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ALFRED HITCHCOCK IN SANTA CRUZ

A GENIUS IN OUR MIDST:

By Geoffrey Dunn

There is a scene in Alfred Hitchcock's classic psychological thriller *Vertigo* in which the two lead characters, Scottie and Madeleine (in unforgettable turns by Jimmy Stewart and Kim Novak), are escaping San Francisco for a long drive south through the Santa Cruz Mountains. We see them winding along Skyline Boulevard, before stopping at Big Basin State Park, just outside of Boulder Creek.

It is there, along the park's celebrated Redwood Trail, that they encounter a 2,000-year-old redwood tree, which forces Madeleine to confront her mortality by thinking "of all the people who've been born and have died while the trees went on living." Hitchcock framed much of the scene in a wide angle, emphasizing the immensity of the redwoods.

Scottie explains that "their true name is *Sequoia sempervirens* — always green, ever living..."

"I don't like it," Madeleine intones.

"Why?" Scottie asks.

"Knowing I have to die," is her prophetic response.

The screenplay for *Vertigo* was based on the French novel, *D'entre les morts*, by Boileau-Narcejac, but Hitchcock infused the film with a Northern California aesthetic, in which the geographical locations and complex colonial history of the region are inextricably woven into the dramatic arc of the film. Indeed, one could comfortably argue

Photo: © Universal Studios

Photo: Alfred Hitchcock personal collection



Alfred Hitchcock walking on a Santa Cruz beach with his beloved Sealyham Terriers.

that Northern California serves as a central character in *Vertigo*, vying for equal billing with Stewart and Novak.

It's long been a common bit of local historical lore that Alfred Hitchcock kept a home in Santa Cruz County for the latter part of his life, making him a rather famous footnote to regional history. Much of the attention has focused on his remote ranch house in the Santa Cruz Mountains or on his celebrated six-day *Vertigo* shoot in nearby San Juan Bautista, during which the mission buildings were significantly altered to accommodate Hitchcock's carefully crafted sense of symmetry — all interesting bits of local historical ephemera, to be sure.

But by focusing on these particular details, one loses perspective on the bigger picture at work here, namely that Hitchcock's 30-year residency in the region had a profound impact on his cinematic sensibilities that marked the latter half of his remarkable career.

One can safely assert that four of his major works — *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943), *Vertigo* (1958), *Psycho* (1960) and *The Birds* (1963) — were directly influenced and inspired by his life in Santa Cruz County, and that these influences can be found in at least a half-dozen other Hitchcock films, including *Rebecca* (1940), *Suspicion* (1941), *Marnie*

(1964), *Topaz* (1969), and his final theatrical release, *Family Plot* (1976).

Hitchcock's association with the region served as far more than one of his trademark cameos. Indeed, if one pulls back the lens to a wider angle, one discovers that Santa Cruz had a significant impact on his cinematic legacy.

Born in 1899, in a northeast suburb of London, Sir Alfred Joseph Hitchcock came of age during the social tumult of Edwardian England. One of his biographers would describe his childhood as "curiously desolate." His father, a vegetable and poultry merchant of Irish extraction, was a strict disciplinarian and sent his youngest son to a Jesuit school, where the young Hitchcock's obesity singled him out for ridicule by his schoolmates. His sense of humor took a decidedly dark turn.

While somehow managing to avoid military service during World War I, Hitchcock didn't miss out on the fear and horror it engendered throughout Great Britain. To escape, he lost himself in the paintings of British masters and took up the burgeoning art of photography. He soon found work as a title-card designer in the embryonic British film industry, and by the time he was 25, he had worked his way up to the position of director at Gainsborough Studios. His second film, a thriller, *The Lodger: A*



(Above) Jimmy Stewart and Kim Novak struggle in the Mission tower in Alfred Hitchcock's 1958 thriller, *Vertigo*.

Story of the London Fog, (1926), was a hit in England and catapulted his career. Throughout the 1930s he was one of Britain's most prolific and successful filmmakers, directing the classic *The Man Who Knew Too Much* in 1934 and *The 39 Steps* the following year.

By the end of the decade, Hitchcock had established himself as one of England's great directors. But with war impending once again in Europe, and Hollywood film production in ascent, Hitchcock was lured to the United States by David Selznick, who had just produced *Gone with the Wind*. Selznick signed him to a seven-picture deal.

It was in the spring of 1939 that Hitchcock, his wife, Alma, and his eleven-year-old daughter, Patricia, arrived in the United States, first settling in Southern California, where Hitchcock began work immediately on *Rebecca*, starring Laurence Olivier and Joan Fontaine, and which was based on a novel by the British writer, Daphne Du Maurier.

The production of *Rebecca* was to have a lasting impact on Hitchcock's life and career. Although set in both Monaco and England, Hitchcock assigned a second unit to film coastal scenes at Point Lobos, just south of Monterey. Hitchcock blended in the sequences shot at Point Lobos to double for the coast of England — and, in many ways, that served as a metaphor for his relocation to the region.

