

Author unlocks mysteries behind place names

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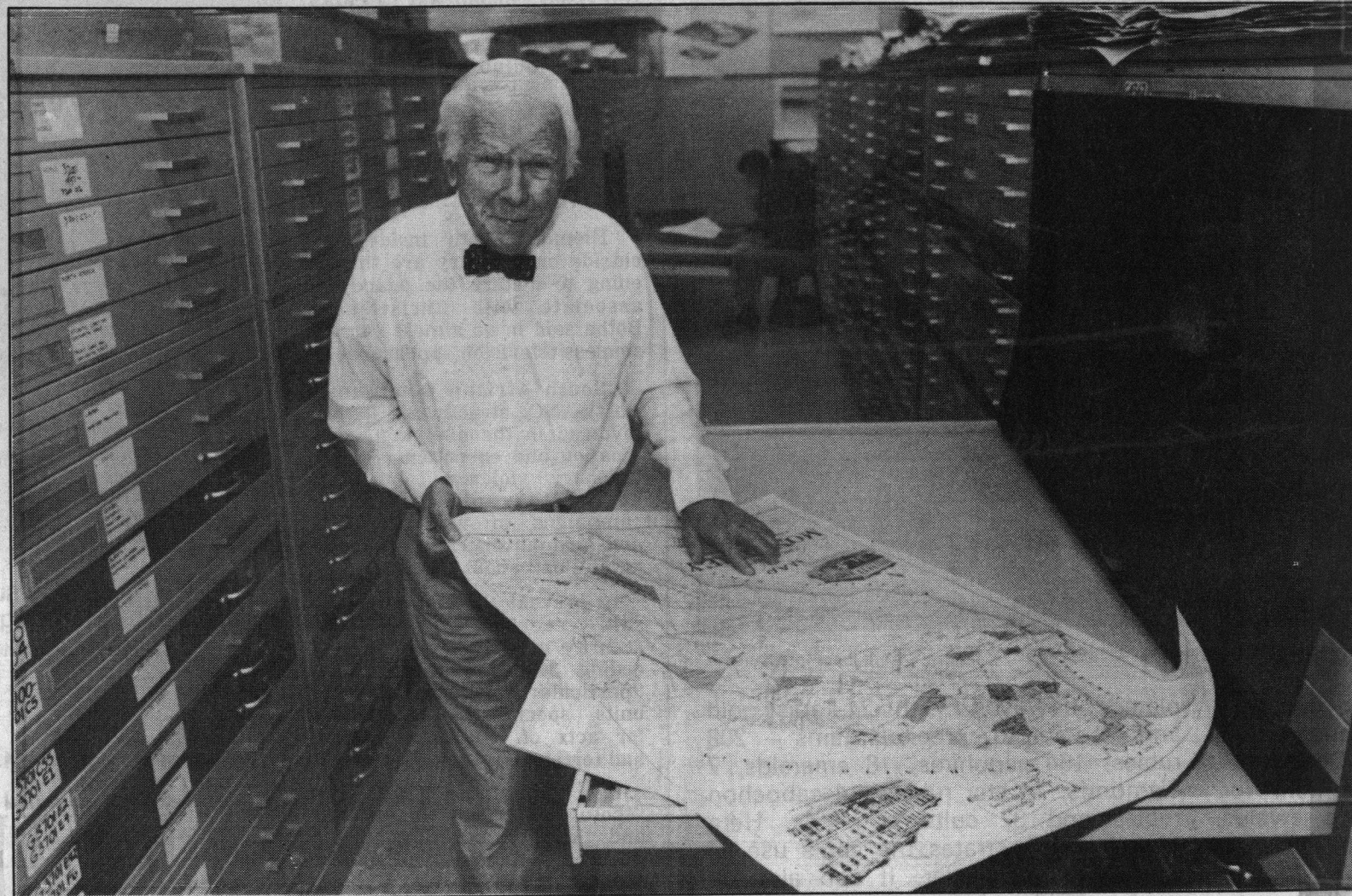
WAS CAPITOLA so named for an 1850s romance-novel heroine, or in jealous acknowledgement of nearby Soquel's effort to become the capital of California?

Was the Pajaro River named for a large stuffed bird that Portola and his band of explorers came upon near the river? Or was it named Pajaro — "bird" in Spanish — because the river was treacherously peppered with quicksand and "fit to cross only by a bird"?

These questions, and many others, are raised in the 552-page "Santa Cruz County Place Names" — an exhaustive geographical dictionary of every place name in the county that has appeared on maps since 1902.

The author of the book, which hit local bookstores this week, is Donald T. Clark, the now-retired founding librarian at UC-Santa Cruz.

The tome includes 2,314 place names of both natural and man-made sites — some of which are obsolete. Listings include location, map references, his source of information and his interpretation of the historical data about each name.



Chip Scheue

Author Donald Clark became intimately acquainted with topographical maps of Santa Cruz County.

Publication of the book marked the first project undertaken by the Fred D. McPherson Jr. Publication Fund of the Santa Cruz Historical Society.

The fund was established to publish major works related to Santa Cruz County history.

"Major" is almost an understatement for this comprehensive work that was nearly 25 years in the making.

Although Clark is co-author of two other books — "The World of Business" and "Dictionary of Business and Finance" — he was unaware he was working on his third when he started researching Santa Cruz County place names.

