



# Death in the Afternoon

One of the bloodiest law enforcement battles in Santa Cruz County history took place at the end of summer, 1925. Three people lay dead in its wake.

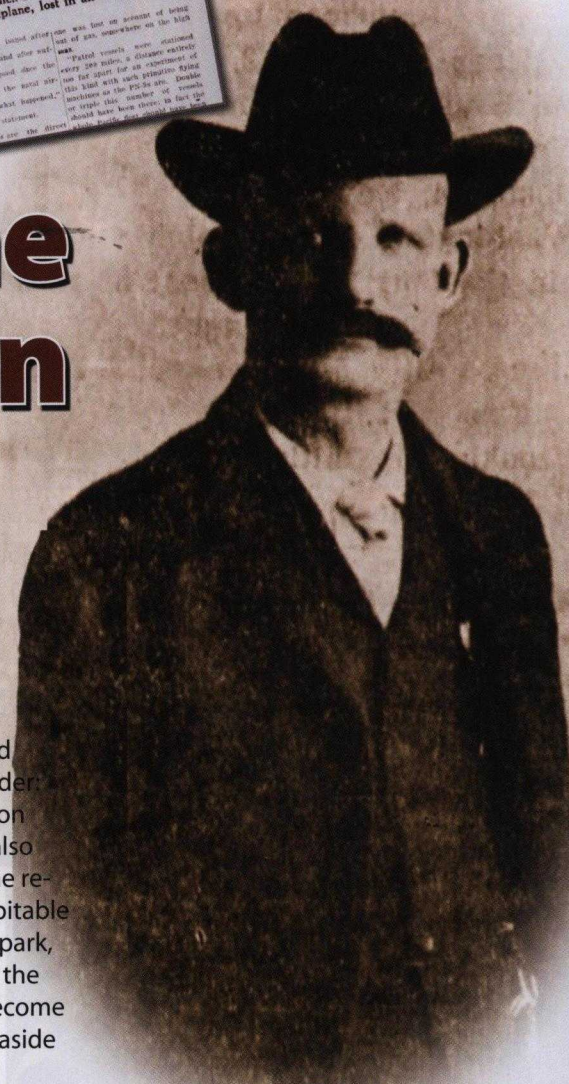
By Geoffrey Dunn

It was a glorious and golden Saturday morning in September of 1925, the beginning of the Labor Day weekend, when the best weather of the year always arrives on the Central California coast. The three days were packed with plenty of excitement. On the beach in Santa Cruz, a "Big Three Day Jubilee Carnival" was scheduled, replete with dances, parades, and "merrymaking on the beach every night." "Carnival Spirit will hold sway," advertisers promised, and "everyone [is] assured a good time." Downtown, there was an end-of-the-season shoe sale. The community was in the swing.

At the burgeoning Seacliff Park

in Aptos, good times were promised as well, but of a slightly different order. Properties in the subdivision were on the market. Promoters there were also promising "throngs" attracted by the region's celebrated weather and hospitable swaths of white sand beaches. The park, said William I. Morgan, president of the Seacliff Company, "is destined to become one of the most popular all-year seaside cities on the California coast."

