Electric Light and Power Company. In 1896 they organized the Big Creek Power Company up the coast in Swanton, which was then known as Laurel Grove. Swanton managed to build 18 miles of electric lines in 60 days from the hydroelectric power plant to serve both Santa Cruz and Watsonville. He was just 34 years old at the time.

Fred Swanton was just getting started, however. His next undertaking was organizing the Santa Cruz Electric Railway which ran cars from city to the beach, and then the Santa Cruz-Capitola Railroad which connected Santa Cruz to the new resort of Capitola. He organized and briefly operated identical companies in both Monterey and Pacific Grove.

Swanton then turned his interest to the Santa Cruz beachfront where he envisioned developing this area into a grand resort, similar to Atlantic City or Coney Island, near his native Brooklyn. In October 1903, Swanton held a meeting at the county courthouse (the old Cooper House) and predicted shares of the planned enterprise would return up to 25%. Within that same month, the Santa Cruz Beach, Cottage and Tent City Corporation was formed, and over $100,000 was raised. He then traveled around the state promoting this new venture and raised an additional $1.5 million, with Swanton himself investing a grand total of $250 – the word entrepreneur comes to mind for Fred. The existing bath houses on the shoreline were purchased with stock shares and a tent city for summer visitors was constructed on land leased from the Southern Pacific Railway.

In the summer of 1904, the brightly colored, Moorish inspired, Neptune Casino opened along what is now Beach Street. The two-story structure included dining rooms, a ballroom and theatre and a 3rd floor rotunda serving as an observatory with ocean views. A 400-foot-long pleasure pier was built along with intake pipes for the baths (called the plunge) and was lit with electric lights.

Just two years later, this ornate but uninsured structure burned down at a loss of $500,000. Before the smoke had even settled, Swanton convinced his partner to put up $1 million and rebuild the casino. Three years later on June 15, 1907, after having hired 500 men at a reported total of $1,500/day to rebuild it (that’s $3/day for each worker!), the new Casino opened on schedule with great fanfare. Upstairs from the Casino, he operated a theater that brought opera stars and other well-known entertainers to the city as attractions. In subsequent years the first “thrill ride” was opened, a miniature railway was built along with a carousel and an organ. Swanton then developed the Casa Del Rey hotel across Beach Street from the Casino in 1911.

In his spare time, this early entrepreneur established the county’s first golf course, the Santa Cruz Golf and Country Club, where Pogonip is today. Swanton even stepped into politics and served as mayor of the city from 1927 to 1933. His one major failure was land he bought and subdivided on the far end of West Cliff Drive, named Swanton Beach Park. He laid out lots and paved streets, most named after those valley towns where many of the city’s visitors came from in hope of attracting buyers: Chico, Modesto, Sacramento, Stockton, Auburn, San Jose, Woodland and Merced Avenues. While some lots were sold due to his powers of promotion, when buyers got a closer look at their often wind-blown and foggy lots, their enthusiasm waned and the area from Swift Street to Swanton Boulevard remained a forlorn, weed-covered, field of dreams until the mid-1950s when the first homes were built west of Swift Street.