



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

'Skip' Littlefield strikes a characteristic pose in a photo taken in January of this year.

Waterfront legend

'Skip' Littlefield dies

"I've outlived five presidents of the Seaside Co. and I'm working on the present one, Charles Canfield."
 — Skip Littlefield

By LAURIE SLOTHOWER
 Sentinel Staff Writer

SANTA CRUZ — Warren Wendell "Skip" Littlefield did not outlive the sixth president of the Seaside Co. It was one of the few things he set out to do that he did not accomplish.

Littlefield, the promoter whose name was synonymous with the Boardwalk, died this morning at his Santa Cruz home. He was 79.

An employee of the Seaside Co. for most of his life, first as a pinboy for a pitch game, later as lifeguard,

publicity director, and secretary-treasury, Littlefield was renown for his florid prose and razzmatazz promotions of Santa Cruz's number-one tourist attraction.

His later years revolved around chronicling the past and maintaining his archives of photographs from early to present day Santa Cruz.

He had nearly completed a book on Fred Swanton and the waterfront, said his daughter, Robin Littlefield of Capitola. The book probably will be published posthumously, perhaps by the Seaside Co., she said.

Littlefield, with his trademark slouch hat and Camel cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth, loved to talk about Santa

Cruz history, a history he knew because he had lived it.

"He was most colorful — he had a lot of stories to tell and we'll all miss him," said Ed Hutton, general manager of The Seaside Co.

"The Skip Littlefield era in Santa Cruz is over, and there'll never be another 50-year period like it," commented Fred McPherson Jr., chairman of the board of The Sentinel, and one of Littlefield's lifelong friends.

"Everything he did, he did in a big way."

"He was the most colorful person I've ever known on the waterfront," offered Robert Stagnaro, whose

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'Skip' Littlefield

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uncle, Malio, and Littlefield were friends for more than half a century. "He was well-loved by the Italian colony on the waterfront. He was one of us."

Littlefield was born in Santa Cruz in 1906 and took his first job at the Boardwalk at age 11, when he worked as a pin boy at a pitch game on the Boardwalk.

At 12, he was a ticket taker and deck hand at Faraola's launch at the Pleasure Pier.

He acquired his nickname, "Skip," as a high school student after his family moved to Stockton because of his habit of missing gym classes. "They made us run the track in sub-zero winter mornings and I rebelled. The coach leveled that name on me in front of the whole class," Littlefield remembered in a Sentinel profile last January.

Littlefield far preferred the rolling swells of the ocean to the circular confines of the track. He was a Pacific Coast swimming champion when he was 18, and at one time held the world's record for the breaststroke.

He studied history, English and newswriting at the College of the Pacific in Stockton and, later, Stanford.

At age 20 he left Stanford barely a semester's worth of work away from graduating. He went to work for the Boardwalk, and put his brother through college. He earned 37½ cents an hour. By day, he was a lifeguard, and worked in the laundry; by night, he was in charge of Boardwalk publicity, arranging hundreds of dances at the Coconut Grove.

In the winter, when the Boardwalk was closed, he laid linoleum and carpet.

He was married in 1948 to the former Shirley Wightman, another Santa Cruz native and an aerialist in a water carnival at the Boardwalk. They were divorced in 1971, according to his daughter, but they remained close friends. Shirley Littlefield died last year.

Littlefield retired in 1981 after 53 years as Boardwalk publicist. "I retired because I was worried the job might become permanent," he told a

Sentinel columnist.

He still went into his office above the arcade at the Boardwalk nearly every day, said publicity director Glenn LaFrank.

Littlefield was renown for his flamboyant language. The Boardwalk did not just have an indoor swimming pool; it had a Cold Water Plunge. Underwater swimmers were Human Submarines. A bodysurfer known as The Mighty Bosco was The Song of the Surf.

He was skeptical of newcomers and contemporary promoters.

"Sales today — it's always 20 percent off — off of what? You don't get through to the public with that kind of advertising."

His philosophy was to "hit upon an idea that is popular with the public, then tell them why they'll like it."

A list of Littlefield's other accomplishments go on and on: he was chairman of the Santa Cruz Advertising Committee, the Santa Cruz Centennial Committee, the Dedication of Henry Cowell Redwoods State Park and a director of the Santa Cruz Chamber of Commerce.

He wrote for the Sentinel from 1926 on, including 130 obituaries of prominent people. He regularly wrote articles about Santa Cruz history. His last story for The Sentinel was an April 7 article on "Breaststroke" Dailey, a late-1800s lifeguard.

Littlefield had been ill from cancer for a number of months. He talked about it with characteristic candor.

"Since I had this chemotherapy, all my hair fell out," he told a Sentinel reporter in January. "Not that I had much to start with!"

At other times, he would wax poetic.

"Most of my tomorrows are yesterdays," he said recently.

Besides his daughter, Littlefield is survived by a son, Warren McArthur Littlefield of South Fallsburgh, N.Y.; a brother, Mervin Littlefield of Santa Cruz; a sister, Marion Fuller of Menlo Park and a cousin, Robert Littlefield of Monterey.

Funeral services are pending at Norman's Family Chapel in Soquel.