

R.E. GIBSON COLLECTION

The night lighting of the "Great White Fleet" was enjoyed from the Beach Hill Gardens of the Sea-

Beach hotel in 1908. The lights were visible from Pleasure Point to Lighthouse Point.

Gibson, Ross

Santa Cruz battled Monterey for 'Great White Fleet' visit

BY ROSS ERIC GIBSON

Special to the Mercury News

In 1908, Teddy Roosevelt's "Great White Fleet" became history's first armada to circle the globe, visiting California ports on its way. But it nearly went down in local history as the great visit Monterey stole from Santa Cruz.

As masted wooden warships were replaced with iron battle-

ships, President Teddy Roosevelt had to expand his 7,000-sailor Navy to 33,000 sailors, nearly four-fifths inexperienced. A 16-ship armada was painted white with gold trim and sent on a world Peace Tour, doubling as a training experience in all climates and seas.

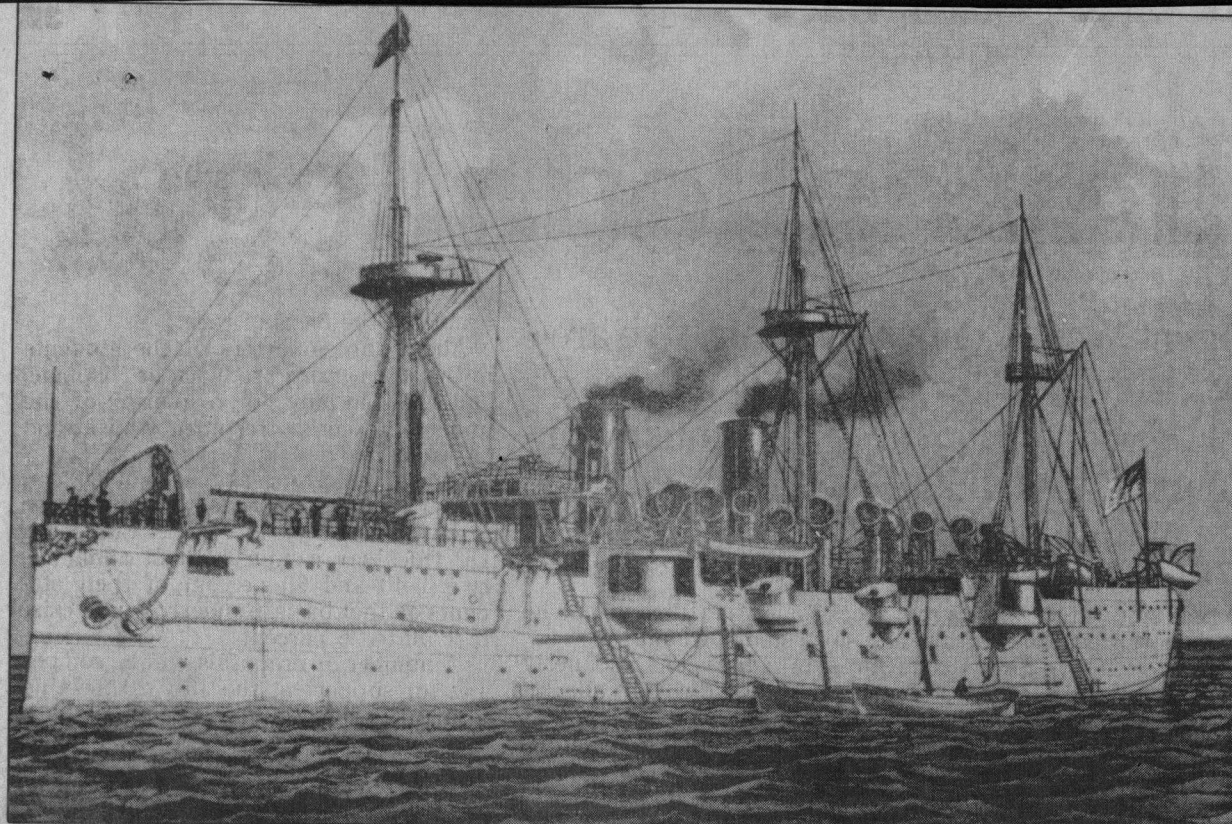
Santa Cruz was one of the first three California port visits sched-



SANTA CRUZ

Historic Perspective

uled. Boardwalk founder Fred Swanton solicited reservations
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Teddy Roosevelt's "Great White Fleet" was painted white with gold trim for a goodwill/training world tour.

