



## The Great White Fleet Visits Santa Cruz

By *Rechs Ann Pedersen*

The Great White Fleet, so-called because the ships were painted white, was a United States naval force of 16,000 men on sixteen battleships, 6 torpedo boats, a hospital ship, and a supply ship. It began a 14-month world cruise in 1907 to prove that the Navy could move easily between the Atlantic and the Pacific.[1]



*Unidentified ship, part of the Great White Fleet, 1908. Courtesy of the Santa Cruz City Museum of Natural History*

### The Arrival

The Fleet arrived in Monterey Bay on Friday, May 1, 1908. It was welcomed by communities at the Monterey end of the Bay on Friday. The next day, the First Squadron moved to the Santa Cruz end of the Bay. The First Squadron (8 battleships and the supply ship) visited the Santa Cruz area for three days: May 2, 3, and 4, 1908. On May 4th, the Second Squadron and the Torpedo Flotilla left Monterey and joined the First Squadron in Santa Cruz. The event attracted many visitors to the area and the city was crowded with sailors and tourists. "Never in the city's history has such a throng of people glutted the thoroughfares as that which filled the public places yesterday." [2] "...such a crowd of people as Santa Cruz never saw before." [3]

The day that the First Squadron arrived in Santa Cruz, the S.C. Surf carried a long, serious article about the supremacy of the Fleet:

"The question of naval supremacy determines the militant power of the world today. In sheer fighting strength the United States Navy at the present moment is the second in the world. Only the British Admiralty now wields a sea power surpassing that at the disposal of the Secretary and Assistant Secretary of the Navy in Washington. But British boats have never made a cruise comparable to the one this fleet has made...Today we cover the cannon's mouth with flowers, but secretly in our hearts we feel that the question of supremacy on the Pacific will eventually have to be settled by heavy guns in favor either of Japan or of the United States. We do well to be happy and joyous and make merry with our neighbors and Uncle Sam's sailors, but we ought not to be flippant, nor to forget that in an hour, some day, these ships will go to victory or defeat, and that the fate of California is bound up in that issue." [4]

But this was not the tone of the events of the next few days. Light-hearted national pride, good times, and hospitality were the keynotes of the visit. Santa Cruzans went all out to welcome the Fleet and arranged a variety of festivities. The festivities began with the arrival of the First Squadron early in the morning of Saturday, May 2nd. Santa Cruzans and visitors—lots of visitors—gave them a warm, patriotic welcome:

Several thousands of eager spectators lined the bay shore for twenty miles, from Twin Lakes to the Lighthouse Point...

The squadron of Battleships leisurely swung its way around the contour of the bay at about an 8-knot speed, coming up abreast, and then maneuvering through a series of changing positions... the battleships came perceptibly nearer, snuggling the shore at Port Watsonville (see note), and coming close to Capitola, and then standing out in the bay a couple of miles for permanent anchorage."<sup>5</sup>

With flags and penants flying from every building of importance along the beach and animated groups of men, women and children waiting expectantly, the faint smoke of the first squadron was descried on the horizon, approaching in battle array in conformation with the shore line of the bay.

This was the signal that caused every whistle and siren in the city and the salutation of the field gun of the Naval Reserve located on the point beyond the San Lorenzo River to proclaim the approach of the men who are to be our guests for the next few days...

...as these immense fighting machines moved in line to their anchorage, a number of sky rockets, to which were attached parachutes, were sent skyward and from these immense American flags that were pendant, floated off over the vessels and disappeared in the distance.[6]

It was a stirring sight, prompting one S.C. Sentinel reporter to write: "Then it was that a deep sense of patriotism welled within us and we fully realized what it meant to be an American citizen." [7]

At 10:00 am, Mayor Palmer [of Santa Cruz] with the City Council and a Citizens Committee boarded the squadron flagship, the Connecticut. They paid their respects to Admiral Thomas and discussed the events of the next days.

