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

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More Local Beaches

It’s always rewarding to get an email from a reader after a column appears, so when I get back more than one response, I feel like I hit a topic that was of greater interest. The last two columns on local beaches were particularly rewarding as I received a handful of responses from locals who have connections with and names for many of our beaches. I always appreciate feedback and input and will endeavor here to fill in some additional history and names, many now lost.

Steve Gray grew up on West Cliff in the early 1960s at a time when there was no bike path or sidewalks and many of the pullouts for parking that existed then have now disappeared into the sea. There were a lot of empty fields out on the windy west side and only a few scattered houses along West Cliff at that time. Many of the beaches from Mitchell’s Cove west were named by those living along West Cliff Drive. Steve wrote to let me know that a lot of the little beaches had names of the closest or perhaps only family living nearby.

One of the little pocket beaches at the end of Fair Avenue was named after the McElroy family (McElroy’s Beach) who lived in the only house on the ocean side of West Cliff (which is still there). While the only access at that time led through their property, there is now a steep path on the east side of the house from the sidewalk to the small beach. There are actually several small summer beaches here that today are known as Backyards by some locals.

The next beach to the west was at the end of Getchell Street, across West Cliff from Steve Gray’s family house, so it was known as Gray’s Beach, and was where he and his family and the other neighborhood kids used to spend their summers. Today there isn’t much of Gray’s Beach left. And Steve’s mother, at 94 years old, still lives on West Cliff on the corner of West Cliff and John Street.

Swift Street is next and the Little family lived in one of the few houses that far out, and guess what, that beach (which is very narrow and difficult to get to today) was known by the kids as Little’s Beach.

Mitchell Lachman, who worked for the County Planning Department in the early 1980s, was assigned by his boss to name the unknown beaches because he was a surfer. He and a number of other surfers (Rick Noe, Marsha Carr, Phil Snowden and Jan Angelica, also known as Preacher Man) used to hang around together at the Lane in the late 1960s and would occasionally talk about the area on the opposite side of Lighthouse Point from Steamer Lane. Apparently they would talk about the area further offshore and ask “Is Its
breaking?” No one seems to know or agree, however, on exactly how Its Beach was named or who named it.

Most of the rest of the small pocket beaches further west are now covered with rip-rap so there are no beaches left to name, with one exception. There may be several names for it, but the one I’ve heard most often is Pyramid or Pyramids, because of the pyramid shaped sculpture on the cliff where people often stand and look down at the sunbathers on the clothing optional beach below. Some know it as 2222 from the closest West Cliff Drive address.

I also heard from the family of Jay Collins, who was another local surfer who became widely recognized for his art work, especially his silk screened posters commissioned by cities of Capitola and Santa Cruz to commemorate the Wharf to Wharf races, the Art and Wine Festivals and also the Begonia Festivals. He was part of the Santa Cruz surfing community, a member of the Santa Cruz Longboard Union, father of Matthew, Jason and Mark, and was working with others on the Santa Cruz Surfing Museum when he sadly died of a heart attack at the very young age of 38. Part of Cowells Beach is referred to as Collins Cove in Jay’s memory.

Leaving the city and heading north the beaches get farther apart and tend to be at the mouths of the coastal streams, and involve a hike from Highway One. Some are named by the streams where they are located: Wilder, Laguna, Yellow Bank, Bonny Doon, Scott and Waddell, and also for their distance from the edge of the city, 3-Mile and 4-Mile. And there are others with their own interesting stories, Panther, Shark’s Tooth, China Ladder and Smugglers Cove.