

On Location in Santa Cruz

By Lisa Jensen

With Jane Seymour in the foreground, it's hard to pay attention to the background. But those of you who were to tear your eyes off the villainous starlet of *East of Eden* might have noticed that some of the locations looked familiar. They ought to—several scenes in the made-for-TV movie (telecast last winter) were shot at the Calvary Episcopal Church on Lincoln Street, the Hitchcock house on Ocean View Terrace and the Capitola pier. To the eyes of folks from Hollyweird, Santa Cruz looks more like Steinbeck's Salinas than Salinas does.

The Eden crew was one of the most visible of the many TV and movie production companies that have come to Santa Cruz. Within the last five years, our town has also played host to crews of the 1976 telefilm *The Entertainer* starring Jack Lemmon, which filmed extensively at the Boardwalk and the movie *Tilt* with Brooke Shields which spent several weeks shooting principal footage in Capitola. (Although the movie fizzled, it received a marginal theatrical release in 1979 and was recently shown on local cable TV.)

Last year portions of the upcoming science fiction comedy *Heartbeeps* with Andy Kaufman and Bernadette Peters, were shot in the meadows of UCSC, and scenes for the TV series *The Gangster Chronicles* came from the Capitola wharf.

Shooting movies in Santa Cruz is not a new idea. We've had a colorful history as a film location that dates back to the silent era. Stars gracing the local scene have ranged from Tom Mix and Zasu Pitts to James Stewart, Jeanette MacDonald and Lassie.

Organized research into this aspect of local history began when the UCSC library purchased a massive collection of photographs belonging to the late Preston Sawyer, an amateur photographer employed for many years as a proofreader for the *Santa Cruz Sentinel*.

Sawyer was an enthusiastic shutterbug who loved to drop in on the sets of visiting film crews, but he never catalogued or identified the thousands of photographs he took and collected over the years. For that Herculean task, the library recruited Barbara Giffen, a retired Westlake School teacher who has spent four years on the project. Barbara's efforts are responsible for much of what is now known about Santa Cruz's 65-year movie career.

The Southern Pacific railroad shot the earliest films here in 1915 to help drum up tourism. In 1916 when the infant film industry was beginning to migrate west from its East Coast birthplace, some local entrepreneur built a movie studio in De Laveaga Park. Complete with stages, dressing rooms and equipment, it was to be rented to visiting production companies. The operation folded within a year. But by then producers of the popular nickelodeon two-reelers had discovered in places like Felton and Boulder Creek the kind of lush forest locations they couldn't duplicate in Southern California. Between 1916 and 1920, the area was used in countless bucolic romances and westerns, among them a now vanished Cecil B. DeMille adventure called *A Romance of the Redwoods* starring Mary Pickford.

Popular cowboy stars William S. Hart and Tom Mix both made pictures in the Felton area. Hart's 1920 western *Testing Block* was filmed around Big Trees and in Capitola (where the crew developed a special light allowing to shoot at night when the days were too foggy). In 1923 during the filming of *The Eyes of the Forest* in Felton. Mix and his famous horse, Tony, were slightly injured on a ridge pass by a special effects "explosion" set off too soon. Mix reportedly remained up on the pass for two hours until he managed to coax the frightened Tony back down to terra firma.

Many of the films shot here in the twenties were "programmers," quickly and cheaply made adventures, romances or melodramas that would become the second half of a double-feature package. The most outrageous of these may have been *Soul of the Beast*. High-spirited Madge Bellamy, costumed in Tarzan-like animal skins co-starred with an elephant named Anna Mae in this 1922 pot-boiler filmed in Boulder Creek. (Unfortunately, there is hardly any record left on what this movie was about!) Native daughter Zasu Pitts returned them to shoot part of *Thunder Mountain*, the only film she ever made here, in 1925.

In the same year, the fledgling ingenue Janet Gaynor (who would go on to win the first Best Actress Academy Award two years later) arrived in Soquel to make *The Johnstown Flood*, which employed many locals as extras. *Scenes for Roadhouse*, featuring Lionel Barrymore, were shot in downtown Santa Cruz in 1928, the same year footage for Michael Curtiz's ambitious part-sound film *Noah's Ark* was shot in Big Basin. Big Basin also appeared as "the forest primeval" in the 1929 version of *Evangeline*.

In 1930, Felton was the location for a talkie remake of the silent classic *Tol'able David*. The film, starring Richard Cromwell, was a disappointment, but it was the only major feature shot entirely in the Santa Cruz area.

The silent era was the busiest time for filming in and around Santa Cruz. Barbara Giffen estimates that some 75 silent films, or parts of them, were shot here, compared to only about 25 talkies to date. Although their visits have been fewer and farther between, Hollywood has made some memorable forays into the area in recent decades.

In 1940, Cary Grant arrived up on Graham Hill Road to film portions of Frank Lloyd's historical extravaganza *The Howards of Virginia*. During one scene, which called for him to sweep his young bride up the steps of their new home, the debonair Grant reportedly tripped over a gopher hole and dropped co-star Martha Scott in an undignified heap.

Fred MacMurray fared even worse when he came to town with Claudette Colbert in 1936 to shoot *Maid of Salem*, for which the Puritan-era village of Salem was reconstructed along Empire Grade. During the shoot, MacMurray went fishing and caught a bad case of poison oak.

Things were happier on the Graham Hill Road set of *The Romance of Rosy Ridge*, an updated bucolic romance made in 1946, in which Janet Leigh made her film debut opposite Van Johnson.

In 1958, James Stewart and Kim Novak arrived to shoot the Muir Woods sequence of Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* in Big Basin. It was the only time Scotts Valley resident Hitchcock ever filmed in this area. Big Basin was also the set for some Walt Disney productions, a 1960 nature short and portions of the 1965 fantasy feature *The Gnomemobile* with Walter Brennan. In 1966, Bruce Brown filmed at Steamer Lane off Lighthouse Point for the surfing documentary *The Endless Summer*, and as cult film fans know, the Boardwalk at night was used in a key scene of the popular 1971 comedy *Harold and Maude*.

The current upsurge of Hollywood activity in these parts may signal the dawn of a new golden age of location filmmaking in Santa Cruz. (Last month [June 1981], a production crew was scouting locations at the Boardwalk for *The Sting II*, sequel to the popular 1973 comedy.) *Tilt* producer Rudy Durant called portions of this area "perhaps the most unique and artistic [sites] I have ever seen." *East of Eden* co-producer Ken Wales said at a press conference last year that Santa Cruz "looks glorious on film." He predicted a big increase in movie business here once the show hit the airwaves. If so, Santa Cruz may still look forward to a long and prosperous career in the movies.

Sources

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