

Old Santa Cruz

• • • By Ernest Otto

There was a time when practically every Santa Cruz boy knew the location of Cowell's Cave and had roamed its underground areas. This was especially true when the writer was a lad.

Practically every Santa Cruz boy had walked up High street and on its extension and had descended the curved dusty road to the bottom of the first gulch after leaving town.

At the bottom of the gulch was a path leading a short distance to the lime rock formation of the hillside. Close by ran a clear trickling stream of water.

Each visiting boy would carry a tallow candle brought from home. All of them had heard of the Mammoth Caves in Kentucky where the eyeless fish had been found and had read about those caves and others in their favorite magazines, the Youth's Companion, St. Nicholas, and Harper's Young People. Most of them also had read Mark Twain's famous "Tom Sawyer" and had thrilled at the description of Tom and Becky Thatcher in the cave in that story.

Visiting Cowell's Cave was a rather scary experience for the younger boys, at least on the first trip. They entered the cave and descended into the first chamber. The lighted candles gave an eerie elegance to the scene. Frankly, most boys were disappointed at the size of the first chamber, but all knew there were two chambers and crawled on their hands and knees into the entrance to the second, so narrow and sometimes rather damp.

The gulch itself was quite a rendezvous for picnics and often whole days would be spent among the redwoods and other trees, with a fire built at noon to heat the coffee. The picnic lunch would be eaten close to the bank of the stream. For many years, it was a favorite picnic site.

The last time this writer went to visit the cave, which by that time had been named Cave Gulch, the same name as given to the school district, his friend, George K. Bingham, the teacher at the school, accompanied him. The Cave Gulch school district since has lapsed and become a part of the Santa Cruz city school system.

The pair went equipped with flashlights, a vast improvement which had not even been dreamed

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of when the writer entered the interesting cave the first time. They went up the path to enter the cave which the teacher of the Cave Gulch school had not even heard of before. There in the entrance were three baby rattlesnakes. The intrepid explorers went no further. There was no cave worth seeing which was guarded by three even single button rattlesnakes enjoying the sun.

In addition to the school bearing the name of the gulch there was a settlement of farmers by the same name. These farmers, all orchardists, were noted for the good fruit they produced.

Here also was gold mining, the oldest mine worked in the county. It was operated for many years by the Stribblings. It was a quartz mine but it never paid commercially for its operation.

The Cave Gulch settlement was practically surrounded by the Henry Cowell Lime and Cement company property. The cave is on the Cowell property and for years was known as Cowell's Cave after the property owner. More than a mile below the cave were the upper kilns operated by Cowell. The others were off High and Bay street. Both of these were closed finally and the kilning operations were transferred to Rincon along the Southern Pacific tracks.

Below the kilns was a beautiful waterfall which still is in existence. On one side of the falls was the Moore ranch and on the other, the Wilder ranch.

In this gulch, a short distance below the cave, were patches of wild holly, the same species as the Oregon water holly. At Christmas time, the people who knew the location of these patches were considered especially fortunate because they were able to gather great quantities of the water holly for decorating their homes.

Probably the greatest event in the history of Cave Gulch was when the area was taken over by Hollywood actors and actresses for the filming of "Maid of Salem." The movie portrayed a great deal of the proceedings in the witch-hunting days in Salem, Mass., and many buildings, replicas of Massachusetts in the 1600s, were erected.

Many Santa Cruzans served as extras in the mob scenes, and when "Maid of Salem" was shown in the local theaters, all attended, attempting to find themselves on the screen. The picture played before crowded houses during local filmings, and some even went to other towns to see it again and again.