## Telephone Connection

An interesting side note—Saturday morning the Pacific Coast Telephone Company used a mile and a half of cable to connect the Connecticut to the Company's main office. Despite rough seas and sea sickness, "the line was towed out to the flagship by one of the vessel's steam launches and was working within half an hour." [8] It was the first successfully installed ship to shore telephone connection during the voyage of the Fleet.[9]

## City Decorations

Downtown Santa Cruz was dressed in its finest, expressing both patriotism and pride in California:

The city is wrapped in bunting, decorated with flags and planted with redwoods. Along Pacific Avenue a redwood is growing at the foot of every hitching post, and arches span the avenue its entire length, with flags and redwood wreaths interwoven.

At intervals are towers opposite to each other, with shields of flag and eagle extending midway into the street. Facing both up and down the street, are round shields set into the surface of the towers, with pictures of military and naval heroes, and presentments of large battleships.[10]

Besides the streets and sidewalks, many buildings were decorated. The Courthouse and Hall of Records [Octagon] were typical:

"The Court-house is a monument to the public spirit of Santa Cruz and the taste and perseverance of the decorators. Every window-arch outlined by redwood garlands, every point and corner festooned with bunting of the red, white, and blue, and wreaths and streamers intertwined with flags and flaglets fluttering and waving in the breeze. Above the imposing entrance, on Cooper Street, banners and flags are caught and held by shield and eagle, while the tree of California, the ever-living redwood, droops above it in garlands, and strive up to it with

stiff, tall branches. shield and flag and eagle; and redwood in wreath, in branch, in garland, decorate the Hall of Records, too, arching above each window, outlining the severe architecture of this heavy structure."[11]

Coincidence or not, the Santa Cruz policemen had new uniforms. Their "natty new uniforms" were the "regulation metropolitan uniform, olive green with helmets."[12]

## The Parade

The city was bedecked for the first major event of the visit on Saturday afternoon: the automobile parade down Mission Street and Pacific Avenue. The event began with a procession of the city's school children. Each school marched as a unit, starting with the High School. They carried their banners, flags, and masses of fresh flowers in colors of red, white, and blue. Each school took its station along the parade route.[13]

Then came the automobile pageant. Forty automobiles and "roadsters" were in the parade, many of them decorated with flowers.

"The Admiral was in the lead and was followed by the officers of the battleships. As they passed through the lines of children, they were literally showered with flowers, their autos being filled with floral tributes."[14]

## Saturday Festivities at the Boardwalk

At four that afternoon the Native Daughters of the Golden West and the Saturday Afternoon Club held a reception at the Casino for the admirals and the officers.

At a little past 4 o'clock the first officers were ushered in, and most graciously received by the ladies, who had formed a semicircle at the upper portion of the room...Mrs. McLean, president of the Afternoon Club, took the arm of Admiral Thomas, and together they traversed the room, moving toward one of the refreshment tables, where the Admiral enjoyed not only a glass of pineapple punch, but also the conversation and the gay laughter of a number of young ladies gathered around the table. Other officers were pleasantly introduced by the Native Daughters, and soon a most animated scene was in progress in the festive hall.

The dark uniforms of the officers, relieved only by gold braid and cord, formed a striking contrast to the light, elegant dresses of the ladies. Lace dresses, silks, crepes, embroidery-covered and heavy with ornament; hats with waving plumes, with drooping feathers, with bright flowers and rich pompons—every shade, every style of the newest and latest, was here to be seen. Robes with graceful trains, dresses of short length, equally graceful, were all to be seen there, and faces fair to look upon were set off by the richest costumes.[15]

That evening, J.J.C. Leonard gave a ball in honor of the admirals and officers at the Sea Beach Hotel. The First Division Fleet Band played on the Sea Beach's veranda.



*The Sea Beach Hotel and its gardens, prior to 1912. Property of Santa Cruz Public Libraries*

The reception and ball were by invitation only. But everyone was invited to other events that evening, also held in the beach area: fireworks, searchlight display, illuminated ships, and a concert by the 22nd Infantry Band.

"It was fairyland at the Casino last night, light and music, and the great warships lying in long line, each an illumination in itself, white, transparent, and sometimes, when some masterpiece of the pyrotechnic art burst high in air, the falling showers of brilliant sparks would dye the water a lurid red or flashing purple, making a wonderful effect of colors..."

