

Canyons, tracks and bridges keep Aptos stroll interesting

7-15-90
Third in a series

THERE'S NO way around Aptos. The Santa Cruz Mountains tumble down along Aptos Creek right to the beach creating a complex barrier through which must thread streets, creeks, a railroad and a freeway. Aptos is Santa Cruz County's transportation junction box.

Aptos was not designed for walking, so it will take a dose of courage to thread the sometimes narrow path between buildings and rushing cars. Walking is made ever more exciting by the absence of sidewalks and crosswalks, and the creature known as *driverus Aptosianus*, an impatient, aggressive, rude person usually seen racing along the narrow streets in a late-model foreign automobile. Nevertheless, the rewards of a walk in Aptos far outweigh the risks.

No. 1 - Aptos Cemetery. Park near the intersection of State Park Drive and Soquel Drive (there is also a bus stop there) and walk over to the Aptos cemetery. Many of Aptos' founding mothers and fathers are here, including Rafael and Soledad Castro. The Castro

Hindsight



Sandy Lydon

plot is in the southeast corner, marked by the tall, ornate obelisk. The inscription is written entirely in Spanish, symbolic of Rafael's life-long refusal to learn English.

Rafael Castro received the Aptos Rancho land grant from Mexico in 1833, eventually building his home on the hill south of the present-day Rancho del Mar shopping center. (The home burned in 1915.) Castro sold a large part of his property to Claus Spreckels in 1872, and from

then until his death in 1878, he seems to have been bitter about the fate of his family at the hands of the aggressive Yankees. Contemporary observers described Castro's funeral as the largest ever held in the county.

The cemetery was laid out on land donated by Rafael in 1868, and a small church was constructed on donated land next door in 1875. In 1876, a row of cypress trees was planted around the property, and the trees at the back of the cemetery and the gnarled old tree on the corner remain from that planting. The Catholic population in Aptos steadily diminished until, in 1935, the church was closed.

Before leaving the cemetery, look west and you will see the heather farm, one of the last vestiges of Aptos agriculture. The four poles south of the farm are radio antennas. Those who know the science of radio waves have explained that AM radio travels through the ground as well as the air. That's why the AM radio station you might be listening to in your car disappears as you drive past Aptos. When the towers were first turned

