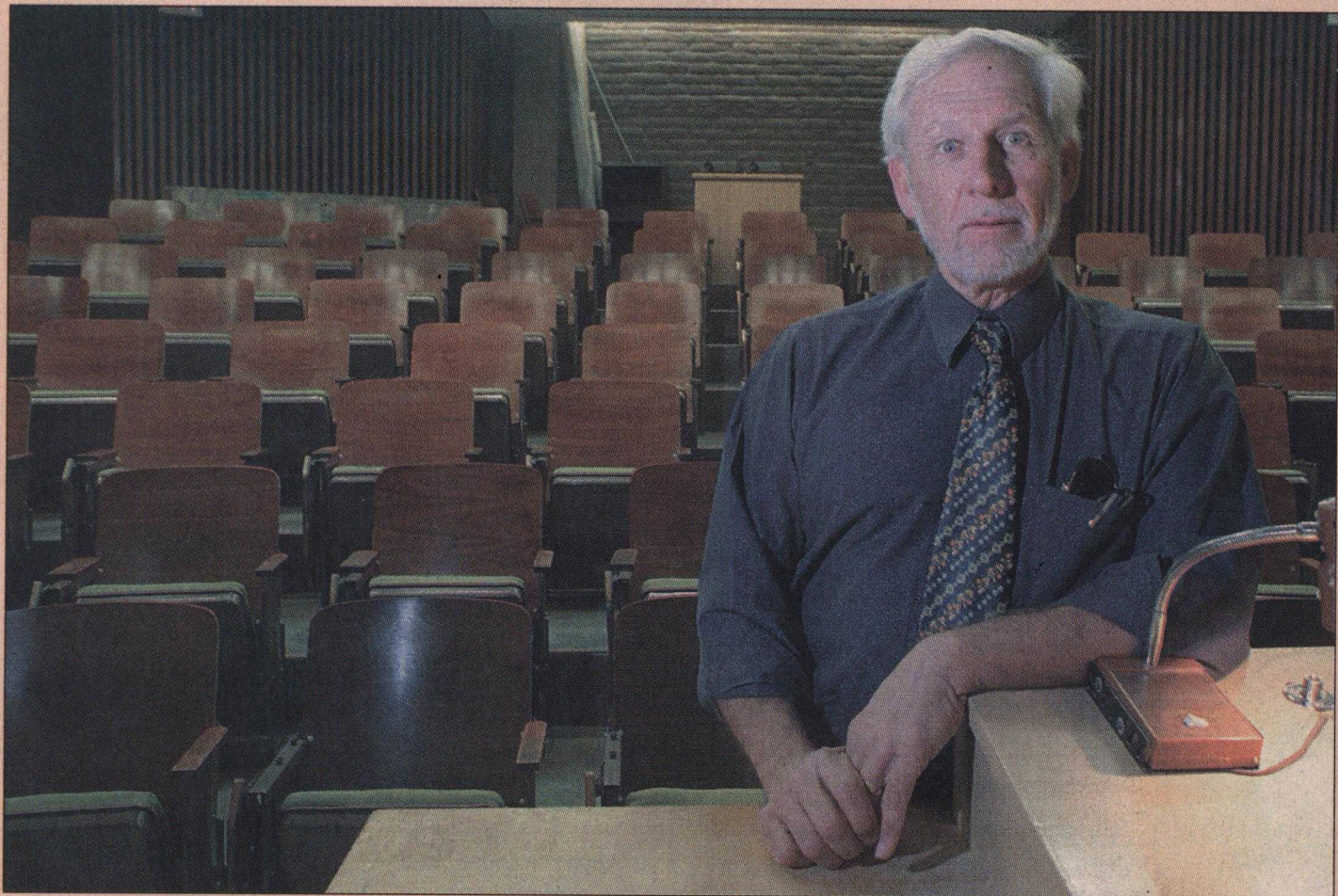


Mr. History



If you would like a seat in Sandy Lydon's final History of Santa Cruz County class you'd better get to spring semester registration at Cabrillo early. Lydon will write the final chapter on his book of teaching when the spring semester comes to a close.

Lydon, Sandy

Cabrillo's Sandy Lydon closes the book on his teaching career

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APTOS

AFTER 25 YEARS of bringing the past to life, Sandy Lydon is about to put his longtime local history class to rest.

This is the last semester Lydon will teach the history of Santa Cruz County at Cabrillo College. He retires from the school in June.

"He's history," Lydon said in his usual playful manner.

The course has been one of the college's most popular. Thousands of students have taken it, and thousands more have vowed they would.

