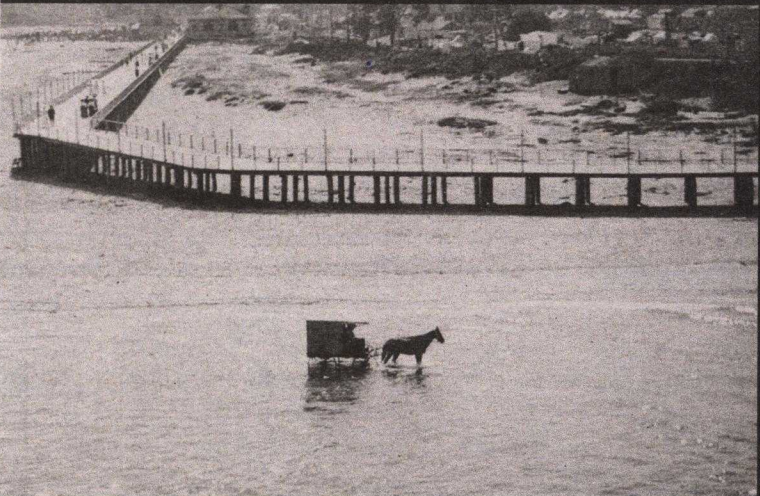




Swanton House, Circa 1885. GEOFFREY DUNN COLLECTION



Swanton House Burning, May 30, 1887. MUSEUM OF ART & HISTORY



Horse & Cart in San Lorenzo River with the newly built "Boardwalk," 1907. GEOFFREY DUNN COLLECTION



Neptune Casino Burning, June 22, 1906. SANTA CRUZ SEASIDE COMPANY ARCHIVES



Portrait of Fred Swanton, 1886, as he embarks on his career at the age of 24. CAROLYN SWIFT COLLECTION

THE BOARDWALK EMPIRE

Fred Swanton was a larger-than-life figure with larger-than-life ambitions on the Santa Cruz waterfront. Some of his dreams came to fruition. Others went up in flames.

✓ **D**uring May of 1906—only a month after the Great Earthquake and Fire destroyed much of San Francisco and severely devastated the economy of the entire West Coast—Santa Cruz impresario and civic booster extraordinaire Fred Swanton embarked on a whirlwind railroad tour of California and Nevada, championing Santa Cruz and its colorful Neptune Casino as a summer-time destination.

Swanton's "booster train," as it was known, was stocked with local dignitaries, theatrical performers and the United States Army's 20th brass band, not to mention thousands of brochures and booklets and colorful souvenirs promoting Santa Cruz. Swanton made stops from Sacramento to Bakersfield, from Reno to Tonopah—and all stops in between—in his annual sojourn heralding the many wonders of a Santa Cruz summer.

When he arrived in San Jose, the local newspaper carried front page headlines— "Santa Cruz Boosters Came With a Band—Annual Tour of the Party From Attractive Surf City." It described Swanton as "the noisiest man in Santa Cruz" and carried with it a lengthy speech by "Colonel Swanton," along with a general outline of activities promised for the upcoming summer season.

Swanton was a master at generating publicity and he garnered barrels of ink wherever he went. Like a carnival

barker, he championed the casino, the beaches, the surf bathing and the so-called "floating pleasure resorts" situated just off the coast, which would one day generate considerable controversy.

"Stay around where I am and you'll enjoy yourself," Swanton promised. "When you get there, look me up. I'm great company. There'll be something doing every minute of the day and evening." There was also just the vaguest hint of decadence in his proclamation. "Nothing is tied down in the city," he declared, "and visitors can help themselves." To what, precisely, he didn't say. It was going to be the biggest summer ever. That was his constant message, his meme, his mantra. It was always bigger and better with Fred Swanton. His optimism knew no bounds.

Little did Swanton realize, however, as his booster train pulled out of the San Jose station on a lovely spring evening, that tragedy lurked just around the corner. That was also a constant narrative in Swanton's life. He was always, both literally and figuratively, pulling himself and his dreams out of the ashes.

Fred Wilder Swanton (his middle name is often incorrectly identified as "Willer"), was a force of nature unto his own. No single figure in the arc of Santa Cruz history has ever had such a profound impact on this community. He was a man of grandiose dreams and monstrous failures.