When the search lights were turned on, the effect was magical, and cheers and shouts went up from a thousand throats. The crowds were enormous. It was astonishing to see the crowds and see them so good-natured, so willing to make room for still one more and so ready always with a kind word and look for the Jackies [slang term for a U.S. Navy sailor]...

At half past nine the 22nd Infantry Band adjourned to the Casino ballroom and when the first strains echoed through the lofty hall, there were many dancers on the floor. The music seemed to reach the ears of people far off, for more and more dancers came, bright young girls, comely matrons, and dance-loving men who found no difficulty in enjoying the strains of the 22nd Infantry Band.”[16]

## **Sunday Church Services**

Many sailors attended morning church services on shore, often with the ship's chaplain assisting in the service.

"In the morning, church parties in command of an officer attended at the Catholic, Methodists, and Congregational churches. Many were at the early mass, and about two hundred at the high mass at Holy Cross, where Father Fisher reserved the center pews. As they left the church the Star Spangled Banner was sung. After service, outside, the men were served soda by the ladies of the church.”[17]

In the afternoon, at the invitation of the Fleet, local churches held services on board the ships.

## **Big Trees Excursion for the Enlisted Men**

On Sunday, the enlisted men were invited on a free train excursion to Big Trees. As late as Saturday, a call went out for food for the occasion.

"An earnest appeal is made to all the ladies of Santa Cruz to do their best to give the Jackies a good time and the only way to do it is to see that they have plenty to eat at the trees. Sandwiches and pastry is needed in large quantities. Let each do what she can and the lunch will be a success... The reputation of the City of Santa Cruz is at stake. Don't let the sailor boys go away thinking us un hospitable or ungenerous.”[18]

The Surf reported that all went well.

"The Womens' Relief Corps has furnished forty loaves of bread, ham and egg sandwiches, cakes, cookies and fruit for the jackies at the Big Trees..”[19]

"The first train pulled out with five hundred aboard and every train—about six in all—carried almost as many. Two express wagons filled with good things, such as the boys' mothers cooked, were a reminder of their days at home, as from all over the city came the sandwiches, cakes, dough-nuts and cookies, which were served all day long, with coffee, cheese, olives and pickles, under the shade of the giant sequoias. The Rebekahs had the affair in charge, and all day long, numbers of the ladies and gentlemen of the order served the boys, who had all they wanted of good food.”[20]

## **Down at the Beach**

The Boardwalk was also very busy that Sunday. Josephine Clifford McCrackin, writing for Sentinel, described the crowds and was eager to assure herself that the jackies were enjoying themselves:

The Casino promenade and pleasure pier looked as if half a dozen Eastern banks had suspended and depositors were crowding around for this money; but of these people many were visitors, and all of them were here to spend money, not to clamor for it...

I tried to interview [enlisted] men from all the different vessels, that is I went right up to them and asked them how they like us and our Santa Cruz, and one and all they said "fine!" Most of them had been at Big Tree barbecue on Sunday morning, and many of them expect to go to the Armory Ball on Monday night, and every last one was pleased and delighted with the treatment received. ..

Earlier in the day the Santa Cruz Beach band had played, and all day long the concessions had been open, cigar-stand, ice cream parlor, Gypsy fortune teller, and above them all the Casino grill in all its stately graciousness...[21]

No dance was scheduled for Sunday night--dances were not usually held on Sunday. The sailors on leave that night managed to have one anyway.

Early Sunday evening a crowd of sailor lads, some from every ship in the squadron, waited upon the Beach Company officials. They wanted to dance and pleaded earnestly to be allowed to do so. When informed that there was nothing doing in the dancing line on Sunday, they seemed heartbroken. Then they told the management how this particular Sunday was the first chance many of them had to go ashore in several months, on account of watches which they had been obliged to serve onboard ship. The management could not refuse this straight forward appeal, and the sailor boys were given the keys to the pavilion and allowed to conduct their own dance.

