



Corner Pockets

A throwback to another time and place,
a handful of corner markets still flourish in Santa Cruz County

By Geoffrey Dunn

When I was a young kid growing up on the Westside of Santa Cruz in the late 1950s and early 1960s, I lived on a then-unpaved cul-de-sac that backed up to what are now the sites of McDonald's and Taco Bell on Mission Street. At the north corner of Mission and Laurent streets was a small corner store—Stop & Shop Market—run by an elderly couple, Harry and Minnie Smith. It was a classic “mom and pop” operation, as many of them were.

The aisles were narrow, and the shelves tightly packed. In the back was a small butcher shop, run by the always affable George Arnold, that offered a wide assortment of choice meats and poultry. With dark

wooden floors worn smooth since its opening during the Depression years of the 1930s, Stop & Shop was a small tiny world unto its own. I was fascinated by it.

Directly across Mission Street, at what is now the Westside Center of the Palo Alto Medical Foundation, was Stagnaro's Liquors, run by brothers Joe and Tom Stagnaro (and which later moved to where the Westside Pharmacy is today). Those two venues—both located within a few hundred feet of my home—formed my first public forays into Santa Cruz, and, for that matter, the world. I loved listening to the conversations taking place near the Stop & Shop cash register and watching George the Butcher make his

various cuts with knives and an old band saw. Sometimes he would hand me a piece of a raw hot dog to nibble on. Later, I discovered that I could bring in empty pop bottles and trade them for candy.

At the liquor store, I listened to Russ Hodges and Lon Simmons broadcast San Francisco Giants games on the radio. The customers talked football and baseball, fishing and hunting, and occasionally some local sports star would come in to challenge one of the muscular brothers to an arm-wrestling

(Top) The Westside's Santa Cruz Market is rumored to be the oldest market in Santa Cruz, dating back to the 1860s.

Photo: Courtesy Shopper's Corner



(Above) East Side Santa Cruz shortly after the opening of Shopper's Corner.

match. The competition was intense—and represented my first peephole into the wonders and complexities of what Saroyan called the human comedy.

For most Santa Cruzans—and indeed for most Americans of that era—corner markets served as a critical link to their community. Neighbors encountered neighbors there on a daily basis. In the days before the internet and social networking sites, corner markets were where community conversations and debates took place, face to face.

By the time I was able to commandeer more than a few blocks on my bicycle, my next corner-store discovery was the Santa Cruz Market, located on California Avenue at Walk Circle. Nestled against the edge of the Santa Cruz-Italian fishing colony, the market was then run by shirttail relatives of mine, Auggie and Lorraine (Carniglia) Canepa, both of whom had been raised in the once-thriving Italian neighborhood.

If I had a single staple in my youth, it was gallette—Northern Italian sea biscuits or hardtack—that was made at Cuneo's bakery in San Francisco. The Santa Cruz Market was one of the few (and last) places to carry it

locally. Auggie would cut me a few slices of salami, crack some gallette, and for a nickel or so, I was in heaven.

Founded in 1866, the market is still in place at 214 California Avenue in the same wooden structure where it has been for a century-and-half. Gone is my cousin Auggie's meat market, but you can still get the basics here—soft drinks, bread, candy, pastries, ice cream, and popsicles, and perhaps, most importantly, lottery tickets. The store, I'm told, has had a few big winners in recent years.

I moved from the Westside to Soquel in the mid-1960s, and shortly thereafter discovered a matrix of dirt trails and unpaved roads that led to the oasis—or more to my friends and me like the Land of Oz—Cásalegno's—at the rural juncture of Old San Jose and Laurel Glenn roads. It was both a grocery store and gas station back then.

A century earlier it had been the site of a stagecoach station for visitors traversing the Santa Cruz Mountains. It has always been an important regional landmark.

Built by ranchers Frank and Vera (Cisi) Cásalegno in 1929, the store was run for nearly a



(Above) Today third-generation grocer Andre Beauregard proudly guides the family's store into the 21st century.

