

Trabing



Mostly about People

By Wally Trabing

If you get to wondering about life in Santa Cruz 80 to 100 years ago you naturally head for the library.

I got to wondering last week, but I found my lore of yore in the agile brain of William Roth who was born in Santa Cruz 90 years ago. He was visiting his niece, Matilda Dedrick, at 411 Cayuga street.

We rambled. I'd ask a question and he'd rub his forehead for a moment urging his memory back 75 years. Whatever it is in the human brain that performs these miracles still functions well for Roth.

He was born near the municipal wharf. His Irish mother took in washing and his earliest recollections were of toddling around the beach looking for stove wood.

He can still visualize three wharves along the beach front. One was called the sulphur wharf, another the Cowell wharf and the third, the railroad wharf. He said everything larger than a letter came to Santa Cruz by steamer.

There were two passenger boats and three freighters which called at the wharves each week and you could steam to Monterey in an hour and a half on a regular scheduled run.

"First electric light I ever saw as a kid was aboard one of these freighters," he said. "It was one of those carbon lights and I was warned that the thing wasn't healthy because electric lights were the ruination of eyes."

"The town was lighted at night by gas lamps and I remember a fella making his rounds each night on a horse reaching up to each lamp with a torch," Roth said. "This was about 1880."

He attended Laurel school until he was about 12. Then he quit to work at Singerson's wood mill.

"My mother tried to chase me to school for awhile, but I could

board sidewalks down Pacific avenue and the muddy streets, and grizzlies in the mountains and huge mountain lions which occasionally decreased the population.

Roth lived here until he was 24. He distinguished himself by playing a cornet in Hastings' band and performing for the locally famous water carnivals about the turn of the century.

Most of his youth was associated with work. He'd milk cows in the morning before putting in 10 hours at the mill. Back home, he'd help his mother prepare milk from her small dairy herd.

He also got a night job wiping off the old steam engine when its run ended in Santa Cruz. He could wipe her down in an hour and a half, earning \$1 for his efforts.

There was fun, too—like the old river swimming hole. While the folks on the beach labored through the water in their cumbersome swimming suits of the time, the kids found more freedom in justs kin.

Later, as an adult, Roth established a "first" in the county. He babied the first automobile over Hecker Pass. He owned a Stanley Steamer, a puffing steam job, and in 1899 came down from Oakland to visit a sister in Watsonville. He made the run around the mountains on the way down, but became devil-may-care on his return trip.

"We left Watsonville just after lunch and started up. We got up to the foothills and met up with a forest fire. My wife wanted to turn around, but I told her I didn't know how to turn it around, so we kept crawling up.

"It got dark and I was running low on water. The road was a wagon trail filled with deep ruts," he said.

Roth figured he fussed with about a dozen flat tires making the crossing. He finally ran into a water trough and some startled horses and riders who told him his was the first auto ever to make it to the top. They arrived in Gilroy sometime after midnight.

Headlights in those days weren't worth the kerosene and Roth was out of the car as much as he was in it, inspecting the road ahead.

But by gum, he made it and he's still at it, and was getting chummy to get behind the wheel for his return trip to Oakland—reasonably sure that he'd make it without a flae this time.