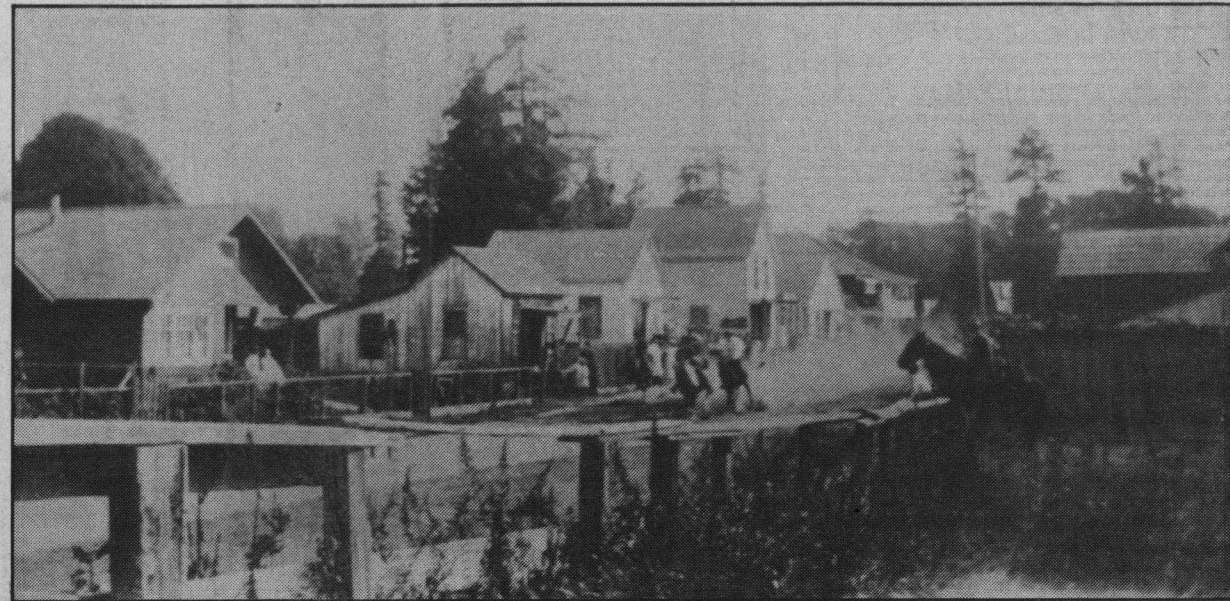


Photo from 1919 looks east down Valencia Street during filming of movie.

on, residents on the hillside above Soquel Drive sometimes picked up the radio station in their ovens.

Restroom note: The only accessible, public, taxpayer-supported restrooms on this walk are across the street in the Aptos branch of the Santa Cruz public library system. So, as my father always said just before we loaded into the car for a Sunday drive, 'You'd better go now.' (The library also has an excellent collection of Aptosiana.)

While we wait for you, this is a good time to deal with the name, Aptos. Aptos was an Indian word, but we do not know exactly what it meant, nor how the Ohlone pronounced it. The word may have been the name of a place, a person, or an Indian group, but despite the oft-repeated translations ('meeting of two streams' is the most common) no one really knows. (For the definitive discussion of the word Aptos, see Donald Clark's 'Santa Cruz County Place Names,' pp. 7-8.)

The locally-accepted pronunciation these days rhymes with 'flap toss.' A variant pronunciation championed by Lucile Aldrich sounds like 'flap tiss,' but one rarely hears that version beyond the confines of the Aptos Ladies Tuesday Evening Society.

No. 2 - Resurrection Church. Known affectionately as 'Our Lady of Safeway,' the church represents the resurrection of Aptos brought about by the opening of Cabrillo College's new campus and the widening of Soquel Drive in 1962. Under the leadership of Fathers Francis Markey and Mike Marini, the congregation flourished during the 1970s and early 1980s. I've often wondered what Rafael and Soledad Castro made of the liturgical stretching going on next door. Cross State Park Drive at the signal and walk east along Soquel Drive.

Soquel Drive follows the route of the Santa Cruz-Watsonville Road which was, until the limited access thruway (now freeway) of Highway 1 opened in 1949, the primary east-west road in the county. Indians, Spaniards on horseback, Mexican caretas, Yankee stagecoaches, and Model T Fords all passed beneath the cypress trees lining the road.

