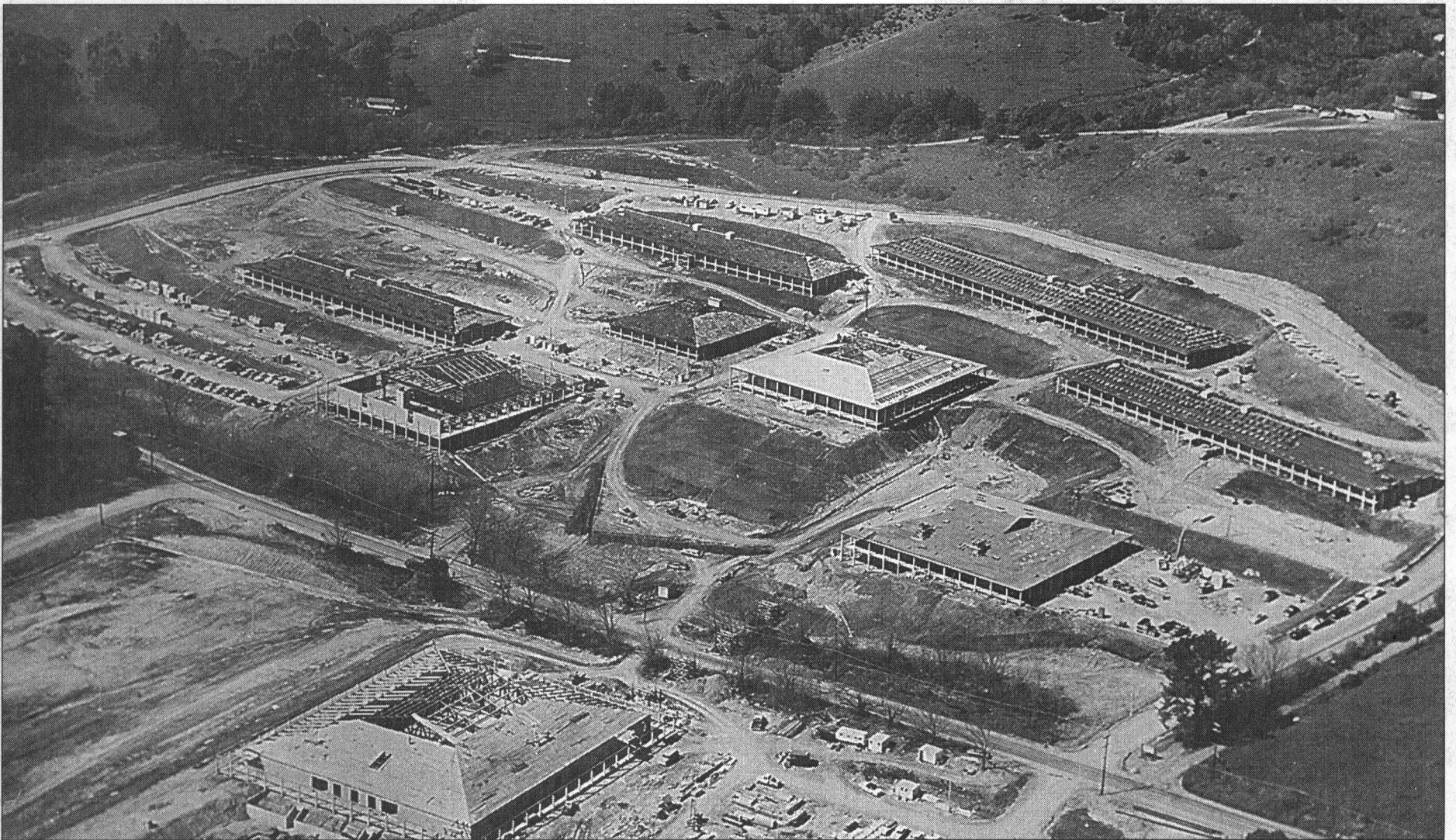


# 'WHY NOT CABRILLO COLLEGE?'



## How we gave birth to a community school

*Cabrillo College - 2000* *11.19.02*

By MIKE MASON  
SPECIAL TO THE SENTINEL

“You know who named Cabrillo College, don't you?” Bob Swenson asked.

