I suspect that living on the beach has been a life-long dream for many. I have read dozens of local real estate advertisements for homes listed with enticing phrases like: “On the sand at Seacliff Beach”, “Iconic home on the beach”, “Beachside bungalow”, “Steps to the sand”, “On the beach! Rio del Mar”, “Nautical beach Living – On the sand”. One thing that should be understood by those attracted to these “on the sand” descriptions is that the sand beneath many of those homes was carried there by waves.

These ads always appear in the long, warm, and sunny days of summer in Santa Cruz, but rarely if ever in the winter months. And the For Sale signs also emerge in front yards of these oceanfront homes at these same times, and for very good reason.

While there are those who migrated here from places like Minnesota or Vermont and who say that Santa Cruz has no seasons, the shoreline and beaches do go through some dramatic seasonal changes. Those wide sandy summer beaches can disappear surprisingly quickly during a major winter storm. It’s when the beach has narrowed or eroded to its winter condition in response to large waves that those homes “on the sand” or “on the beach” often find themselves in precarious positions.

The newspaper articles over the past century or so provide clear accounts of shoreline storm damage on an astonishingly regular basis. While researching the history of various calamities in the region as I was writing a recent book, Between Paradise and Peril – The Natural Disaster History of the Monterey Bay Region, I came across descriptions in the early editions of the Santa Cruz Sentinel of the same low-lying shoreline areas that suffered repeatedly during major storms, only to be quickly rebuilt.

March 13-14, 1905. Headlines stated “The Worst Storm for 27 Years Visits Monterey Bay”.
“Capitola paid for its advantageous location on the sea beach Sunday night with broken porches, flooded cottages and general wreckage of many of its summer homes... sidewalks were washed against the cottages and for a time created a fear that the whole summer settlement would be swept away”.

November 27, 1913. A severe storm with “monster waves” arriving at high tide washed across the beach at Capitola to the Esplanade and spread “clear to the railroad tracks.” Water reached the Hihn Superintendent’s building at Capitola and Monterey Avenues.
February 13, 1926. Headlines “High Waves do Damage to Beaches”. Never in the history of Capitola, according to its oldest residents, has such havoc been wrought to the beaches and buildings of Capitola than during “The Famous Lincoln’s Birthday Storm” of February 12, 13 and 14. At 10:10 a.m. when the highest tide of the season arrived, a huge 20-foot wave broke. The two bandstands collapsed almost simultaneously, and the Capitola bathhouse and boathouses were washed away by the waves along with beach concessions. High tides reached a block up the main streets and downtown Capitola was under a foot of water. The Venetian Court apartments, which has just been completed and replaced the old Italian fishing village, were flooded and their seawall promenade was broken. Wave run-up reached the second floor of the Hotel Capitola.

December 9-10 & 23-29, 1931. In Capitola, damage was confined to the waterfront area as “waves smashed in several doors and windows in the first row of the Venetian Court apartments, drenching their furnishings and compelling a hasty exodus of residents there. The Esplanade was blocked to vehicles because of the enormous quantity of driftwood strewn about”.

January 4, 1939. Capitola seemed to have taken the brunt of this storm as the ocean swept over the Esplanade during the night and brought sand and seawater into the dance floor and up to the bandstand. High tide and waves carried sand and rocks, some six to eight inches in diameter, a block and a half into downtown. Sand and rocks were also washed into the lower terraces of the Venetian Court and onto the covered porches of the Casino on the waterfront.

January 8, 1940. The Capitola waterfront was lashed by one of the worst storms in recent years this morning leaving a trail of havoc. As the tide peaked, the Capitola Casino on the Esplanade “began to collapse as immense waves pounded it unmercifully and by noon it was a complete wreck”. A.V. Woodhouse, president of the Capitola Amusement Company, said plans had already been made for rebuilding the structure for the next season.

October 26-29, 1950. Waves 10 to 15 feet high caused considerable shoreline erosion and swept across Aptos Beach Drive at Rio Del Mar, carrying fence posts across the drive smashing against the beachfront homes. Windows were broken and at least one home had seawater in the living room.

April 3, 1958. “Spectacular Waves – Damage is Heavy”. In Capitola, waves surging under the pile-supported businesses along the Esplanade “exploded with hydraulic force, buckling floor, flooding and breaking windows”. At one point in the storm, the waves picked up the Cove Bar from its pilings and then dropped it with a jolt. Waves washed over the low seawall on Capitola Beach and flooded six to eight of the Venetian Court apartments on the beach. The waves also carried mammoth redwood logs over the low wall fronting the Court, which bashed in doors and broke windows.
February 8-10, 1960. “Capitola and Rio Del Mar Hit Hard by Gale Winds and Heavy Seas.”
Along the Capitola Esplanade, huge waves smashed the beach restaurants and amusement concessions and destroyed the picturesque merry-go-round. Waves rammed against the beach level Venetian Courts, causing extensive damage to at least 12 of the apartments. Once windows were broken, rocks, logs, sand and seawater poured in. A sign was ripped off the end of the wharf, rolled into a ball and deposited in one of the apartments.

Twenty-five luxury beach homes along Beach Drive in Rio Del Mar were damaged as the force of the gigantic waves battered garage doors, plate glass windows, and even heavy front doors. Although most of the vacation homes were not occupied, sand and rocks were inches deep in the homes, furniture was shoved against the walls, and one owner returned to find a huge log in his hallway.

While we tend to have short disaster memories, this history is telling us something worth remembering. If you are interested in reading more about our region’s histories of disasters you might want to get: “Between Paradise and Peril – The Natural Disaster History of the Monterey Bay Region”.

Waves crash against the Capitola Esplanade in February 1926. (Contributed)