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Time and tide show no mercy

Hindsight



Sandy Lydon

MY GRANDMOTHER taught me seashore etiquette on the beaches west of Pescadero. On summer mornings when the "BeeeeeeeWump" of the Pigeon Point foghorn did not drift up the Butano Canyon, she would load me in her double-wide Buick for the winding ride out to the coast. The road was too narrow for two vehicles to pass so whenever she met another car, she would stop, shake her finger at the opposing driver and shout "Now you back up young man. I have the right of way." (She was not being sexist saying "young man." She just could not see well enough over the car's long hood to make out who was driving the other vehicle.) I once squirmed and cringed in the front seat while she stared down a logging truck until the poor guy jockeyed the rig around to make room for her to pass. I grew up thinking that Buick drivers had some special right-of-way privileges, but now I realize that it was the height of the rear window in that huge car which gave my grandmother her relentless go-forward-only momentum. She was so tiny she could not see to the rear. (I am tempted to say that this right-of-way privilege seems to have passed to drivers of Mercedes sedans, but I won't.)

Whether we went to the beach at Pescadero with its mysterious cave or the silky-smooth pebbles at Pebble Beach, I was not free to roam until grandmother had pointed sternly at the waves and described the "monster seventh wave" (or was it ninth?) which swept negligent children out to sea when they turned their back to it.

Not a bad lesson. If we had more tough, wise grandmothers we would not need that phalanx of signs along the coast which no one seems to read anyway.



Sandy Lydon collection

Building seawall at Seacliff Beach, summer 1925.



Seacliff seawall following storm on February, 1926.

My grandmother came to mind the other day as I was sitting on the beach in the dutiful seaward-facing position. Her respect for the sea came not from a long seafaring tradition, but from a life where nature's power (and glory) was a constant presence. She may have been in a state of deep denial about the dangers of driving a huge automobile (the St. Christopher medal may have been her equalizer), but she knew that creeks rose each winter to sweep away bridges and that anyone who underestimated the power of the ocean was a fool.

I had gone to the beach at Capitola to think of other things. I had just read that the city of Capitola is planning to put a seawall at the base of Depot Hill and I wanted to take another look at the beach and bluff to see if something had changed. Nothing had. The bluff was still there with the waves lapping benignly at its base. On this day, that is.

At the top of the bluff, I could see the drainpipes, culverts and abutments which punctuate the reality that the bluff is moving relentlessly to the north.

Builders and developers along this coast went through another spate of seawall mania in the summer of 1925, building walls at Capitola, Seacliff and Swanton Beach to protect esplanades and building projects from ocean waves. The mid-1920s were a time of we-can-do-anything building and development in Santa Cruz County. For while the concrete was being poured along the beaches, developers at Lompico were selling 1,500 tiny lots with the caveat to purchasers that they would have to make their own arrangements about water.

At Seacliff, developer W.I. Morgan was building a seawall to withstand "the greatest waves imaginable." Morgan and the other developers did not have to wait long to have their imagination stretched, for in February 1926, the ocean destroyed all the seawalls along the coast. Waves broke over the Capitola esplanade and several huge combers broke second story windows of the ocean front Capitola Hotel. (Today, those would be waves breaking over the roof of the restrooms at Capitola beach.) Morgan went broke soon afterward, and the legacy of trying to stop the ocean from eating the esplanade at Seacliff has passed to the state of California, which, the last time I looked, is us. Later this winter, when the beach sand goes on its annual migration, go down to Seacliff at low tide and you will see the remains of seven seawalls, each destroyed by storms.

Sitting there on the Capitola beach that sunny afternoon, I wondered what my grandmother would say about all this were she alive. She would probably shake her head and say, "There is no way any seawall is going to stop that ocean."

Maybe it is time for the grandson to play the role of grandmother. So, I'll say it for her. Given the long, melancholy history of failed efforts to stop the sea along the Santa Cruz County coast, the proposed Depot Hill seawall is folly. Whether it is little kids playing on the beach, fishermen sitting on the rocks, or city officials meeting at oval tables, anyone who underestimates the power of the ocean is a fool.

Sandy Lydon is a teacher and author on matters historical. He dispenses weather and history on KCBA Channel 35 twice a day. His show "Backyard Adventures" airs twice every Sunday on KCBA.