Wm. T. Jeter, chairman of the music committee, granted the jackies the use of the 22nd Infantry Band and the Beach Company donated the use of the building and lights. The sailors and their lady friends then proceeded to enjoy themselves and there was an enormous crowd in attendance.[22]

## **Officers' Barbecue at Big Trees on Monday**

M Fleet officers and selected residents (500 invitations were sent out) were invited to a barbecue at Big Trees. 9:50 on Monday morning, the train left the S.P. station with a 16-piece Fleet band to provide musical entertainment at the event. Another train was scheduled at 11:30 but never left because of an accident on the tracks.

Before the meal, guests walked around the redwood groves—"Kodaks and cameras were busy." [23]

Preparations for the huge-scale barbecue had started the day before and continued into the night. The Surf reported that:

W.R. Welch [the chef] and assistants went to the Big Trees yesterday afternoon where they worked all night. The pit was dug in the Cowell grove. It was 15 feet long, 6 feet wide and 5 feet in depth. Five and a half cords of oak wood and five sack of charcoal were placed in the pit. The fire started at 2 a.m. in the morning and at 10 the hot coals created sufficient heat for the barbecuing of the meat, done in the real old Spanish style.

Large steaks were secured... Beside the four beeves and twelve sheep, there were six hundred loaves of French bread, 200 pounds of potato salad, 100 gallons of coffee, gallons of Spanish beans, 27 cases of California wine, 12 cases Santa Cruz beer, celery, olives, cheese, and 1000 cigars.[24]

The meal was served under the redwoods by forty local men. Josephine McCrackin attended the party and reported:

"On the stand among the trees the Marine band was stationed, and gave ample proof that they could hold their own with the 22nd Infantry and our own Santa Cruz band. How the Reception Committee managed it, I don't know, but of all the 600 guests each one found their name on a card at the long, long tables and the cross-sections...It was a right merry company, though husbands were torn from wives and fathers from daughters, so that our guests might be provided with pleasant partners each. Beside each plate lay not only a long-stemmed, wonderfully colored tulip, but a napkin with a napkin ring, these rings, carved of native woods, to be taken as souvenirs.."[25]

After the meal came short speeches by Mayor Palmer, Captain Schroder of the Virginia, and Lt. Governor Porter.

## Visiting the Ships

While members of the Fleet went ashore to visit Santa Cruz, many Santa Cruzans and out-of-town visitors went on board the ships on Monday. The Fleet gave Santa Cruz's school children a special invitation to tour the ships.

"All children of the Santa Cruz public schools and the School of the Holy Cross will be at the railroad wharf promptly at nine o'clock Monday morning, accompanied by their teachers. Free transportation is to be furnished them, and they are to go aboard the fleet at the special guests of the Fleet." [26]

Over 1200 children toured the ships. [27] Adults also took the opportunity to tour the Fleet, but they had to pay for transportation to the ships. The round trip fare was 50 cents. "Over 5,000 tickets were sold, and over 6,000 people visited the battleships on Monday." [28]

The Surf warned,

"If you are a gentleman, you will not attempt to light a cigar or cigarette on shipboard, and throw the match into the ammunition hoist. For the girls, there is no close season for matches--Lucifers and the other kind—but don't ask the same Jackie the same question, but six times—that's the limit." [29]

Besides the workings of the big guns, the tour included the cook's galley, the butcher shop, the scullery, the bake shop, the hospital, and the brig. [30]

## Monday Evening Balls

To cap off the festivities, two balls were given on Monday night, the Naval Militia ball and the Grand ball. The Naval Militia ball was held for the enlisted men and the non-commissioned officers at the Armory. It began at 8:45, when Mrs. Palmer, the mayor's wife, and Quartermaster Goodrich of Rhode Island lead four hundred couples in the grand march. The Fleet Divisional Band provided the music. "Immense crowds filled the floor with dancers and the galleries with spectators, and the ball was a complete success." [31][32]

The Grand ball given for the officers was held at the Casino. The Second Squadron arrived late Monday afternoon and the officers were immediately invited to the ball. Like the reception on Saturday for the First Squadron admirals and officers, the Native Daughters of the Golden West and the Saturday Afternoon Club sponsored the event. The 22nd Infantry Band from Angel Island played for the occasion.

