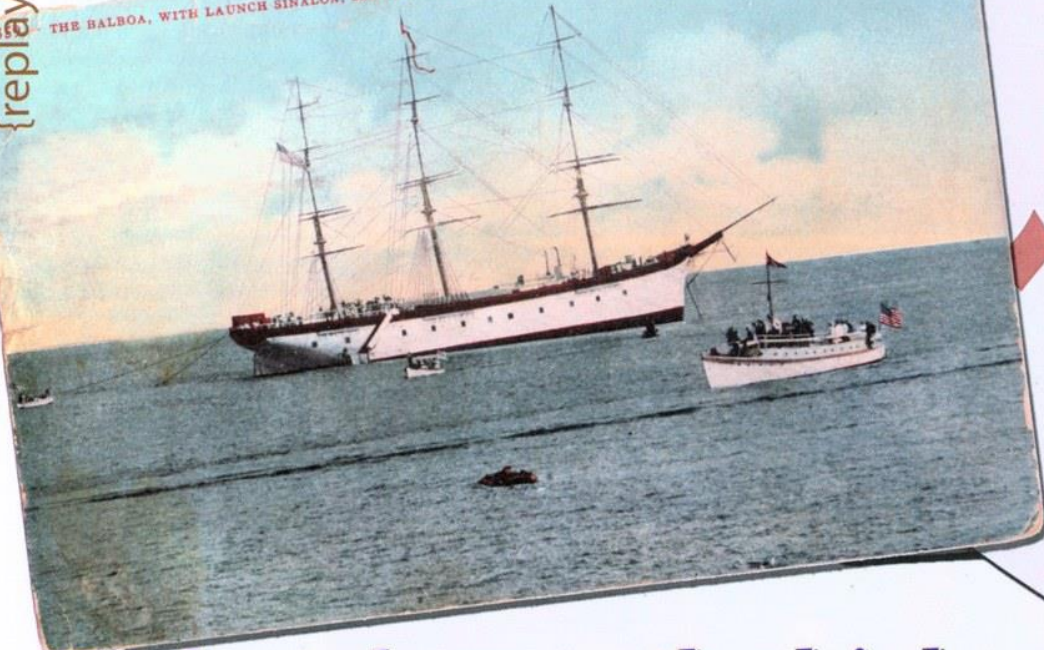


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THE BALBOA, WITH LAUNCH SINALOA, SANTA CRUZ HARBOR, CALIFORNIA.



High stakes on the high seas

The “pleasure boat” Balboa, docked off the Santa Cruz waterfront in the early 1900s, was rumored to be a floating den of iniquity. With its speedy “little” sister ship, the Sinaloa, scurrying passengers to and from shore, it was often difficult to separate fact from fancy.

By Geoffrey Dunn

The year 1907 heralded a period of rapid change and the roar of economic engines on the Santa Cruz waterfront. On the first day of summer of the previous year, a devastating fire had swept through the Beach Company’s famed Neptune Casino, burning it to the sand. The Boardwalk’s great impresario, Fred Swanton, who had imagined Santa Cruz as the “Atlantic City on the Pacific,” was forced to rebuild his dream from the ashes.

If ever there was a man up to the task, it was Fred Swanton. For well more than a half-century — from the late 1870s nearly until his death in 1940—the Santa Cruz waterfront, if not all of California, served as his stage. Swanton was a force of nature unto his own. No single figure in the arc of Santa Cruz history has ever had such a

profound impact on this community. One of his famous slogans that he bequeathed to his beloved Santa Cruz — “Never a Dull Moment!” — applied equally to him as well.

And never was this more pronounced as the summer season of 1907 approached. Hundreds of workers were rapidly rebuilding his beloved casino while Swanton himself was travelling throughout the state, trying to raise money to support his ambitious vision, and doing his best to promote Santa Cruz as the tourist destination *par excellence* in the American West.