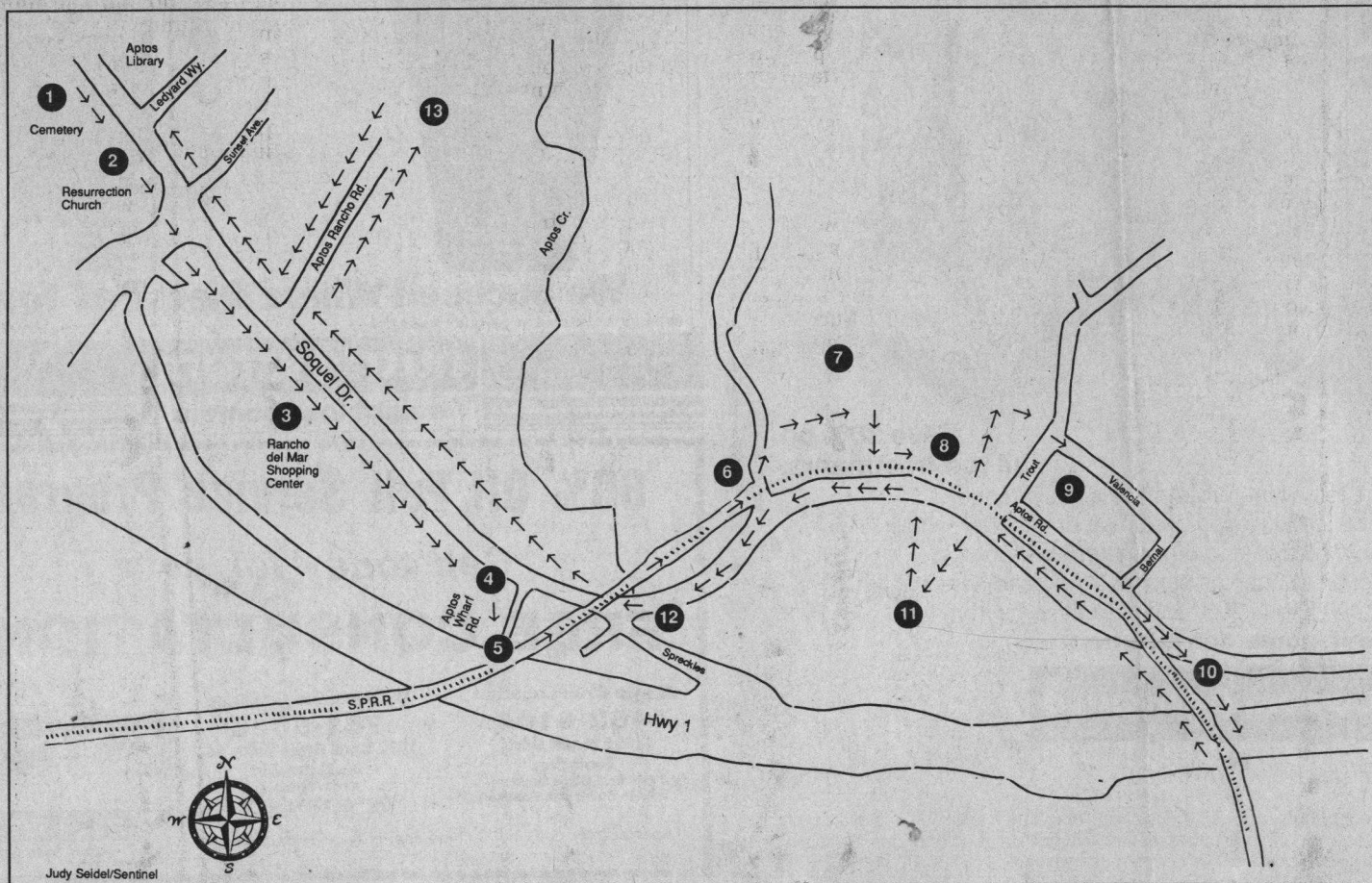
No. 3 - The Rancho del Mar Shopping Center. This center also dates from the heady days of growth in 1962. Walk through the center and descend the stairway between Kentucky Fried Chicken and the Aptos Twin Theaters. Cross the parking lot, and just beyond Uncle Kwok's you will come to a strange, short road.

No. 4 - Aptos Wharf Road. As the name suggests, this road once ran due south to a wharf located just west of the mouth of Aptos Creek. The intersection formed by the Santa Cruz-Watsonville Road and this road to the wharf was the center of historic Aptos. The oldest extant building in Aptos is the white, two story with red trim (#7996) opposite you and to the left. Built in the early 1850s, the building contained an early store operated by Rafael's son-in-law, Jose Arano. The house is on the original grade, and you can see what changes were made to accommodate the later grade of the road, bridge and railroad. Turn right on Wharf Road and follow it to the fence. At the opening beside the telephone pole, climb down the bank on to the railroad tracks.

No. 5 - The Santa Cruz Railroad. This is the best place to see just what a complex transportation corridor Aptos is. First turn to the right and walk to the bridge over Highway 1. Imagine that the canyon cut for the highway was filled in and you can understand how Wharf Road made it to the beach. The opening of Highway 1 in 1949 chopped off many roads, forever leaving us with the frustration of standing at a chain link fence realizing that the address we want is on the other side of the freeway.