His kinetic energy was absolutely indefatigable. One of his famous slogans that he bequeathed to his beloved Santa Cruz—"Never a Dull Moment!"—applied equally to him as well.

For well more than a half century—from the late 1870s nearly until his death in 1940—Santa Cruz County, if not all of California, served as his stage. In 1930, there was a movement to have him nominated for governor of California. People either loved or despised Swanton, but there was never any ignoring him. He was always ahead of the curve—sometimes too far ahead of it—and he seemingly never looked back.

Coming into manhood during what Mark Twain dubbed the Gilded Age in American history ("The golden gleam of the gilded surface hides the cheapness of the metal underneath," Twain observed), Swanton pursued both fame and fortune relentlessly, but I suspect that his eye was mostly on the former. Like the leading character of "Nucky" Thompson in HBO's award-winning period drama *Boardwalk Empire*, which superbly chronicles the rise of Atlantic City, Swanton had his fingers in virtually every aspect of Santa Cruz life. There was a time when newspapers around the state referred to the city as "Swanta Cruz."

While the likes of Frederick Augustus Hihn and Henry Cowell accumulated vast tracts of land and great wealth in the region, Swanton's greatest accomplishments were more often than not in the civic realm, though large sums of money often loomed in the background. Personal wealth eluded him, for the most part, though for a brief time he had amassed a small fortune and built a pair of lavish homes on Santa Cruz's east side. At one point it was estimated that he had secured nearly \$8 million worth of investment into Santa Cruz during his lifetime. Yet he died nearly destitute, still trying to pull off one last haul.

The man who would one day be known as "Mr. Santa Cruz" was actually born in Brooklyn, New York, during the Civil War, on April 11, 1862.

His father, Albion Paris Swanton, a native of Maine, was listed in the Brooklyn registry of 1864 as being a "stove merchant," but sometime that year he joined his elder brother, Charles William Swanton, running a highly successful hotel and livery stable in Pescadero.

In the aftermath of the Civil War,

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BY GEOFFREY DUNN

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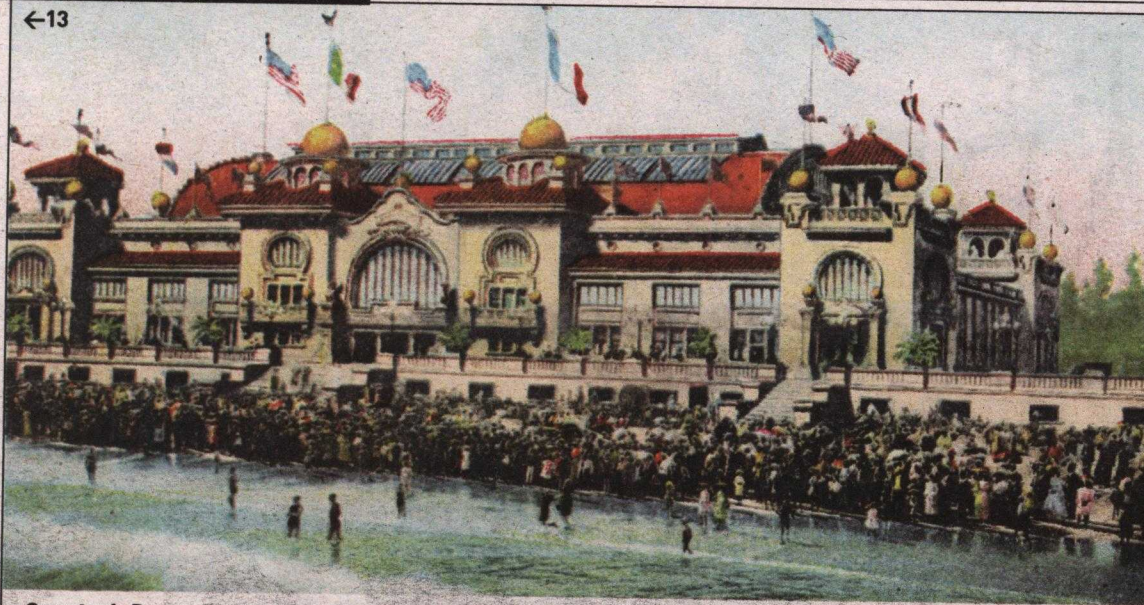
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BOARDWALK EMPIRE

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Swanton's Dream The Neptune Plunge, depicted in a 1906 post card. GEOFFRY DUNN COLLECTION

Albion sent for his wife and young children, first settling in Pescadero, but moving in 1866 to Santa Cruz, where the Swantons set up an operation similar to his brother's, focusing primarily on a livery stable and eventually expanding into a downtown boarding house.

