

Capitola has outgrown its post office

By BILL AKERS

Anyone who's mailed a letter at the Capitola post office — and just about everyone in town makes it up there at one time or another — is familiar with the parking problem.

The four parking spaces in front of the post office, and the two or three curbside spots, aren't adequate to serve a one-chair barber shop, let alone a post office that does the volume of business this one does.

But 15 years ago, when Capitola was still pretty much a sleepy resort town and the real growth pressures hadn't been felt, that was deemed to be plenty of parking. It was back in 1962 when the post office was moved to its present location on Capitola Ave. from San Jose Ave. where the Craft Gallery is now located.

To the planners, those four parking spaces seemed plenty, given the growth pressures of the day.

But today, it's a different story. "We're bulging at the seams," declares Postmaster Mary Parker, who's been running the Capitola post office since 1959. Not only is there a parking shortage out front, just about every square foot of working space inside the building has been taken up by the sorting stations and other mail handling facilities. And the carriers themselves have just about reached the saturation point in the number of delivery stops they service, Ms. Parker says, each having 700 to 800 stops on their routes, and one having 900. And the volume of mail the office must handle continues to build at a substantial rate. What five

employees could handle on San Jose Ave. before 1962, it now takes a crew of 13 clerks and carriers, a supervisor and postmaster to handle.

At the present time there are 4,562 deliver stops in the area served by the Capitola post office — generally from the freeway to the beach between 41st Ave. and Park Ave. Within the next six months, Ms. Parker says, that will increase by 10 per cent — over 400 stops — judging from the amount of building going on in town. "That's based on what the carriers tell me of what's going up — 20 units here, six units there. Look around — they're building on every vacant lot."

The addition of that many stops means "one more route, and I don't know where I'd put another carrier," she says, gesturing

toward the crowded work area.

The post office enjoyed a brief hiatus in growth during the building ban, measuring less than five per cent increase in the number of stops during the past year. But that respite ended with the lifting of the ban, and now she expects a 10 per cent increase in a half-year.

To give an idea of the volume of business that goes through the office, Ms. Parker explains that each day, 10,000 pieces of first class mail are delivered by her carriers. And this says nothing about the second and third class mail that must be handled and the large volume of parcel post generated by nurseries and a couple of firms who sell commissary and service club supplies to the military.

Added to that is the traffic

generated by the people who come in to buy food stamps. They come on the first and 15th of each month, and on those days the lines often spill out of the lobby onto the street. "We sell \$27,500 worth of food stamps per month in about 600 separate transactions," she explains. This business, combined with the normal post office traffic, generates the long lines that, she admits, irritate people. "People call up and complain," she says, "but they must realize I'm limited in the number of clerks. I have just so much manpower."

"Where ever you go these days you have to stand in line — at Albertson's, Longs, and in the banks, my goodness . . ."

Nor can she set up a special window just for the food stamp traffic so that someone wanting to buy a 13-cent stamp doesn't have to wait in line. "We're not allowed to do that," Ms. Parker says. "We are not allowed to discriminate."

Another complicating factor, she points out, is that Capitola "is quite a transient area. Where you have a lot of apartments — Las Flores, 870 Park, and downtown area — they come and go."

