

The Deer Park Tavern

A Mid-County Landmark and Its Many Incarnations

by Sarah Weston

What became one of the Mid-County's most famous and enduring restaurants had its origins as a ranch house. In 1872 "Sugar King" Claus Spreckels bought the 2,390-acre Rancho Aptos from Don Rafael Castro, and needed to provide a home to his newly hired ranch manager. The resulting two-story wood frame building, built facing what is now Soquel Drive, became known as the "Company House." Hans Larsen, a Danish immigrant who was hired to the position at age 21, lived in the Company House for the next 37 years, until after the death of Spreckels.

Another employee, a Welshman who trained horses for Spreckels, took over the position under the ranch's heirs until 1924, living as Larsen had in the Company House. By then the ranch had been sold to developer Fred Somers.

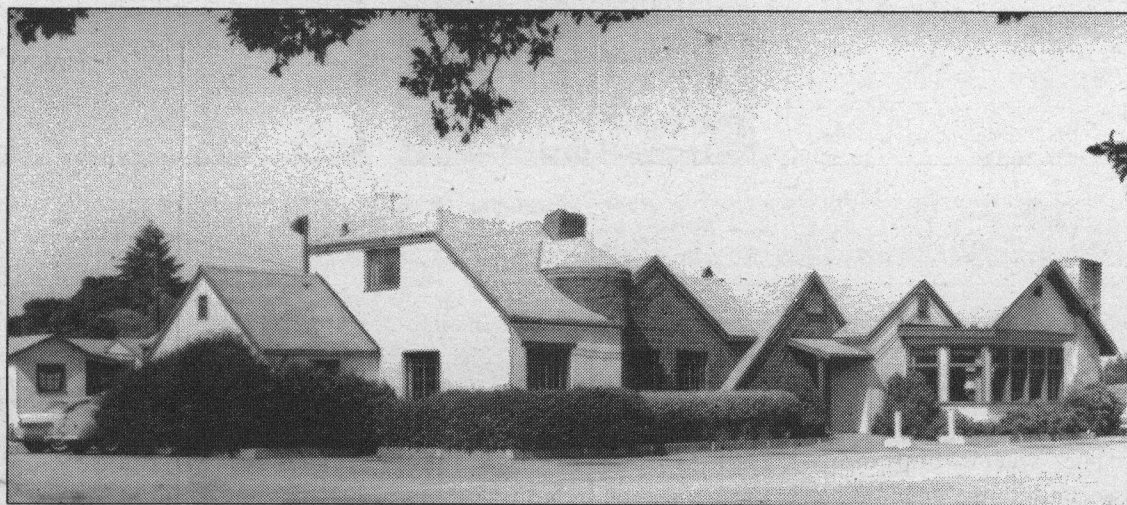
One of the first investors in the new venture was George Humes, Somers' real estate manager. Humes bought the Company House property from Somers, but not with the intention of living in it. Humes had a sister who lived in Aptos, 36-year-old Harriet Sweet. Harriet was recently separated from her husband and needed employment. She tore out many of the inner walls and opened what became known as the Deer Park Tea House.

The Deer Park Tea House

The Tea House was a typical road house of the era, with food, slot machines and poker tables. The place remained popular with locals as well as vacationers. Part of the attrac-

tion was that while Prohibition was in effect, enforcement was spotty, and the Tea House had a bar.

However, one of the peculiarities of the legislation was that names such as "Tavern," "Bar," and "Saloon" could not be used. With that in mind, in 1930 the Tea House, which was long past serving tea, changed its name to



Sometime in the 1930s, the Tavern's former home originally built in the 1800s by Claus Spreckels was demolished. In its place, a new concrete and brick restaurant was constructed.

the "Deer Park Cavern."

Harriet, however, had gone on to new ventures, including a stint as fire tower lookout. The Cavern was sold to a group of Watsonville businessmen, one of whom was named "Shorty" Butriza. By now, in 1933, Prohibition has been repealed and the Cavern, renamed "Tavern," was facing widespread competition. Not for the last time, it underwent a major makeover.

Shorty Gets Tavern

Shorty would end up running the Tavern for the next 42 years. He bought out the original partners, installed white tablecloths and crystal glasses, added a gourmet menu and offered dinner music. The revamped establishment became one of the most fashionable lounges and dining spots around.

One of the Tavern's most distinctive features was its decorations. Along with a friend and partner, Shorty was an avid hunter, and the walls soon filled with their trophies. The hobby also led to an annual invitational venison barbeque which grew in scope year by year, finally pulling in 2,000 people who consumed up to

10 deer.

At some point the booming business outgrew the old Company House and that building was torn down, to be replaced by a larger, single story concrete brick facility. Many other structures on the site of the old Rancho Aptos suffered and closed during the Depression and war years, including the Rio Del Mar Country Club Inn, the golf lodge and the beach club.

But with so many servicemen and construction workers in the area and nowhere else to go, the Deer Park Tavern became the top social gathering spot for miles around.

The Freeway That Divided It

That very prosperity was to deal a severe blow to the Tavern. In 1947, plans for the new Highway 1 freeway went straight through it. Rather than close, Shorty undertook

the difficult task of moving the brittle concrete structure to the top of a nearby ridge.

The relocated Tavern continued to do steady business for the next two decades. Then on New Years Day of 1968, retiring after a long night's celebration, Shorty was attacked in his bed by armed gunmen. They bound him tightly and

taped his mouth, ransacking the business. Shorty suffered both circulatory and emotional problems after that, dying a few years later.

As Shorty's health failed, his friend and hunting companion Peter Copriviza took over the running of the Tavern. Shortly before Shorty died, plans for the Deer Park Shopping Center received their final go-ahead. Rather than try to weather years of heavy construction, Copriviza held one last memorable New Years Eve party, then closed the Tavern's doors.

Another Life Yet to Live

The venerable old establishment had not breathed its last. Four years later the Tavern was extensively refurbished once again by new owners, and an invitational re-opening cocktail bash was held for a thou-

sand of its old customers. Unchanged were the Tavern's trademark standards of good manners, fine food and exceptional service.

Remaining also were Shorty's many hunting trophies, at least until 1987. At that point the Tavern was leased to new management, Richard and Joann Blake, who operated the Edgewater Club on the Capitola Esplanade. The Blakes committed the arguable sacrilege of sweeping out all the moldy old ducks, elk and moose.

"We have too many complaints from people who don't like to eat with a goose's butt or buffalo head staring at them," said Richard in an interview with a reporter at the time.

That change was well accepted, but at last another change of management pushed the fates too far. In 1994 the Tavern was closed yet again for modernization, re-opening as the "Palm Bar and Grill." This was just too much; the old Tavern's historic flavor had been lost. The Palm Grill defaulted, more than \$1 million in debt.

However, the story was to have a happy ending. One year later, the Company House/Tea House/Cavern/Tavern/Palm House sprang up phoenix-like yet again. In 1996 it opened as the Bittersweet Bistro, with an already well-established following. The Bistro now sports trendy pastel colors, but in side-by-side photographs from the heyday of Shorty Butriza it is still instantly recognizable as the Deer Park Tavern. ■

[This article was condensed from a "Dining For History" presentation by the Aptos History Museum. For more information on upcoming Dining events to benefit the Museum, call 831-688-1467.]