The Swanton children (Fred had two sisters, one who died in childhood at the age of 3, and another who died in early adulthood) were thus raised in downtown Santa Cruz and attended local schools.

In May of 1879, according to the Leon Rowland archive at UC Santa Cruz, Swanton was playing right field on the local semi-professional baseball team, the Santa Cruz Olympics. Swanton's love affair with the burgeoning national pastime was to last his entire life. Although he lost the tip of his right little finger at some point in his youth, he was also an accomplished swimmer and completed long-distance ocean swims at record times well into his adulthood.

While various newspaper accounts duly noted the success of his father's livery business, Fred Swanton had ambitions of his own, many of which were chronicled in a finely researched, albeit unpublished, master's thesis on Swanton entitled "Never a Dull Moment: Fred Swanton and Santa Cruz, 1882-1940," written by Richard Hallett in the mid-1970s and available at the San Jose State University Library.

In November of 1880, the *Sentinel* noted that Swanton was off to San Francisco to attend Heald's Business College, from which he received a diploma the following year. He was soon employed by the Madera Flume and Trading Company—a lumber business located in Oakhurst, not far from Yosemite—where he worked as a bookkeeper. He took a similar position the following year, closer to home, at a lumber mill above Felton.

Following an extended visit with his mother to the East Coast in 1883, Fred Swanton worked with his father in the livery business and real estate enterprises, but he also pursued the first of many business ventures fueled by his passion for new technology and capital aggregation—the telephone—or more precisely, a telephone company.

He and a cousin developed a phone system that they first sold in Santa Cruz County and then throughout the state. In what would be a recurring pattern of Swanton's, he dumped his cousin for another partner, and then got caught up in yet another pattern of

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Swanton's: litigation. By Christmas of 1883, as Hallett noted, Swanton was employed in a local grocery, where he was described as a "whole-souled, good looking genial clerk."

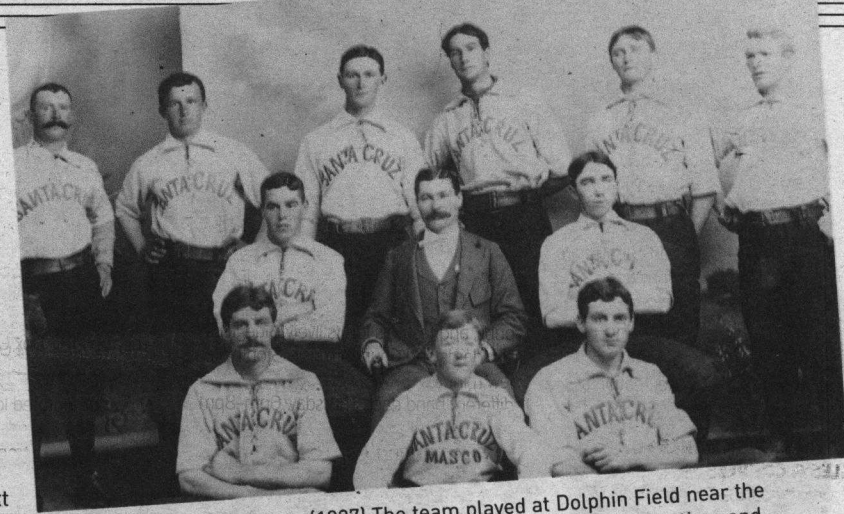
The following year, Swanton's energies became focused on a dream of his father's—the Swanton House—a handsome three-story hotel of Italianate design located at the corner of Front and Water streets (the present site of the downtown Post Office) built over his livery stable. The second and third floors were designated for sleeping rooms, with lovely views off the back (or eastern) side of the building of the San Lorenzo River. Fred Swanton devoted his attentions to his family business during the busy summer season, apparently delighting visitors with his pet mongoose and crowned toads, "Ferdinand" and "Isabella."