The videotaped history session was over, and Dr. Robert “Bob” Swenson put his hand dramatically to one side of his mouth as though sharing a congressional secret.

“It was Sentinel columnist Wally Trabling,” the college's founder and first president revealed.

That little-known tidbit isn't included in the video made by historian Stuart Wisong of the Capitola Museum's Recorded History series, to document the community college's first days.

Trabling, the humanist and humorist whose daily columns ran for decades, came up with “Cabrillo” when Swenson and the college board were scratching for a name to put on the new school.

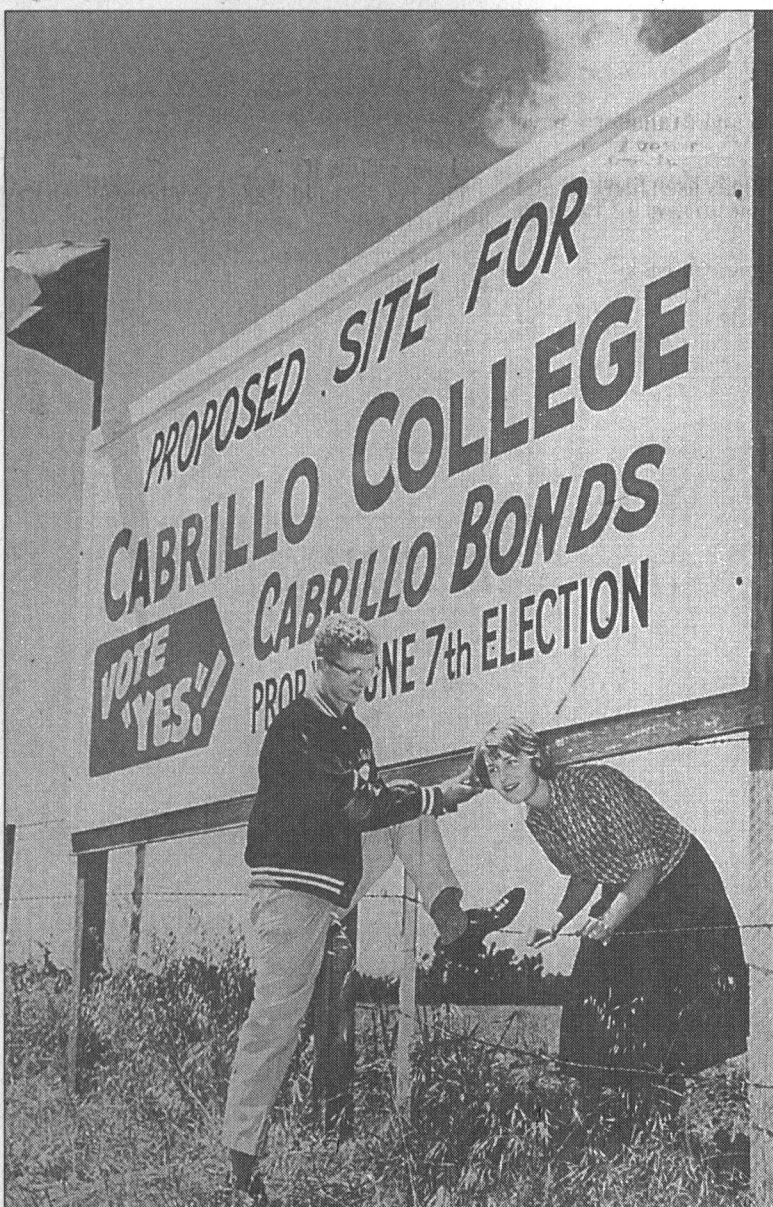
Portuguese explorer Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo led the first Spanish expedition up the California coast by ship in the 1500s. The modern Cabrillo Highway was named for him.

“Why not Cabrillo College?” Trabling asked. No other school had the name. The new community college board agreed.

### Saving on signs

Besides, joked the late Floyd Younger, dean of instruction, “When all the Cabrillo

Please see **CABRILLO** on **PAGE B2**



**TOP:** The college takes shape.

**FAR LEFT:** It took three tries to pass a bond measure; this photo was taken in 1958.

**LEFT:** An early classroom.

Contributed photos



# Cabrillo

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Highway signs go up, we can just add 'And J.C.' (for junior college), and save all that money on signs."