"I think Northern California always reminded Hitch of England," production designer Robert Boyle recalled. "It was fog and rain and then sunshine... It was a moody strange area both forbidding and foreboding, and I believe that's what intrigued him. It had kind of a mystical quality."

Hitchcock had first been introduced to Northern California by his female lead Joan Fontaine, whose mother, former British stage actress Lillian Fontaine, had relocated to Saratoga. The Hitchcocks desperately sought a weekend getaway from the glitz and pretense of Hollywood, and, given Hitchcock's love of winemaking, the Fontaines recommended the Vine Hill area above Scotts Valley on the ocean-side of the Santa Cruz Mountains. In 1940, the Hitchcocks purchased the 200-acre estate, replete with a well-seasoned vineyard,



The Hotel McCray on Beach Hill (Santa Cruz) inspired Hitchcock's design of Norman Bates' home in *Psycho*.

for \$40,000 (see pg. 30).

"We always had a country home in England, away from London," observed Hitchcock's daughter, Patricia Hitchcock O'Connell, in the foreword to the delightful *Footsteps in the Fog: Alfred Hitchcock's San Francisco*, by Jeff Kraft and Aaron Leventhal. "[My] parents fell in love with Scotts Valley... They found a house with a spectacular view of Monterey Bay, and decided that it was an ideal equivalent to their English country home."

Rebecca immediately established Hitchcock's reputation in the United States. Not only was it a box-office hit, the film received the Oscar for Best Picture, while Hitchcock, Olivier and Fontaine also received Oscar nominations.

With his 1943 classic, *Shadow of Doubt*, Hitchcock directed his first film set entirely in Northern California. And while



Kim Novak reviews her script on the *Vertigo* set in San Juan Bautista.

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Photo: © Universal Studios

he chose Santa Rosa as the setting, the small-town ambience was very much reminiscent of World War II Santa Cruz. Hitchcock clearly enjoyed his isolation and relative anonymity in Santa Cruz County, and he did not want to destroy either by turning his backyard into a movie set. But the close proximity of Santa Rosa to his Scotts Valley hideaway provided him with an easy commute for weekend getaways during production.

"Hitchcock North," as the estate was dubbed, was laid-back and a place where work was discouraged. In the hot summer months, Hitchcock often donned a work shirt and shorts, and led his guests on hikes through the dense oak-and-redwood forest.

Hitchcock was a renowned practical jokester. He often greeted guests in the mornings in mock-butler mode, providing them with breakfast, newspapers and champagne. "If Hitch invited you to Santa Cruz and you said 'no,'" one screenwriter recalled, "he was very hurt."

It was in August of 1961 that a startling event occurred in Santa Cruz County that would have a considerable impact on Hitchcock's next film.

Thousands of Sooty Shearwaters, migratory birds that arrive in Monterey Bay each summer, came crashing into homes and com-



(Above) Alfred Hitchcock, with his wife Alma and daughter Patricia (back) study a film magazine.

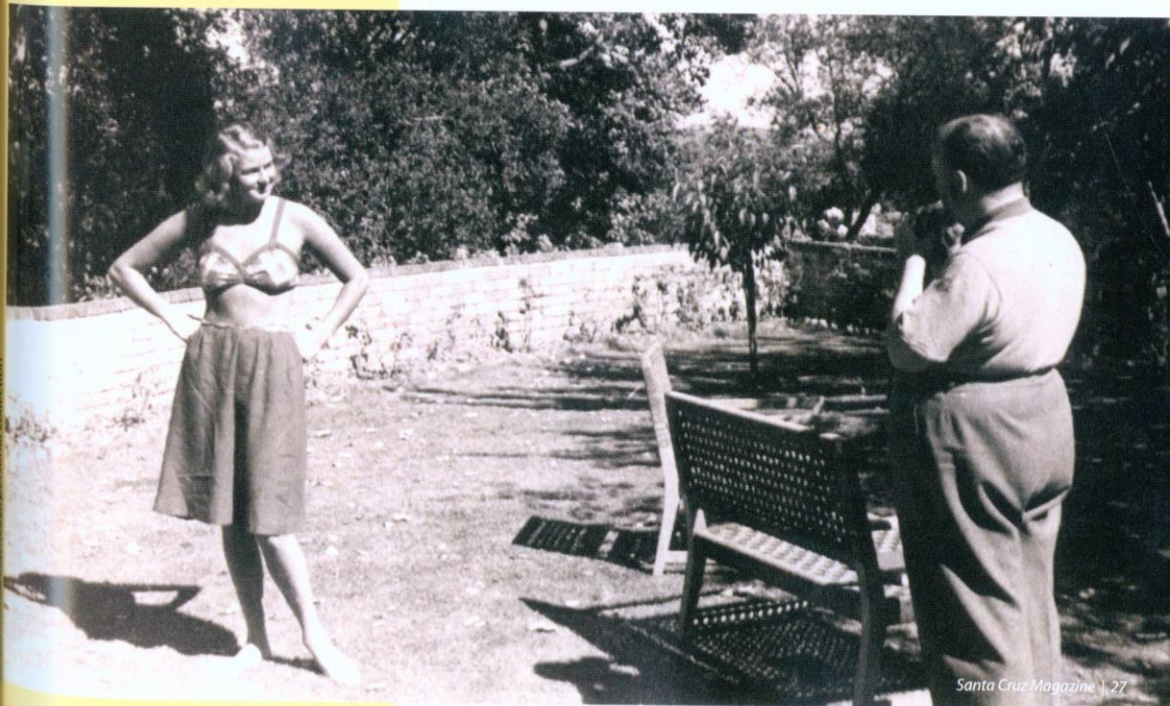
(Below) Alfred Hitchcock photographs Ingrid Bergman at his Scotts Valley Ranch in the 1940s.