"It was for my own edification," the white-haired Clark said. "As it grew and people learned I had this file, I started getting all these questions."

Four years ago, Stan Stevens, UCSC map librarian, persuaded his friend and former boss to turn his file into a book.

Clark borrowed his son's personal computer and began the task.

CLARK'S fascination with the names of places began when he was a boy growing up near

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Seattle. He lived near Snohomish, Mulkulteo, Liliwaup and Walla Walla.

"I just began, I suppose, wondering where did they come from?" Clark said. "How did they get there? Do they mean anything?"

He was introduced to the library's world of information and research quite accidentally while looking for a job as a young man.

"I trudged around the cities of Berkeley and Oakland," Clark recalled. "One day I stopped to rest at the Berkeley Public Library. I noticed some young people putting books on shelves and I thought, 'I can do that.'"

Clark spoke with the head librarian, Susan Smith, and began his job as a page the very next day. Smith took great interest in "her boys," as she referred to them. From that time on, Clark was librarian-bound.

He earned an associate degree at UC-Berkeley, a bachelor's degree in library science at Columbia and a master's of business administration at Harvard. He was librarian of the Harvard University Business School's Baker Library when he was

invited to UC-Santa Cruz in 1962.

ONCE he arrived, he began wondering, he says in his book, "who was this Hermon for whom a mount was named? ... What was Bonny about Bonny Doon? Gold Gulch, Pogonip, Mountain Charley Creek, how did they get their names?"

By the time Clark began posing these questions, he had developed his interest in map-reading and had helped charter the American Name Society. He had even met, fallen in love with and married Emily Espenshade, daughter of the late A. Howry Espenshade, author of "Pennsylvania Place Names."

Armed with this background, he began collecting local place names. When he began his research in earnest, he made a list of every place name that appeared on topographical maps produced by the U.S. Geographical Survey from 1902 to the present.

He started talking to local people who knew the history of the area. He painstakingly read microfilm copies of old newspapers.

In many ways, Clark's work became that of a sleuth.

One example — the mystery of Hepsidam.

Hepsidam was the name of a mountain home of a Santa Cruz family. It was located near Mt. Hermon and was named by the husband because he remembered a little jingle with "Hepsidam" in it.

"I tried all kinds of places to find out what this means," Clark said.

He even wrote to the historical association in a Northern California town by the name of Hepsidam.

Their reply: We don't know what the name means or where it came from.

"Of course, through this whole thing, I read till my eyes gave out microfilm of the Sentinel, the Surf, the Pajaronian, the Register," Clark said. "One day, just by serendipity, I ran across an entry about Hepsidam in the Santa Cruz Surf."

The editorial in the Aug. 28, 1886, issue read:

"Hepsidam doesn't mean anything. It originated in one of the mock 'Hardshell Baptist' sermons ... which were

very funny, and much appreciated, and were written by Wm. F. Brannan, the artist and poet ..."

The article goes on to say a Dr. and Mrs. Kittredge, of Santa Cruz, moved to this mountain home and called it "Hepsidam" after the poem that begins, "Let us gnaw a file and flee to the mountains of Hepsidam."

How did Clark feel when he made a breakthrough like that?

"Whoopee!" he said. "It's really a great exhilaration."

The work Clark said he found most enjoyable was that of analyzing the information he compiled.

For instance, he favors the argument that Capitola was named after Soquel's attempt to become the capital of California and not for the heroine Capitola in the 1850s books by Mrs. Emma Dorothy Eliza Nevitte Southworth.

Analysis of the facts was key to determining how Rose Reservoir, a South County reservoir that no longer exists, got its name.

By looking at maps that show ownership during certain periods of time, he discovered the property was

once owned by a William H. Rowe.

"You can just see this guy from the Geological Survey down there mapping everything out. He asks some guy, 'What's the name of that reservoir,' and the guy says, 'Oh, that's Rowe's Reservoir.'"

"And the guy writes down 'Rose Reservoir.'"

Rose Reservoir is an example of something else Clark discovered.

He categorized what places were named for and found they were fairly equally named for the people that owned them, other people and descriptive characteristics.

"Of those places that were named for people, it turned out that, unlike a lot of other places in the country, they were named for local people," Clark said.

"I think it's because the history of this area was really young compared to the rest of the United States. People would identify things by saying, 'That's Henry's creek,' because it ran through Henry's property. Pretty soon, it would come to be known as 'Henry's Creek.'"

TO MAKE the dictionary as useful as possible, Clark included a glossary, a table of cross-references, a guide to pronunciation, a bibliography, map sources and an index to personal names.

He is ready for a barrage of letters about mistakes or alternative interpretations of his data.

"I know darn well as soon as this is out, people are going to find umpteen mistakes in this," he said. "There just has to be, because they know a lot more than I'll ever know about this area."

That seems debatable.

Against the advice of Stan Stevens, the UCSC map librarian, Clark included "A Plea to Users" in his book, telling his readers that mistakes, oversights, confusions, spelling errors were bound to occur and giving an address where people could send "comments, emendations, criticisms and suggestions."

Clark was glad he did.

Since this is truly his book — he composed it on his computer and it was converted to camera-ready copy via a Macintosh LaserWriter Plus — he was responsible for the typing error just above his Plea to Users.

"I'll be damned if just one paragraph above it," Clark said, "— I misspelled library."