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

#297 September 15, 2019
The Twin Lagoons – Woods and Schwann

I’ve learned a lot from readers about local beach names over the past month or so, and there are still places in our backyard with names we use all the time, but probably most of us don’t know where the names come from.

Perhaps the stretch of coast from Seabright to Twin Lakes is one of the most intensively used beaches in Santa Cruz. The two “lakes” were actually coastal lagoons where fresh water runoff mixed with salty ocean water. Woods Lagoon, with some dredging and filling in 1963-1965, became the Santa Cruz Small Craft Harbor. But why Woods Lagoon?

Back in the 1880s and 1890s, the lagoon was a favorite spot for a mix of picnics, swimming and even duck hunting, but probably not all at the same time. John Woods was the landowner whose property abutted the original lagoon. He was an original member of the Santa Cruz County Society of California Pioneers and was born in Ohio in 1818.

John migrated to Missouri, served in the Mexican War, returned to Ohio, married, and then left for California in April 1848, just three months after gold was discovered. After a short period of mining for gold, he settled in the Seabright area of Santa Cruz.

How about the other half of the twin lakes, Schwan Lake? Jacob Schwan was an immigrant from Germany who settled some time before 1862 as a farmer in the area. He built a house and later moved to the shoreline of the lake/lagoon that now bears his name.

Seabright Beach, also known as Castle Beach, also has a history. At one time the Seabright neighborhood was its own settlement with its own railroad station and post office, now La Posta restaurant on Seabright Avenue. The origins of the Seabright settlement go back 135 years to 1884 when Mr. F.M. Mott (of Mott Street in the immediate neighborhood) purchased land in the area and then began to develop it.

At least 12 acres of the Seabright neighborhood, including the beach, cliff and flat terrace land, constituted what was known as the “farm” and summer home of Mr. Mott of Sacramento, and in the old days he was known as the father of Seabright. An early description describes how Mr. Mott “became enamored of the beauty and delights of the spot, purchased it of Mr. Doane (who also has a street named after him in the neighborhood), the owner, and built thereon a long, low farm house, where he and his family and the good friends that a man of his quality was sure to draw about him, used to foregather and forget Sacramento’s summer swelter, in the enjoyment of Pacific surges, Santa Cruz surf bathing, salt air and refreshing fog….”
In the early years of his owning the farm, Mr. Mott visited New Jersey and the Atlantic coast village of Seabright. He returned with an even greater appreciation of his little estate by the bay, and decided to name the area Seabright and decided to lay out streets and lots. These weren’t intended for sale to the general public, but to those of his friends who appreciated the place as he did. And so the name Seabright stuck and gradually transitioned from a summer retreat from hot Central Valley towns to having a permanent population.

One other local geographic feature that marks the western edge of the Seabright neighborhood, and which presented a barrier to early residents to venturing over to the village of Santa Cruz, is the San Lorenzo River. Where did this name come from? The first white men to see the river were part of a scouting party for the Portolá expedition.

On October 17, 1769, now 250 years ago “at the end of a day’s march…. not far from the sea we came to a large river, which, in the place we crossed it, must have been about eighteen varas wide (a vara is about 33 inches, so about 50 feet), and which in the center reached to the bellies of the animals”.

The belief among at least some historians is that the naming commemorated the feast day of St. Lawrence, which is actually August 10, not October 17, but maybe they hadn’t had a feast for a while on their long journey overland from San Diego. Just to provide some perspective, St. Lawrence was a 3rd century Christian martyr, who was put to death along with numerous other clergy during the persecutions by the Roman emperor, Valerian. It is said that he was burned to death in 258 A.D.

Not sure I want to remember that story as the namesake of our local river. Twenty-two years, however, later a mission was established not far from the river and Santa Cruz became a name on the map.