He also focused his attentions on the adopted daughter of a successful Santa Cruz dairyman, Emma Stanley Pope Hall, an accomplished musician and vocalist, and the two were married on Christmas Eve, 1884. They would eventually have one daughter, Pearl.

As a gift to the newlyweds—and perhaps in a subtle effort to anchor his itinerant son—Albion Swanton deeded half of the Swanton House and the livery stable to the young couple. Matrimony seems to have had a momentarily quieting effect on Fred Swanton. He focused his attentions on hiring musicians to entertain guests at the Swanton House for the remainder of the summer.

But Swanton soon had another new technology in his vision—gas—which was then used for lighting and heating purposes. Swanton installed a so-called Clingman Gas Machine, which both lit and heated his family's hotel at a fraction of the price they were currently paying the local gas company. It began a life-long cycle of Swanton attempting to control the city's utilities—gas, electricity, water, transportation—and for the next half century he actively pursued schemes and ventures for controlling these enterprises, most of them ending in economic or organizational failure.

Swanton would be called many things during his lifetime (some of which cannot be noted in a family newspaper), but mostly he would be known as a "booster" and "promoter." In fact, he was first and foremost a showman, always on the lookout for grand theater, both literally and figuratively. He loved the show and the drama of life—in politics and sport, in business and in entertainment—and he was always in constant pursuit of it, and the accompanying dollar it might bring.



Santa Cruz baseball team (1897) The team played at Dolphin Field near the Boardwalk. Swanton had a lifelong love affair with the national pastime and promoted several professional baseball teams in Santa Cruz for more than 40 years. GEOFFREY DUNN COLLECTION

Having booked summertime musical entertainment for his family's hotel, Swanton's next move was to assume the position as manager of the Opera House, a local theater, of sorts, located off Pacific Avenue (near what is now Center and Union streets). The first play that Swanton produced, "Widow O'Brien," met with a modicum of success, but his second play, the more salacious "Wages of Sin," had been less profitable, so he turned his attention back to his family business.

Not far from the Opera House, at Santa Cruz City Hall, a drama of a different sort was taking

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place. The city's Common Council, as it was then known, passed a license fee for livery stables, which had the impact of controlling entrance into the business, an ordinance that very much benefitted the Swantons. In 1886, Albion Swanton was elected to the council, and politics entered his son's bloodstream.

At the grand old age of 24, Fred Swanton was thus involved in a variety of enterprises—a stable and hotel, natural gas and theatre, telephones and real estate—and, in the spring of 1887, he turned his attention to one of his childhood loves, baseball. He organized a local professional team—the Santa Cruz Dolphins, which held their games on a field near Main Beach—and negotiated a spot for them in the burgeoning Central California Baseball League. He quickly set about raising money for his project.

On May 30, 1887, however, while Swanton was at a baseball game, the first of several public tragedies befell the young entrepreneur and his family. At three in the afternoon, a fire started at a laundry located in the Front Street Chinatown, and quickly spread north, igniting some hay in the Swantons' stable and soon consuming the hotel. According to the *Sentinel*, only a few pieces of the hotel's furniture were salvaged.

Damage was estimated to be \$10,000, while insurance covered only \$4,000 in losses. The one saving grace amidst the tragedy was that the Swantons' horses and equipment had been spared. They had means to earn a living and to begin recovering their losses. Indeed, according to the *Sentinel*, the Swantons were



The Swanton "Boomer Train" in Reno Nev., May of 1906, just before the fire that destroyed the Casino. SANTA CRUZ SEASIDE COMPANY ARCHIVES

operating their livery business from the sidewalk the following day. The Swanton House was never rebuilt, but Albion ran the family's successful livery business for the remainder of his life.

Over the course of the next decade, Fred Swanton's interests and business enterprises would continue to expand. He set up a real estate business and established an insurance company. He opened the Palace of Pharmacy in downtown Santa Cruz—which sold alcoholic tonics for "medicinal purposes" and the latest delicacy in town, ice cream sodas.