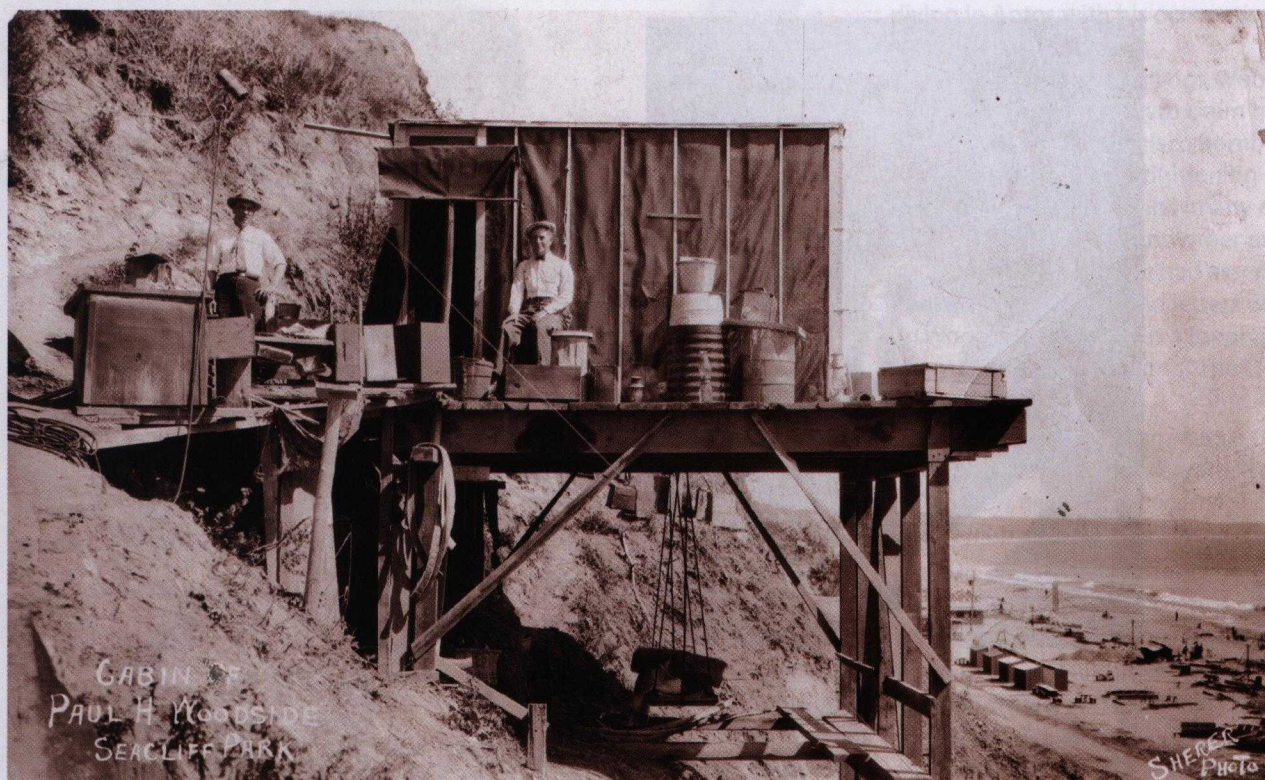
Sunshine and real estate make for a hyperbolic mix, and Realtor Morgan had something to peddle. On Saturday, September 5, a large, second-page advertisement appeared in the "Santa Cruz Evening News" proclaiming the various amenities



(Top) The headline of the *Santa Cruz News* sadly proclaims details of the tragic incident. (Above) Sheriff Howard V. Trafton who was shot while making an arrest near Aptos in 1925.



Photo: © WB. Sherer / The Museum of Art and History



(Above) A rare professional photograph taken of Paul H. Woodside's Seacliff shanty, looking southeast from the cliff, a few days after the infamous killings took place in September of 1925. Pictured are deputy sheriffs Peter Garavanta (left) and Edward Valentine Moody (right). Note the suspended bed below the flooring on which Woodside slept.

of a newly announced subdivision at Seacliff, with the headlines "Water! Water! Water!" Seacliff, the announcement promised, had plenty of "pure water," of "prime necessity" in a newly sprung community like Seacliff.

The Labor Day celebration in Santa Cruz County marked the perfect time to market the new properties.

