

An Old Tree With a Story

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The tree used to stand on Vine Street — it was part of the rear gardens of one of Santa Cruz's early hotels — and it was passed daily by a parade of pioneers both colorful and drab, and a parade of visitors to town.

The tree hasn't moved. But the street has changed its name from Vine to Cedar. Today the tree stands alone, surrounded by autos and pavement, although a small square of earth has been left so it can breathe a bit.

It's a huge black walnut — messy, some complain. The birds love it. So do the squirrels who harvest its nuts — or used to. There was a gray squirrel who took up residence just a couple of blocks away on Chestnut Street — I wonder if he's still there?

In the youthful days of the tree it graced the formal gardens of the Pacific Ocean House, a hotel said to serve "the best table of any hotel on the Pacific Coast."

The hotel itself, which fronted on Pacific Avenue, had a picturesque history. It was a two-story brick structure built on the site of another hotel, the San Lorenzo House which was built in 1852, a wood structure which had burned. (The San Lorenzo House had changed its name to the colorful "Steamboat Exchange.")

The Pacific Ocean House was built in 1866 by Amasa Pray and soon gained the reputation of its "best table" and as THE place for visitors to stay in Santa Cruz.

Venison, fish and shell fish from the bay, trout from mountain streams, and ducks from the nearby lagoons were stock items on the menu in those days.

The hotel eventually gained a third story of frame and plaster and boasted about 150 rooms at the height of its career. It also had a garden out back that was the pride of the town, with bordered paths, blooming shrubs and flowers much of the year, (Santa Cruz was famous for its gardens), and the black walnut tree.

Ladies in long sweeping gowns strolled the paths

and took afternoon tea in a small teahouse set among the flowers, attended by gentlemen garbed in dark swallowtail coats, shirts with celluloid collars, peg-leg trousers, and (probably) dusty boots.

George Bromley, a San Francisco hotel man, was brought to Santa Cruz to run the Pacific Ocean House and give it a touch of class.

On April 1, 1870, a corner room of the hotel was taken over by the Santa Cruz Bank of Savings and Loan which operated there for about five years. Interest rates on loaned money was 15 per cent per year in 1870; the bank had a paid up capital of \$20,000, and rapidly took over all the local banking business which had formerly been done for Santa Cruzans by Wells Fargo Express Company, according to an account by the late historian Leon Rowland.

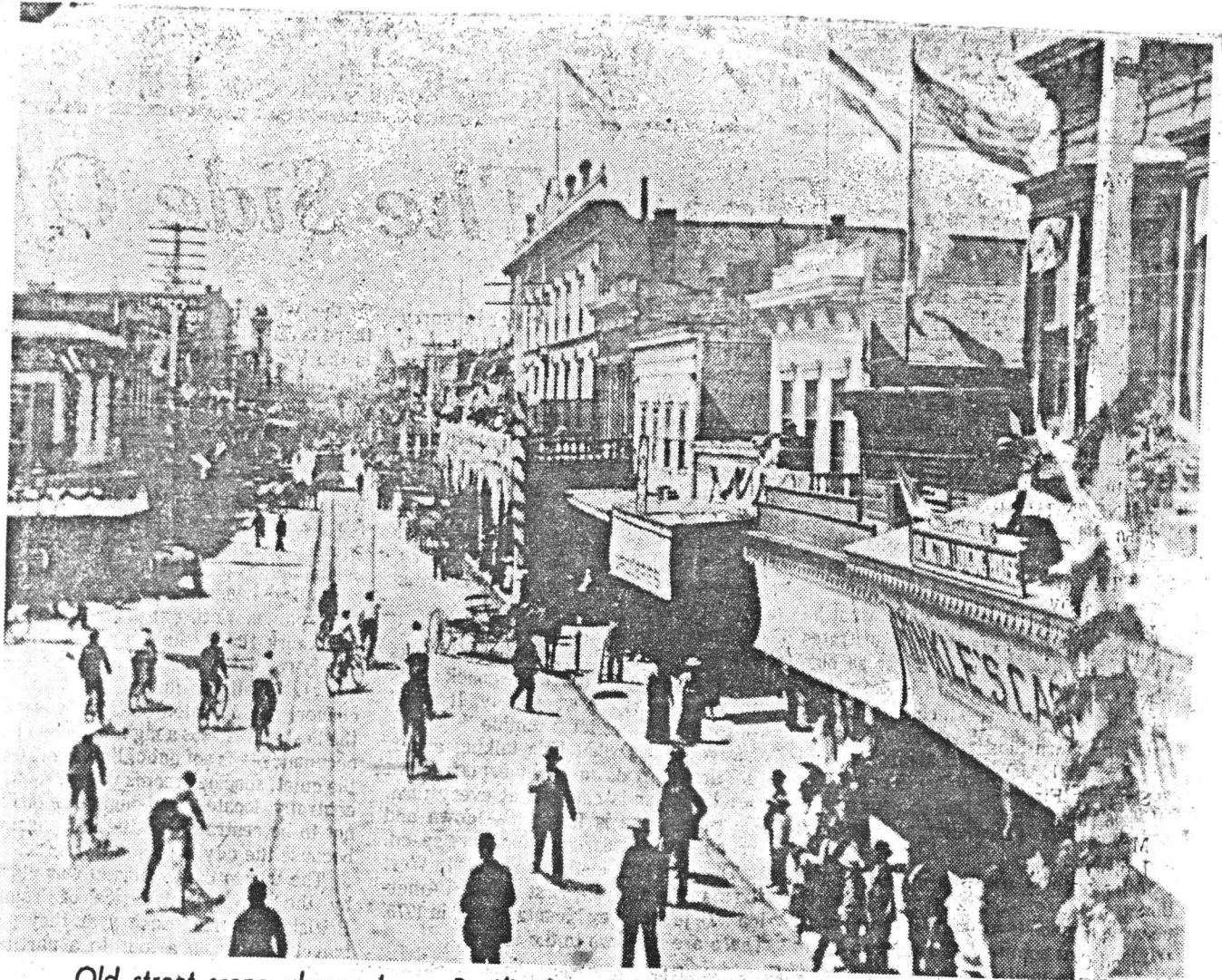
In 1875 when the Santa Cruz Bank of Savings and Loan moved out of the hotel, Lucien Heath moved into the same corner room with his "gold" bank. Heath was a merchant who had come to Santa Cruz from Oregon in 1868. In 1878 Heath's bank and the Santa Cruz Savings and Loan Bank combined with Heath as president. Today the historic bank is known as County Bank.

