

Santa Cruz has a Long History of Convention Business

By Ross Eric Gibson

With studies under way to possibly reintroduce the convention industry to Santa Cruz, it might be well to recall its long history here. Santa Cruz was once the most popular convention destination in Northern California, after San Francisco.

The city of Santa Cruz began as a major shipping port for raw materials and agricultural products. Then, in 1862, the Bay Association held its convention in Santa Cruz to escape the hysteria of Civil War mobilization in San Francisco.

The association returned with such glowing reports of scenic Santa Cruz that other conventions made this their destination. For the first time, the tourist potential of Santa Cruz was recognized, and by the end of the Civil War, the first bathhouse on the West Coast had been constructed on the Santa Cruz waterfront.

The first luxury hotel in Santa Cruz was the Pacific Ocean House, built in 1865. Today's PG&E Building has some of the original Ocean House structure. It grew to contain its own theater, ballroom, banquet hall, roller skating rink, bar, billiard hall, bathhouse, tennis courts and croquet grounds.

In those days the avenue was called Willow Street. But in 1866, the name was changed to Pacific Avenue so the new influx of visitors would know which road led to the ocean.

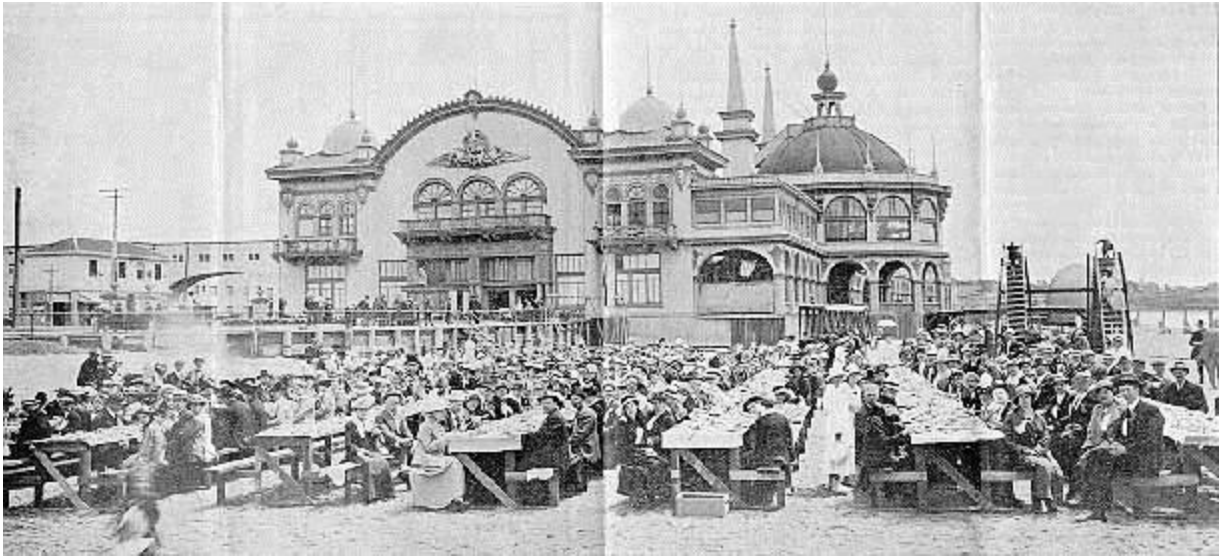
Coming to Santa Cruz was a day's journey over the mountains from Los Gatos on dusty, precipitous trails. That was reduced to a couple of hours when the railroad was completed in 1880.

But local merchants complained that many train tourists who came to see the redwoods then passed through Santa Cruz to stay at the Monterey Peninsula's quality resorts of Del Monte and Pacific Grove.