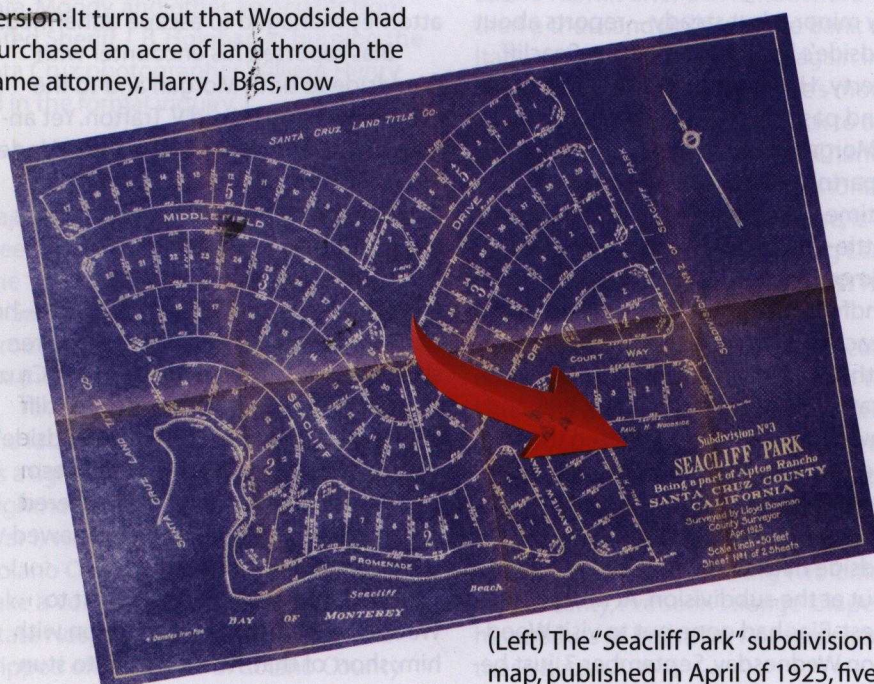
There was only one problem: Trouble—and I do mean big trouble—was on the horizon, in the form of one Paul H. Woodside, who would later be described as a "giant of a man," likely more than 6-foot-1 and 225 pounds and "all muscle," according to the undertaker who would tend to him, "and not an ounce of surplus flesh." With black hair and dark eyes, the 36-year-old Woodside was an imposing figure.

**G**iants, of course, can be difficult to move, and such was the case with Paul Woodside. But contrary to how he has been portrayed ever since his meeting with history nearly a century ago, Woodside has been incorrectly identified by both journalists and several historians

as a "squatter," tromping on the private property rights of lawful real estate men intent on earning back their investment.

There's only one problem with that version: It turns out that Woodside had purchased an acre of land through the same attorney, Harry J. Bias, now

overseeing the Seacliff subdivision, and Woodside was living on his property legally. He had even negotiated a right-of-way settlement with Morgan



(Left) The "Seacliff Park" subdivision map, published in April of 1925, five months before the killings. The arrow denotes the Woodside parcel.



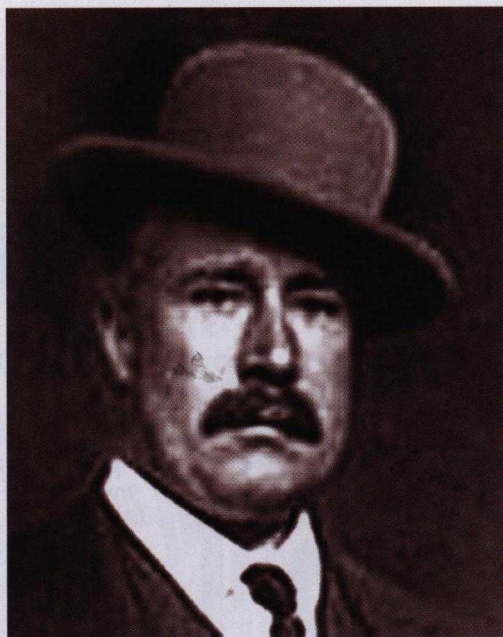


Photo: Geoffrey Dunn Collection

(Above) Undersheriff Richard H. Rountree was shot and killed by a Seacliff resident who was being placed under arrest in 1925.

and Bias on his beachside thoroughfare. But when Morgan offered him \$5,000 to clear out, Woodside balked. He might as well "offer a trillion," Woodside growled. The muscular recluse had no intent of moving.

