

House of good times



ROSS ERIC GIBSON COLLECTION

The Pacific Ocean House, a luxurious hotel, held dances both in its interior ballroom and on its 100-foot-long balcony.

Lonely tree recalls days of elegance

BY ROSS ERIC GIBSON
Special to the Mercury News

The walnut tree on upper Cedar Street in Santa Cruz is the last vestige of the Pacific Ocean House's elegant gardens from the time of its reign as the county's first luxury hotel. A portion of the 1865 hotel still stands, behind the modern facade of the former Pacific Gas & Electric Co. building on Pacific Avenue.

Henry Rice, a 300-pound Carolinian, built a luxury hotel on the site to pam-



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per successful farmers from the 1852 Spud Rush. Amasa Pray and William Moore purchased it in 1858. But two months after adding a third story in 1865, the wooden hotel burned down.

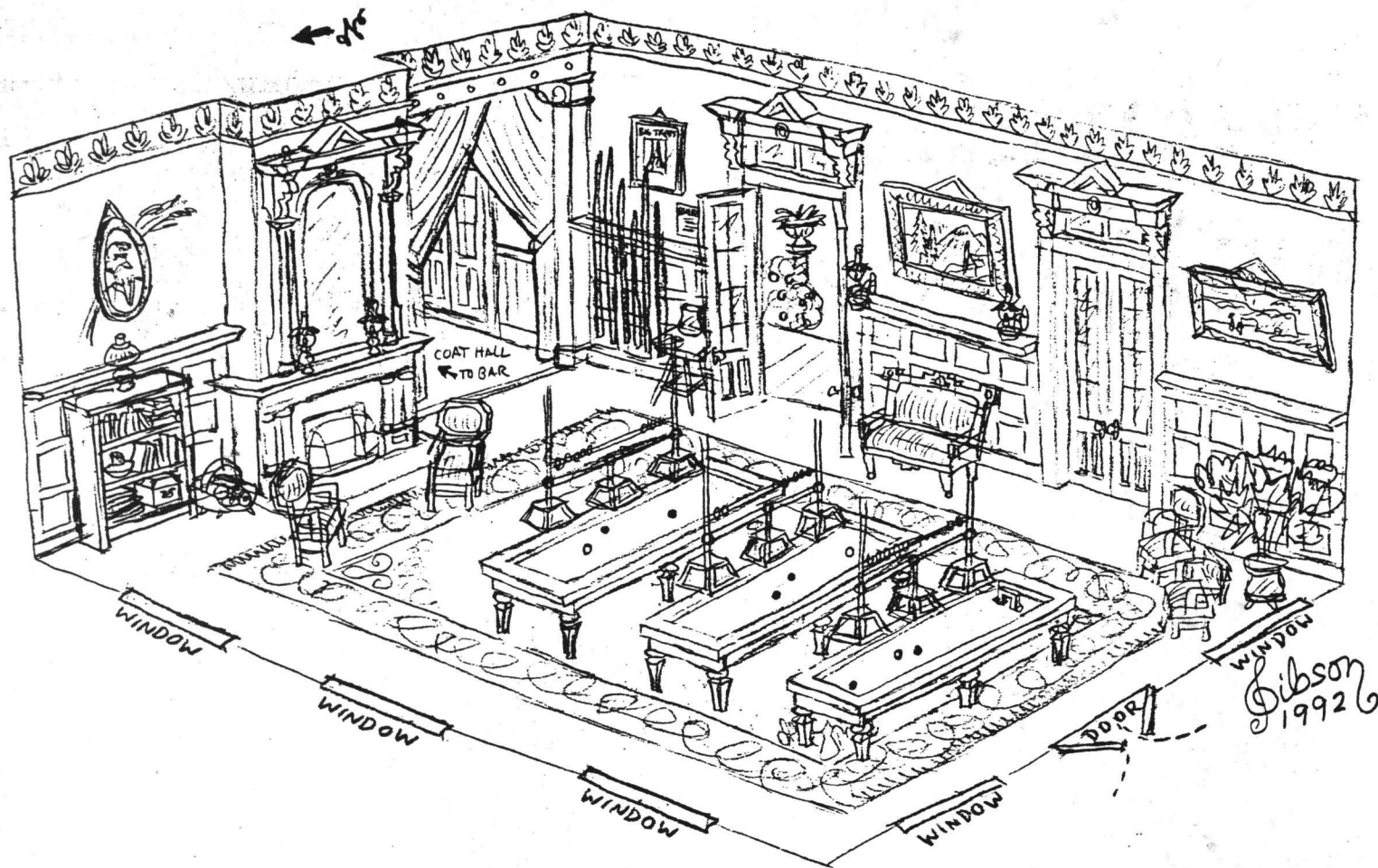
It was replaced with a two-story white-brick hotel, stretching from Plaza Lane to today's Compass Rose building. It opened in 1866, the year Willow Street was renamed Pacific Avenue. The hotel was named Pacific Ocean House and made up for its lack of ocean views with luxury and convenience. The hotel became the social center of Santa Cruz.

