

The fading legacy of a Santa Cruz “Wall Dog”

Local sign painter Leo Sievert left his mark on our area



By Frank Perry

Today, most signs are designed on a computer. Thousands of typefaces and colors are available with the click of a mouse. But not all that long ago it all had to be done with pencils, rulers, brushes, and paint. Sign painting demanded careful planning, a steady hand, and a willingness to get a little dirty. For over fifty years the Santa Cruz area was fortunate to have one of the finest at this craft—Leo Sievert.

Born in Los Angeles in July 1901, he was only six years old when he was run over by a streetcar and lost a leg.

“At that time, I imagine that was an experience that set you apart,” said his son, Ken. “I think that made him put in extra effort to succeed.”

In 1913, Leo’s parents, Albert and Mary

Sievert, moved the family to a farm in Soquel near where Casalegno’s Store is today. This was a paradise for young Leo and his two brothers, Albert and Harold. They could explore the countryside and catch trout in Soquel Creek. Leo graduated from eighth grade at the old Mountain School. He attended Santa Cruz High for a time, where he was a member of the High School War Service Corps during WWI.

Leo loved doing art work and took correspondence courses in art and illustration. In 1923 he married Miss Gertrude Pengrey of Live Oak, and soon the young couple moved to the Los Angeles area where Leo sought work as an artist in the budding motion picture industry.

“He would do hand-painted scenes used

in the first frames and introductions to a movie, like western action scenes for early cowboy movies,” said Ken. This was when movies were still silent. Leo worked in Los Angeles for only a short time, but it was good experience. He loved to tell about one particular incident.

“A guy came in wanting to hire artists to do illustrations for a cartoon that featured a mouse,” Ken explained. “Everyone thought that was a crazy idea and laughed him out of the studio. It turned out that the guy was Walt Disney.”

By 1926, Leo and Gertrude were back at

(Top) A sign with a tropical theme to promote Capitola Hawaiian Gardens dance club.

(Inset) Leo Sievert’s business card.

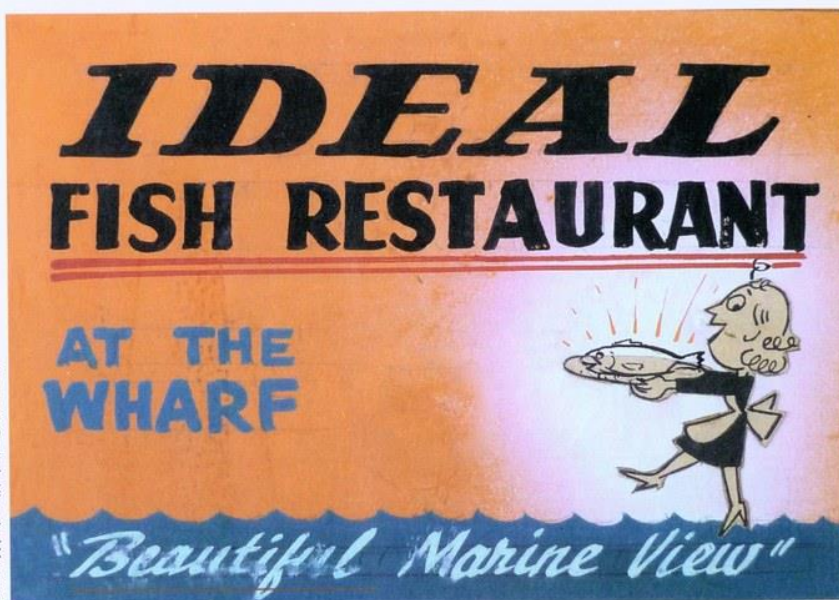


Image: © Capitola Historical Museum

(Above) In a design for a sho'card, a 1950s style cartoon waitress serves a fish dinner at Santa Cruz's Ideal Restaurant.

the ranch in Soquel, where their first daughter, Betty, was born. Leo and his younger brother, Harold, got a job for the Standard Oil Company traveling around California painting signs for service stations. By the early 1930s, Leo's reputation around Santa Cruz and the mid-county area had grown and he was able to focus on local work. His business card during this period quipped, "A sign in sight is

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worth two in the brush."