The railroad was built by Chinese laborers for the Santa Cruz

Please see APTOS — E2



Judy Seidel/Sentinel

Aptos

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Railroad in 1875. Walk back toward the railroad trestle (there's a great blackberry bush amid the eucalyptus stumps on the right) and stand on the trestle looking down at the road bridge below. This three dimensional intersection of railroad, highway and creek dates from 1929. Note the plaque on the railroad trestle behind you. From this perspective you can see what a Gordian knot Aptos is. The railroad grade has always been fairly constant, but the highway has ducked and twisted beneath it to cross the creek. Continue across the trestle.

(Note: If you are afraid of heights, you can loop back down and follow Soquel Drive across the creek, rejoining the walk across from the Aptos Garage.)

Aptos Creek is over one hundred feet below, and it is this formidable canyon which has always posed a problem for cross-county transportation. Before the first bridge was built across the creek, the road forded the creek upstream near Aptos Village Park. Continue on the railroad grade until you come to Aptos Creek Road.

No. 6 - Aptos Creek Road. The technical name for this road is the T. (for Timothy) Hopkins Right-of-Way, a standard gauge railroad grade built in 1883 (also by Chinese laborers) running just over seven miles up the Aptos Canyon. Today the right-of-way is actually a part of the Forest of Nisene Marks State Park, explaining the small sign in the juniper bushes on the right. Turn left onto the road and follow it around behind the Aptos Station. (The actual Aptos railroad station was on the south side of the tracks, and the present Aptos Station buildings have nothing to do with the railroad.)

No. 7 - Granite Way. Turn right into the open field and follow the dirt road east toward the concrete

foundations. This flat was originally used as a lumber yard during the years that logging dominated both the Aptos and Valencia watersheds. The concrete footings at the base of the hill on your left are remnants of the era in the early twentieth century when Aptos was an apple-packing center. There was a Chinese apple dryer (owned jointly by Lam Pon and Ralph Mattison), a vinegar works and several apple packing sheds on the flat. The huge concrete pad in front of you was built during the 1940s to support a cannery, but by the 1950s, the fruit industry was consolidated in the Pajaro Valley and Aptos' apple era ended. Follow the concrete pad to the right and pass between it and the back of the stores and you will pop out into a parking lot. On a clear day you will be able to see the bay glittering off to your right.

No. 8 - The Bayview Hotel. Originally constructed in the winter of 1878-79 by Jose Arano (the date on the plaque is incorrect), the Bayview represents the movement of the center of Aptos from the Wharf Road intersection out onto this flat. Aptos village (as it currently is known) did not exist until there were dependable bridges and trestles across the creeks in 1876. Though I can't prove it yet, I suspect that the Bayview was designed by Thomas Beck, a local architect and builder who did similar mansard-roof buildings including the Daubenbiss House in Soquel, the Riverside Hotel, and the original Cooper Street county court house in Santa Cruz.

Stop and admire the grand magnolia tree and then go in and see the great restoration work. As with a number of other historic buildings in Santa Cruz County, the bed and breakfast inn industry has saved and restored a number of otherwise doomed buildings. Patronize the bed and breakfast inns and support local history.

Just east of the Bayview, turn left between the metal posts and walk north toward the Village Fair building, another remnant of those early apple packing days. If the building is open (Thursday through Sundays, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.), go in and browse. While you're here, look back and note the new wooden chimneys on the Bayview, courtesy of the Loma Prieta earthquake, epicentered about four miles due north.

No. 9 - The Hihn Subdivision. Cross Trout Gulch Road (there are no crosswalks anywhere on this street!) and stand in the parking lot on the right side of Valencia Street. If you hold up the accompanying photograph, you can see the street and most of the buildings are still standing. The photo was taken during the filming of a silent movie titled 'One Way Trail' in 1919, and though several trees have grown up in front of the houses, you can clearly see most of them in the photograph. Walk down Valencia and be sure to look at the two-story Somerset House which housed Aptos' first telephone exchange.