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(Above) Originally opened in 1929 by the Casalegno family, Casalegno's Market continues to thrive today serving the Santa Cruz Mountain residents who live above Soquel.

half-century by their son Frank in a motorized wheel chair (he had been paralyzed when hit by a truck in his teens), and then by various members (and generations) of the family following Frank's death in the mid-1980s.

Today, the actual business of the store is no longer in Casalegno family hands—but it offers a lovely venue to have a cappuccino or cold drink on the faded green bench overlooking Little John Creek. The same 7-Up sign that hung over the ice machine when I was a kid is still there. It is a throwback to another, simpler time.

If the Santa Cruz Market and Casalegno's are now little jewels located on the margins of the county's mercantile economy, Shopper's Corner, prominently situated at the juncture of Branciforte and Soquel Avenues, has positioned itself as the pulsating hub of the community's locally owned and operated markets.

Competition in the Mid-Town shopping district (which those of us of a certain age still refer to as the Eastside) is intense. Safeway, Whole Foods, and Staff of Life (also locally

owned and operated) all contend for the local grocery dollar, and Shopper's continues to thrive against what is stiff competition.

Ironically, Shopper's started in 1937 at the site of what was a regional chain of 19 grocery stores founded by W.J. Espindola of Watsonville in 1911; Espindola was way ahead of his time. The Depression-era economy eventually broke the back of Espindola's mini-grocery empire, and by 1939, Shopper's was purchased for the regal sum of one dollar (with a contract executed on butcher paper). The new proprietors were a couple of local Chaminade High

schoolmates, Emmett "Bud" Beauregard and Vince Williams, who had been working at an Espindola store on Pacific Avenue that had also gone out of business.



(Above) A vintage cash register resides on the counter of Casalegno's Market recording the day's transactions.



(Above) "Time to Shop" reads the vintage clock on Shopper's Corner. Day or night Shopper's had served Santa Cruz for more than 80 years.

For decades, Bud and Vince put in long hours at the store, before turning it over to their sons, Jim Beauregard and Bob Williams respectively. In 1994, the Beauregard clan bought out the Williams' shares, and, today, a third generation member of the family, André Beauregard is at the helm.

On a warm afternoon in early fall, I sat with the 36-year-old André just outside the doors of Shopper's while a steady stream of customer's greeted him with hugs and gratitude. Like myself, many of the them have shopped at Shopper's for decades. The intense feelings they have for the store are an absolute rarity in the days of behemoth corporate markets.

André, who started working at the store when he was just 11, is very much aware that he is part of a powerful family tradition whenever he steps foot in the store. He realizes he has some high standards to uphold. "My grandfather ("Bud") and dad (Jim) dedicated their lives to this place," he says. "Their motto was work, work, work. 'I don't want that legacy to be lost or forgotten.'"

Part of Shopper's charm is that it carefully balances that legacy while keeping up with customers' ever-changing demands. Nostalgia blends in with the avante-garde. In recent years there's been a new empashis on

organic produce and natural foods, while the thriving meat market still maintains a stable of 17 butchers.

If you've lived in Santa Cruz for any length of time, it's almost impossible to stroll the isles of Shopper's without running into someone you know. Rumor has it that Tim Lousatalot of DeLaveaga Golf Course fame can hold court there for hours.

Plus there are local celebrities behind various counters. The much heralded meat market employs one of Santa Cruz's most celebrated athletes of the late 20th century: Paul Bagnasco. And history can still be made in the isles: The next time you run into Bagnasco's Holy Cross teammate Terry Bernard, ask him about the legendary leap he made one rainy day to save a young girl's birthday balloon. Of such feats are local lore made.

"I can get lost in conversation here

if I'm not careful," André chuckles. "I have to keep moving. I don't want the spirit of my grandfather to think I'm not working."

There's a special feeling that you get while shopping at these venerated markets that you simply don't get at more modern, impersonal stores. They provide a unique and special sustenance to our lives. 🍷



(Above) A horse-drawn wagon sits beside P.P. Wettstein's Grocery on California Street in Santa Cruz. Now Santa Cruz Market the store sports the original floors dating back to the 1800s.