Many of his early clients are largely forgotten today, except by old-timers. They included the Ship Ahoy restaurant at the base of the Santa Cruz Wharf, the Chinese Gardens and Hawaiian Gardens nightclubs in Capitola, the Avenue Grill on Pacific Avenue in Santa Cruz, and the Stokely Fruit Company (currently Pacific Edge). Others are still in business, such as Stagnaro's, the Boardwalk, and Goodwill.

Photo: © Chevron Corporation

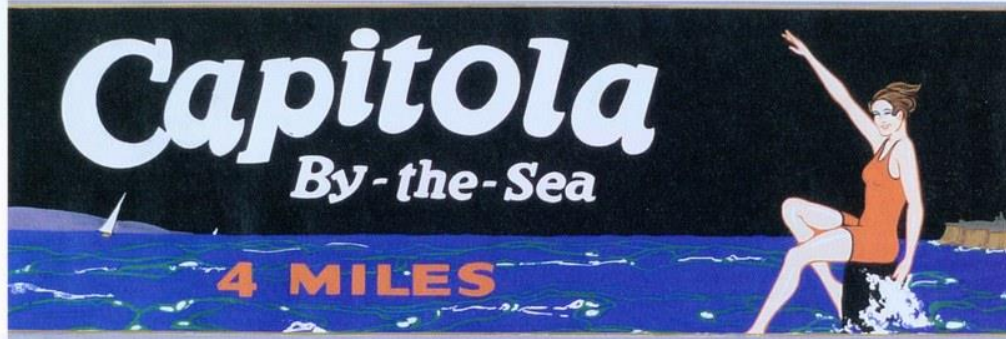
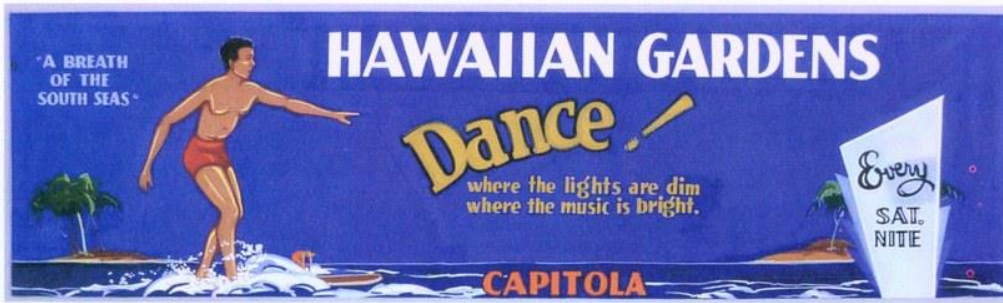
Amazingly, one of Leo's largest works still exists: the Theater Del Mar sign high on the back of the building, facing Front Street. That he was able to paint such a sign, so far above the ground, and with only one leg, seems quite remarkable. Ken once asked his father just how he did it. It took two, he said: Leo and his brother Harold. They had big hooks that fit over the top of the building and long ropes tied to the hooks. They sat on a plank attached to the ropes, and raised and lowered the plank with a block and tackle. When they reached the desired level, they would each tie off their ropes to hold it in place.

"One fumble with the tie-off would not be good," Ken noted. "It would scare the bejeebers out of me, but that's the way they did it." Since sign painters were literally tied to a wall when working on a large project such as the Del Mar, they became affectionately known in the advertising industry as "wall dogs."

At the other end of the size spectrum was a two-and-a-half-inch picture of "Capitola-by-the-Sea" that Leo drew for Capitola Postmaster Harry Hooper in 1938. Hooper used the image to decorate cachet



(Above) A woman waits beside her Stutz Bearcat in a Standard Oil service station. During the 1920's Sievert traveled throughout California painting signs for Standard Oil.



