

A Bit Of 'Ernesto' Returns To Wharf

By Margaret Koch
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A trophy was brought into The Sentinel the other day. It was carried in carefully by a friendly woman who said "It was Uncle Ernest's. It belongs in Santa Cruz — somewhere down at the wharf, I think."

And after asking me to find the trophy a suitable home at the wharf, she left.

The woman is Mrs. Edward D. Vallerger of Belmont, a grandniece of "Uncle Ernest." He was Ernest Otto, a Santa Cruz newspaperman for 74 years, 36 of them as a reporter for The Sentinel.

He was born here January 4, 1871, in a house that stood where The Sentinel is located today. He died in Santa Cruz on July 10, 1955. He was regarded with love and respect as "Mr. Santa Cruz" wherever he went.

And Ernest went almost everywhere — in Santa Cruz. He walked at least six miles a day covering his beat. It took him from his home at 319 Cleveland Avenue to the Municipal Wharf, back uptown to the county clerk's office, recorder's office and the mortuaries. In earlier

days his beat also included the courts, the SP depot to meet incoming trains and check outgoing trains for important people, the main hotels to check registers, Chinatown, the city council and county supervisors' meetings, weddings and social doings and — always, the wharf.

Besides his daily stint he wrote a Sunday column on old Santa Cruz and a daily "waterfront" column. Ernest's pockets were always full of scribbled notes: Somebody's tulip magnolia tree was in full bloom, sand was piling up at the mouth of Neary Lagoon or small boys were catching frogs there; a distinguished person was visiting Santa Cruz for a day or two; someone died, babies were born; the Italian fishermen were mending their nets on the wharf; the albacore catch was particularly good — or particularly poor.

If Mrs. Jones had white-washed her fence, Ernest wrote it up. If someone got a new dog, Ernest got the pedigree.

Ernest was one of those special, star-touched people who are at home wherever they go. But he was most at home down

at the wharf with all of his old friends, the Italian fishermen.

His short, solid figure was seen everywhere; his friendly eye missed not a jot nor a tittle of Santa Cruz life. And he wrote it all down in his kindly, inimitable style.

Although Ernest has been gone for 13 years, there are scenes and incidents that his surviving friends treasure and tell, keeping the memories bright with each re-telling, polishing them with the affection they felt for the man. He had friends everywhere — hundreds of them. And he became a legend in his own time.

Like the Christmas season when Ernest's desk at the newspaper was piled high with gifts. Here is one partial list somebody compiled: 40 jars of home-canned fruit; six boxes of candy, 10 fruit cakes, a smoking jacket from "a Chinese friend;" \$10 in cash from an "Italian friend;" a shoe shine from a "Negro friend;" delicacies from every fish market on the wharf and hundreds of greeting cards.

Or take the time a group was berating one of Ernest's friends who was notoriously fond of the bottle. Ernest silenced the gossips with, "Some people are better drunk than others are sober."

Ernest never touched a drop himself, but he practiced tolerance. In fact, the reason he didn't drink makes another oft-told story. When he was 10 he was sent to the grocer's for a bottle of vinegar. He took a bottle of wine by mistake, and drank a goodly portion of it on the way home. In the family yard he collapsed and was picked up awhile later, much the worse for wear. That was his first and last encounter with the juice of the grape.

Ernest served as clerk of the First Congregational Church for 57 years — but he was equally welcome in the Roman Catholic Church or the Jewish Temple. When he died, he left a portion of his estate to eight local churches.

But it was at the Santa Cruz wharf that Ernest liked to spend his hours — more and more of them as the years crept by. He knew the history of every fisherman's family. Ernest started reporting wharf activities in the days of the traditional lateen fishing boats — and finished in the jet age. To the Italian fishermen he was "Ernesto."

Ernest swam for years — until about 1938 when he finally gave it up. According to Warren (Skip) Littlefield, the veteran reporter had a black and white striped bathing suit that hit him down around the knees. He kept the suit at the plunge and donned it several times a week for a dip in the briny.

When the annual "Day on the Bay" celebration was revived after World War II in 1947, Ernest was the guest of honor and was given a trophy. It was presented by Dan Yee of the



This trophy was presented to the late Ernest Otto, veteran Santa Cruz and AP reporter, in 1947. It came back to the Santa Cruz wharf this week and will be kept there by Malio Stagnaro, above, an old friend of Otto's. Ernest Otto's beat for more than 60 years took in the wharf and waterfront.

Teacup Restaurant for "outstanding work reporting waterfront news for 60 years." After the presentation, Ernesto was serenaded by the Italian fishermen's chorus.

This week Ernest's trophy went back to the wharf. Malio Stagnaro will keep it where it belongs — where Ernest Otto would want it kept.

School Officials Convene In SC

Assistant superintendents of schools in 11 Bay Area counties held their monthly meeting Tuesday in Santa Cruz and toured the new government center.

Jim Eachus, assistant superintendent in the county office of education, hosted the session which marked the officials' first visit to Santa Cruz in several years.

During the business meeting, the group discussed general problems of instruction and agreed to combine several projects for development of curriculum materials in science. The projects include publication of a series of cards for use in science classrooms. They will be ready for use in the 1968-69 school year, Eachus said.

Four administrators — from San Joaquin, Solano, Alameda and Santa Clara Counties — also toured the county's special training farm on San Andreas Road.

Certain species of flightless flies are parasites on bats, one of the few families of animals which are entirely a flying group.



If the Italian fishermen at Santa Cruz Municipal wharf caught an octopus, "Ernesto" wrote it up. Here he is with one, back in the 1930s.