

Can't spot it



Dan Coyro/Sentinel file

The Mystery Spot sign on Soquel Avenue advertises mystical powers in 1994.

Ordinary laws of billboards are no longer suspended

By KATHY KREIGER
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — The city's last billboard is gone.

Sometime this summer, the ancient yellow and white ad for the Mystery Spot slipped almost unnoticed and apparently unmourned into the mists of history.

Somehow, the 8-foot-tall by 16-foot-wide sign had survived past decades, which cleared away acres of smiles and white teeth from the urban landscape. No one could explain why.

Perhaps the sign had absorbed some of the strange powers of the Mystery Spot, a place where balls roll uphill and where, goes the pitch, the ordinary laws of the universe are suspended.

It survived a brief attempt by car dealers to develop the Eastside Arana Gulch property where it stood near Capitola Road. It survived the cows that grazed at its feet during the years the city and the property owners wrangled over the land.

And even after the city bought the 55-acre site a year ago, the sign's luck held.

A mystery alert

Graphically simple — you could say primitive — it alerted cars westbound on Soquel Avenue to the wondrous mysteries on display. "Visit the Mystery Spot," it said. "Open daily. Guided tours."

Sometime this summer, its luck ran out. Its mysterious powers proved no match for the city's sign laws.

"We took it apart piece by

'... What was amazing was how many people didn't know it was there.'

— Ray Sherrod,
city parks

piece, like the London Bridge," said Ray Sherrod of the city parks department. "... What was amazing was how many people didn't know it was there."

Apparently, that included city officials, who learned of its existence this spring when former property owner Charles Canfield forwarded to the city the check he'd received for a year's rental of the space.

'It's so pretty'

That sealed its fate, even though the city's vice mayor took a personal interest in the sign a year ago.

A self-confessed billboard hater, Mike Rotkin seemed a mysterious and unlikely champion for the sign. But he said then he really didn't think of it as a billboard: "It's so pretty."

And perhaps the sign's historic value might earn it the right to stay, he suggested.

But as luck would have it, Rotkin was out of the loop of those who decided the sign had to go.

The ones who had a hand in it

said the sign not only violated the billboard ban but also clashed with the city's laws against commercial advertising on public property.

"It was not a sign that conforms with city ordinances," said environmental attorney Celia Scott, one of three City Council members who sit on the council's Greenbelt Subcommittee. "It wasn't like it was a big issue. I don't see it as a major issue. It was just a matter of bringing the property into compliance."

Its powers return

City planners said there was no need to apply for a demolition permit. There was some discussion of the sign's possible historic value by the Greenbelt committee, but no one asked the opinion of the city's Historic Preservation Committee.

Rotkin, a Westside resident, didn't learn of the sign's disappearance until weeks later. He decided to find out more, but was pragmatic about the outcome.

"I'm probably not going to make a big deal of it now that it's already chopped down," he said this week. "I probably would have made a bigger deal if it was still standing. I don't like fighting battles where even if I win I've just made a point and haven't changed anything."

In defeat, the sign's powers returned.

Someone spoke up for the dismembered billboard and saved it from an unmarked grave at the

Pl SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL
September 29, 1995

REFERENCE 4066

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dump.

Instead, it was carted off in boxes to the basement of the McPherson Center for Art and History.

There, it joins a motley collection of other time-worn Santa Cruz memorabilia pushed aside in the name of progress: the old Teacup restaurant sign from the Pacific Avenue establishment ruined by the 1989 earthquake; a photograph of Santa's Village on

Highway 17 that is now the site of a computer software company; and a contorted but dead tree trunk from the defunct Tree Circus in Scotts Valley.

To 'weirdness section'

Museum curator Nikki Silva is happy to have the sign join "our little weirdness section," despite its size.

"I didn't know where we'd keep it, but I couldn't turn it down," Silva said. "... It's pretty

unique. It had a catchy little logo with that spot there. And it kind of matched their bumper stickers. You knew exactly where it came from."

Someday, she'll put it on display, she said, and then the Mystery Spot sign will live again.

In the meantime, all those uncounted hordes of Mystery Spot bumper stickers — still roaming the streets of Santa Cruz, still eluding its sign laws — will have to suffice.