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The Quintessential Home Girl

MCP 4-17-07

From Reporter to Historian, Carolyn Swift Has Spent Her Career Covering Mid-County

by Mary Bryant

With a blend of intellect, wry wit and an encyclopedic memory for names and historical tidbits, Carolyn Swift has spent most of her career recounting the lives of others – first in print and now in Capitola's small museum. She began her livelihood as a cub reporter, moving on to journalist and author, but her interest in history was sparked a generation earlier.

"I spent a lot of time with my grandparents," Swift recalled of her childhood.

Her family's house was in La Selva Beach, but her hometown was Watsonville. Her maternal grandparents were also from the area – Grandpa Fred Hillman was a foreman for Martinelli's and raised on a ranch in Pajaro growing strawberries, while her Grandma Esther Hobson Hillman's family owned a bath house at the Boardwalk, near the mouth of the river.

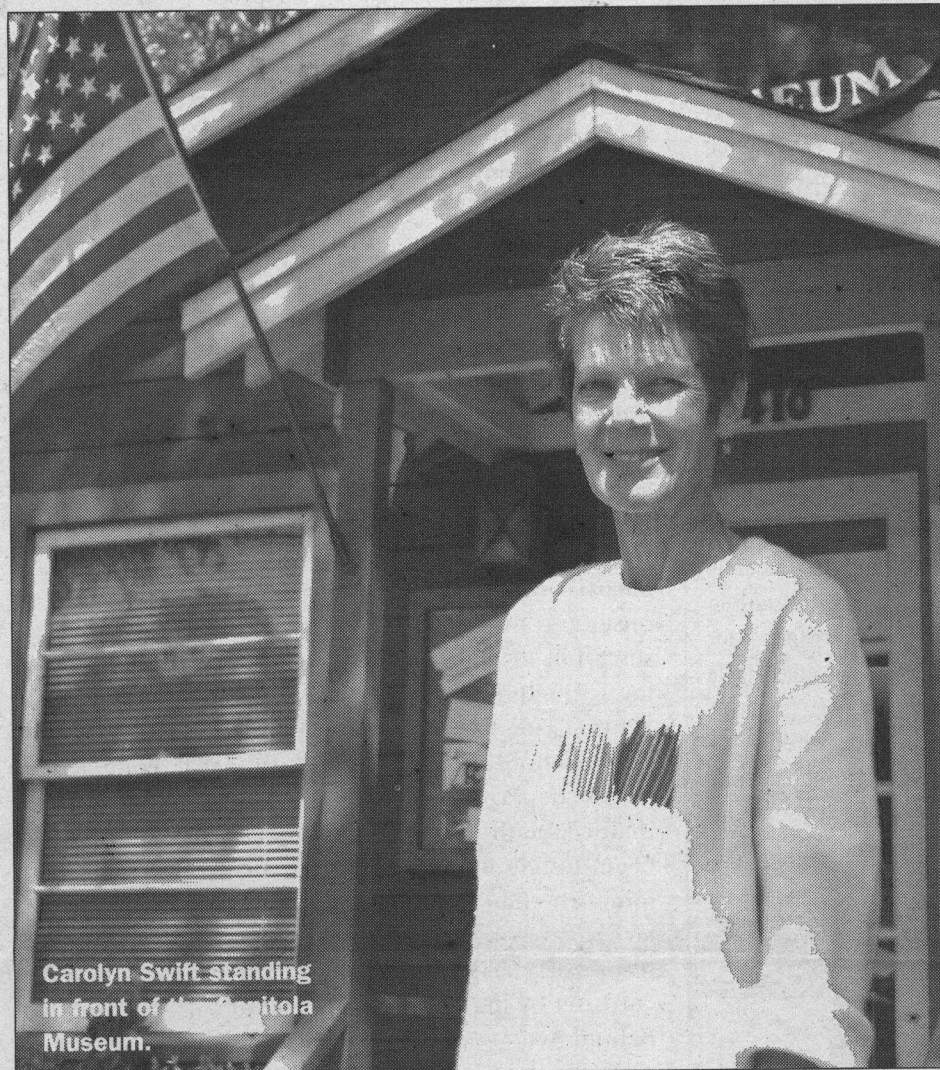
"My family seems to have come to Santa Cruz County quite early," she pauses for effect, "and made no mark at all." Swift quickly added that the one exception may have been when pioneer mogul Frederick Hihn once threatened to turn off her great-great grandmother's water for non-payment. "That's a point of pride with me."

While maybe Swift ancestors weren't on the Central Coast's Who's Who list – competing with names like Claus Spreckels, Hihn, Mary and William Sesson, H. Allen Rispin, Marion Hollins, Henry Cowell and Fred Swanton – they were a thumbnail's distance away, working and living nearby.

However, it wasn't the lives of the rich and famous that caught Swift's attention early on. Instead, she recalls being more interested in the Ohlone Indians and early Santa Cruz County settlers. She can remember her grandparents showing her the old adobe home that was the first Pajaro building with proper windows, then known as the "glass" house.