And as always, he had one eye on the latest technology—this time electricity and incandescent light. He established an electric light plant in the city, and later the Big Creek Power Company on the North Coast. He promoted an electric rail line linking Santa Cruz to Capitola, and a failed coastal railroad adventure between San Francisco and Santa Cruz. And in 1900, he ventured north to Alaska in pursuit of gold, only to come back empty-handed when inclement Arctic weather prevented him from reaching his intended destination at the Port of Nome.

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Throughout all these activities, Swanton continued to promote the economic interests of Santa Cruz, and he continually kept one eye on the Santa Cruz waterfront. In the first years of the 1900s, Swanton embarked on a bold and ambitious course that would shape Santa Cruz history for more than a century.

In 1902, with the vast majority of regional Southern Pacific Railroad passengers going to the Del Monte Hotel in Monterey, Swanton got busy promoting Santa Cruz and securing outside investment for developing the Santa Cruz tourist industry. He cajoled representatives of the Southern Pacific Railroad into making a commitment to promote Santa Cruz as a featured tourist destination. He had visions of a "Coney Island of the West Coast" or an "Atlantic City on the Pacific"—but whatever it was called, Swanton wanted desperately to expand the Santa Cruz tourist market.

Swanton called for a "New Santa Cruz," a phrase that seemed to capture the booming energies of the city. If Swanton had to sell his plans to Californians and other inland communities in the west—he promoted all the way to St. Louis and Chicago—he also had some selling to do at home. Santa Cruzans were well aware of Swanton's hyperbole, and they worried about his follow-through.

During the spring and summer of 1903, Swanton, who had recently turned 41, orchestrated an exhausting schedule of events and activities along the waterfront. He helped bring President Theodore Roosevelt to town on his western tour in May of 1903, and then set about a

summertime show unequaled anywhere in the world—80 days and nights of firework displays, acrobats, theatrical troupes, dances, marching bands, massive dinner banquets and even burning ships in the bay—never a dull moment indeed.

Not everyone in town was happy with Swanton. Teetotalers and local ministers were irate over alcoholic consumption at the Boardwalk and lewd dancing in the ballroom, and there were whispers of prostitution and gambling taking place on ships docked offshore. Swanton made public the fact that he had been the object of several threatening letters, including one that declared: "We are tired of you. If you don't quit promoting things—street car railways, electric light plants or casinos, you will be called upon by a committee and tarred and feathered."

Swanton remained undaunted. His fundraising and promotional efforts had paid off. The summertime extravaganza of 1903 got locals thinking big and investors thinking bigger. For the following summer, Swanton proposed a massive new casino with an accompanying tent city to be located in the flat marsh-



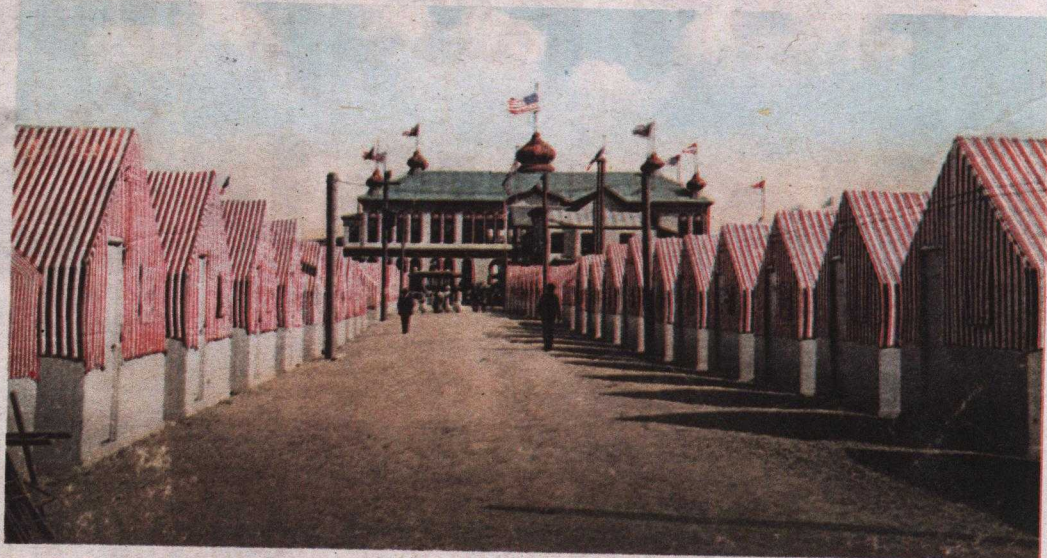
Booster Ribbon handed out on Swanton's Southern Pacific Sojourn through the West, Spring 1906. SANTA CRUZ SEASIDE COMPANY ARCHIVE