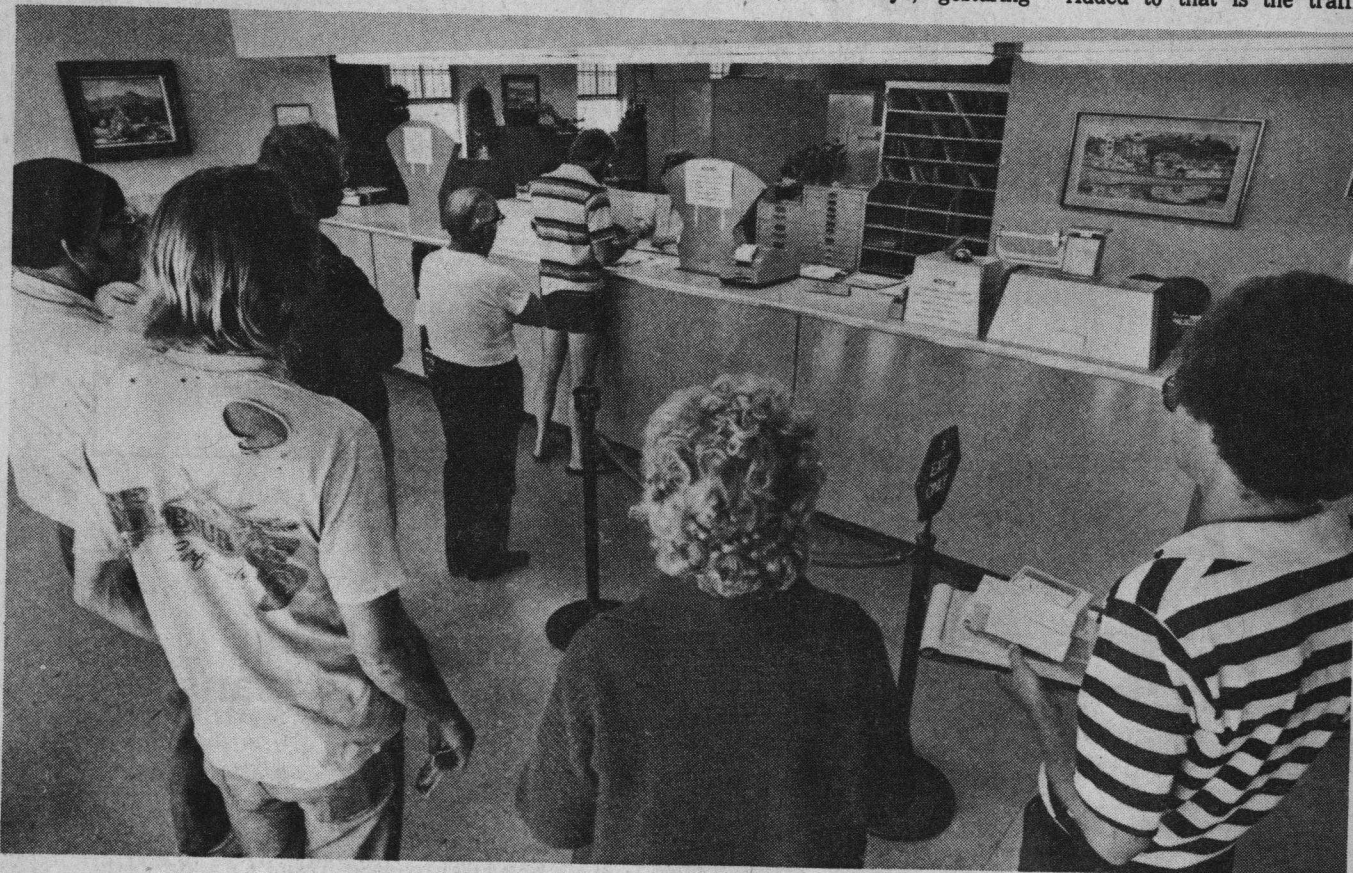
And she produces the statistic to prove this. "Every month we forward 10,000 pieces of mail. You can see the amount of clerical work it takes to handle all this." Last month alone there were 250 requests for mail forwarding.

Ms. Parker is emphatic about one thing — mail isn't "left lying around somewhere in the post office," as some people insist when a letter doesn't reach them when they think it should.

"Every piece of mail that is received here that is deliverable, is delivered that same day," she says firmly. There is an occasional piece that is undeliverable because of improper or illegible address, but everything else goes out the same day it comes in, she insists.

"I get calls — usually from businessmen — I got three earlier this week. They say 'someone mailed me a check on Tuesday and this is Friday and I haven't got it yet. Is it lying around the post office?'"