Swenson was the star of the history video. Still a dignified figure at 84, he can easily stride up Cabrillo's hills. Swenson outlined the trials and triumphs of establishing a school that maintains a national reputation and has grown from 800 students to 12,000.

"Without a community college, we wouldn't have the university here," Swenson said. "By state law at the time, a university campus could not be established in any area without a community college."

Local movers and shakers were ready to move heaven and earth to get a university campus for what was then an impoverished Santa Cruz County.

Cabrillo also brought together the northern and southern halves of a county whose interests were so badly split in the 1950s that "you couldn't cross Freedom Boulevard without getting permission from someone," as Swenson put it.

"The guys from Santa Cruz and the guys from Watsonville High used to get into regular fights at the ball games," added Jack DuFour, one of Cabrillo's first students, who was also part of the history taping.

DuFour went on to teach and coach at Harbor High School.

"When Cabrillo formed, almost immediately much of that stopped," he said. "We had a chance to work together on the same team."

"The two areas of the county got together for the first time," Swenson agreed.

Before Cabrillo, local high school grads who wanted more education either drove (or took a daily bus leaving at 6 a.m.) to Hartnell Junior College in Salinas, or Monterey Peninsula College, getting back late at night. The third alternative was San Jose State, over the hill.

## Live Oak for \$300

Looking at today's wealth in Santa

Cruz County, it's hard to picture how poverty-stricken the area was in the post-war '50s.

"In 1959 (when Cabrillo opened), we were second to St. Petersburg, Fla., in the percentage of people over 65," Swenson said.

"Retired folks moved here on Social Security and bought \$300 plots in Live Oak as chicken ranches. It was a poor county."

Worse yet was the loss of opportunity for local students. "Less than 3 percent of students went beyond high school," he added.

Today Cabrillo has one of the highest transfer rates of students from a junior college into four-year colleges and universities, he said.

Swenson shepherded the infant institution through the usual problems of raising money and gathering political support.

"It required a vote of the people (to form a college district), and it took us three tries to pass it," he recalled.

To get the money to build something, Swenson and the new college board pointed out that local taxpayers would actually save money by approving bonds.

"It cost us more to send our students to other schools than to build our own community college," he explained, "because those outside colleges billed right back to us for every student."

The new college didn't open on a hill with award-winning architecture, but in what Bob Swenson called "a partially abandoned building on the Watsonville High School campus, built in 1901."

For more classrooms, the high school district bought an abandoned Army Air Force barracks from a military airport (gone now) east of La Selva Beach and leased it back to the college for \$1 a year.

"They had to saw it in half to move it," he said.

## In the '49ers playbook

Swenson said his staff didn't expect much enrollment that first session. "We were astonished when 800 students showed up," he said.

Among the early Cabrillo staff was the late Floyd Younger, whose name

will go on Cabrillo's new Horticulture Center at the top of the hill.

The college's first athletic director, Larry Siemering, did a lot with a new team and a knack for creative football plays.

"Some of his plays are still used by the '49ers," Swenson said.

DuFour, who lasted three semesters at Cabrillo before joining the Marines, took advantage of the opportunities community colleges can offer. When he got out of the Marines, DuFour returned to Cabrillo and announced, "I'm back!" His second chance led to 30 years as a schoolteacher.

"Community colleges offer students not only a second chance, but a third and fourth chance," historian Wisong pointed out. "That's why we're such a great country."

Swenson agreed. "We are fortunate in America to have a public educational system all the way through to the universities.

"It opens up opportunities not only in education, but a chance for people

of different ages, different cultures, races and economic levels to relate to each other. This concept helps preserve our whole democratic system."

The stately columned Cabrillo buildings didn't open on the old Swenson family property until 1963. Time magazine called Cabrillo one of the most beautiful campuses in America.

In its new quarters, Cabrillo played host to Dean McHenry and his UC Santa Cruz staff while construction of the new university campus was planned.

An odd echo from the poverty days came from DuFour, speaking as coach and teacher: "My athletes and students who grew up and graduated from high school here now can't afford a house.

"They can't send their kids to college here. We are losing these students. It's ironic that we're cutting our local kids short again."

*Mike Mason of Santa Cruz was Cabrillo College's first interim student body president.*