lands between the beach and the curving San Lorenzo River. He hired architect Edward Van Cleeck to design his "Neptune Casino," a colorful blend of Moorish and Venetian architecture proposed to grace the Main Beach.

Swanton pushed to have the casino completed for the summer season of 1904. He missed his deadline by only a few weeks, and the casino opened on June 12, according to the *Sentinel*, to a "blare of music, a blaze of rockets and the boom of bursting bombs." Santa Cruz, Swanton proclaimed, was now "the queen of summer resorts."

Two years later, on June 16, 1906, a massive dinner was held in Swanton's honor for his work promoting Santa Cruz. The Franciscan missionaries, it was noted, had founded the "Old" Santa Cruz, but it was Swanton who had inaugurated the "New" version of the city. The *Evening Sentinel* declared, "had pressed the financial button, and the money had come pouring in."

The following week, however, on the morning of June 22, 1906, just as the summer tourist season was



The Tent City at the Boardwalk, circa 1905, the site of the Dolphin Baseball Field and now the location of the Boardwalk parking lot. MUSEUM OF ART & HISTORY

ramping up, tragedy struck Swanton again. A fire swept through the Neptune Casino, burning it to the sand. All that was left of Swanton's dream were charred pilings.

It was a devastating blow to Swanton's—and his investors'—fortunes. The insurance didn't come close to covering the company's debt, much less the rebuilding of a new casino.

Swanton had his back to the wall, but he fought back, as he had from his previous disasters. Within days, bands returned to playing on the beach. Swanton began the construction of a massive canvas casino as a temporary replacement. As planned, Santa Cruz hosted the Republicans in September for what was one of the most corrupt conventions in the state's history, an affair that was soon be known as "The Shame of California."

All the while the irrepressible Swanton went about the state securing more money to rebuild his dream. He eventually found John Martin, who had made millions as the developer of hydroelectric power in California and was one of the founders of the then fledgling Pacific Gas and Electric Company (PG&E), and he convinced Martin of the profitability of his Boardwalk enterprise. Within months, Swanton had reorganized his debt, formed a new corporation—the Santa Cruz Beach Company—and had commenced to building an even bigger and better casino.

Remarkably, Swanton was able to get the new casino—less architecturally ornate and gimmicky than the original version—rebuilt by the following May. It was a phenomenal achievement. "Those who know Fred on the seamy side as well as on the front, never think of him as Saint Swanton," the editor of *The Surf*, A.A. Taylor, opined. "Yet Santa Cruzans ought to be proud of his work on, and for, the waterfront of the city."

By the beginning of the next decade, Swanton had brought a sparkling new hotel to the Santa Cruz waterfront, the Casa del Rey, and a promising new golf course to the Santa Cruz foothills, the Casa del Rey Golf and Country Club (now Pogonip.) But trouble always seemed to loom over Swanton and, even with his waterfront dream, financial

problems soon engulfed him. Much of Swanton's financing was clearly executed with smoke and mirrors. Production costs always skyrocketed; more significantly, operating expenses almost always exceeded revenues.

By the winter of 1912, with extensive losses looming, Swanton left the Beach Company and headed for San Francisco. By the following year, the Beach Company was on the verge of collapse. Litigation ensued. Swanton was castigated in the press. His mismanagement and extravagant spending habits, it was argued, had augured the Beach Company's doom.

In December of 1915, with debt consolidated (mostly by Martin) and local management once again willing to step up, the waterfront businesses once headed up by Swanton were reorganized as the Santa Cruz Seaside Company. "Mr. Santa Cruz" was allowed nowhere near the new enterprise.