'Great White Fleet' spawned California political port battles

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from inland towns and Midwest communities whose sailors and state names were on the cruisers.

Mayor Palmer also invited Monterey's town fathers as honored guests. Mayor Will Jacks said Santa Cruzans should instead be Monterey's guests, though no Monterey visit was scheduled.

War hero "Fighting Bob" Evens was a main attraction as head of the fleet. But when the fleet reached San Diego, the admiral was so crippled with rheumatism, he was sent to a Paso Robles hot springs to recoup, thence to join the fleet in Santa Cruz. But Jacks enticed the secretary of the Navy for a fleet visit to Monterey instead of Santa Cruz, offering an entire floor of the magnificent Del Monte Hotel for Naval use. The secretary accepted the offer but would send the fleet's lesser ships to Santa Cruz to satisfy their prior arrangement.

Santa Cruz vigorously lobbied the Navy not to divide the fleet, having done extensive promotions and preparations. Monterey argued that Santa Cruz made promises it couldn't keep in collecting \$7,500 in fleet-hosting funds. These should be turned over to Monterey for this purpose, which had less than \$1,000 budgeted.

What Monterey didn't realize

was that Admiral Evans' brother-in-law, Fred Swanton, was lobbying for Santa Cruz. The Navy chose to send the entire fleet to Monterey first, then half the fleet to Santa Cruz one day, joined by the whole fleet later.

After San Diego, the fleet visited Los Angeles, whose reception sailors rated tops. This contrasted with their visit to effete Santa Barbara, where officers were treated royally and sailors ignored, left to shift for themselves in town. Even worse, merchants overcharged sailors, selling nickel beer for a quarter and 50-cent dinners for \$6. A mob of sailors stoned the restaurant of the worst offender, though removing the patriotic bunting first.

Proceeding up the coast, the fleet passed "greeting bonfires" before anchoring at dawn to awaken Monterey with air horns. The trans-bay rivalry was forgotten, as Santa Cruz boats arrived for Monterey's celebration.

In Santa Cruz, a balloon trailing an American flag was released from Pacific Avenue to signal the fleets' approach May 2. The county reception committee included San Jose dignitaries. Sailors paraded down Pacific adorned with evergreen, flowers, bunting and shields depicting Roosevelt and Evans. Three arches along the avenue were by famous local painter William Lemos.

While the public toured the fleet, the soldiers enjoyed base-

ball games and events, then took the train to a Big Trees barbecue. Evening Navy balls at the Casino, roller rink and elegant Sea-Beach hotel, looked out on the ships illuminated with strings of lights, giving searchlight displays amid fireworks. A lecture by Capt. R. Hobson proposed establishing an international court at the Hague and a United Nations to pursue world peace.

On May 4, Santa Cruz became the first port in the tour where all 24 fleet and support vessels were gathered. It was also where their ship-to-shore telephone finally worked. The sailors said that nowhere since Los Angeles had they been so thoroughly entertained, and the supply ships' crews were included in the festivities for the first time. The fleet continued to San Francisco on May 5 for a spectacular reception hosted by Santa Cruzan James D. Phelan.

The monument of the Santa Cruz visit was Fleet Park, a chamber of commerce attempt to beautify a Washington Street lot near West Cliff bridge (now a parking lot). Landscaping included a covered picnic area and Greek lamp posts. The highlight was a number of gold-trimmed white rowboats planted with flowers, laid out like the fleet.

Local historian, architectural consultant and author Ross Eric Gibson writes a weekly history column for the Santa Cruz/Monterey edition.