

When the Sea Beach burned

SANTA CRUZ has suffered through several major downtown fires and oldtimers still talk of the "Fire of 1894" which leveled much of the business section.

In the same category was the Sea Beach Hotel fire of June 12, 1912. The Sea Beach had evolved from a much simpler structure in a day when Santa Cruz was becoming widely known as the "Newport of the Pacific."

The small hotel was called the Ocean View House and it was built by Thomas V. Johnson in the early 1870s. In 1883, A.H. Douglas purchased it and renamed it the Douglas House. It had 32 rooms and stood on Beach Hill where the Casa Blanca is today. The property extended along Main Street from Second Street to Beach Street and had a bay-side frontage of 140 feet.

In 1887 D.K. Abeel purchased the Douglas House and expanded it, adding sunrooms and verandas and wings which reached out over the bluff at several angles. It finally totaled 170 rooms, each of which had magnificent views of Monterey Bay or the local beach.

The Sea Beach was popular with San Francisco socialites who came by train for "the season," starting in June each

year. In fact, the hotel was due to open just three days after it burned, a financial disaster which probably affected a good portion of the town. James Leonard was operating it at the time and had been in charge since 1901.

Shortly before 3:30 a.m. on the fateful morning, the city-fire bell on Front Street rang the alarm. Word soon spread through the town — "The Sea Beach is burning!"

Every available piece of fire-fighting equipment raced to the waterfront hotel. The fire had started on the roof at the beach end of the huge building and the hotel's long halls created perfect draft conditions that made it impossible for firemen to confine the blaze to one portion of the hotel. Five tall brick chimneys fell during the fire and the others were taken down soon after as a safety measure.

Santa Cruzans came from all parts of the city to watch the spectacle which lasted for more than four hours. People sat on the beach at a safe distance although they felt the fire's great heat and the flames made it almost as light as day.

When the Sea Beach was reduced to

ashes, all that remained were two detached buildings: the ballroom and the laundry, and a small piece of the hotel's north wing which housed the office and lobby. Loss was set at \$100,000 — a great amount for that day. It was covered by insurance.

With the loss of the Sea Beach as a tourist attraction, Santa Cruz lost a wealthy clientele. Well-heeled tourists who had been accustomed to coming there, started going to the Del Monte Hotel and never came back to the north side of Monterey Bay, according to Helen MacFadyen. She remembers well the fire of 73 years ago. Her family, then living on California Street, hurried down to watch it. Helen's childhood memory is of the flames lighting up the sky — "The whole sky" she says. It was the passing of an era.

— MARGARET KOCH



Above, the Alert Number One Hose Cart team answered the call when the Santa Cruz fire bell rang the alarm, and won the diamond belt twice. A fully loaded cart weighed about 1,000 pounds and was pulled by team members as fast as they could run. Right, the Santa Cruz Fire Department near the corner of Church Street and Pacific.

