Our Ocean Backyard—Santa Cruz Sentinel columns by Gary Griggs, Distinguished Professor of Earth Sciences, UC Santa Cruz

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Naming Local Beaches

Whether you have spent your entire life in Santa Cruz or just arrived yesterday, you know or will soon realize that our coastline and our beaches have a lot of local names. Some of these are common but not official, some are known to locals but not visitors, and for many others, there are lots of people who aren’t at all sure where the names came from.

Thirty-three years ago, Donald Clark, the University’s Librarian Emeritus, published an invaluable reference that is as useful today as it was in 1986, “Santa Cruz County Place Names”. Our local historian, Sandy Lydon, wrote a wonderful preface to the book, and put this volume and its importance to local history in perspective. Donald painstakingly researched the history of nearly every beach, stream, road, school, hill, grove, gulch, wharf, trail, park, spring, canyon, creek, camp, ridge, pass and a whole lot more. It’s 552 pages aren’t exactly a novel, but more like a very interesting local history encyclopedia.

I think because of these columns on our ocean backyard, I’ve often been asked, where did the name of that beach come from anyway? Some of these are well known, others not so much. But what follows are histories of some local beach names, thanks to the detective work of Donald Clark. And in some cases, despite his research, even he wasn’t able to find historic agreement on the actual source of the name.

Mitchell’s Cove is one of the few moderately large West Cliff Drive beaches and is best reached by a stairwell near the end of Almar Avenue. The stairs descend over the pump station where our secondarily treated wastewater is pumped offshore several miles. Al Mitchell is reported as one of the first locals to surf the area, which breaks on a larger swell, so Mitchell’s Cove became the local’s name for this beach.

I wrote about Castle Beach (Seabright Beach) back in May of 2012, and it remains an interesting local story. James Pilkington, one of the sons of Thomas Pilkington, a Seabright area pioneer, built a bathhouse above the beach in 1899-1900 across East Cliff Drive from where the Santa Cruz Museum of Natural History is today. The bathhouse was built to look like a castle and is the source of the original name, Castle Beach. It isn’t clear, however, whether there was any connection between the 13th century Moorish castle and fortress in southern Spain, the Alhambra, and the castle on Seabright Beach and Alhambra Avenue.

In 1918, Conrad Scholl and his son Louis took over management of the bathhouse, and in later years added a dining room and renamed it the Scholl-Mar Castle. Another era for the castle began in the 1940s, when it became a restaurant named Casa del Mar. In the 1950s and early 1960s the castle saw new life as an art gallery.
Throughout its history, and prior to the construction of the Santa Cruz Small Craft Harbor and the subsequent widening of Castle/Seabright Beach, the waves attacked the bluff, including the castle, nearly every winter. In March 1967, the castle was demolished, leaving behind a very wide beach with a curious name and an interesting history.

Johans Beach is at the end of Johans Beach Drive between 16th and 17th Avenues along East Cliff Drive, and is also known as Sunny Cove. It was named after an early landowner and farmer, Henry Johans, who was living along lower Capitola Road in 1875.

Corcoran Lagoon is best recognized as the lagoon with the radio towers and their blinking red lights at night rising from the shoreline of the lagoon. The beach across East Cliff is known as Corcoran Beach by some and was named after James Corcoran, another early settler. As early as 1856 he had a large farm that extended from Schwan Lake/Lagoon to Corcoran Lagoon, and from 17th Avenue to Lower Capitola Road. James was originally from Ireland.

Just a few blocks to the east is Moran Lake and Beach. Donald Clark believes that these two took their name from another early settler, Patrick Moran, also from Ireland and who was a local blacksmith in Santa Cruz for many years. More beaches and names in two weeks.

The castle that gave Castle Beach its name.