Swift's dad, Dick Heebner, was a lino-type operator for the *Watsonville Press*, moving on to work 25 years for the *Register Pajaronian* in its heyday.

"I have ink in my veins," Swift said, then turning the moment into a laugh.



Carolyn Swift standing in front of the Capitola Museum.

"Actually, there was ink all over our house."

At 19, Swift got her first break in media at the *Pajaronian* helping pen the society page, together with what was to be her lifelong friend Marybeth Varcados. It was Marybeth's husband, Peter, who first recommended Swift for the job. Swift was taking Peter's history class while attending the then-six-year-old Cabrillo College in Aptos.

"Working for a newspaper will improve your grammar," Swift added. She also learned how to type working on deadline.

According to Swift, the *RP* editor at the time, Ward Bushee, called her at home to interview her for an assistant's job. He asked if she could type; Swift lied and said she could.

"But he didn't fire me," she recalled of her first day at work.

While Swift has spent the past decade as director of the Capitola History Museum – located in the small red schoolhouse-like building next to City Hall – she spent the better part of her

earlier career in journalism, including stints with the *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, the *Express* and this publication, among others. And while she covered a range of beats, her stories about historical places and people have made her a popular byline.

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Having been born and raised in Santa Cruz County in the '50s, Swift's recollections now make for their own kind of Central Coast history – a time before there was a university in Santa Cruz, a community college in Aptos, an indoor mall in Capitola or a crowd of newly arrived residents vying for high-priced property.

Back then, La Selva Beach was very small place on the outskirts of Watsonville. Swift's mom worked as a saleslady at Ford's Department Store, where Swift and the other "Ford's children" would hang out after school. In the '50s, the department store was the "big place" in town.

As a child, with mousy brown hair,

Swift stood out. Topping six-feet, one-inch, Swift continues to stand out today.

Swift said that she was the tallest kid in her school. In fact, by sixth grade, she was taller than the teachers and custodians.

"It was real hard. ... I was ultrasensitive anyway. I was very shy," she said. "Then nothing fit. ... I almost had to graduate from the eighth grade in tennis shoes."

Swift was the only girl in the family. She has two brothers. She remembers family vacations in Oregon as being too hot.

Still, "I didn't appreciate Watsonville as much as I do now," she said.

At 13 years, Swift started picking loganberries – a cross between raspberries and blackberries developed by local physician and horticulturist Dr. James Logan.

She worked five seasons picking berries.

"I had experience working with farm workers," she said. "I really saw the pace at which a farm worker had to work to make anything. ... If you are a farm worker you are working really hard for not very much."

She said that at Watsonville High School she didn't see any indications of overt racism, although she observed that Latino teens who didn't speak English wouldn't stay on campus during lunch. She said that classes were filled with a variety of students from different ethnic backgrounds, but that there weren't classes for English language learners.

"If you couldn't speak English, you either got [the lessons] or you didn't."

As a teenager in the '60s, she was in some of the first classes at Cabrillo College.

"I loved Cabrillo. That place changed my life," she said of what was then a recently opened campus.

She said that besides new buildings, the faculty was young. She had already been attending high school with the sons and daughters of Cabrillo's instructors, adding that the newcomers tended to be used to more rigorous curriculum than the local students.

"I couldn't keep up with them. ... They were moving lots faster," Swift said.

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In the late '50s, Swift's dad had auditioned for the college's new theatrical productions, so by the time Swift enrolled in Cabrillo she already knew the campus.

She also already knew the kids. And where did teens hang out in the '60s?

Swift says that Vic Jowers owned the Sticky Wicket, a beatnik coffee house.

"I was so enchanted. My dream was to wear a leotard and work in a coffee house," recalled Swift, adding that small café on Mar Vista in Rio del Mar was also her first taste of cheesecake.

However, except for the Sticky Wicket, there wasn't much in Mid-County in the way of distractions.

"Around here, there was nothing," she said. "Young people left as soon as they could."

Why didn't Swift also leave?

"When I was old enough to leave, I had enough sense to stay," she said.

However, Aptos did have a parade on the Fourth of July, and that was where Swift would meet her first and second husband.

"I was... selling watermelon," Swift recalled. She said that Steve told her she was wearing a "dorky" hat. "I was really offended. ... [I had] no idea that

he was flirting."

She was formally introduced to Steve a short while later on campus at Cabrillo.

"I was always looking for [someone with] a cool last name," Swift quipped.

She added that Steve also was a few inches taller and the neatest guy. She said she realized that even more after their divorce in 1978.

She would begin seeing Steve again in the '90s, after he divorced his second wife. On Jan. 1, 2001 at one second after midnight, Steve and Carolyn were remarried.

"It was pretty good the first time around. ... The second time is really great," she added. "When you are older, you appreciate [more]."

Her two marriages to the same man were a bit similar to the way Swift finished college.

She started attending Cabrillo College as a teenager, and continued off and on for 14 years. She also started her community studies coursework at UCSC in 1974, returning in 2000 to finish her degree.