In the weeks and days leading up to Labor Day, Morgan, a real estate developer from Georgia, had received relatively minor—but steady—reports about Woodside's behavior out at the Seacliff Property. He was threatening both workers and passerby alike.

Morgan sent his business attorney and partner, Henry Bias, the scion of a longtime Santa Cruz family, out to Seacliff to settle some of Woodside's dust. He had known the reclusive Woodside for a handful of years and he had been out to Seacliff three or four times in recent months hoping to tame Woodside's confrontational behavior. Ironically, Bias and his law office had also facilitated the sale of the one-acre site to Woodside earlier in the decade.

Morgan had received word that Woodside had been threatening workers out at the subdivision. At Morgan's request, Bias had gone out to visit Woodside on Wednesday, September 3, just before the start of the big weekend. When Bias approached Woodside's shanty on

the low road along the beach, Woodside told him to get out of his car and threatened him with what Bias described as a "long pistol."

Bias asked him if there was some sort of dispute over title. Morgan responded that he didn't care "anything about laws." He laid a claim, on the property, he asserted, "just as far as I can shoot." The attorney managed to escape unharmed.

Bias reported his encounter with Woodside to both Morgan and to the County Sheriff, Howard V. Trafton. Yet another local land agent had warned Under Sheriff "Richard "Dick" Rountree of the Woodside situation, noting that he was armed and dangerous.

Trafton had asked Morgan to accompany him out to Woodside's site—he declined—and so Trafton and Rountree skirted down the Watsonville-Santa Cruz Highway and the steep, sandstone cliff alone. When they knocked on Woodside's shanty door, Woodside informed them that he would kill them if they entered his home. He was now holding a sawed-off shotgun.

Trafton tried to sit down next to Woodside in the cabin and reason with him; short of that, he then tried to stun him with a blow to the head. At the same time, Rountree bolted inside and tried to

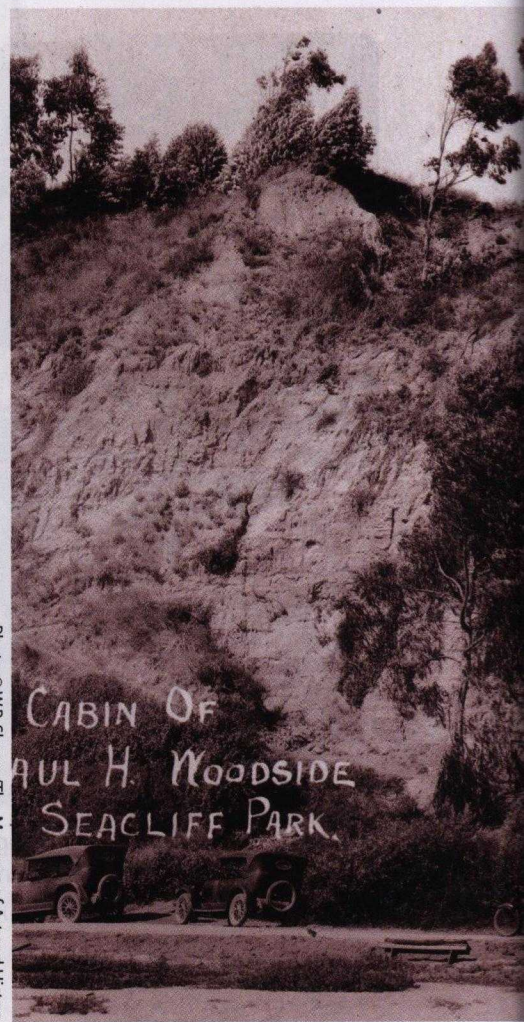


Photo: © W.B. Steyer / The Museum of Art and History

place a pair of handcuffs on the injured Woodside; he failed to secure the second cuff when the first one he placed went on backwards. Disaster was looming.