To appeal to the tourist market, the downtown replaced its boom-town utilitarian structures with quality commercial architecture of historic detail. The local answer to the grand Del Monte Hotel was the 1890 Queen Anne-style Sea Beach Hotel on Beach Hill. Its enormous ballroom took up almost the entire ground floor, suitable for conventions, events and exhibitions of almost any size.

The 1895 St. George Hotel did not stint on its quality of design and was praised by William Randolph Hearst for its elegance and service.

But no one promoted the Santa Cruz convention market as well as Fred Swanton. He built the 1911 Casa Del Rey convention hotel as part of his 1904 Boardwalk development. The Spanish Arches were an elevated hallway over Beach Street, which connected the hotel to the Coconut Grove Ballroom and Bayview Banquet Hall. In back was a palm grove of private cabins called Cottage City.



*The National Editorial Association having a meal on the beach near the Boardwalk, July 5, 1915.
(Photo from Santa Cruz Chamber of Commerce Activities, November 1915.)*

The Del Rey was easily accessible from the wharf's steamer port and by rail, with special convention trains stopping under the Spanish Arches. The Del Rey boasted its proximity to the Boardwalk, bathing beach and hot water plunge as well as fresh-water and salt-water fishing and boating. Its grounds included a putting green under the arches, with tennis courts in back.

And the hotel's country club was at Pogonip, which included golf links and polo grounds and a clubhouse modeled after the log clubhouse at Pebble Beach.

When the Sea Beach burned in 1912, it was a great loss of convention space and luxury suites for the waterfront. To compensate, the La Bahia Courts were built in 1920 as luxury suites for the Casa Del Rey.

The downtown, which had been the center of Santa Cruz tourism, now found its economy in decline, losing out to the more scenic beachfront facilities. Fred Hotaling, owner of the St. George, decided the only way to recapture the convention market for downtown was to compete directly with the waterfront.

This began with the 1920 construction of the New Santa Cruz Theater at Pacific and Walnut streets, which served as a movie theater and civic auditorium. Hotaling expanded the St. George into several adjacent buildings, added a facade in the Spanish style of the beachfront and, in 1922, renamed it the St. George Mission Inn.

This, coupled with the construction of the 1928 Palomar Hotel, regained the downtown's share of the convention market.

In a brilliant stroke, businessman Frank Roth leased all three convention hotels in 1930. Having them under the same management made it easier to book conventions of any size into Santa Cruz, any time of the year.

Promoting the variety of attractions within a five-mile radius of the town's convention hotels soon made Santa Cruz a top name in the industry. Conventions became a sustaining basis of the Santa Cruz economy.

By 1948, local investment in tourism surpassed all state averages. At one point, there were two to three conventions in Santa Cruz every week, year-round. Conventioneers brought family and friends, and businesses serving conventions were filling large orders every month.

Then a protracted restaurant strike in 1953 resulted in a substantial loss of convention bookings in Santa Cruz. Shortly after, the flood of 1955 killed the industry entirely, destroying the Santa Cruz theater and many businesses downtown and having much the same effect as the later Loma Prieta earthquake. All convention hotels became retirement homes.

A 1962 plan for a convention center at Lighthouse Field was designed by the late Frank Lloyd Wright's foundation and consisted of nine three-story crescent hotel wings, a pyramid convention hall and domed pavilions on the cliff, comprising an "international shopping village" in a parklike setting. When the developer failed to raise funds for the project, he intended to develop the field piecemeal with a cinder-block motel, restaurant and movie house.

But he sold the property in 1968 to a Los Angeles land speculation firm. Its Hilton plan proposed 11-story, Las Vegas-style slab skyscrapers and one-third of the field for a parking lot. Plans also called for turning West Cliff Drive into a four-lane highway (wiping out most homes and all front yards on West Cliff) and rezoning the drive as a high-density commercial strip of motels, fast-food outlets and service stations on the model of Ocean Street.

This also would have isolated the convention market so as not to benefit existing business centers, and that fact combined with opposition from neighbors to defeat the plan.

Sources

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