

Photo: Courtesy Geoffrey Dunn Collection.

Cowabunga!

“Surf City” Moniker Dates Back to 19th Century

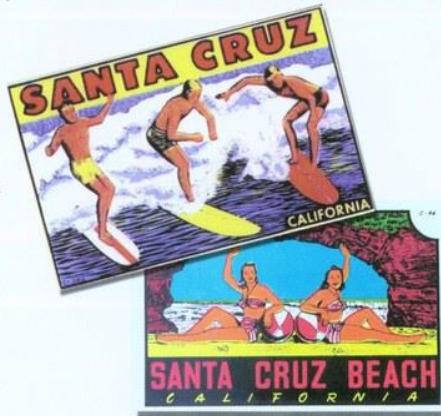
By Geoffrey Dunn

When the controversy over Huntington Beach claiming the “Surf City USA” trademark made headlines a half-decade ago, I couldn’t help but shake my head. It seemed not only petty and specious, but absolutely absurd. I had grown up in Santa Cruz during the 1960s and ‘70s when a half-dozen or so businesses — including Surf City Breakfast Club, Surf City Produce, Surf City Motors, and Surf City Realty — claimed the moniker.

Moreover, a quick look through some early phone books and business directories revealed that as early as January of 1906, a collections company located on Pacific Avenue, owned by E.A. Dille and C.J. Trull operated under the name Surf City Collection Agency.

Since Huntington Beach hadn’t even incorporated until three years later, in 1909, it was going to be difficult to top that.

In 2007, a reporter for the Santa Cruz Sen-



These vintage auto decals were proudly displayed by autoists or visitors after their visit to the Santa Cruz Beach.

tinel claimed that a November 13, 1927, article from the San Jose Mercury Herald, located in the archives of the Santa Cruz Beach Board-

Surf City circa 1889. Rare, hand-colored lithograph rendered by noted graphic artist Arthur Ignatius Keller for Picturesque California (1894). Note the swim-line extending from the beach out into the surf.

walk, provided a “smoking gun” to the controversy. A photo caption for the story, covering the arrival of vacuum cleaner salesmen to Santa Cruz, proclaimed: “Managers of Pacific Coast Hoover Company adjourned yesterday after a five-day convention at Surf City...”

Those of us in the local history game all knew that we had encountered references earlier than that in our research. Soon, local historical sleuths, most notably Steve Williams, dug up dozens of previous references, the earliest dating back to the Oakland Tribune, on July 4, 1904, when a Santa Cruz cricket team was dubbed “the Surf City players.”

Up until a few months ago, that was the earliest documented reference to Santa Cruz as “Surf City.”

Vintage auto decals: Courtesy Bob Barbour and John Lindsay Collections.



Photo: Courtesy Geoffrey Dunn Collection.

I have an obsession for anything related to 19th century Santa Cruz baseball and am a huge fan of a colorful ballplayer named William “Red Brick” Devereaux, who played in Santa Cruz in the early 1890s. Indeed, he played on baseball teams throughout the Pacific states, including the then-territory of Hawaii, and was part of an early tour of Americans playing baseball in Japan.

While looking at the San Francisco Call’s account of a game, played on July 10, 1898, in which Devereaux played first base and collected two hits for the Santa Cruz “Sand-crabs,” I couldn’t help but notice its colorful opening line: “Santa Cruz, reinforced by a throng of Surf City adherents...narrowly escaped being shut out.”

There was a solid reference to Surf City in the 1890s. Take that Huntington Beach!

Could there be any prior to that? Indeed I found several others throughout the decade, the earliest coming on October 17, 1895, again in the San Francisco Call, in which a series of sub-headlines about a statewide Odd-Fellows convention announced: “Honors to Santa Cruz...The Surf City Won on the Third

Ballot — The Great Parade To-day.”

Roughly a month later, November 22, 1895, again in The Call, another headline announced: “Swiss Minister at Santa Cruz: He Is Visiting Relatives in the Surf City.”

Talk about ironies — on the very same page, one column away — was a short article noting that Collis P. Huntington, one of the so-called “Big Four” who financed the Central Pacific Railroad and the uncle of Henry E. Huntington (the founder of, you guessed it, Huntington Beach), was taking a private train from San Francisco on his way to Los Angeles, more than a decade before his nephew ever had the gleam of developing Orange County beaches in his eyes.

Even local celebrities got into the act. On September 12, 1897, the Call made reference to the illustrious Frederick A. Hihn, noting that “the millionaire lumber merchant of Santa Cruz will make a personal canvass of the Surf City.”

Two of my favorite references to Surf City were contained in stories involving illicit love affairs. In July of 1902, a young couple jumped a train out of “the surf city” to elope

in San Jose, where they were avoiding an irate father of the bride, while the groom was facing burglary charges.

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In another, in June of 1899, a widow, Bertha Leibbrandt, matriarch of the local family that operated a famous bath house on the waterfront, sued a wealthy Arizona miner for “breach of promise.” She claimed to have engaged in “improper relations,” in the manner of “husband and wife,” based on the miner’s promise of marriage. A jury awarded her \$4,500. According to the San Francisco Call, “the little bathhouse proprietress of the Surf City evinced considerable pleasure when the verdict was read.”

It should be noted that virtually all California cities had appellations bestowed upon them by regional newspapers. The nicknames stuck well into my childhood. Watsonville was known as “Apple City,” Salinas as “Lettuce



City," San Francisco as "Fog City," Fresno as "Raisin City," Gilroy as "Garlic City," and, yes, Huntington Beach was known as "Oil City." Ad infinitum.

How did Santa Cruz get its 19th century moniker? The obvious letter correlation — S.C. — provides an apparent link. But an even earlier reference I discovered with a slight variant on the theme appeared in the Mohave County (AZ) Miner of April 21, 1894. "Santa Cruz, the City of the Surf," the newspaper noted, "was almost totally destroyed by fire the first of this week." By using a capital "S," it suggests that the name was derived from the popular 19th century newspaper here, the Santa Cruz Daily Surf, published by the acerbic A.A. Taylor.

Little more than a year later, it had been condensed to "the Surf City" and, eventually, simply to "Surf City." It was a commonly used phrase that western journalists used frequently in the 1890s.

And the name stuck. For more than a century.

My friend Lee Quarmstrom, former columnist of the San Jose Mercury who now lives about 20 miles north of Huntington Beach in Orange County, was the chief journalistic invoker of the Surf City nickname during the 1980s and 1990s. "As a newspaper writer," he noted, "I frequently tried, as Chef Emeril might say, to kick up my writing by using snazzy words every now and then...I liked it, I used it and readers knew that Surf City was Santa Cruz — a breezy way of saying Santa Cruz."

Now we know that California journalists dating back to the 1890s felt precisely the same way. *

Geoffrey Dunn's next book, "Santa Cruz is in the Heart: Volume II," will be published in 2012 by the Capitola Book Company.

Santa Cruz was frequently referred to as Surf City in the media of the 1890s.

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