



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

One of the rarest trees in Santa Cruz — *Quercus suber* — above, grows at the entrance to West Cliff Drive. No one knows who planted this cork oak approximately 100 years ago.

## Our rare cork oak trees ...

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**Editor's Note:** A letter was recently received at The Sentinel asking about the origin and history of Santa Cruz's cork oak tree. There are two, easily located and visible to the public.

**S**ANTA CRUZANS by the hundreds and tourists by the thousands pass a rare cork oak tree every day without knowing what it is. The tree clings to a perilous patch of soil on the bank at the entrance to West Cliff Drive. Drivers are usually so intent on making the narrow curve that they don't have time of even glance at the tree.

Where did these (few) cork oaks come from? Who planted them? They are not native to Santa Cruz. No one knows the answers to these questions, although there are a few clues.

At the corner of Soquel Drive and Seventh Avenue there's another — larger, more flourishing in its more suitable location. A Captain Starbuck may have planted that one a hundred or more years ago. He built his retirement home there and the tree is located in what would have been his front garden. The house was demolished long ago.

The Jarboes had an elegant home on the curve of West Cliff Drive where a motel is now located above the railroad track. Perhaps Mrs. Jarboe planted the cork oak. After the hardship days of pioneering were over, prosperous Santa Cruzans vied with each other in building fine homes and establishing beautiful gardens. Many exotic and unusual flowers, trees and plants found homes here.

The West Cliff Drive tree's age has been estimated at 100 years or more, although it is stunted in comparison to the Soquel Drive tree.

The cork oak, *Quercus super*, brought from Spain and Portugal, was first planted in California about 1858-60. Corks were needed for the bottles of California wines being produced. In 1858 the government imported a load of cork oak acorns but the experiment failed, according to the late Woody Metcalf, UC-Berkeley tree authority. The acorns were allowed to dry out before and after planting.

In 1940 Metcalf came to Santa Cruz to

harvest acorns from the tree on Soquel Drive. Properly cared for at UC-Davis, the acorns sprouted and from them, seedling trees went to many parts of California.

In 1943 a commercial cork venture was considered here, because Santa Cruz County soils and climate are ideal. But several major obstacles came up. The cork oak takes about 15 years to mature to the age of production, a long wait for

cork oaks were successfully grown in Butte County in 1883 by George Robinson, and trees were thriving in Chico and on the State Capitol grounds at Sacramento.

Their greatest value, Lafferty felt, would be on watershed areas of the state.

As for making corks, it was far easier, faster and cheaper to import corks from Spain and Portugal. Another factor —

### A glance at history

financial returns, and after harvest it takes eight years for another crop to mature. Also, only about half the crop of cork is useable. The project fell through.

Later, the late Robert Burton, UC classmate of Metcalf and a tree buff himself, gave out cork oak seedlings to interested individuals. He also planted some in DeLaveaga Park and Ranger Les Gum planted a few in Felton.

In the 1970s "Mr. Cork Oak" himself came to Santa Cruz to retire. Lester Lafferty got hooked on the cork oak long before he arrived here, and spent a good deal of time trying to get the tree accepted in various parts of the State. He noted that

synthetic cork was being manufactured by then.

In 1967 the late Leavitt McQuesten of Santa Cruz received 25 cork oak trees in gallon containers, to be planted in Santa Cruz County. He gave Lafferty three, two of which died (the cork oak doesn't transplant well.) Lafferty planted the third tree at 910 Third Street on Beach Hill and by 1976 it was about six feet tall.

Lafferty's last proposal was "an avenue of cork oak trees along the High Street frontage of the UCSC campus."

But with the press of more urgent matters, that idea got lost in the shuffle.