

# The sea captain's cork

By MARGARET KOCH  
Sentinel Correspondent

**T**HE LARGEST cork oak tree in Santa Cruz County thrives at the corner of Soquel Drive and Seventh Avenue. It was spared when a gas station went in on that particular corner a few years back. Original plans had called for demolishing the tree along with the old house and the variety of exotic trees that formed its gardens.

All this was the home and garden of a retired sea captain who had his home built there, well back from the corner, then surrounded it with shrubs and trees he brought from the four corners of the earth: camphor, cedar, Australian oak and magnolia among others.

His name was Starbuck — a name to inspire wonder in itself. The old sailor retired to Santa Cruz about 1879. Today, no one knows for sure who planted the cork oak — or the other old cork oak at the entrance to West Cliff Drive. That one is barely hanging onto the cliff beside the road and its age is telling on it. But the oak at Seventh Avenue is doing fine.

Santa Cruz had a number of talented "green thumbs" in its German and Italian population. They wouldn't have accepted the title of "landscape designer," but that's what they did and they were good at making things grow. Full or part time gardeners were hired at most of the local estates and more elaborate homes.

Today, the cork oak at Seventh is well preserved and properly labeled. It attracted wide attention in the 1940s when Dr. Woodbridge Metcalf of UC-Berkeley, heard about it. He got the word from his old friend, Robert Burton, who taught science at Santa Cruz High. Burton had a curiosity that wouldn't stop about all flora and fauna of Santa Cruz County.

Metcalf, who was a regular visitor at Burton's home, began to keep annual records of the tree's growth and its development of cork and acorns. He gathered the acorns which were sprouted into seedlings, then planted at various other places including the UC-Davis campus. He

also harvested the cork — a process which does not injure the tree if done properly, and which allows another layer to form.

Metcalf speculated that Starbuck had brought the cork oak from Spain or Portugal, where the tree grows and until the age of plastic, produced bumper crops of cork.

Santa Cruzans have always been interested in trees, and the year 1970 was a big tree year in the county, good and not so good. The county works department got into hot water that year by cutting trees along a drainage ditch on 34th Avenue. A nearby resident, Katherine Silva, said she moved to that area because of the trees and wild roses which formed a natural beauty spot. The beauty spot vanished when the county moved in with axes and saws. County Supervisor Dan Forbus inspected the site and agreed with her that the county "over-did" the job.

The county assistant director of public works got into it by answering in defense that "every time we cut a tree we're in trouble ..."

Sure enough. People can become attached to trees as they do their dogs or other pets, although it's hard to visualize a tree as a pet.

The citizens got so upset over the whole thing that a paper collection drive was started to save trees by recycling paper. Known as Ecology Action, it included a group of UCSC students and local college and high school teachers.

In 1972, the city council passed two emergency interim ordinances, establishing a 60-day halt on permits for the demolition of historic structures within the city and made it illegal to remove trees of certain size from private property.

Good? Well, like most restrictions, yes and no.

There are times and situations in which trees should be removed, as anyone with common sense will tell you. Trees get old and weak and sick, just as humans do, and they can get diseased beyond the salvage point. They can become dangerous. Laws and ordinances don't always cover

## oak tree

the fine points adequately and sometimes in our zeal to save, we save something that should be allowed to go quietly into a permanent rest.

On the other hand, I look down from my windows on a line of giant marching redwoods, trees which one oldtimer refused to cut for his small lumbermill. He could have, easily. But he said no, and the trees stand as his living memorial.

Those redwoods are almost like members of the family. One has a stripped top that stands up like a flagpole. It served as a flagpole once when a brash young fellow climbed it more than 100 years ago and put an American flag there. The flag flew for years until it disintegrated and no one since has been brave enough to climb up and put another at the top of that giant.

And so there are stories and stories about trees.

In 1972, a walnut tree, supposedly the last of the Santa Cruz Mission orchard, created a flap. It stood on Mora Street until it was cut down in April of that year. A story began to circulate that it was the very tree from which the Indians had hanged one of the Mission priests. Not so. But a story like that gets a lot of mileage.

In 1973, about a hundred Eucalyptus trees were chain-sawed out at Schwann Lagoon on East Cliff Drive

and citizens in that area raised an uproar.

The trees were on State Beaches and Parks property and the hard-pressed coast area manager explained that permission had been given to cut. Many of the trees were "stumpers," with three or four growing from one stump. They were getting so thick that they crowded out the native oak, redwood and pine, according to the manager. However, there were citizens who looked at the act as if murder had been committed.

Nature has its own way of thinning and pruning during storms. We've seen a lot of that, some of it tragic, in recent years.

If you think saving trees is a fairly new idea, it isn't. In 1930, Santa Cruz club women formed a delegation to preserve shade trees in the city's residential areas. They appeared before the city council to protest what they called "indiscriminate cutting." Among those sturdy females were Mrs. Otto Jensen, Mrs. A.J. Hinds and Mrs. George Pratchner.

Mayor Fred Swanton was nobody's fool. When the ladies marched on his office he asked them politely to form a committee to work with a committee that he would appoint. That satisfied everyone and the ladies retired to their domestic duties — except on meeting days.

## A glance at history



Santa Cruz has a tradition of keeping demolition crews away from its old trees, like the cork oak on Seventh Avenue.