The Emergence of Rio del Mar from a Marsh

Development early in the last century brought big changes to much of the Santa Cruz coastline from West Cliff to La Selva Beach. The entire area now occupied by Rio del Mar was originally part of a 6,686-acre land grant from the Mexican government to Don Rafael de Jesus Castro. What was known as Rancho Aptos extended nearly four miles from today’s Cabrillo College almost to La Selva Beach, and from the shoreline two to three miles inland. This was a lot of land. Don Rafael, who was a cattle rancher and also very enterprising and colorful character, and his wife, Soledad Cota, granted large parcels of their rancho to each of their 12 children when they matured or were married.

With the Mexican-American War (1846-1848), followed by California becoming first a U.S. territory and then a state in 1850, the status of many Mexican land grants came into question. By the early 1870s, the Castros were also having marital problems, and combined with the challenges of dividing up their land, accepted an offer from Claus Spreckels, the rich “Sugar King” of Hawaii and San Francisco, for the 2,390 acres remaining in Rafael and Soledad’s possession. Spreckels paid the Castros $71,900 for the 2,390 acres, or $30/acre – not a bad deal for Mr. Spreckels.

Today’s Rio del Mar then became a little piece of the new Aptos Ranch of Claus Spreckels. When he died in 1908, followed by his wife’s death in 1910, the ranch management was turned over to the San Christina Investment Company. In 1922, the ranch was no longer thought to be of beneficial interest to the Spreckel’s heirs and was sold to Fred Somers. He was a southern California real estate investor and had grand intentions for the property, including a country club and golf course. Somers formed the Aptos Company, which soon partnered with a San Francisco development group, Monroe, Lyon and Miller.

Development then began at a rapid pace on the original coastal portion of the Castro land grant. The first subdivision took place in 1925, which included space for a golf course, 584 residential parcels and many of the streets that make up Rio del Mar today. What is now often referred to as the Rio del Mar Flats, which is on the left in this picture from 1935, was originally a low, soggy, frequently flooded area at the mouth of Aptos Creek. It was basically an estuary where people a century ago used to boat and canoe.

In 1926, the developer built concrete retaining walls in order to channel Aptos Creek. The swamp and lagoon were soon filled with soil and rock from a hill formerly located about where the Rio Sands hotel sits today, and also from portions of the bluff where Rio Del Mar Boulevard descends to the beach. This raised the level of the flats about seven feet and streets were then laid out. The development company, whose name was changed
several times over the years, coined the name for the area as Rio del Mar (river of the sea), thinking this would help promote land sales.

In 1928, a concrete dam was built across Aptos Creek near its mouth, where the pedestrian bridge is today, in order to form what was touted as “the world’s largest fresh water swimming pool”. A large bathing pavilion with lockers, showers and dressing rooms was built along the west side of the creek. Despite the Great Depression in the 1930s, lots were beginning to be sold and, over time, homes were built.

However the area closest to the creek continued to flood in wet winters and still does today. The low marshy area was originally the natural flood plain of Aptos Creek, where overflow would go at times of winter floods. With the creek now confined to a narrow channel, however, the water has no place to go, particularly at times of high tides, and overtops the concrete walls and returns to its old flood plain.

In 1929 the 22-room Hotel Don Rafael de Castro was built atop the hill overlooking Monterey Bay with big plans for future development of the area. The hotel went through several owners and name changes over the years, including the Rio del Mar Country Club Inn (1931), Rio del Mar Hotel (1946), Aptos Beach Inn (1955), and finally the Aptos Beach Inn and Racquet Club (1962), when it burned to the ground on the night of March 17, 1963.

The headline in an article from the Santa Cruz News of June 10, 1937, stated “Fastest Growing Residential Area in State is Rio Del Mar.” The full page story that followed must have been written by the Aptsos Company.

“The bathing beach at Rio Del Mar has been recognized for a century as the safest and cleanest around the curve of Monterey Bay. Never has there been known a casualty of bathers in its surf. It is clear of kelp and sea weed. There is no riptide or undertow. With the sands kept clean as a scoured floor, the rafts installed at the Rio del Mar beach club, the strand has every qualification of a hundred-percent beach”.

“One hundred new homes are now being planned for erection in Rio del Mar this year. The most pretentious of the new dwellings are being built in the new section of the beach, below the beach club house, where the new road and bulkhead are now being constructed…. Under the protective shelter of the towering cliffs”. This story, like the beach development, isn’t finished yet, however.
Rio del Mar in 1935