

Elegant decadence at the Boardwalk

By CAROLYN SWIFT

For decades, the Santa Cruz Boardwalk has been one of the most popular and unpopular spots in the county — well-liked by children and tourists but a nuisance to the general population.

Yet, because of its prominent location and contribution to the Santa Cruz economy, it seems that all roads in the city lead to the beach and its carnival amusements.

There is a touch of elegant decadence to parts of the Boardwalk — the casino, plunge and merry-go-round — that are reminiscent of an era of spectacular dreams and imagination. And if it could be said these beachside attractions are haunted, the ghost is surely the entrepreneur who had such dreams — a man named Fred Swanton.

It was Swanton who created the character and shape of the Boardwalk as we know it today, who wanted to make it a tourist spot for the wealthy but who settled in the end for middle-income, ordinary folk.

He was a champion of promotion who loved to speculate in schemes of the lavish and high-priced variety. Swanton was known to back anything with glitter and flash, from inventions such as electric lights and telephones to entertainments like Venetian water carnivals and beauty pageants. His financial ventures ranged from movie stars and streetcars to oil wells.

Beachland development at the turn-of-the-century was natural raw material from which Swanton would create his own work of art in the decade between 1903 and 1913.

The Santa Cruz resort amenities and climate had been popular once the railroad linked the county to the state's hot, stuffy valley towns and communities of the San Francisco Bay. Its reputation was further boosted a few years later when the Douglas House was transformed into the "Sea Beach Hotel," the county's one truly luxury accommodation.

It was the hotel's bid for affluent tourists that led to Swanton's vision of Santa Cruz as a high-class, but affordable, resort town. In cooperation with Southern Pacific in 1903-1904, Swanton traveled by rail to interior valleys, where he stumped for the "New Santa Cruz." Aided by entertainers and a 21-member band, the propaganda pitch offered samplings of parades and concerts to be featured at a tourist spot, "to rival Newport."

At home, Swanton organized the attempt to run an electric railway line from Santa Cruz to Watsonville, a service completed as far as Capitola in 1904, but no further.

Santa Cruz Beach Cottage and Tent City Corporation acquired beach rights and tore out the old bathing houses to make way for the Neptune Casino which boasted, among other things, some 500 dressing rooms, a cafe, grill, ballroom and two roof gardens of "Oriental or Moorish design." There was a bath house, plunge, electric pier and a "tent city," for those with pocketbooks too meager for the Sea Beach.

In 1905, the Ocean Shore Railway Company was organized to construct a railroad line along the coast from San Francisco to Santa Cruz. The project ran into trouble from the beginning, and a direct link was never made, but the attempt illustrates the confidence of Swanton and his promotional colleagues in that year.

The season of 1906 was to be the most elaborate, the most successful. It was, instead, the most disastrous. On the first official day of summer, June 22, the casino, plunge, and most of tent city was consumed by fire. It began in the kitchen, but the cause remained unexplained.

Swanton was far from discouraged. He promised the buildings would be replaced before the start of the next season — and the framework for the second casino was already up by New Year's Day. The structure was near ready to open by spring, and has since become a familiar landmark to Santa Cruz.

The years of 1907-08 mark the years of development and expansion for the Boardwalk. It was an accomplishment noted with pride in the circulars given to tourists that season:

"Nature could not do more for the 'City of the Holy Cross,' but where nature left off, western brains and human skill have added to the picture. On the beach, that wide and perfect strip of land, are located amusement features mammoth on such a magnificent scale that the total investment of the Santa Cruz Beach Company is over \$1,000,000."

A panoramic view of the bay was achieved from the circular garden on the casino roof. Attached to the building were some 22,000 incandescent lights. On the bay, Swanton's ship, "The Balboa," was similarly lighted, as was the "electric pleasure pier," that extended 700-feet into the bay.

The Balboa was a 225-foot "floating palace of pleasure," with a grill cafe and room for dancing. The casino's grill had a seating capacity of 500, and prospective customers were told, "The pocketbook of the average visitor will be considered, it being the purpose of the management to please and satisfy all."

The plunge was finished by 1908, and sported not only a men's and women's saltwater pool, but swings, springboards, a trapeze, nightly exhibitions of water sports, decorative electric lighting and 150 dressing rooms.

Amusements included a skating rink with a maple floor, a "miniature railway," shooting gallery, Japanese bowling and nightly fireworks displays during the summer. Band concerts were presented morning and evening at the outdoor bandstand of oriental design. Inside, there were evening ballroom dances to a full orchestra.

During the season of 1908, the Boardwalk attractions reached the full length of the beach with completion of "Thompson's Scenic Railway," the forerunner of the roller coaster, built with a price-tag of some \$35,000.

Across the street, 300 small cabins were constructed in "cottage city," an area now largely converted to blacktop for public parking. These cottages ranged in size from one-to-four rooms, and were built to accommodate from one to eight people. They were furnished with comforts of home that included sidewalks and tiny grass lawns.

Three-years later, the space once devoted to tent city became the breaking ground for the Casa del Rey. Designed to accommodate the tourist of moderate means, a chief feature of the hotel was its bridge directly into the casino.

Just as Swanton's dream was set in motion, the Sea Beach Hotel began to fade in popularity. When it mysteriously caught fire and burned one night in 1911 — Santa Cruz bid farewell to the luxury tourist market.

Within a year, the boardwalk was nearly bankrupt. Although it was revived through development of the automobile and birth of the "weekend tourist," the amusement park would never again be as elaborate, as costly, or as exciting.

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