mercial buildings from Pleasure Point to Rio Del Mar, but primarily centering in Capitola. "Residents were awakened about 3 a.m. today by the rain of birds," wrote *Santa Cruz Sentinel* reporter Wally Trabing. "Dead, and stunned, seabirds littered the streets and roads in the fog and early dawn."

It remains uncertain what triggered this avian invasion (a prevailing theory has it that the Shearwaters became intoxicated by anchovies feeding on a red tide), but what is certain is that Hitchcock, then in Hollywood, immediately requested newspaper accounts of the incident. He was at work adapting another work by Du Maurier, a short story entitled "*The Birds*," and once again he incorporated events in Santa Cruz County into his cinematic expression.

"Something like this happened in Santa Cruz last year," says a traveling salesman in the film. "And they made some mess, smashing into buildings and everything..."

Hitchcock set *The Birds* in Bodega Bay, a small coastal fishing community, not entirely unlike Capitola in the early 1960s. Shortly after the film opened, Hitchcock needed his friend, the San Francisco columnist Herb Caen: "Perhaps some day I will be known as the Birdman of Santa Cruz."



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Other regional influences would figure into Hitchcock's films in the ensuing years, most notably the Bates Mansion in *Psycho*, which was inspired by the then-dilapidated Hotel McCray, located on Beach Hill, overlooking the Santa Cruz waterfront.

For those of us growing up in Santa Cruz County during the mid-20th Century, Hitchcock was something of an enigmatic figure. I recall an intimidating quality to his presence, projected largely, I suppose, from the macabre nature of his films and his television series, "*Alfred Hitchcock Presents*."

It is hard today to conceptualize just how small and isolated the county was when Hitchcock arrived in 1940. The county's population was only 15 percent of what it is today, and Scotts Valley, yet to be incorporated, was little more than a gas station and country store.

The Hitchcocks' caretaker, Joe Chiesa, was a native of Italy and provided a link to the local Italian fishing community. "Hitch" and Alma could be spotted occasionally at the Santa Cruz Municipal Wharf, where they purchased fresh sole and other seafood. They also frequented what was then a small seafood restaurant run by my late aunt, Gilda Stagnaro, who always viewed Hitchcock as a "dignified gentleman—very polite and very proper." Mostly he kept to himself. He sold the majority of the grapes from his Scotts Valley vineyard to the Cresta Blanca winery, but kept a small amount for Chiesa to make red table wine that he served to his guests. The late Roy Rydell, the legendary local landscape architect who would leave his

mark on the old Pacific Garden Mall and Abbot Square, worked for Hitchcock, an avid gardener, on his estate. He once described Hitchcock to me as "affable, if a bit reclusive" and "thoroughly devoted to his family."

In June of 1968, Hitchcock received an honorary degree from the University of California, Santa Cruz, where he delivered a self-effacing commencement speech to students.

"In my years in the film business," Hitchcock deadpanned, "I have survived the silent films, talkies, the narrow screen, the wide screen, 3-D, the drive-in movie, the in-flight movie, television and so on. I began as a writer, then became successfully art director, director/producer, and, now, the climax of my career, after-luncheon speaker."

By the time of his death in 1980, Hitchcock's reputation as a filmic genius was secured. While the role that Santa Cruz played in influencing his career has gone largely overlooked, his 30-plus years here left an indelible mark on his legacy. Hitchcock is now a global icon, rightfully ranked as one of the great directors in cinematic history.

"Like Edgar Allan Poe," cultural critic James Wolcott once wrote, "Hitchcock is the most obvious of thrill vendors, and the most stubbornly cryptic. Ravens belong on both men's shoulder, perched forevermore." 🦇

It would seem a lot of moviegoers are still hesitant about taking a shower. Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* tops the American Film Institute's "100 Years ... 100 Thrills" list. Two other Hitchcock films also made the top ten.

Santa Cruz filmmaker Geoffrey Dunn has written and co-directed nine films, including *Dollar a Day*, *Ten Cents a Dance*, *Chinese Gold*, *Mi Vida*, *Miss...or Myth?*, *Maddalena Z*, and *Calypso Dreams*. He is the author of *Santa Cruz Is in the Heart*.