



Courtesy of Margaret Koch
The late Sentinel reporter Ernest Otto interviews two young fishermen on the Santa Cruz wharf in the 1930s.

1918: Lone staffer on a one-reporter paper

OTTO, Ernest
EDITOR'S NOTE: The Sentinel is celebrating its 150th year in 2006 by reaching into our archives to republish some of the noteworthy stories out of the past. The following column, titled "Old Santa Cruz," was printed in the Santa Cruz Sentinel on August 29, 1954. It was written by legendary staff writer Ernest Otto, who worked in newspapers for 74 years. He became a reporter for the Sentinel in 1918 and worked at the newspaper into the 1950s. He died in 1955 at the age of 84.

By ERNEST OTTO

When the writer in 1918 became a reporter for the Santa Cruz Sentinel

after leaving the Santa Cruz Surf where he had been employed since 1881, he still was the lone reporter on a one-reporter paper. One other staff member was the editor, and Josephine Clifford McCrackin was a special writer.

Those were busy days for a reporter. He would leave his home at 11 a.m. and return at 2 o'clock the following morning with an hour off at noon for dinner (not lunch) and another hour off at 6 p.m. for supper.

From his home, this reporter went to the Southern Pacific station where he tried to keep tab of those leaving on the

train of five or six passenger coaches. Keeping track of these travelers meant many personal items for the paper, and in addition, the contacts would give reports on the goings and comings of other people.

Next the reporter would go to the Casa del Rey to look over the register. In those days, the old fashioned ledger type of register was used, and the reporter could scan the list of signatures quickly and then query the clerk about any notables who might be registered.

Later in the day, the reporter would

go to the Pacific Ocean house, the Wilkins house, the Riverside hotel and the St. George hotel to check the registers and interview the clerks. In the early days, each of the San Francisco papers would daily carry a column or more of announcements of those who arrived at the Palace, Baldwin, Grand and Occidental hotels and the Russ house and the Lick house. Those arrivals were checked for local names, and a part of the personal items written by this reporter was telling what hotel was

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visited by the Santa Cruzans.

At 6:30 p.m., the outgoing train was checked and at 7 o'clock the incoming train. This was a very important part of the job because the conductor would be able to give the latest editions of the Evening Bulletin. The earlier edition, delivered here in the afternoon, did not provide all the telegraphic news of the late editions.

The later edition was clipped carefully for telegraphic items which were used to expand the scanty telegraph service used by the Sentinel.

A box on Page One always was printed under the caption, "The Latest."

One of the major sources of local news was the courthouse. The county clerk and the recorder had reports of real estate transfers. Marriage licenses were obtained from the clerk's office and the court calendar also was important. The sheriff's office provided criminal news, and gave the names of offenders brought to the jail from the lower end of the county.

The offices of the justice of the peace and the chief of police were other fruitful news sources, and the constables always were helpful. The office of the chief and the city clerk were in the city hall as was the library.

The health officer provided information on births in the city, and the fire department's black-

board carried news in those days before there was a paid department.

The writer frequently visited Chinatown, where he knew every merchant and spoke to most of the 300 inhabitants, calling them by name.

At meetings of the city council, the writer took the minutes, seated as near the councilmen as possible. When nothing of interest was going on, he would prepare copy and when the meeting ended at noon, practically all of his copy would be ready. In those days, each of the four wards was represented by a voter from the district, and there was great jealousy between the wards who showed up at the council meetings.

The supervisors met usually twice a month in the courthouse. The first item of interest to the newspaperman was the reports of the department heads. These were snatched up even before the meeting opened, and were ready to go on the copy hook along with other pieces of news as soon as the reporter returned to his office.

In the early days, meetings did not progress with much dispatch, and sometimes after a meeting continued until 7 o'clock it would be adjourned and then carried on the next day.

The morticians, then undertakers, would be called daily by telephone, and then the bereaved families would be contacted. Obituaries seldom were less than half a column long.

All of the reporter's friends would be asked for news, and

some even would take notes to hand to the reporter, and how he would turn out copy in long hand.

If a theatrical attraction was offered, usually Mrs. McCrackin would make a report on it, but sometimes an outsider could be induced to go and write a report after he had received a free ticket.

The reporter usually had the sports items covered by someone who liked the honor. School sports could be obtained from someone at the high school, but the reporter still was kept busy checking on all of those who were depended on to assist.

Many liked to aid the one reporter when it came to social doings. Many times friends would come in with or mail the story of a wedding, but in most cases, the single reporter had to cover the affair and write the story himself. When a wedding was of unusual prominence, a special invitation would be issued to the reporter. That required a visit to the home the day before the wedding, and preview of the gowns and the gifts — but this reporter always insisted some member of the family write the descriptions. And then he had to please one and all by attending the affair, for fear that something on the great day might occur which would be different from his story.

In the early days, the names of the donors were

published along with the gifts, and how eagerly those gift lists were read. Home weddings among non-Catholic couples were more frequent then than now.

And the wedding dinners! It was no serving of sandwiches, cake and punch, but more like a Christmas feast.

The writer remembers when his two older sisters married two brothers, the menu included roast turkey, chicken and goose.

Those were the days of both the wedding cake and the bride's cake. The wedding cake was the richest of fruit cakes and the

bride's, a white cake.

The newly married couple would take a taxi from the home to the Southern Pacific station where they would board the train, usually for a honeymoon in San Francisco.

Society was all agog in those days over the card game, euchre, and this was another item of interest for the lone reporter to cover.

The Sentinel once conducted a poll to determine the readers' preference in news and the result showed: General local news, first; society, second; personals, third; sports, fourth; and editorials, fifth.