

Laura's 'Souvenir' Starts a Fund

By MARGARET KOCH
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Little did Laura Hecox dream when she acquired the curious wood comb, that one day in the future it would be classed as a "study piece," and added to a nationally known collection.

The artifact, collected years ago as a "tourist souvenir" by Laura, will provide Santa Cruz Museum with the nucleus of an acquisition fund.

The article is a comb, about six by four inches, carved from wood by the Tlingit Indians of the Pacific Northwest. It dates from about 1840 and was originally carved for re-sale to tourists of that day.

The carving depicts a stylized wolf's head devouring a child, feet first, in the manner of totem pole carvings.

Like many another "tourist" article, such combs were probably numerous in their day, and lightly regarded. However, today, they have become scarce. And this is the wood comb — an entirely unspectacular piece, for which the Menil Foundation of Rice University at Houston, Texas, is willing to pay the City of Santa Cruz \$12,000.

The Texas foundation is in the process of putting together an extensive collection of Pacific Northwest artifacts which promises to be one of the foremost in the U.S. They learned of the comb from Edmund Carpenter, a former UCSC student who saw it at the

local museum and is now employed by the Menil foundation at Houston.

"The foundation spends several million dollars each year, part of which goes for art objects of the Pacific Northwest," commented Rob Edwards, chairman of the museum commission.

The local museum first attempted to negotiate negotiate for a long-term loan, in accordance with its policy not to dispose of any museum articles.

But the Menil foundation would not go for that.

"They wanted it for a permanent display, available as a study piece," Edwards said. "They also are going to include it in a fine color catalogue they are preparing on the entire collection they are making."

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Charles Prentiss, curator of the local museum, makes it clear that Santa Cruz Museum will not sell a local painting or local artifact: "The comb is a perfect study piece, but here it would rarely be shown, due to space limitations and the fact that local displays have first priority."

When the offer for the comb first arrived locally, an effort was made to find out where Laura Hecox got it.

"We think from a friend in Nevada," commented Prentiss, "but no one really knows."

It is even possible that an

early-day ship's captain could have brought it to the Hecox home. The Hecoxes operated Santa Cruz Lighthouse for years and knew all the waterfront visitors when Santa Cruz was a busy shipping point.

The lighthouse lamp began guiding ships to harbor in 1868, after a number of shipwrecks along the adjoining coastal areas. First lighthouse keeper was Adna A. Hecox, early Santa Cruz preacher and one of the founders of the First Methodist Church here.

Adna also built what is believed to be the first billiard table in Alta California, and for a brief time, owned an interest in The Santa Cruz Sentinel newspaper. He served as Santa Cruz City treasurer from 1864 to 1866.

The Hecox children grew up at the lighthouse, two sons and the daughter, Laura. It was Laura who loved to roam the Santa Cruz County beaches with her father, collecting shells, sea weeds and other oddities of nature.

When Adna retired as lighthouse keeper in 1883, Laura, who never married, was named to the post.

She kept the great light shining out over the waves for 33 years, was pensioned in 1916 and died three years later.

The Hecox collection of shells was given by Laura to form the nucleus of the City of Santa Cruz Museum.

In 1904 she donated the wood comb to the museum.



Laura Hecox roamed the beaches for miles, but was clad in the young lady's proper outfit of her day, even so. Here, seated on a beach rock, she wears hat, bustled gown, and no doubt, high-button shoes and plenty of petticoats! This old photo is from Santa Cruz Museum's collection.



Laura Hecox as a young girl on the porch of the early-day Santa Cruz Lighthouse. From childhood on, she delighted in roaming local beaches to gather "treasures" of many kinds. She later became lighthouse keeper herself.