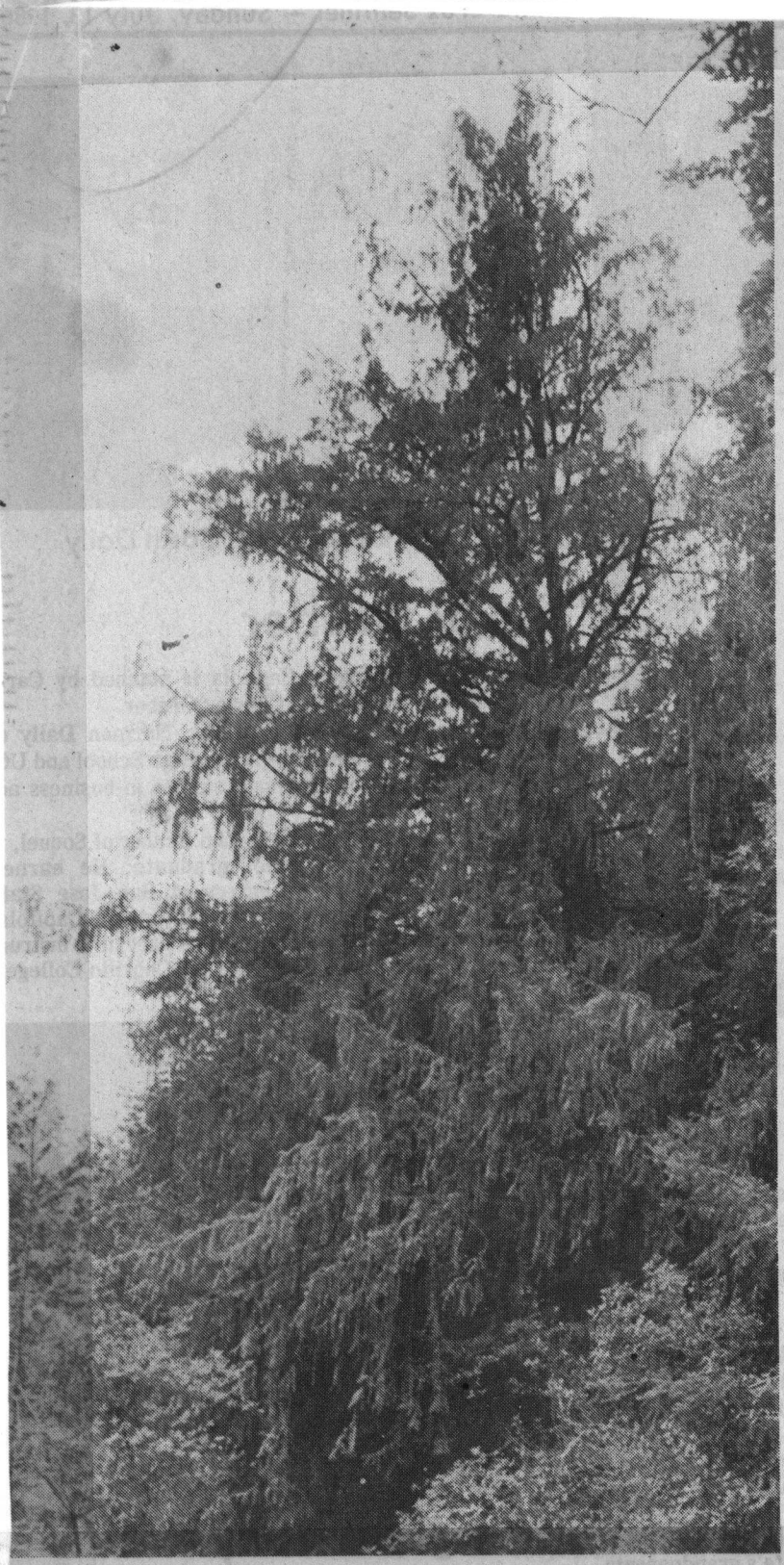
The trees are gone, but the street names remain the same



The nutmeg tree is rare, but can be found in this county.

By MARGARET KOCH
Sentinel Correspondent

TODAY THERE are no locust trees on Locust Street, or Walnut trees on Walnut Avenue, or elms on Elm Street, or spruces on Spruce Street, or maples and myrtles on the streets of those names.

In most cases, we don't have the trees anymore but the names remain to remind us that once, streets and trees were closely related.

Perhaps the street was named for one majestic specimen, such as Redwood Street which was named for two giant backyard redwoods. The early Santa Cruzans were great on trees, and the wealthier families imported exotic specimens from many parts of the world for their formal gardens.