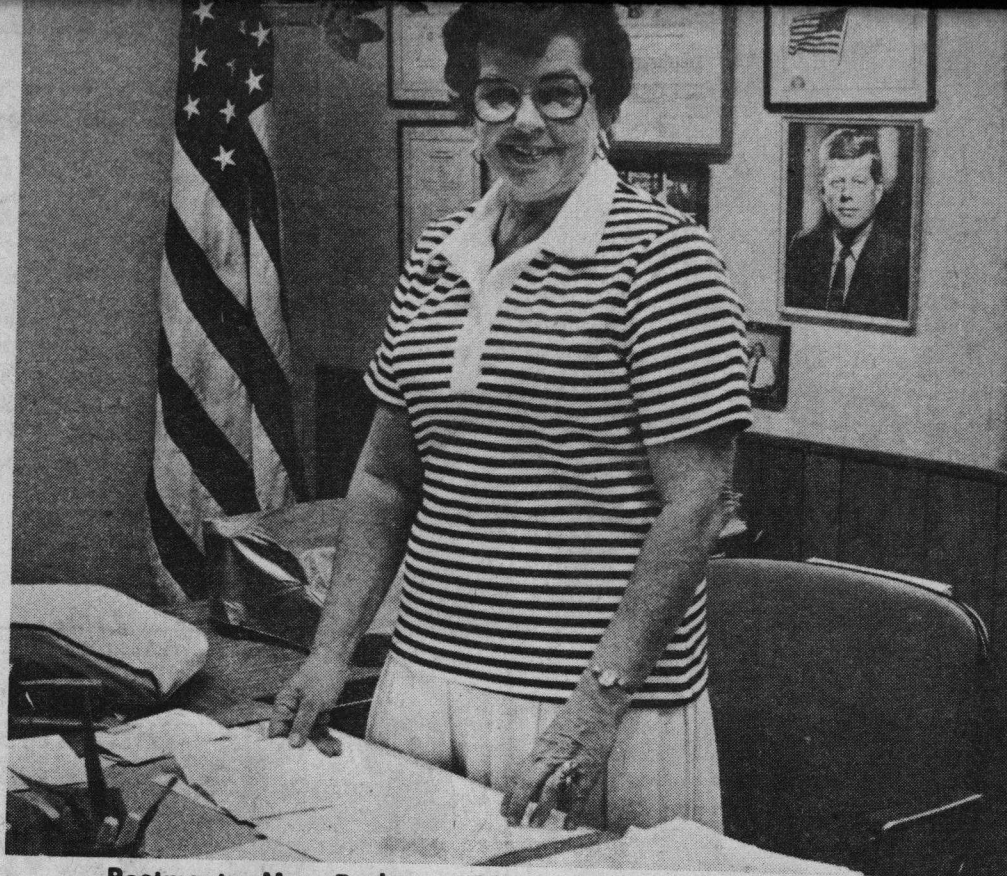
"Well, I resent that," she says. "Every piece that can be delivered is delivered the same day. When a letter that someone



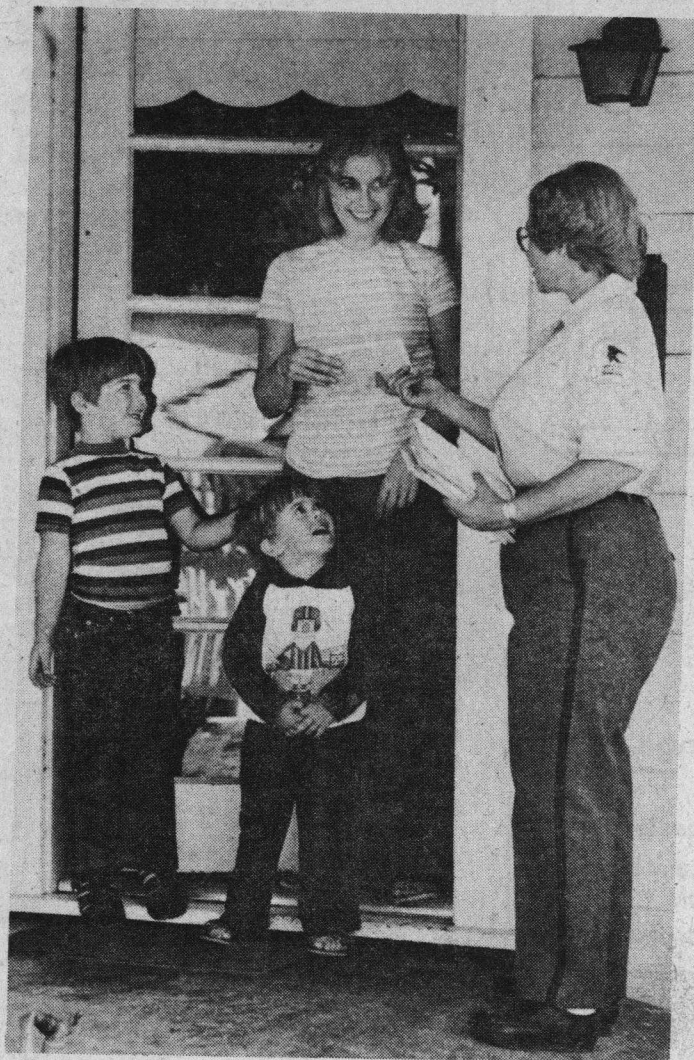
Sometimes the line gets long in the Capitola post office.

