

Church Groups Found a Haven in Santa Cruz in the 1800s

By Ross Eric Gibson

Few people on the central coast realize they are living on holy ground, in areas first settled as religious retreats. The 1791 mission that gave its name to the city of Santa Cruz wasn't the only local religious settlement to become a village.

When the Methodists established Pacific Grove in 1875 as a retreat and campground for their state conventions, it was the finest such meeting place on the West Coast. It showed the prestige such retreats could bring to a local community, and it became a model for other denominations.

Santa Cruz started enticing church groups to establish camps in this area, adding \$3,000 cash to any deal offered by local landowners. Many groups already preferred Santa Cruz, because some people like the coast and others wanted to be in forests or close to mountains. Eventually, five religious retreats were established along the coast, linked by a trolley line. The narrow tent lots favored miniature architecture, which evolved into quaint, pedestrian-friendly communities.

In 1887, the Christian Church wanted its own state conference grounds on the model of Pacific Grove. The church chose Santa Cruz, and on 10 acres of land, circular streets for tents and summer cottages were laid out around a large octagonal tabernacle with a 100-foot bell tower. The retreat was named Garfield Park after president James Garfield, who also was a pastor of this faith. Its main street was Garfield Avenue, known today as Woodrow Avenue.

The 1890 building looked like a beached ship and was nicknamed The Ark. Its 3,000-seat hall had large doors around its perimeter to accommodate overflow crowds or to become an open-air pavilion in fair weather.

In 1890, Baptists meeting in Oakland had their choice of six 10-acre sites in Santa Cruz. Natural Bridges Beach and the Fair Street Racetracks were top contenders. But they finally chose Kimbleton Park in east Santa Cruz, thanks to J.C. Kimble and Jacob Schwan, adding to the site until it comprised 41 acres. The site sat between Wood's Lagoon (today's yacht harbor) and Schwan Lake, so they named it Twin Lakes.

The camp hotel, built on Schwan Lake near the beach, was named the Hotel Surf because the Santa Cruz Surf newspaper had been a major influence in bringing the Baptist camp to Santa Cruz.

Sacramento architect S.B. Abbott designed a 300-seat brown-shingle church with Queen Anne tower, which ranked for 75 years as one of the county's finest landmarks. The Baptists extended lot sales to other denominations that could accept a "dry" community.

Further east, on East Cliff Drive, was the 1891 retreat for Catholic women of limited means. The campgrounds, just west of Corcoran Lagoon, were donated to the Catholic Ladies' Aid Society by James Corcoran. It was named Santa Maria Del Mar, as was the cliff hotel and convent that operated the retreat. They planted 1,400 trees.

In 1894, a Jesuit retreat was established down the coast, called Villa Manresa. It was named after the Spanish town where the order's founder regained his health as a wounded soldier. The retreat served the College of Santa Clara,

which even considered moving its campus to Manresa. But the Jesuits sold the retreat in 1922 and it is today known as La Selva Beach.

There were other county religious retreats in the mountains, but the coast retreats mark a distinctive evolution as tent-lot communities. At one time, each lot was required to have at least one tree, creating forested grounds. But as these sites became year-round residences, many trees were removed. This exposed the humble architecture, which can still be widely found.

The tent-frame cabin was popular, and dated back to when downtown Santa Cruz was a boom town of tents. These consisted of an elevated floor and wainscot with a wooden frame for canvas walls and ceiling. And as in boom town Santa Cruz, these were often shingled over later into permanent buildings. The 49er cabin dated from the Gold Rush and was just large enough for a bunk bed and side table.

The beach cabin or cottage was a narrow, two-room frame dwelling. The brown shingle or board cabin with log porch also was popular. Another trend was the board-and-batten cottage with "tent finish," meaning the battens were painted like a striped tent.

Sources

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