

The Missing Beach That Helped Transform Capitola

By Sarah Weston

A 1965 newspaper headline read, "Capitola Winter Storms Approach - Wave of Fear Inundates Beaches." Residents had good reason to be fearful. In 1958, a major winter high tide had destroyed much of the Esplanade and swamped the landmark merry-go-round. The same thing happened in 1960, eventually causing Capitola mayor Andy Antonetti to finally pack up his carousel for good. But now there was more than usual reason to view the darkening storm clouds with dread: the city's beach, not only its major tourist attraction but also its bulwark against the roiling winter swells, was rapidly disappearing.

The erosion had begun a year earlier, and the effects were drastic. Twenty-one pilings had been ripped from beneath the Capitola pier, building foundations were undercut, and sewer lines had been exposed, with the prospect of dumping raw sewage along the city's edge. The cliff bluff by Grand Avenue was eroding at the rate of more than a foot a year.

Fingers quickly pointed to a single suspect. The Santa Cruz Yacht Harbor (then called the Small Craft Harbor) had been completed in 1964, and Capitola officials believed that the sand was being shortstopped by the rock jetties that were part of that construction. Previously, every year the sand would get washed down and replenish the beaches. Once the Small Craft Harbor was built, the sand got clogged, and Capitola became a beach town with no beach.

Who Is Going to Fix It?

Capitola officials appealed to the State Department of Water Resources to help solve the problem of disappearing

sand. One problem was that the beach didn't belong to them; at the time it was still Capitola State Beach, a six-acre state park. They also pointed a blaming finger at the Army Corps of Engineers,

suddenly there was a pressing need for schools, parks, police and infrastructure. However, there had not yet been sufficient time to form the citizen participation and oversight commissions that mark a



With the beach almost gone in the mid-1960s, surfers had to be segregated from bathers (photo copyright Covello & Covello Photography)

which began to consider the problem thoughtfully, and did so for the next three years.

Meanwhile, the beach eroded right up to the edge of the Esplanade. The state dumped 500 cubic feet of rock rubble next to the wall as a buffer, which left only a few feet of sand as a vestigial remnant. Another report in 1966 stated, "Easter vacation finds most of Santa Cruz County beaches crowded with sun worshippers and surfers, except for Capitola beach, which is still plagued with a sand shortage. The few souls who visit the beach these days have to be satisfied with rock bathing." Sure enough, photos from the period show would-be Annette Funicellos perched uncomfortably on beach towels spread over boulders.

What to do? Capitola at this time was a city deep in the throes of transition. Largely a retirement community prior to WWII, the town now saw a flood of Baby Boom families just as Cabrillo College and UCSC were completed, and

mature community, leaving the city council, however well meaning, to act largely autonomously. In a decade that came to be noted more for indulgence and excess than restraint or good taste, this was not necessarily a good thing.

Hotels, Motels & Parking in the Bay

Among those who had picked up on the town's sudden appeal were some large out-of-town developers. One of the various schemes proposed (and seriously considered) was an idea that would not only boost the economy but halt erosion and trap the sand. They would build a three-story convention hotel at the base of the cliffs, complete with restaurant and cocktail bar. There would also be a 1,000-car parking lot out into the bay. The whole project would cost \$1.5 million, nearly \$11 million in 2012 dollars. Noted local historian Carolyn Swift characterized one of the associated hotel proposals as "looking like an

ice cube tray."

Considering the current extended debate that has accompanied the much more modest ideas of restoring the Rispin Mansion or building a smaller hotel in the Village, one has to wonder what the Council was thinking. However, they were being pressured from several directions. State Senator Donald Grunsky from Watsonville was the force negotiating with the state to turn the beach over to Capitola, and he was doing so with the idea of development. Also, the fire department was pushing to raze a good deal of the Village as it then stood.

Much of the area consisted of little wooden cottages that had been built in 1882-1885. They were not on foundations, and the fire department considered them substandard fire hazards and wanted them torn down. Many were quite dilapidated, and with the sand problem the economy had gone absolutely flat. So to many city fathers, development seemed like a good idea.

As the area grew more run down, a different kind of merchant moved in. Shops that had once sold hot dogs, sea shells and beach umbrellas now offered beads, incense, tablecloths from India and the occasional plastic marijuana leaf. Many artists and artisans, some very talented, were attracted to the cheap rents. However, to the older, more conservative leaders who had guided Capitola through its first decade of cityhood, they were known collectively as "the long hairs."

The long hairs were not anxious to see a massive tourist complex go up, and said so. Olaf (Al) Palm, a self-styled beatnik painter with a fascination for 17th century Dutch Masters, personally undertook a renovation of one of the decaying buildings as a show of gentrification. Bernie Waymire, another artist who owned a shop called the Plum Tree, was appointed to the city's planning commission, from which position she advocated slow growth.

"Long Hairs Seek Voice in Capitola," trumpeted one 1971 headline. "[Establish-

ment members] have expressed concern that "non-conformist youth in the community, centered around a group of young downtown merchants and craftsmen, is attempting to take control of the community's government and agencies," from which to use them as a springboard to their goals.

A Return to Sanity

In the end, the "long hairs" proved to be something of a straw man. It turned out that their opposition to development was much more the mainstream position. Numerous grassroots organizations sprang up from the early '60s to the mid-'70s, determined to preserve the character of Capitola and the surrounding communities. There were groups like Save Old Capitola, the Capitola Survival Committee, the Aptos Action League and the Live Oak Community Action League, all dedicated to keeping development from overwhelming the community, and to provide the oversight of its citizens.

As for the sand problem, someone came up with the idea of building a groin (i.e., a stone jetty) instead. Though less complicated than a massive car park, it was hardly simple - the 250-foot groin required 5,500 tons of rock and more than 2,000 loads of sand to even begin to restore the beach.

While the beach and the Village area consumed much of the attention in the 1960s and early '70s, another, less noticed phenomenon was taking place a few blocks to the west, one that would ultimately provide much of the sorely needed boost to Capitola's economy - the paving of 41st Avenue and the beginnings of what would become the Capitola Mall.

As for Capitola's beach, the episode proved only a momentary blip in the city's meandering, often quixotic history. "The beach has been coming and going for years," as one San Jose reporter put it. "But lately, it's just gone too far."

[The Capitola Museum provided the source material for this article.]