"I'm not taking this lightly," Lydon said. "I meet people all the time who say, 'I've been meaning to take your class.'"

Well, it's now or never.

Lydon, 60, will burn his lecture notes and go on to devote his time to historical research. He has four books in the works.

His lectures, however, are what earned him a reputation as one of the area's best links to its past.

"There's no better way to learn about Santa Cruz history," said Rob Edwards, director of Cabrillo's archaeological technology program.

Edwards is not only a colleague, but one of Lydon's former students.

"Sandy is a wonderfully entertaining instructor," he said. "If he didn't become a historian, he could have probably made it as a stand-up comic."

Not many other history teachers would be bold enough to include a discussion of "the stupidest things that happened here."

In Lydon's opinion, the dumbest move occurred in 1850 when state officials drew the county line down the middle of the Pajaro River.

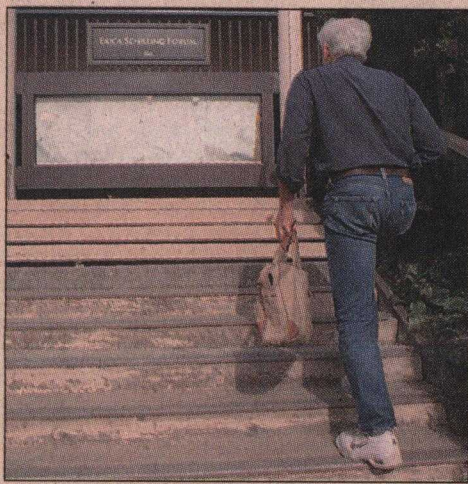
"From that point forward, we have been wrestling with issues of the Pajaro Valley being split in half," he said.

Lydon began at Cabrillo College in 1968, teaching Asian history. The school was one of the only community colleges in the state with a full-time faculty member on the subject.

The class became a hit because the country was in the midst of the Vietnam War and interest was high.

"There was an edge to everything," remembered Lydon.

Many of the students were people heading to Vietnam or just returning.



by Donna Kimura

photos by Bill Lovejoy

Lydon began looking at Asian immigration in the region, which kicked off his interest in local history. He began teaching the local history class in 1975.

"There's no seam between what I do for a living and what I like," he said. "I'm very lucky that way. I never ever said as I was going out the door that I'm going to work. No, I'm going to school."

The class, he said, has been popular because it is relevant to people.

"It's about where they live," explained Lydon, who grew up in Hollister. "This is a very interesting place. This is not like any other place."

One of the questions Lydon has pondered over the years is, "Does Santa Cruz County attract people who are eccentric already or does it take normal people and enhance their eccentricities?"

He is still searching for the answer.

Lydon, however, is convinced people have to learn to be local.

"This place is complicated," he said. "It's tricky enough that you have to pay attention to get it."

In his class, Lydon plays a word association game with students. He asks them to write the first thing that comes to mind when he names regions of the county.

"People have agreements about the perceptions, about the different locations, but then come to realize the places

are very different," he said.

For example, there is the Trout Gulch area near Aptos. Most people would assume that it got its name because the streams were filled with fish. It got its name, however, from a family called Trout who used to live there, explained the historian.

The rich natural and cultural history of the area runs so deep and takes so many turns that it can't be acquired by just hanging around, according to Lydon, who has written numerous books on the area. He also did a stint as a local television weatherman in the early 1990s and used to write a history column for the Santa Cruz County Sentinel.

Some people have taken his class more than once.

"Just say several times," said Lillian M. Rouse, a repeat student.

Every time Lydon has taught the course, he has offered something different, she said.

When students pass his class, they receive a certificate declaring them a bona fide local. It is so desired that bootleg copies have appeared in Watsonville.

Despite the entertaining nature of the class, Lydon can be a demanding teacher.

Carolyn Swift, director of the Capitola Museum and co-author of a book on Capitola with Lydon, remembers being so immersed in the class in 1975 that she was forgetting to pay bills and ignoring the laundry.

"He put so much energy into it, it was like an insult not to put the same energy back," she said.

Lydon didn't necessarily want to be entertaining. "He likes it, but he wanted people to learn," Swift said.

There's a saying that history never really goes away. That can be said of Lydon.

He will continue to study, write and work on special projects.

"I'm not retiring from historical work," he said.

Lydon will teach two more classes. The History of Santa Cruz County to 1880 will be held 6-10 p.m. Thursdays Jan. 27 through March 16. The History of Santa Cruz County 1880 to the present runs 6-10 p.m. Thursdays March 23 through May 18. Space is limited. For more information, call the Cabrillo College Registrar's Office at 479-6201.