This subdivision, originally laid out by F.A. Hihn in the 1880s, represents the egalitarian, working-stiff roots of historic Aptos. Though multi-millionaire Claus Spreckels had a summer home just east of here, in the nineteenth century he was the exception. Upper-class Aptos did not really begin in earnest until the 1920s with the subdivision of present-day Rio Del Mar and the development of Seaside in the 1960s. Aptos originally was a town of lumberjacks, wood choppers, apple packers and farmers, and this little neighborhood is one of the last places you can still get a feel for those days. (See if you can find the WPA logo in the curb.) Turn right on Bernal and follow it to Aptos Road, cross over and scramble up the bank and back on to the railroad tracks.

No. 10 - Valencia Creek Bridge and Trestle. Turn left and follow the tracks out onto the bridge which crosses Soquel Drive. Suddenly there will be another canyon below you, this time created by Valencia Creek. This is the other end of the transportation puzzle. Stay on the tracks and cross Highway 1. The grove of redwood trees on the south side of the freeway is considered to be the closest that native redwoods came to the sea (they abhor salt air) anywhere in North America. Cross the freeway and note the huge construction project on the right. Aptos pioneer Benjamin Nichols used to live there. Follow the railroad back into Aptos Village and when you get to Trout Gulch Road, cross Soquel Drive and walk back to Old Country Pizza.

No. 11 - Earthquake Country. Aptos Village was hit hard on Oct. 17, and the Old Country Pizza was a victim. Note the huge hole in the asphalt to the rear of the building on the right. The primary reason I brought you back here, however, is so that you might look back through the trees on the right and see the backs of the buildings which hang off Soquel Drive. See? That's why some of them are no longer there. Walk back to Soquel Drive, turn left and follow carefully along the false-fronted buildings, most of which date from the 1890s and later. If Cafe Sparrow has reopened, stop in and check out their menu. I recommend Cafe Sparrow highly, particularly their week-end breakfasts.

Carefully continue west on Soquel Drive along the chain link fence and where the view opens up on the left, note the horse training facility (another earthquake victim) on the flat and the freeway traffic on the bridge in the distance. (Yet another bridge!) Follow Soquel around, past the Aptos Garage (1929), and across the Aptos

Creek Bridge.

No. 12 - Aptos Creek Bridge. Opened in a grand ceremony in 1929, this bridge is but the last of a series of bridges spanning this formidable canyon. Look off to the right and you can still see old abutments looming in the maples. Though it is shorter and lower than the Bixby Creek bridge south of Carmel, I have always liked this arch of concrete suspended in the tree tops. Continue west on Soquel Drive and peek behind Kendall Potter and Mann to see the steep and ever-present cliff. Continue on the right side of Soquel Drive, past Aptos Dairy Farm, Krazy's and the laundromat until you come to those lovely cypress trees.

No. 13 - Aptos Rancho Road. Turn right on the new road (curbs and gutters) and follow it down past Coast Medical Plaza. This is also a state park right-of-way, and the recent construction certainly was hard on the trees. (Note the huge, fresh scars on the Monterey pines on the right and the dead pine on the left.) I have always been attached to this corridor of trees because it represents the era

of the Castros. Look to the right and at the back of this lovely swale is Vicente Castro's (Rafael's son) house, framed by specimen walnut and magnolia trees. Continue down the road, ignoring the No Trespassing sign as this right-of-way belongs to you and all the people of California.

Just beyond the end of the pavement you can see a state park entrance sign and if you walk just a big farther, the road narrows to a trail. Were you to follow the trail you would eventually cross Aptos Creek and come out on Aptos Creek Road in the Forest of Nisene Marks State Park.

This sudden oasis of second-growth redwoods is a welcome capsule of quiet after all that traffic back up there on Soquel Drive. As you walk back up the hill, imagine that this short road is a time-line of Aptos history, beginning with the redwood forests, passing the Castros, the Santa Cruz-Watsonville road, the shopping center of the 1960s, ending with the hustle and bustle of 1990.

The next walk will be Monterey County's Point Lobos.