We are still big on trees. As long ago as 1963, then Sentinel editor Gordon Sinclair wrote a picture-page editorial titled "Slow Down on Our Tree Ways."

He pointed out: "It may take some thought to find a tree that doesn't disturb the neighbors or drop leaves on someone else's lawn, but there are all types of trees climatically suited to a city by the sea..."

In 1969, a concerned young fellow named John Scott slept nightly at Lighthouse Point among the cypress trees, which everyone thought were doomed to fall under the axe when a convention center was built there. (The convention center plans fell through.)

Scott also took out a full-page ad extolling the virtues of the trees and the Monarch butterflys that came to them each year. He sold his car to

The nut of the nutmeg is not like the spice.

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pay for the ad ... said he didn't need the car anyway.

In further explaining his actions, he said, "It's not a question of how many people use something. That doesn't determine its value to us. These trees, this grass, provide us with oxygen to breathe. That's just one example."

A glance at history

IN THE early days of settlement, no particular system was used in selecting tree names for streets. The town was a crazy quilt of trees, remnants of farm orchards, and lanes or paths that turned into streets. Cherry Street, now gone, was named that because of a cherry orchard.

Locust Street had one huge locust tree at the corner of Pacific Avenue.

Walnut Avenue had a large sycamore tree and actually more Lombardy poplars than walnut trees, although it also had some of those.

Elm Street had no elms; Spruce Street no spruces. Maple Street had poplars. Laurel and Sycamore Streets did have those trees growing along them. But Cottonwood had no cottonwoods. Madrone Street had only one such tree and it grew in a backyard.

Much of the town's beauty in the 1870s,when it was gaining wide recognition as the "Newport of the Pacific," came from the variety of trees which lined the streets, according to the late historian Ernest Otto.

Maple Street was actually lined with huge specimens with widespread branches extending until they met over the center of the street, forming a cool, green tunnel when in leaf.

Big cottonwoods grew along northern Ocean Street and a field of grain thrived where today's fast-food eateries and businesses are located. Hard to believe? Once there was a bench near Pryce Street for pedestrians trudging out to visit the IOOF Cemetery.

Alder trees were planted not only for shade and beauty, but to be cut later into four-foot lengths and hauled to the local California Powder Works to be turned into charcoal.

Small boys delighted in the many fruit trees. Red apple trees grew along Lincoln Street near Washington Street, bellflower apples grew along Taylor Street as remnants of T.J. Weeks's farm and home orchard.

One of Santa Cruz's Chinatowns, located on Pacific Avenue between Walnut Avenue and Lincoln Street, was marked with two tall rows of Normandy Poplars and in the fall they glowed like golden candles standing tall above the surrounding buildings, Otto wrote.

In his reminiscences, he also mentioned that the town still had its plank sidewalks in the 1870s — with nails that stuck up in places, to the anguish of small, barefoot boys.

Otto was one of those boys who helped himself to apples, pears and plums in season, going to and from school, and who stubbed his toes on the protruding nails from time to time.

In those days, two California towns were especially noted for their tree-lined streets and their beauty: Santa Rosa and Santa Cruz.

THE county is so well known for its great stands of redwood that not many people are aware that it is the home of a truly rare tree all its own — a native, the California nutmeg (Torreya Californica). It's a member of the yew family.

According to W.L. Jepson, who wrote THE definitive volumes on trees, the nutmeg is widespread in the Santa Cruz Mountains but is common nowhere. It's a rare tree, and not even Jepson knew who discovered it.

It also grows along Stevens Creek in Santa Clara County, and in Big Basin, Little Basin, at Swanton and on Mount Umunhum. In the county, it is scattered mainly along creek beds or on moist hillsides.

Jepson describes it as ..."A handsome, dark green tree, 15- to 90-feet high with a trunk up to three feet in diameter..."

The nutmegs look like olives or plums, either green colored or green and purple as they ripen. They appear in September or October after catkins that formed in June and July.

The Ohlone Indians knew the nutmeg fruits as a great delicacy that they roasted before eating. But don't try to use them in the usual nutmeg way. It won't work. They are not related to the commercial nutmeg.

Early-day woodsmen called the tree the "stinking yew" because when cut, the wood is unpleasantly odorous. There are several fine specimens of the California nutmeg on the McCrary Ranch near Swanton.

To the casual observer, the tree looks like one of the local conifers. But look again more carefully. The big difference is in the way the nutmeg's foliage grows from its branches. Long fronds droop and drop from each branch.