(Above) Two designs for billboards promoting Capitola By the Sea that were later placed along the roads leading to into town.

envelopes commemorating National Airmail Week, May 15 through 21. He mailed them to addresses all over the United States.

In 1938 Leo opened a sign shop at the corner of Soquel Avenue and Frederick Street (now the site of MacKenzie's Chocolates) which he occupied for over 40 years. He usually signed his signs, but even those he didn't can usually be recognized.

"The top of his 'S' is larger than the bottom," explained his granddaughter Kathy Thoma Greytak.

Leo emphasized outdoor, window, and truck signs, but he also did showcards—small display signs for sales and special events. He belonged to the Santa Cruz Art League, but didn't do that much fine art. Sometimes, however, his signs incorporated landscapes, portraits, or cartoons. In the 1950s he did an all-color version of the County Seal for the capitol in Sacramento. He also designed billboards to be placed in other cities, such as Bakersfield, promoting Santa Cruz's industrial and real estate potential. In 1957 he made fourteen sketches of characters from Santa Cruz County history. These were for a "pictorial parade of the past" in the Santa Cruz County exhibit at the Los Angeles County Fair. He drew them in pen and ink and based the likenesses on old



(Above) Seivert's pen and ink drawing of the legendary Charley Parkhurst for an exhibit at the 1957 Los Angeles County Fair.



Photo: Mickey Carroll

(Above) Painted during the last century, Sievert's Del Mar Theatre sign continues to live on today.

photos. Famed stagecoach driver Charley Parkhurst required a bit of imagination since no photo existed. All three of these jobs were funded by the Santa Cruz County Advertising Committee, of which Malio Stagnero was president.

Stagnero, who was also president of the Cottardo Stagnero Fishing Corporation on the Santa Cruz wharf, had known Leo since high school. In the early 1960s he engaged him in another atypical project. This was a series of amusing cartoon panels depicting the Stagnero clan in a Buone Feste (Happy Holidays) advertisement in the newspaper.

Besides commercial work, Leo also did volunteer work for charities. In 1940 he was accepted into the Lions Club. (How could they not accept someone named Leo?) One of his early projects with the club was helping to create a sign at the County Courthouse on Cooper Street listing all northern Santa Cruz County men and women serving in the armed forces during World War II. He painted a four-foot-wide eagle above the 2,500 names. The sign was dedicated on December 30, 1943, in an impressive patriotic ceremony that blocked off Cooper Street. Even downtown stores closed so employees could attend.

Art and music often go together, and Leo was a living example. He was



(Above) Sievert tests out a hand-painted "head in the hole" photo backdrop, before delivering it to his customer.

a lifelong musician, playing drums in a dance band. He was a member of the local musicians union for more than 25 years.

Leo's Soquel Avenue shop was often lit at night, with Leo working away. He loved painting signs. In the late 1970s he sold the business to one of his employees, but Leo continued painting. He worked right up until his death in 1980. Many artists leave

behind a legacy of work hanging in galleries or private homes, or published in books. Sadly, sign art, no matter how beautiful or creative, usually has a limited lifespan. Eventually the sign fades or peels, or the client goes out of business. Fortunately, Leo and his descendants saved a few of his miniature prototype signs that he would show to clients for approval. They are just a small sampling of a lifetime of work, but his care and creativity are immediately evident. Stored away for as much as 80 years, the signs still radiate with stunning reds, greens, yellows, and blues as

Visit The Exhibit

What: Leo Sievert's Sign Art

When: Through 2016
Thursday through Sunday,
Noon to 4 p.m.

Where: Capitola Historical Museum
410 Capitola Avenue
Capitola 95010

Contact:
(831) 464-0322
email: capitolamuseum@gmail.com
www.cityofcapitola.org/capitola-museum

Image: © Capitola Historical Museum