

Live Oak plays role

By CAROLYN SWIFT
(First of a series)

Live Oak is an unincorporated community of 4.78 square-miles that lies roughly between Arana Gulch and Soquel Creek in northern Santa Cruz County—and is generally known as a place one must drive through to get from Santa Cruz to Capitola.

Because there is no city government to tend its needs, Live Oak has traditionally been regarded as a “country cousin,” to its more prestigious neighbors. Without a well-defined character, Live Oak has remained diversified and its concerns treated with a lesser priority than other county areas.

Reasons for Live Oak’s low status go back further than its present problems of inconsistent zoning, poor planning and mixed land uses. Live Oak was ignored even 200 years ago—when the county’s residents were Ohlone Indians.

Before the Spanish arrived in 1769, there were about 10,000 Ohlones who lived between San Francisco Bay in the north and Point Sur to the south. In Santa Cruz County, Ohlone Indian villages were political units ranging in population from 100 to 500 people—and sites used by the Indians were largely the same ones later picked for towns and industry by American settlers who came at the end of the Mexican period in the late 1840s.

Indian lifestyles depended on an ecological balance within the environment. Villages were all near good sites for hunting, fishing or food gathering, and never drifted far from an ample water supply. The greatest concentration of population in Santa Cruz County was at the Pajaro River Basin, where there was a supatribe of 500 people as well as a trading center. Tribal units throughout the county moved in an organized pattern within their own territories along streams or near the banks of the Pajaro or San Lorenzo Rivers.

These same sites—the Soquel, Aptos and Valencia Creeks as well as the river basins and northern coastal lands—were natural locations for towns that later depended for economic support on lumbering, fishing, shipping, agriculture and eventually the tourist industry.

There have been no archeological sites discovered in Live Oak and the Live Oak community has never had a “downtown.”

Cabrillo College archeology instructor Rob Edwards said Indian sites have been found near Live Oak boundaries at Arana Gulch and Soquel Creek, but none have been discovered within the community itself — even in areas where some use might have been possible, such as Woods Lagoon (now the site of Santa Cruz Yacht Harbor).

There may have been “sphere

of influence” lines for Live Oak in the early days too. Edwards said territories might have been used by several tribal groups for food gathering or weaving, but recognized as an “open land,” a buffer to prevent conflicts between tribal units settled in the areas now occupied by residents of Capitola and Santa Cruz.

Since there are no real streams in Live Oak, the resources may have been insufficient to support continuing use or a permanent population.

Live Oaks too, were poor substitutes for the tanbark oak, which was abundant in the Santa Cruz mountains but not along the coast. In his book, “Monterey Bay Area: Natural History and Cultural Imprints,” Burton L. Gordon said tanbark oak trees were the most important oaks in the northern half of the Monterey Bay area, and were regular producers of good quality acorns preferred by the Indians, who made annual trips to areas with the greatest number of oaks.

Coast live oaks—the type found in Live Oak—were the most common species, but its yield was low and its acorns mediocre.

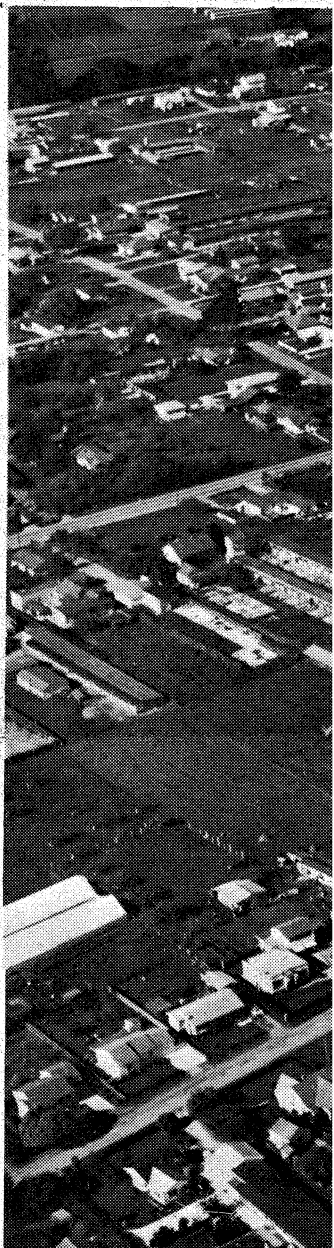
Eventually Santa Cruz County became famous for its fine beaches, impressive redwoods and prosperous agricultural valley—but this recognition eluded Live Oak, which came to be known more for its weeds, marshes and gulch wetlands vegetation that were obstacles to early day travel.

Jan Fosselius, senior planner for the Santa Cruz County planning department, said there are a few spots up the coast today that resemble Live Oak of the 1800s. These are grassland areas with clumps of oak and brush vegetation.

Fosselius guessed it was fairly difficult for a traveler to move through some parts of Live Oak 150 years ago. There were patches of clay around the lagoons that were hard-packed in summer but soft in the rainy season—much like the harbor area at Moss Landing today—and in between seasons there were spots people could walk on, and other places where their feet could sink a foot or more with no warning.

When Santa Cruz Mission was founded in 1791, Live Oak was included as mission territory. After secularization in 1834, Live Oak lands were transferred to Villa Branciforte. While other county lands had already been sought for Mexican land grants by the Californios — much of Live Oak stayed with Branciforte, and was declared public land after 1850.

Californios had obtained grant titles for most county lands before the mission was secularized. Two families from Villa Branciforte — those of Don Jose Joaquin Castro and Don Jose Antonio Rodriguez (also spelled



This was Live Oak in the 1800s and its additions had become part of the Live Oak community. The house on Avenue and Capitola is the home built in 1881. Sur-

Rodrigues)—acquired together almost one-quarter million acres.

These two families were related through the marriage of Francisco Rodriguez, son of Don Jose Antonio, and Rafaela Castro, daughter Don Jose Joaquin. In 1834, Francisco received title to Rancho Rodeo—which included Live Oak land from Rodeo Gulch to Soquel Creek. There is a natural amphitheater at Rodeo Gulch that may have been the site for annual cattle round-ups held by the two families, and for which the gulch is named.

On May 12, 1845, land title to Rancho Rodeo was sold to John Hames and John Daubenbiss, who had arrived at Santa Cruz in 1843. Their claim for 1,473 acres was patented on May 3, 1882. Both Hames and Daubenbiss resided near Soquel Village and developed industries along Soquel Creek.

Santa Cruz County’s smallest rancho—the tiny Rancho Aquajita—bordered along Live Oak, resting as a triangle on the