

Cabrillo came about because of tax drain

By CAROLYN SWIFT

While Santa Cruz County today has a reputation as an enlightened community of superior educational climate, it was known 20 years ago as a locality with uncultivated tastes for higher learning — a visually-pleasing social and cultural desert.

In the 1950s, county income and education levels fell below state-wide averages. By 1958, residents had twice rejected election bids for the founding of a junior college — and a third try was bogged down by rivalry and the longstanding polarity between southern and northern regions.

At times portrayed as "a seedy little resort town," Santa Cruz was then populated largely by retired pensioners. Watsonville typified an agricultural valley that would rather secede from the county than harmonize with "Surf City," its northern neighbor.

Overall, the prevailing view toward schooling was apathetic — an attitude exemplified by location of the County Office of Education in hard-to-find quarters upstairs over a Santa Cruz barroom.

Robert Swenson, who retires this month as president of Cabrillo College, first arrived in Santa Cruz County when the appeal for a junior college finally

passed in 1958. As he recalls, county life was characterized by political conservatism and a general lack of community activity.

"Other than to go down to the Boardwalk and ride the roller coaster, there really wasn't too much to do," he said.

Swenson delivered one of his last talks as Cabrillo's president last Thursday when he became a guest lecturer in Sandy Lydon's class on Santa Cruz County history. Swenson's topic was the coming of Cabrillo College and UCSC, and the transitions inspired by these two institutions.

He said Santa Cruz County became sold on the idea of a junior college only when faced with a powerful economic motive.

While no local college existed, students were permitted to attend community colleges in other counties — but the tab for their education was still sent home each year — and by 1958, the annual bill was close to a half million dollars.

Since costs for transportation, instruction, equipment and use of buildings were all charged to the home county, schools like Hartnell, Monterey Peninsula College and to a lesser degree, San Jose City College, found recruitment here an excellent way to finance their expansion

programs. These institutions competed for students by sending buses throughout the county on regular schedules.

County residents were finally convinced the only way to avoid spiraling education expenses was to establish their own junior college campus.

"I know it sounds cynical," Swenson said, "But it's true — the primary incentive was economic."

The campaign for a college in 1958 was itself an example of the traditional split between the north and south in Santa Cruz County. Watsonville — closer to Hartnell and MPC — had social, political and economic ties more similar to Salinas than Santa Cruz, and felt less need for county college.

South county residents also suspected — from past experience — that any new buildings approved for countywide use would ultimately

be constructed in "Surf City."

Opposition in Watsonville was spearheaded by an attorney, Tony Franich, "who believed the college would dig into taxpayers' pockets," Swenson said, "... And which we've been doing now for the past 18 years."

Pajaro Valley support in favor of the local campus was led by Watsonville High School Principal Bud Decker. Countywide support was directed by Norman S. Lien, county superintendent of schools, while the chamber of commerce was in charge of the Santa Cruz campaign.

To ease south county opposition, the first college board of trustees promised to pick a site for the campus between La Selva Beach and Capitola. They also followed an unwritten understanding to avoid the popular trend of naming colleges after the counties that support them. There was to be no "Santa

Cruz Junior College."

Because there was a strong feeling that it be centrally located near Highway 1, Swenson said the accepted name for the college was one proposed in a newspaper article by Santa Cruz Sentinel columnist Wally Trabing.

He suggested the college be named after the Cabrillo Highway and the Portuguese explorer Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo, who first discovered and explored the coast of Upper California in 1542.

A problem, Swenson explained, was the Spanish "Cabrillo," is a corruption of the original Portuguese spelling, "Cabrillo," and the resulting pronunciation "made the name sound something like soap pads." Trustees decided to follow Trabing's reasoning that since Cabrillo sailed under the Spanish flag, the familiar spelling and pronunciation were acceptable.

In April, 1959, Cabrillo College staff was hired and told to create a program for the fall semester. A temporary campus was organized in partially-condemned quarters at the old 1901 Watsonville High School building, and another small structure was moved from the former naval air base at Freedom. The second building is still used for Pajaro Valley Unified School District offices.

Students already attending neighboring colleges were permitted to continue there, and Cabrillo planned for an opening enrollment of 150 students. The estimate proved too low — and some 400 appeared for classes. The flow of students southward to MPC and Hartnell had begun to taper off, and Watsonville warmed to the idea of a community college at home.

Still suspicious, Watsonville withheld approval for a funding campaign to finance Cabrillo's construction until a midcounty site was chosen.

Swenson said the present site was picked with few of the expected battles. "It was a happy choice, made at the right time," he said, "It could have been a very divisive issue."

