

Carl Bengston, developer of many city parks, dies at 87

By GENEVIEVE BOOKWALTER
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

Carl Rodney Bengston, the former Santa Cruz City Parks and Recreation director who developed Harvey West Park, created DeLaveaga Golf Course, improved the wharf and bought the town clock, died Tuesday after a long illness. He was 87.

"He was really a hands-on person," said Dannettee Shoemaker, current director of parks and recreation, who Bengston first hired for \$1 an hour when she was a high school student in 1967.

"He knew every inch of the park system. He drove the park system if not every day, every other day."

Born in Kingsburg, Bengston moved to Santa Cruz from Grants Pass, Ore., with his family in 1958 when he took the job of director of parks and recreation, public beaches, public buildings and the Municipal Wharf for Santa Cruz.

Then-City Manager Robert Klein was quoted in the Sentinel as saying he hoped Bengston's experience field marshaling a pool in Grants Pass would "aid him in

Santa Cruz when we start our own pool." Bengston ended up doing much more than that.

"We lived in Harvey West Park for the first 10 years we were here," said Bengston's wife of 66 years, Virginia Bengston. "There was a house out there and that's where we lived. People don't hardly believe that."

Along with helping develop Harvey West, and sharing a close friendship with the park's namesake, Bengston was responsible for Grant, Garfield, and San Lorenzo parks as well, Virginia said.

Those at the wharf remember him for his work on the pier.

When Carl first started, "the council felt, some of the members felt the wharf should be torn down," said Robert "Big Boy" Stagnaro, co-owner of Gilda's Family Restaurant, who counted Bengston as a close friend.

"Because of Carl's hard work the pier's always been maintained, and the pier is in excellent condition," Stagnaro said.

Bengston enjoyed planting the palm trees along Beach Street between the

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ROBERT 'BIG BOY' STAGNARO,
CO-OWNER, GILDA'S FAMILY
RESTAURANT

wharf and the Boardwalk, his wife said, and acquiring the land for DeLaveaga Park.

Even after his retirement in 1973, Shoemaker said, "He'd pop up to the golf course and introduce himself to the younger guys."

"It just showed me how proud he was of his accomplishments and that he had real ties to the city and the department," Shoemaker added.

He was also the man who purchased the Town Clock for \$1.01 from the Odd Fel-

lows Building, his wife said, and kept it in safe storage until it could be mounted at the head of Pacific Avenue.

"He's such an institution around here," said neighbor Kenneth Bloome, who met Bengston in 1978.

"He had that sort of stature and flair where he would conduct a meeting or a social event as the emcee with just always being appropriate with his language and body habits and position and stature," Bloome said.

Despite his retirement, Bengston kept calling his former employee to question department decisions he didn't agree with — like charging for services.

"I remember when we put parking meters in out at Harvey West Park, he thought we'd lost our mind," Shoemaker said.

"I think he felt some real ownership in the contributions he made to the park system. Every once in a while I'd get a call from up on the hill saying, 'Dannettee, what are you guys doing down there?' This big, booming voice," Shoemaker said.

"I tried to gracefully explain to him that

Carl Rodney Bengston

BORN: August 25, 1917.

DIED: May 3, 2005.

OCCUPATION: Retired.
Former director of parks
and recreation for Santa
Cruz.

SURVIVORS: Wife of 66
years, Virginia Bengston; sons Robert
Bengston of Chula Vista and Ronald
Bengston of Davenport; daughter Nancy
Emerson of Carbondale, Colo.; six
grandchildren; three great-grandchildren; and
one niece and two nephews.

SERVICES: 11 a.m. Saturday at Benito
and Azzaro Pacific Gardens Chapel,
1050 Cayuga St., Santa Cruz.

times had changed since he'd retired."

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