In early January of 1907, headlines around the state announced that Santa

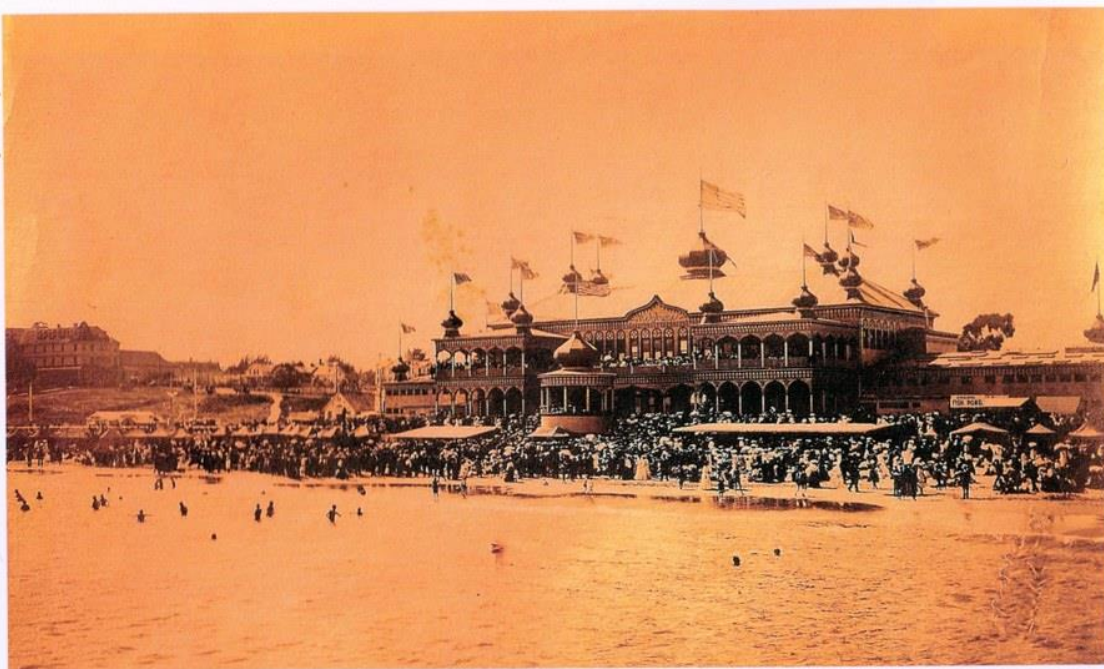
(Top) A vintage postcard displays Santa Cruz’s notorious Balboa with its “sister ship” the Sinaloa in the foreground.

Cruz was about to become “Monte Carlo on the Water.” Swanton had purchased a massive old clipper ship — the *J.B. Brown*, originally built in Bath, Maine, in 1874. It had reportedly sailed around Cape Horn more than two dozen times — for the stated purpose of “amusements,” all, according to initial reports, while anchored beyond “the three-mile limit of municipal jurisdiction.”

Swanton had also formed a special business entity — the Santa Cruz Bay Navigation Company — to finance and oversee operations. Investors for Swanton’s maritime enterprise were equally distributed between Santa Cruz and San Francisco. Swanton’s marketing motto for the Balboa left a little wiggle room for the imagination: “Everything to please — nothing to offend.”

While the *Santa Cruz Sentinel* declared

Postcard: Courtesy Geoffrey Dunn Collection.



any claims to illegal activities aboard the *Balboa* as “rot,” it was alleged by the *San Francisco Examiner* and other California newspapers that, in addition to dancing, fishing, dining and imbibing on board, there would be gambling, and perhaps other illicit activities, as well. The *Examiner* alleged that Swanton had plans to “transform the vessel into a floating gambling palace, equipping it with roulette wheels, faro layouts and all the necessary paraphernalia required” for games of chance.

The *San Francisco Call* hinted at something else, declaring that the “*Balboa* will be anchored ... beyond reach of any city ordinances that might conflict with social affairs on board.”

By April of 1907, Swanton had directed that the nearly decrepit vessel be towed down to Santa Cruz for a massive facelift. A crew of 45 painters and carpenters was hired to put the finishing touches on a massive ballroom 40-feet wide and 180-feet long, and to freshen up the vessel with several coats of bright and colorful paint. Massive front-page headlines in the local newspapers welcomed the three-masted windjammer in advance of its arrival.

To transport potential revelers from the shore out to the *Balboa*, one of the swiftest

speedboats of its size on the Pacific (Swanton claimed it the “absolute fastest”) was built in San Francisco, with special twin engines and a sleek 68-foot hull.

Christened the *Sinaloa*, the launch used the Pleasure Pier — built in 1904 and which extended out from the Boardwalk’s Natatorium and Plunge — to load its passengers. Although several local histories have described the *Sinaloa* as a “steam launch,” it was, in fact, gasoline powered. Its initial engines had been destroyed in the April 1906 San Francisco Earthquake and Fire and had to be reconstructed in time for its 1907 debut.

According to a glowing account in the *Sentinel*, the *Sinaloa*’s owners “intend later to challenge the Spreckels’ yacht *Lurline* to a race for the gasoline yacht supremacy of the coast.” In fact, in addition to tendering passengers to and from the *Balboa*, the *Sinaloa* made two-hour runs across the bay to Monterey for a fee of \$1.50 per passenger.

As it turned out, the *Balboa* wasn’t anchored three miles from shore as predicted by the San Francisco papers — it was actually closer to 2,000 feet and received electricity on board through an underwater cable. According to a report in the *Santa*

Cruz Surf, a “ragtime pianist” entertained patrons on board.

The controversy surrounding the *Balboa* — and its alleged activities — continued to swirl throughout California. One San Francisco newspaper asserted that not only was the *Balboa* “devoted to gambling,” but to “other immoral purposes as well.”

The sensational allegations brought one of California’s most respected journalists into the fray — Josephine Clifford McCrackin, the famed author of “Overland Tales” and “The Woman Who Lost Him,” then living in Santa Cruz.

In a special 1,000-word dispatch written for the *Sentinel* on May 20, 1907, McCrackin declared that she was out to reveal “the real truth about the ship *Balboa*,” and asserted that she had “seen every nook and cranny of the ship except the hold.”