Photos by Chris Stewart





Postmaster Mary Parker could use a bigger building to work in.



A friendly greeting for the carrier from Kathy Cook and her sons Billy, 4, and Bobby 3.

called about does come into the post office, we usually find it's been mailed just the day before. Seven out of 10 times, it's the mailer's fault."

There are errors, she concedes, because the mail is still being handled by people, "but considering the amount of mail we handle, the percentage of errors is very small."

Ms. Parker is quite proud of the dispatch with which the people in her office handle the mail. Pulling out a records form, she states, "The last report shows we are making 100.16 deliveries per hour. That is very, very good."

The reason for that good record is, "I really have the top carriers in the whole section. I have a top staff, which means I have a top supervisor," referring to Nick Whitfield, her superintendent of postal operations.

Although the volume of mail and number of stops keeps increasing, it all has to be handled under the present budget. "I have just so many man-hours (allocated to me)," she explains, "so we have to get more production to keep up. There's no lagging here."

Only Santa Cruz County mail is processed at the Capitola post office. Everything else goes to the sectional center in San Jose where it is sorted by machine. (Local mail that is included in the mail picked up from the outlying boxes at 5 p.m. every day goes to San Jose, too, but it is back in

her friendly, helpful ways have earned Elaine Bunner much praise from the people on her route.

Capitola by 5:30 the next morning, Ms. Parker explains.)

Clerks begin work at 5:30 in the morning, sorting the mail into the six routes which cover the delivery area. The carriers come in at 7:30 p.m. and sort their route mail until 9:30 a.m., at which time they go out to deliver it. Each carrier operates out of a quarter-ton Jeep.

They must deliver their mail by 3 p.m., at which time they come back into the office to begin sorting out third class mail for the next day's delivery. On the first of the month, when bills are being mailed and many publications and flyers hit, the carriers must stop at most of the 700 or 800 stops on his route. "And he (she) must do all that in eight hours," Ms. Parker says.

And the postmaster doesn't do much sitting still herself. She works out of a pleasant, brightly-painted office made more pleasant by hanging plant paintings on the walls. There's also a large picture of John Kennedy and a U.S. flag stands in the corner. She is constantly answering the phone, fielding such inquiries as the postage to Africa, a request for a post office box and someone asking if the check that was supposed to have been mailed last week "is lying around the post office somewhere." Employees are in and out

of the office, one getting an authorization on a postal form, another checking in cash ("We send it in every day. We don't keep any over night."), and others for sundry reasons that have to do with the day's business.

She cheerfully admits hers is a busy job, and referring to the old days when postmasters — particularly in larger cities — were political appointees, she says, "The days of the postmaster just sitting around, going hunting or playing golf are over."

Although born in Switzerland, Ms. Parker has lived most of her life in Santa Cruz County, having gone to Santa Cruz High School. ("We're having our 40th reunion soon.") She began her postal career by getting a part-time job in the Soquel post office, where she later became acting postmaster for one year. She could have had the top job, except she lived in Capitola instead of Soquel. "In those days you had to live where the post office was located."

Before Capitola began "bulging at the seams," Ms. Parker said she worked at the counter four or five hours a day. "I loved it because I got to meet and talk to the people." She says she misses that aspect of it now, and with the loss of direct contact

with the public, the departure of "a lot of the old timers" and the ebb and flow of a mobile population, she doesn't know a lot of the people who come in.

Two months ago, Ms. Parker submitted a request for new offices. "We've outgrown this building. We need a lot more space." Officials came from San Jose and made a survey of the situation and approved the request. It must now go on up to the district and regional offices, she explains. "These things take a year or so."

In the interview Ms. Parker touched on a subject that is close to the hearts of all postmen — dogs.

"I'm very strict on dogs," she said, emphatically. "If we find a place where a dog is loose, we won't serve that house until it is confined."

"We've had some severe dog bites in the past, and I just won't subject the carriers to that. There's a leash law in Capitola, and people should observe it."

The dog situation is better now than it once was, she says, because "the dog catcher is doing a fine job."

But aside from not having enough room, Ms. Parker is pleased with the way the place operates.



The many apartments in Capitola generate a lot of 'please forward' business.