The lobby contained offices for Western Union, Star Telegraph and Wells Fargo Express. After a dusty coach ride, you could wash up in the basement bathhouse; relax to a massage; be groomed by the

house barber, bootblack and manicurist; write letters in private gentlemen's and ladies' drawing rooms; then meet friends at the top of the stairs, in the elegant hotel parlor. This was a velvet-draped, mirrored art gallery with a grand piano. It opened onto the 100-foot-long front balcony, which, at 13 feet wide, was used for moonlight dances.

North of the parlor was the hotel library. North of this, the hotel opened into the second floor of the Baldwin Building where its theater was located. Downstairs was the palatial bar, whose sunny back room was a billiard hall, resembling a wood-paneled English men's club, where people spoke in hushed tones.

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ROSS ERIC GIBSON DRAWING

The billiard hall at the Pacific Ocean House resembled an English men's club; people there spoke in hushed tones.

A lone walnut tree recalls days of elegance

■ HISTORY

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The south wing contained the spacious dining hall, with a smorgasbord in a glass conservatory. This hall looked out on manicured gardens, with tennis and croquet grounds, and a bandstand holding radiating strings of Japanese lanterns. Connected to the dining hall was the ballroom and roller skating rink. The Olympic Club gymnasium was next door.

In 1873 the hotel expanded to the south, constructing the Pray Building, with second floor hotel rooms connected by an enclosed overpass arched above Plaza Lane. The lane was owned by the hotel and was where its Chinese laundry stood. When the railroad reached Santa Cruz in 1876, the first station was in today's Goodwill Building. Plaza Lane became a vital carriage



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entrance bringing train guests to the front of the hotel.

The hotel housed the county's first bank in 1870, and first business college in 1885. The first manager of the Pacific Ocean House, George Bromley, became U.S. consul to China.

Names of note filled the hotel's register, and began a tradition of special invitation-only balls limited to 400 guests. "The 400" became a Santa Cruz term for the local ruling class. Then in 1889, guests were shocked to learn one of the 400, John Cooper, was a hotel waiter. Cooper was fired and evicted from the hotel, and he filed a lawsuit against manager J.B. Peakes. In court, Peakes tried depicting Cooper as a ruffian. Yet Peakes couldn't explain why he had sent Cooper invitations to all the exclusive balls. Peakes won, but lost his job soon after.

F.A. Hihn, co-owner of the hotel since 1882, added a wooden third story in 1892. But just as the elegant St. George Hotel opened across the street in 1896 as their chief competitor, Hihn's co-owner went bankrupt, and the Pacific Ocean House closed. Hihn became sole owner, leasing

the hotel to the St. George as a boarding house. The third story was removed in 1907 after the roof burned. The former dining room became a popular grill, later called Brownie's Tavern, and finally Manhattan Tavern. The south wing was replaced in 1966 with a one-story cinder-block structure.

When it began in 1865, the Pacific Ocean House was the first local hotel entirely lighted by gas. But in 1876, high prices led the hotel to manufacture its own gas on site for one-third the cost. In 1892, combination gas and electric fixtures were installed. The local gas and electric company bought the hotel's north portion in 1937. They moved the south wall into the former courtyard, and added a modern facade.

Now the stately black walnut may be in its sunset years. City arborists plan to cut off most of its limbs in an effort to prolong its life.

Local historian, architectural consultant and author Ross Eric Gibson writes a weekly history column for the Santa Cruz/Monterey edition.