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— Carolyn Swift

Time After Time

By the time that Swift enrolled in a history class in 1975 taught by instructor Sandy Lydon, she had already grown up in a household with generations of its own local history, taken history classes at UCSC and written about historical figures for the daily newspaper.

According to Swift, what she got from Lydon's course was context.

"You can't just tell the story all by itself," she said. "I didn't know how to link to the back-drop of local history, and that of the rest of the nation."

For instance, Swift learned that Capitola was typical of coastal communities development after World War I. Also, like other tourist hubs along the Golden State's seashore, the arrival of automobiles changed Capitola along with a nation.

With Lydon, Swift compiled her first book about Soquel Landing and Capitola, tracing development from its days as a wharf serving the industrial and shipping needs of Soquel. She's now written

others, including the history on Capitola's Begonia Festival. A new Begonia Festival volume is currently in the works with the cooperation of Gordon Van Zuiden and the Capitola Museum board of directors.

But, in the beginning, even with published work, Swift didn't really consider that she was an expert on local history. Instead she was more a curious novice who liked to write about the past, a kind of storyteller. Not that her lack of official status stopped the boxes from crowding her spare bedroom, filled with old newspaper clippings and photographs.

"I just love old images," Swift added. "When you have the photos, you have to write stories to go with the pictures."

Writing for *The Mid-County Post*, Swift mostly covered how the lives and times of early pioneers shaped Soquel, Capitola, Aptos and other nearby communities. She made famous men and women who had been dead for decades, some more than a century, tracing how their lives shaped modern character of Santa Cruz County. Swift also began collecting oral history from local long-lived residents.

Yet, maybe all her capacity to investi-

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gate history — tearing through old papers, newspaper archives and interviews — would never have resulted in a new career as curator had it not been for her ability to tell a story. For decades, her historical tours through Capitola Village and streets lined with century-old homes drew crowds. Her ability to synthesize miles of historical fact into a contextual format was unique, but she also makes her stories human scale, accessible and interesting.

She doesn't just tell her audience when someone was born; she fills their lives with emotions, imagining how events of the day impacted families, from the flu pandemic to weird weather.

Finding Capitola

Swift didn't find Capitola until her late teens. By then, she no longer picked berries or lived at home; she was working at night for Sylvania in Santa Cruz. About midnight, she would head to Capitola Village with friends before the bar called The Local closed.

"Most of the time I just sat there," she said. Carolyn was too young to legally drink. "There was just this buzz of activity. ... There were some really

interesting people."

Years later she returned to Capitola to help make ends meet, taking a part-time job in the Village, fulfilling another lifelong dream working as a barista before such a vocation had a moniker. In the 1980s, Mr. Toots was the place for late-night chatter — people alive on caffeine solving the world's troubles.

"I drank my first cup of coffee at Mr. Toots. ... I had a great time working there," Swift recalled of a time filled with Capitola history. "People would line up and stand out on the street [waiting to get in]."

And besides getting a delicious dessert at Mr. Toots with your java, patrons also got a bit of local history. Swift wrote monthly snapshots of Capitola's past on Mr. Toots menu. She retired from Mr. Toots in 1981.

In the mid-'90s, Swift accepted a job to work full time as Capitola's Museum curator. For many years previously, the small red clapboard bungalow at the front of city hall was run by volunteers.

"I came to the Capitola Museum and

felt there were all these things I could do for it," Swift said. "I knew there was not much funding."

She said by piecing together the brilliant work of volunteers and clever solutions to bridge the funding gap, the Capitola Museum opened some first-

rate exhibits, along with offering all comers the opportunity to immerse themselves in things past. And like her stories, many exhibits have been popular topics, like the exhibit on early Santa Cruz feminists or local tourism.

However, at the time, she said she did-

n't really understand the importance of the city's move.

"Not many cities have museums like this," she said. "I have really come to appreciate what the city has decided to do."

A Closer Look at Capitola

As a study of all things related to Capitola's history, what does Swift think about Capitola's future?

She answers with a brief history lesson. In the late 1800s, Swift says then-

owner Hihn was a Victorian man, conservative. He opened up Capitola to middle class tourists from San Jose.

In the '20s, Rispin emerged. And while she said recent investigations suggest that Rispin's successor, Robert Hays Smith, was involved from the beginning as a shareholder in Rispin's first company and not just the wealthy guy who bought Rispin's estate when Rispin's fortunes failed, as front man Rispin brought a lot of big dreams and flash to the sedate Village.

She adds that Rispin's huge expansion and sudden exit paved the way for city government. Who else would deliver the water and fill the potholes?

From her days at Mr. Toots, Swift says that Capitola isn't nearly as funky as the Village was in the '70s and '80s.

"Maybe it is a bit more gray haired," Swift said. "It is still in an evolutionary stage and the town is just beginning to flex its muscle."

She believes the new proposed hotels — the Rispin Inn on Wharf Road and Barry Swenson's seaside hotel in the Village — are just a refinement to the Village. She adds that the challenge will be for Capitola to reinvent itself while preserving its character.

"What a challenge!" she emphasized. ■

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— Carolyn Swift