

The Sunshine Brings Santa Cruz Tourism Recovery

5/9/82 Weather

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When the sun finally chased away months of rain clouds over soggy Santa Cruz, it ended a drought for the tourism industry.

The first three and a half months of 1982 were a real wash-out for nearly every visitor-related business in the beach area.

Easter Week proved to be the darkest hour as unrelenting rain splattered where bare feet should have been on the Boardwalk and droplets clung to the neon

"vacancy" signs at the dozens of motels huddled in the shadow of the Giant Dipper.

Ward Noland Jr., owner of the Flotsam and Ports of Call shops on Municipal Wharf, peered out the window at the deserted Boardwalk in between waiting on the few visitors who hurried in out of the rain to browse around.

"We didn't suffer near the loss of the Seaside Co. because the small number of people who did come to Santa Cruz came out on the wharf," says Noland, president of the Wharf Tenants Association.

In a word, Easter Week as "terrible,"

explains Marq Lipton, marketing director for the Seaside Co.

Easter Week is important the Seaside Co. because it's the kickoff for the tourist season. It was to have been especially important this year because of the long winter.

It was to have been especially important, too, for Noland and the other businesspeople on the wharf. During the January storm, the wharf was lost for eight days because of lack of water and minor damage to some of the piers. Business, says Noland, was down 5 to 70

percent in that one month alone.

A "really good" Easter Week can account for as much as 5 percent of the annual business at the Flotsam and Ports of Call, says Noland. What he and the other merchants got was a really bad week.

Noland says the poor weather did more than just take away the tourist dollar.

"It's a funny thing, the bulk of the people who live in Santa Cruz seem to think the wharf survives on the tourist business, but that's not true. It's the local business that makes the difference

whether we make money," he explains.

In his own case, Noland says county residents account for about 45 percent of his business because he carries a large inventory of sun and beach wear.

And, when you're selling sun wear you'd better have sun.

Joe Flood, manager of the Santa Cruz Convention and Visitors Bureau, was keenly aware of the impact the bad weather had on the multi-million-dollar industry and had prepared a hefty advertising blitz to tell Northern California residents that Santa Cruz had survived the storm and was waiting for them with open arms.

Flood says he hoped to launch that blitz just ahead of Easter Week.

When the holiday had come and gone.

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Now the beach is a strong attraction as this crowd at the Boardwalk on Saturday attests.

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the advertising campaign had been on hold for three weeks.

By Monday, the convention bureau knew "we had to do it" and promo stories and ads were set loose. A major San Jose radio station started broadcasting the lure of the surf, sand and sun.

Two days later there really was sun.

Five days later everything was all right.

By 11 a.m. that Saturday, there was a steady crawl of cars from Camden Avenue to Beach Street.

It's been a bumper to bumper tourist crop every weekend since.

The first and second sunny weekends, alone, were enough for the Boardwalk to wipe out its Easter Week losses.

In fact, says Lipton of the Seaside Co., weekday crowds on the main beach have been above normal for an Easter Week, even with the Boardwalk closed.

A survey of beach area motels, says Flood, shows reservations — which were off by more than 50 percent — are picking up on a daily basis. "Advance reservations for June, July and August are now equal to and even ahead of last year," Flood explains.

Those in the tourism business are confident this is going to be a big summer for Santa Cruz.

The long winter which dampened business here also kept Northern Californians pent up inside for months, so it's believed the beach will be a strong attraction.

Secondly, Lipton of the Seaside Co. believes the poor shape of the economy will lead many families to Boardwalk, where admission is free and they won't have to "commit to a lot of dollars" to have a good time.

Lack of money may have the same effect lack of gasoline had in 1973, which Noland terms the most important year for the wharf business.

Lack of petrol forced vacationers into one-tank trips, making Santa Cruz the ideal spot for visitors from the San Francisco Bay Area and the San Joaquin Valley.

Coupled with the drought that year, the tourist season expanded from a three and one-half month peak to a seven-month peak, and that longer season has carried on since.

"A lot of Northern Californians discovered Santa Cruz in 1973 and we've seen the same faces once or twice a year since," says Noland.