Woodside was now an awoken, angry giant. He seized Trafton's gun and took single shots at both officers. By now, everyone inside the shanty was wounded. In spite of two heavy blows to the head, Woodside was momentarily able to maintain control over the revolver. He killed Rountree with a gut shot that knocked him through the door onto the decking. Trafton, regaining control of his gun, shot Woodside with a .38 caliber slug that entered his right cheek and exited out his right ear. It was utter carnage.

By the time the battle was over, Woodside was barely alive a few feet from Rountree, while a fatally wounded Trafton (shot by Woodside just below the heart) crawled his way up the hillside. He tried driving away on his own. Another car eventually swept him away to the County Hospital. He didn't have a





(Above) Previously unpublished view looking north at Woodside's encampment from what is today known as Seacliff State Beach. Woodside's chicken coop was located at lower right on the cliff. Sheriff officers Garavanta, Moody, and other associates from the Sheriff Department assisted newly appointed Sheriff J. B. Holohan in burning the shanty. Images were taken by well-known Santa Cruz photographer William Henry Sherer; his brother John D. Sherer participated in the formal inquiry.

chance—but he was able to tell his version of events to a witness. He died at 10 p.m. that evening.

The killings brought a pall over all of Santa Cruz County. Both Trafton, a native of Watsonville, and Rountree, the scion of a local law enforcement family and a Native of Lighthouse Field in Santa Cruz, were both extremely popular and beloved figures. Their memorial services both drew large crowds.

Woodside, for his part, was a complex, complicated figure, mostly likely mentally ill. Born in April of 1884, he had been sent to sea at the age of 11 as a deckhand to Australia. He was the son of an infamous San Francisco shipping

captain, Marshall A. Woodside, who had been charged in 1900 with wrecking the "May Flint," a large coal transporter, in San Francisco Bay. The incident had brought permanent shame and infamy on the Woodside family.

In May of 1918, seven years before the fatal incident, Woodside (who worked as a lighthouse keeper at Roe Island Lighthouse in Suisun Bay during World War I) was booked on insanity charges in Solano County. The court urged him to take a voluntary stay at the nearby Napa State Hospital; he declined. Woodside slipped off the radar of Solano County authorities by moving to Aptos. In the 1920 Federal US Census, he is listed as

living in Aptos with his occupation as a ship builder.

Shortly after the killings, Woodside's mother arrived in town to claim her son's body. A San Francisco bomb squad arrived to detonate a frightening collection of two-dozen bombs (many of them hidden or trip-wired) and other explosive material that Woodside had assembled. Nearby were poems and letters written in Woodside's hand, plus a longhand copy of Oliver Goldsmith's "The Deserted Village."

*Even now the devastation is begun,  
And half the business of destruction done;  
Even now, methinks, as pondering here I stand,  
I see the rural virtues leave the land.*

On the Thursday after the killings, newly appointed Sheriff James B. Holohan and his deputy Amos Beauregard, went back out to the scene of the crime to exorcise Woodside's ghost. They burnt his shanty, destroyed his arsenal, and dynamited his cave at the base of the cliff. Meanwhile the state insurance compensation fund awarded each of the two stricken families \$5,000 each, along with \$150 to cover the cost of services. To this day, pictures of both Trafton and Rountree are on display prominently in the Sheriff's Department, with the inscription "Died in Performance of Duty."

As it turned out, Woodside was not such a hermit after all. He had more than a thousand dollars in the Bank of Italy, and nearly half as much again in the Bank of Oakland. Woodside's mother eventually deeded his land back to an agent of the Seacliff Company, Charles H. Fyfe—a property, as Aptos historian Kevin Newhouse explained to me, is today bounded by the cliffs, Long Leaf Lane, Court Way, and the southeast hook of Mar Vista Drive.

One longtime resident of the coast, Game Warden Ed Moody, observed the following January, after a series of fires destroyed several fishermen shacks on the beach, that "ever since Paul Woodside, who used to watch mythical golden galleons plying these waters off the beach, died after murdering two officers in his shanty, I've seen strange shapes hereabouts at night. I'm not surprised by these blazes." 🌲