Cabrillo's site met nearly all necessary criteria — close to Highway 1, easily accessible, with ample room to expand. The property was owned almost entirely by the Porter family, and the only major problem was a later disagreement over retention of mineral rights.

Potential sites considered for the campus included an old ranch

that has since become Seascope; the Aptos polo grounds; Aptos High School property, and a tract above Aptos Junior High School—but it is the present location that serves as a meeting point between influences of the north and south.

Borregas Gulch, which runs through Cabrillo property, divides old townships at what is considered the approximate center of the county, and was originally a boundary between the ranchos of Aptos and Soquel.

After a \$6½ million bond election passed in 1960, the college prepared for an opening with a student body of 2,000 students in 1962. Shortly after, trustees realized the enrollment would soon exceed the 3,000-student masterplan, and plans were drawn for multi-story addition.

During the past 18 years, eleven members of the original faculty — including Swenson — have remained with Cabrillo and observed its changes. Course offerings have grown from 50 to more than 700, and the college is now recognized as a contributor to the generally high level of education in Santa Cruz County. It is admired as an open-door institution that seeks to fill educational needs of all segments of the community.

Swenson said he is proud of Cabrillo's reputation as a college that cares about people. "I'm often told by students that they decided to come here because they know the faculty really cares what happens," he said.

While the Cabrillo campus was in its infancy, regents of the University of California began scouting for a campus site somewhere between San Luis Obispo and San Francisco. At first, the logical spot appeared to be in Santa Clara County, where there was a large population center and adequate support services for the university.

Santa Cruz County was still suffering from its "seedy resort," image Swenson said, and the regents questioned the community's ability to absorb impact of a university campus. Yet there were 2,000 acres of available Cowell property, with a unique view and enough isolation to protect colleges from the tensions of urban sprawl.

The decision to locate a UC campus in Santa Cruz was made the same year Cabrillo opened in Aptos, and many of the planning details for UCSC were drafted from rented offices at the

REFERENCE

CABRILLO COLLEGE 1970-1979

community college.

"The thing that tipped the scales was the regents' tour," Swenson said, "The day the regents visited the Santa Clara County site, the temperature was about 105 degrees, it was smoggy and traffic was everywhere. In Santa Cruz County, the temperature dropped, the view was nice and the air fresh. At least emotionally, the regents made their decision that day."

While Cabrillo was designed small and grew larger, the UCSC campus first projected a total enrollment of about 25,000 students — but later had to scale-down its estimates to a top of about 7,500.

Together, UCSC and Cabrillo College have raised the total educational level in the county and created a stronger support for schools in general, Swenson said. The two institutions have cultivated a wide variety of cultural programs, so residents no longer need to seek entertainment elsewhere.

In the past several years, the overall age pattern of the county has changed. While there are still many retired persons moving here, they are generally wealthier and the total percentage is less.

Swenson noted that Cabrillo and UCSC have together provided a pool of leadership and talent for the community, with staff from the colleges serving in active roles. Both institutions are also major county employers.

In some ways, UCSC has a greater impact. By forming a voting block, university students have demonstrated a strong political interest and considerable power. The concentration of votes created an issue, Swenson said, concerning whether or not students from homes elsewhere should be allowed to vote in Santa Cruz. This controversy has caused no little concern among many longtime north county residents.

Economic impact of UCSC has also been greater. The total

payroll is \$30 million annually, and in the past ten years the university has spent more than \$8 million on building projects — all to the benefit of local business.

UCSC has changed the image of Santa Cruz from seedy resort to home of a major university. Created as a unique experiment, the secluded design of the campuses attracts more than 50,000 visitors annually from all over the world — and adds further benefits to the city's tourist industry.

Swenson said students themselves spend about \$10 million a year in Santa Cruz County. A disadvantage is that UCSC and Cabrillo students also share a responsibility for part of the housing problem. They now must compete with low-income elderly persons for available space, while new construction is high cost housing not designed for student needs.

While UCSC may have a greater impact in some aspects, Cabrillo has several advantages over the large university. Swenson noted that Cabrillo is open to people of all ages and backgrounds—while UCSC is by design an institution for the academic elite — and the community college was established through a vote of the people, while UCSC appeared by decision of the UC regents.

It is much more difficult to attend UCSC on a parttime basis than Cabrillo, and UC students must rely to a greater extent on mass transportation — even when it is inconvenient. At Cabrillo, students can take advantage of more ample parking or the mass transit system.

Cabrillo's retiring superintendent-president noted too, that one of the junior college's greatest contributions has been the unifying influence on northern and southern regions of the county. Both have helped the college develop in the past 18 years—and it now serves the communities equally well.

Only when a midcounty location was agreed upon did south county opposition fade.