Business was growing. By 1895 Santa Cruz had 9500 residents, two railways, and was putting down bitumen pavement mined right here in the county. It has been said that Santa Cruz had paved streets (or more of them) before San Francisco did.

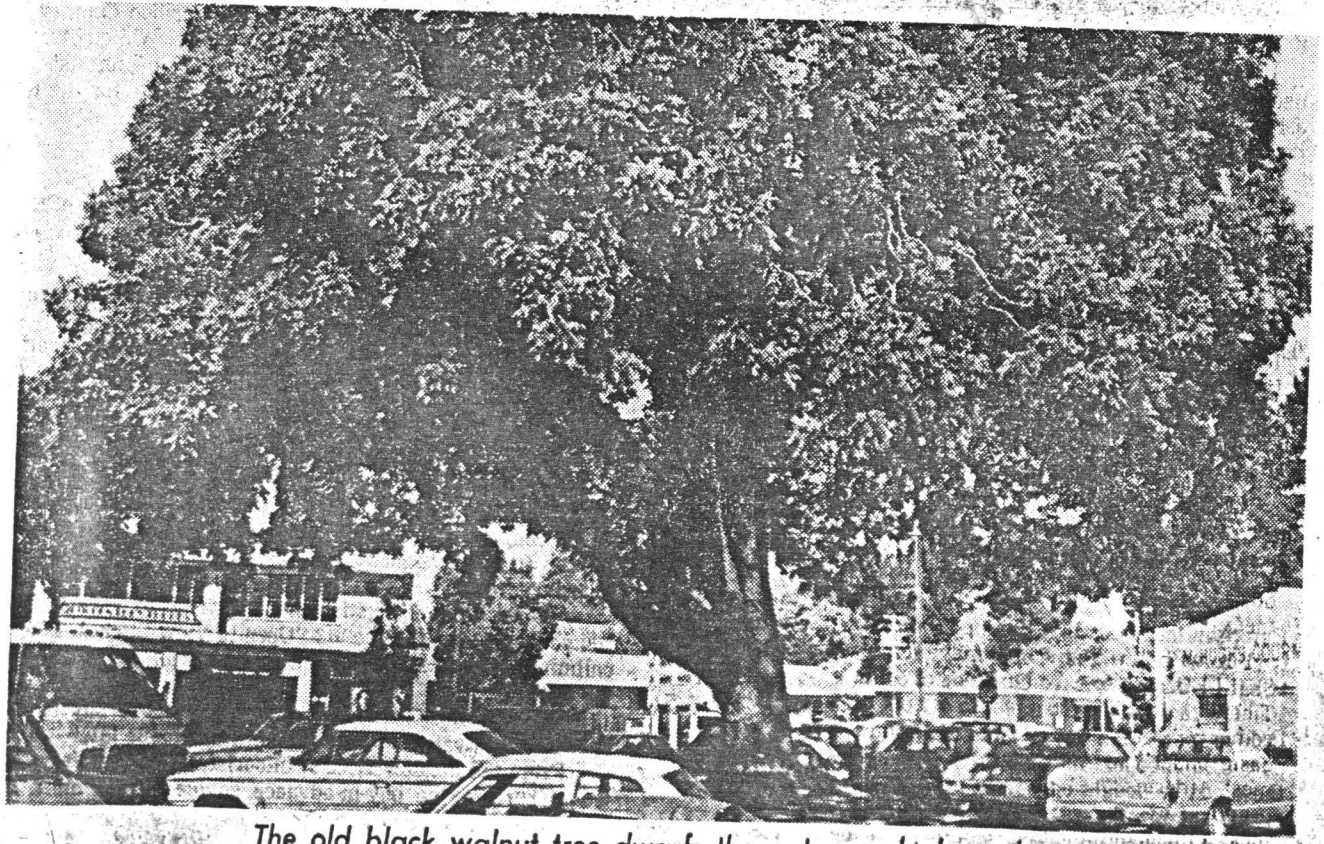
The Pacific Ocean House had a ringside seat for all the development and although its days of glory faded after some years, it was used as a rooming house until 1907.

Several fires damaged it through the years. By 1952 part of the hotel had been razed to make way for Coast Counties Gas and Electric building (PG&E today). The Manhattan Tavern occupied part of the hotel shell for a time. In 1962 the last remnants of the old brick structure were demolished, the portion that had housed the Bubble Bakery (now across the street) and Charlie's Shoe Shine Parlor.

Today only the old tree remains as a reminder of those early, colorful days.



Old street scene above shows Pacific Ocean House (center) all dressed up with flag flying, probably for the Fourth of July. Note Arlington Rooming House on right, (recent McHugh-Bianchi Grocery building).



The old black walnut tree dwarfs the autos parked nearby