It was F. Scott Fitzgerald who famously noted that "there are no second acts in American lives." Fitzgerald was wrong, of course, and never more so than in the case of Fred Swanton.

The loss of his Boardwalk Empire simply sent him in new directions. Swanton's friend, Santa Cruzan Charles C. Moore, who headed up the fabled Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco, named Swanton head of the amusement operations at the expo, which included a "Roumanian Gypsy Camp [sic]," and which also, like many other Swanton endeavors, proved exciting, if unprofitable.

Swanton tried his hand in the fledgling movie industry, bringing Cecil B. De Mille to town and forming a film company at DeLaveaga Park—the Fer-Dal Motion Picture Company—which quickly began production on four films and with equal rapidity went out of business. Swanton blamed the failure on the poor quality of the actors and directors.

Swanton pursued oil wells in Santa Cruz County and chromium mining in Southern California. He even took a stab at talent management in Hollywood, where he briefly assumed managerial responsibilities for the career of Santa Cruz film starlet ZaSu Pitts.



FRED W. SWANTON

"A CITY BUILDER"

SOLICITS YOUR SUPPORT FOR

MAYOR

CITY OF SANTA CRUZ MAY 3, 1927

In 1924, Swanton opened an airport on his Westside properties (near today's Lipton site on Delaware Avenue), only to see it close within a year.

Three years later, at the age of 65—at a time when most men of that era were looking forward to retirement—Swanton ran for mayor of Santa Cruz and was subsequently elected to three straight terms, a first in Santa Cruz history. He took some political swipes at the Santa Cruz Seaside Company during his tenure, threatening to reclaim beach lands that he had originally secured from the city two decades earlier for his own personal enterprise. The irony (or hypocrisy) apparently escaped him. He also became embroiled in a corruption scandal that saw two of his administrators charged with accepting bribes, with one of them being sent to San Quentin for an extended stay.

There were whispers that Swanton had turned his back on the illegal practices and had even taken kickbacks of his own. The controversy and bad publicity brought an end to Swanton's mayorship when he decided, albeit reluctantly, not to run for re-election in 1933.

Even his tainted political career did not mark Swanton's grand finale on the Santa Cruz stage. In 1934, California Gov. Frank Merriam—the conservative Republican who had defeated leftist Democratic candidate Upton Sinclair in a contentious battle for the statehouse—appointed Swanton deputy chief director of state parks. In this capacity, Swanton once again pushed to boost Santa Cruz County by helping to bring three area beaches—Seacliff, New Brighton (China Beach), and his own Natural Bridges—into the state park system. They were three more jewels to the crown, however tarnished, of Swanton's lasting legacy in the region.

Swanton made one more final bid for Santa Cruz mayor in 1937, this time losing to C. D. Hinkle in a bitter runoff election.

As the 1930s came to a close, Swanton's health was deteriorating, and the seemingly endless energy that had once charged his life had finally dissipated. He had been forced to declare bankruptcy earlier in the decade and he was, according to some, nearly penniless. But Swanton refused to let his dreams die. Two weeks before his death, Swanton was reportedly still engaged in an effort to reopen his once productive chromium mines in Southern California.

Massive headlines in the *Santa Cruz Sentinel* marked his passing on May 4, 1940: "Fred W. Swanton Dies: Colorful Promoter, Builder of Seaside Company, Passes at 78." A pair of stories and nearly a full page of photographs celebrated his legacy. Few of his many disasters were mentioned, while his triumphs were heralded, some beyond recognition. He was, the paper declared, the "outstanding promoter of Central California." Even in death—long after his Boardwalk Empire had slipped through his fingertips—Fred Swanton was still front-page news.

He is buried, along with his wife, at the IOOF Cemetery on Ocean Street Extension, a little more than a mile up the San Lorenzo River from his beloved Santa Cruz waterfront. ■

Excerpted from the forthcoming "Santa Cruz Is in the Heart: Volume II," by Geoffrey Dunn, to be published by the Capitola Book Company. Special thanks to the following for their assistance with photographs and archival material: Kris Reyes, Brigid Fuller, Marla Novo, Stanley Stevens, Joan Martin, Carolyn Swift, Richard Hallett, Kim Stoner and the late Warren "Skip" Littlefield.