

Capitola Hotel's Heyday

By Ross Eric Gibson

In only 25 years, Capitola went from an 1869 campground to home of one of the top seven coastal resort hotels in California, the Hotel Capitola. The town of Capitola continued to grow in popularity, and today is a popular beach destination. On Wednesday Capitola will celebrate its 125th birthday.

In 1869, lumberman and developer F.A. Hihn laid out a campground near his 1857 lumber-shipping wharf at Soquel Landing. He named it Camp Capitola, after the heroine of a series of novels. When Hihn built his 1875 Santa Cruz Railway along the coast to Watsonville, he bypassed industrious Soquel to give his Camp Capitola the advantage of a station. This led to its rapid development.

When a modest hotel was outgrown, Hihn replaced it in 1894 with the palatial Grand Capitola, fashioned after Victorian resort hotels sometimes called The Rambles. These followed the Picturesque Villa school of wood-frame gingerbread construction, composed of rambling wings and towers nestled in a scenic landscape. Of these, the Grand Capitola ranked with coastal California resort hotels like the Del Coronado, Manhattan Beach, Del Monte, the Piedmont, San Francisco's Cliff House, and Santa Cruz's Sea-Beach.

The first wing of the hotel was constructed in 1894 by Hihn's favorite Santa Cruz architect, Edward Van Cleeck, who the year before designed Capitola's bathhouse. Instantly popular, the hotel doubled in size by the turn of the century. The Queen Anne-style building with Moorish bell-domes was painted cream with mustard-gold porches, a vermilion-red roof, and sea-green porch roofs.

The hotel stretched from where the Capitola Theater is today to the water's edge. The hotel was noted for its natural light, and a 1910 postcard said a "jungle of potted palms and flowers . . ." filled the lobby, dining room, and solarium. Local author and journalist Josephine Clifford McCrackin said the views from every window were varied and unsurpassed, and satin, lace and tassels framed every window and archway.



A post card of the Capitola Hotel, postmarked April 7, 1908.

The dining hall was famous for its fresh seafood, brook trout, and wild game. In balmy weather its bank of glass French doors could be opened onto a central courtyard, making the hall feel like a beach pavilion. The ballroom also opened onto this court, and some evenings dancing spilled out into a courtyard illuminated with strings of Japanese lanterns.

The hotel's theme song was "The Grand Capitola, or the Phantom Waltz." It was based on a popular dance form, where ladies stood behind a long sheet held before them, with only their hands or a scarf exposed, which a man would take.

They would discover their partners after the music started and the sheet was lowered. In some places it was considered a scandalous dance.



An undated post card showing Capitola beach with the hotel in the background.

The courtyard had a stone promenade along the beach, ending at a clubhouse. It had a billiard hall and bowling alley and a roof garden as an observation deck.

What in summer reminded folks of Brighton, England or the south of France in winter brought visitors to enjoy dramatic, stormy wave displays "as if from the deck of a ship." Waves sometimes broke over the clubhouse, and washed away part of it in 1914. Twin fireplaces made the reading room a popular place in such weather.

After the hotel opened, Hihn embarked on a unique scheme in 1896 to electrify the hotel with an experimental Gerlach wave motor that was supposed to be powered by natural wave motion, but it was largely unsuccessful. This hampered Hihn's plans for an electric trolley from Santa

Cruz to Capitola. While building the Santa Cruz boardwalk in 1904, Fred Swanton completed the trolley line, and the Capitola terminal was behind the hotel, at the foot of stairs scaling Depot Hill. Coast roads also were linked up and renamed East Cliff Drive, as the scenic auto route from Santa Cruz to Capitola.

After Hihn's death in 1913, millionaire Henry Allen Rispin bought the resort in 1919, hoping to make it the Riviera of the West. The hotel and community were upgraded, but in August 1929, everything was auctioned. The Depression hit in October, and when the empty hotel burned on Dec. 16, some speculated it was torched for insurance money. Nothing has replaced what was called "the heart of Capitola."

Sources

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