"The glamor of the myriad of electric lights in the beautiful ball room, the handsome ladies, elegantly gowned, the presence of many officers in the naval full dress, with the bright brass buttons, and the gold braid, made a scene long to be remembered." [33]

"So many of our Native Daughters are fair to look upon, and understand the art of dress to perfection... For this was a display of wealth, though good taste held the display in check. But the fact remains that the scene in the Casino ballroom was enchantingly beautiful; it was gorgeous too, and no city on the Atlantic Coast could have rivaled the ball that was given in honor of the fleet officers here at Santa Cruz. If the dancing floor was crowded, the balcony, the boxes, were simply overflowing; people stood up in the gallery, and were glad thus to obtain a look at the gay scene below." [34]

## Sports Activities

The weather was sunny the four days of the Fleet visit. The Surf reported that many of the sailors rented bicycles and went sightseeing. Saturday and Sunday afternoons, Oakland played against Santa Cruz at the Casino baseball park. Three thousand attended the Sunday game. Much to hometown pleasure, Santa Cruz won both games. Monday afternoon, the

Fleet baseball team challenged the home team, also at the Casino park. The Sentinel sports writer flamboyantly announced the game the day before,

"...the latter baseball tossers are no scrubs, but the pick of the athletes from every big battleship in the mighty Atlantic squadron. The sailor lads are ready to demonstrate that they are not only able to handle a marlin spike and knock the double-distilled extract of whey out of things with their big guns; but they can also stop hot lines on the firing line of the baseball diamond, and knock the dog-gasted cover off of a league ball with a weighty willow."[35]

Unfortunately, no results of the game are given in either the Surf or the Sentinel. Some events were cancelled; it is unclear if the game was held as planned.

## **The Departure**

The Fleet departed at 3:00 p.m. on Tuesday, May 5, 1908. The Connecticut left early Tuesday morning to pick up Admiral Robley D. Evens in Monterey. Admiral Robley, who had been ill, was resuming his command of the flagship.

The Connecticut was sighted on the horizon on her return trip at 2:30 and at 3 o'clock, the time set for departure, she had rounded in position and given the signal for departure, without once lessening her speed.

Thousands of people thronged the water front and the Casino, the adjacent hills and every elevation that would afford a view of the spectacular sight.

The torpedo flotilla had just hoisted anchor and gotten into position to depart when a rocket was fired and high in the blue dome of the heavens appeared a red and white parachute from which hung a large American flag that fluttered gayly for a moment and furled its bright stars and broad stripes as if in mourning over the departure and lost itself in the haze of the distance.[36]

The crowds were especially thick at the Vue de l'Eau, the streetcar depot on the cliffs at the end of Woodrow Avenue.

"The greatest crowd ever seen by several thousand at Vue de l'Eau, was on view Tuesday afternoon. They had arrived on foot, in the [street] cars, by carriage and auto, the head of the procession being on the Ocean Shore as early as one o'clock. The cars remained crowded till four o'clock, the passengers on those arriving at this time just seeing, and dimly, the stern ends of the disappearing ships."[37]

The enterprising Ocean Shore Railway Company scheduled an excursion train to Davenport, leaving from Santa Cruz at 3:00 p.m. For the round-trip fare of \$.50, passengers could view the Fleet as it moved up the coast to San Francisco.[38]

"The Ocean Shore railroad carried about a hundred passengers yesterday afternoon on a follow-the-fleet trip as far as the terminus beyond Davenport. The train which consisted of both open cars and regular carriages...kept pace with the line of warships as they moved along in stately procession up the coast, the battleships at a distance of about a mile from the shore, with the destroyers close in shore."[39]

## **Santa Cruz Justly Congratulated Herself**

When the Fleet had gone, the Sentinel commented:

"As far as one is able of judging, there was not the smallest detail wanting in the entertainment provided and Santa Cruz has acquitted herself in manner that will endear her to thousands of the pleasure-seeking public. Not one instance, so far, has been reported of attempted extortion and all jackies had no hesitation in expressing satisfaction at the entertainment that had been afforded them. Nor is the general public in any way to be deprived of its full quota of credit for the success that has been achieved; for without the liberal contribution

that were made to the entertainment fund, the [Fleet Fund] committee would have found itself sorely handicapped, if not entirely embarrassed...