McCrackin held that the charges being levied at the *Balboa* were “so ludicrous that one stops to ask how and why such charges could and should be made.” She pulled no

(Top) A view of 1905 Santa Cruz waterfront featuring the Beach Company’s famed Neptune Casino, which was destroyed by fire in 1906.

Photo: Courtesy Geoffrey Dunn Collection.

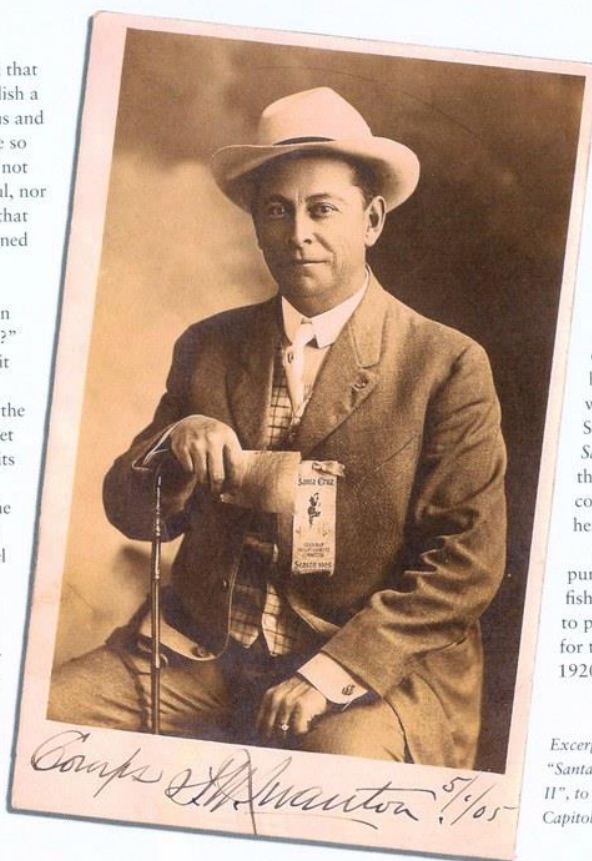
punches in her polemic. She argued that other communities hoping to establish a tourist trade were "naturally jealous and envious of Santa Cruz; and they are so anxious that the 'best people' shall not visit here, that no slander is too foul, nor accusation too vile to resort to, so that our summer visitors may be frightened away."

While she acknowledged that dancing most certainly took place in the ballroom ("Is dancing immoral?" she queried), she boldly asserted, "it is time to call a halt the insidious statements, the open calumny, and the slander that crawls slimily at the feet of those into whom it would bury its fangs to destroy."

She described in great detail the various beauties of "Swanton's pet idea," concluding that "if the vessel is fair to look upon in the bright light of day, how can I describe its beauty by night as I see it from my window. Its masts, its spars, its rigging all ablaze with light — a fairy ship, such as mortals may dream of, but can never see in real life, until they come to Santa Cruz and visit the *Balboa*."

For all the controversy and ensuing publicity, the *Balboa*'s time in Santa Cruz was relatively short-lived. The inaugural summer of 1907 proved it to be a popular enough amusement, but by the end of the following tourist season, September of 1908, the *Balboa* made the voyage back to the mudflats of the Oakland Estuary, never to return again.

For Fred Swanton, his time was running out at the Boardwalk as well. His smoke-and-mirrors business practices at



At the same time, the *Balboa* was rotting in the Oakland Estuary, its days also numbered. Historians have written that it was scuttled and burned that same year, but its denouement was a bit more complicated. An account in a 1910 issue of the *Coast Seamen's Journal* indicated that a portion of the "notorious *Balboa*" had been "converted into a warehouse" in San Pedro. Still another article in *The San Francisco Call* noted that the *Balboa*'s owner "is constructing a houseboat from her sea-scarred timbers."

As for the *Sinaloa*, it was purchased by the local Faraola fishing family and continued to provide maritime excursions for tourists here well into the 1920s. ♣

Excerpted from Geoffrey Dunn's "Santa Cruz Is in the Heart: Volume II", to be published this fall by the Capitola Book Company.

the Santa Cruz Beach Company finally caught up to him and his many investors. By the winter of 1912, with extensive losses looming, Swanton left the Beach Company and headed for San Francisco, his beloved waterfront dream on the verge of economic collapse.

(Above) An autographed photograph taken in 1905 captured Boardwalk entrepreneur Fred Swanton.

(Below) A news clipping from *The San Francisco Call* accounting the plans for the *Balboa*, Santa Cruz's gambling ship.

Photo/graphic: Courtesy Geoffrey Dunn Collection.

Santa Cruz May Have Monte Carlo On the Water

Regarding the establishment of a floating Monte Carlo at Santa Cruz, the Sentinel of that city exclaims, "What rot!" But notwithstanding the denial the San Francisco Examiner today contains the following: "Santa Cruz may become the Mecca for gamblers. Rumors of a *Monte Carlo* for the Surf City, Santa Cruz, are being spread by Fred Swanton."

