

On Valencia Street, In Aptos

By MARGARET KOCH
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Not many houses today can boast redwood boards 18 inches wide and 20 feet long ... square nails in two sizes ... these are hallmarks of yesteryear in Santa Cruz County, when virgin redwood trees stood in all the deep canyons.

Sommer House in Aptos has nails and boards like these.

It is solid redwood — built around 1882, to house one of F. A. Hihn's lumber mill families.

Aptos was a "booming" lumber town in those days, with outlying areas planted to apple orchards. Hihn owned the street on which the house yet stands, as well as acres of redwoods back in the hills. He had many houses built for his workers, a social hall (Hihn Hall), a store and apple packing shed.

Before the Sommer House property passed to Hihn, it was owned by Vincente Castro, a son of Rafael Castro. Aptos Rancho was granted to Rafael by the Mexican Government in 1833, a handsome prize of more than 6000 acres which included the present town site.

The name "Aptos" is of Costanoan Indian origin and no one really knows what it meant, although there are individuals who like to put forth guesses.

It is said that Vincente, bitter at the way the Spanish Californians were being bilked by many of the Yankees in later years, sold his acres to Hihn to get rid of a potential problem. The ten acre piece that contained what is Valencia Street today, was sold to a man named Bernal, then to Hihn.

The original Castro holdings reached out in all directions. Rafael had a grist mill and a lumber mill, and he built a small wharf at Aptos Landing before 1867. In 1880 a sugar millionaire named Claus Spreckels pushed Castro's little wharf out 1000 feet into the bay.

The story of Aptos is really the story of the two millionaires: F. A. Hihn, who it is often said, became Santa Cruz County's first millionaire, and Claus Spreckels, already a millionaire, who came here later and fell in love with the Aptos area.

The area east of Aptos Creek, (sometimes called the Aptos River), was bought up by Spreckels in 1872. He then proceeded to develop a social stamping ground there for himself and his many distinguished guests. He built mansions — not one but several, for various members of his family; he put in a

swish hotel for his guests, and many cottages, a fancy dance pavilion, a race track and polo field.

In 1908 Spreckel's sons put his more than 2000 choice acres on the block, and in 1925 Rio del Mar was begun.

However, Aptos also is the story of the more ordinary folk who, far from being millionaires, struggled to buy a horse and wagon (the "Mustang" or "Impala" of yesteryear), pay their taxes and keep shoes on their kids. (In the winter.)

People like these lived in Sommer House. The original front parlor was a tiny room, no larger than a good-sized closet, in which Mama probably kept some choice hair flowers under glass, or a similar household treasure — if she could afford one.

The Sommer family has removed the wall and joined two tiny rooms into one larger one, for the gifts and import shop Tana Sommer operates in the house today.

Once, the story goes, that tiny room held the Aptos telephone switchboard, a pay telephone, the sleeping quarters of the couple who ran the switchboard, and odds and ends of people tramping in and out at all hours.

Another story goes that in the old days, long before the street was paved, it was paved with lumber and horses were taboo because it was felt they would wear out the boards. Sometimes, just for the hell of it, the local hell-raisers would get tanked up and ride hell-for-leather clat-

tering down the board street. Or maybe it was sidewalks. Anyway, it makes a rousing good story.

When Hihn died he left the property containing Valencia Street and Sommer House, to his grand daughter Ruth Younger Benner, a sister of Attorney Donald Younger. That was about 1917.

In 1920 a movie was made in Aptos. It was titled "One Way Trail" and dealt with a lumber camp. Sommer House served as a "hotel" in the movie, playing a starring role. Tana Sommer has tried to get access to the movie, which was shown elsewhere recently as an early-day epic. She would like to rope off Valencia Street and invite the town to see it, some nice evening. The street, of course, figures pro-

minently in the movie also. It was a Selznick production written by Charles Mortimer Peck.

In 1965 the Sommer family drove through Aptos, spied "the house," fell in love with it, went away, thought about it a lot, couldn't forget it, came back, bought it and have been happy about it ever since.

By 1968 Tana, the Sommer daughter, had started her shop. Last year they added on a room downstairs and upstairs, to house the growing business and enlarge the living quarters a bit.

The house is now a spanking mellow yellow, with a handsome new bay window in the downstairs addition.

"We love it — I wouldn't live anywhere else," Tana says.



The old, above, and new, below.



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Tana Sommer in the shop portion of the old house, part of which was recently added on.

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