"...no overcharge was made by Santa Cruz business men or women while the Fleet was anchored in our harbor. All honor to those to whom honor is due for this credit mark. Through the greed of one restaurant keeper in that town, Santa Barbara received a discolored optic... "[40]

The Surf reported that,

"Only one pocket was picked during the visit of Fleet...[police] officers with Sheriff Trafton, went to Monterey Friday, where they notified between thirty and forty bunko men and pickpockets who were plying their work there, that if they came to Santa Cruz they would be arrested immediately on landing. They took the hunch [hint?] and made direct for San Francisco and gave Santa Cruz the go-by."[41]

## Finally

"Now that Santa Cruz has successfully entertained the officers and men of the sixteen warships and their auxiliary ships, we feel able to entertain the Nation and balance of creation."[42]

## Note

Port Watsonville was located on the Bay on the area that is now Sunset State Beach. It was originally called Port Rogers and was the terminus of Watsonville Transportation Company's electric line. (Clark, Donald Thomas. *Santa Cruz County Place Names*. Santa Cruz Historical Society. 1986. p. 263.)

## Footnotes

1. "Navy, United States," World Book Encyclopedia. 2000 ed. v. 14. p.88
2. Santa Cruz Morning Sentinel. May 5, 1908. p.1
3. Ibid. May 6, 1908. p.1
4. Santa Cruz Surf. May 2, 1908. p.2
5. Ibid. May 2, 1908. p.1
6. Santa Cruz Morning Sentinel. May 3, 1908. p.1
7. Ibid. May 3, 1908. p.1
8. Santa Cruz Surf. May 2, 1908. p.1
9. Santa Cruz Morning Sentinel. May 5, 1908. p.1
10. Ibid. May 2, 1908. p.5
11. Santa Cruz Morning Sentinel. May 2, 1908. p.5
12. S Santa Cruz Morning Sentinel. May 2, 1908. p.1
13. Santa Cruz Surf. May 2, 1908. p.1
14. Santa Cruz Morning Sentinel. May 3, 1908. p.1
15. Ibid. May 3, 1908. p.1
16. Santa Cruz Surf. May 1, 1908. p.1

17. Santa Cruz Surf. May 4, 1908. p.3
18. Santa Cruz Morning Sentinel. May 2, 1908. p.1
19. Santa Cruz Surf. May 2, 1908. p.1
20. Ibid. May 2, 1908. p.7
21. Santa Cruz Morning Sentinel. May 5, 1908. p.2
22. Ibid. May 5, 1908. p.1
23. Ibid. May 5, 1908. p.1
24. Santa Cruz Surf. May 5, 1908. p.1
25. Santa Cruz Morning Sentinel. May 5, 1908. p.1
26. Ibid. May 3, 1908. p.1
27. Santa Cruz Surf. May 4, 1908. p.8
28. Santa Cruz Morning Sentinel. May 3, 1908. p.1
29. Santa Cruz Surf. May 1, 1908. p.1
30. Ibid. May 4, 1908. p.6
31. Santa Cruz Morning Sentinel. May 5, 1908. p.1
32. Santa Cruz Surf. May 6, 1908. p.3
33. Ibid. May 6, 1908. p.7
34. Santa Cruz Morning Sentinel. May 5, 1908. p.1
35. Ibid. May 3, 1908. p.8
36. Ibid. May 6, 1908. p.1
37. Ibid. May 6, 1908. p.1
38. Ibid. May 3, 1908. p.5
39. Santa Cruz Surf. May 6, 1908. p.4
40. Santa Cruz Morning Sentinel. May 6, 1908. p.1
41. Santa Cruz Surf. May 6, 1908. p.4
42. Santa Cruz Morning Sentinel, May 6, 1908. p. 4

*The content of this article is the responsibility of the individual author. It is the Library's intent to provide accurate local history information. However, it is not possible for the Library to completely verify the accuracy of individual articles obtained from a variety of sources. If you believe that factual statements in a local history article are incorrect and can provide documentation, please contact the Webmaster.*

