

The streetcars of old Santa Cruz

42-85

TEN YEARS AFTER the turn of the century, Santa Cruz was still a quiet place.

Well, there were sounds. An approaching trolley made a kind of mechanical music.

Sunday's column dealt with suggestions of bringing back the streetcars to cut down on the suffocating auto traffic that is plaguing the city and environs. Trollies were people movers before there were automobiles. At least they were rare.

Virgil and Violet Macy of 26th Avenue, both harking from life's class of '03, once told me about those days. Virgil died last year but Violet carries on. They had memories of yore as sharp as a slide show.

Violet would say, "Those trollies leaped along. They rocked and rolled and rattled."

She rode them daily to Santa Cruz high from the country side around 17th Avenue.

The kids loved to play tricks on those streetcars.

"They," said Virgil, trying to insinuate he was never involved, "used to rub paraffin wax on the tracks at the base of Water Street hill (going up to Branciforte), known then as Chalk Rock Hill."

Then they would hide and watch the trolley's wheels spin and the conductor sputter helplessly.

Another thrill was catching the run down the hill on a rainy day.

Virgil remembered with glee that the trolley had a large brake lever (like on the San Francisco cable car) which was pulled back causing the rope to tighten on a drum.

"But on rainy days," said Virgil, his eyes lighting, "when the drum became slick, that's when the fun began — flying down Water Street from North Branciforte with no brakes!"

Wally Trabing



There was a spur track that ran the length of Morrissey Boulevard. Along about 1912, calculated Macy, it was extended to Prospect Heights, which was little more than a number of lemon orchards, but the land beyond that was to become De Laveaga Park and people rode the trollies up there for recreation.

"There was a tall semaphore signal erected up there at the park. The trolley didn't regularly rumble up that far, but when people wanted to be picked up after their picnics, they would pull up the arm and the conductor would look for it at the end of his Morrissey run.

"Well, sir, do you know, kids used to pull that semaphore arm up and run to beat the band," said Virgil, again talkin' like it was OTHER kids that did it.

De Laveaga was once rolling, grassy hills. Then came a period when it was viddy viddy chic to plant a tree up there. Lodges, troops, ladies of the Saturday Afternoon Club, EVERYBODY planted trees, and look at it today — beautiful.

Trees make the neighborhood. Today, you can tell which are classy by the number of trees in it.

Anyway, it was a big thing in those days for kids to

build pine-needle slides. Kids came from all over to said Violet, with their barrel staves and cloth car. The run snaked down along the present road leading to golf course.

"I'll bet you'd still find staves and car-tops down those gulches," she said. "Probably covered by br now."

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In that open space where De Laveaga Park Road a Pacific Heights join there once was a bandstand where stirring strains of Strauss, sea songs, and sensation sousaphone solos sent shivers up the spine. Probab down, too.

And two elks lived in the park zoo nearby. The male bugle calls sent tingles down Violet's back. She said the could be heard clean to Soquel Avenue. Probably how E Street got its name. It's up there below the park.

I was surprised to hear that most townspeople walked to their destinations.

"It was expensive to own a horse and buggy," Virgil said. "A rig cost around \$500 when your whole house would sell for only \$1,000. There weren't many horses around then.

"I lived out by the present Dominican Hospital and would run or trot to Santa Cruz High School in about 4 minutes. No problem at all.

"The school then gave county students \$6 a month for transportation (for trolley rides or for horse feed) but I saved mine for a future car."

Virgil eventually bought a chain-driven Metz, and boy was he popular with the high school girls.

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Santa Cruz was a tight little community then. But there were hints of growth.

"When Eberts announced construction of a department store and grocery store, waaay out of town — heads wagged.

Macy recalled that people thought it was absolutely crazy to invest money way out there.

"Way out there," was at Soquel Avenue and Seabright.