

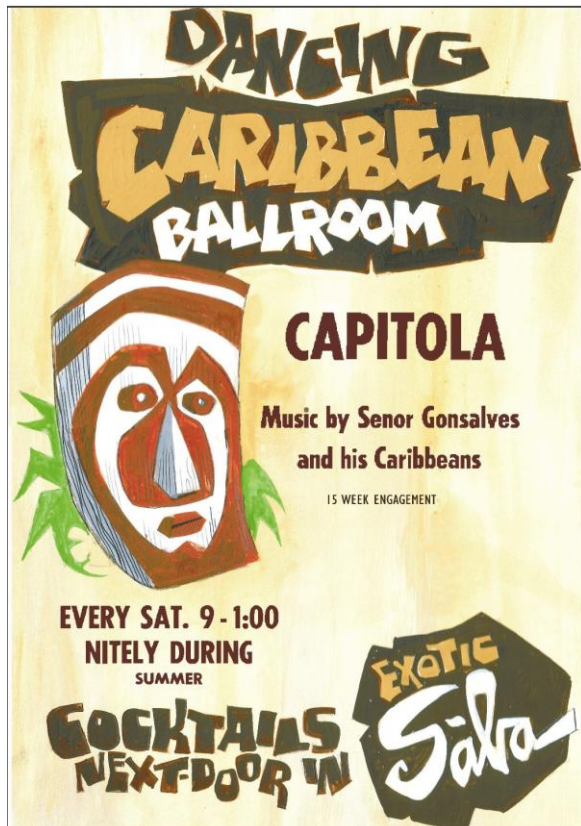
CAPITOLA SUNSET

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Just Beachy—Capitola in the 1950s

Themed to harmonize with plans for the upcoming celebration of the City's 60th birthday, the Capitola Museum's new exhibit opened this fall with two festive events. A public reception on December 6th followed a volunteer welcome on November 8th. Star guest on both occasions was Frank Hill, the former art student who crafted tikis in 1954 for the Saba and Caribbean Ballroom at the end of the Esplanade.

Hill, who has yet to retire from his long career as an artist, recently updated one of his 1950s Saba posters. Illustrated with tikis, the poster has been reproduced on t-shirts. The shirts had their debut at the reception and are currently the number one item offered for a donation in the Museum store.



Our new tiki t-shirt by Frank Hill.

People Who Made It All Possible

Judith Steen, who has designed our exhibits for fifteen years, once again brought together images and objects to tell the story of Capitola's history. This one is both youthful and fun.

Artifact loans, energy, and skills were also generously given by Betsy's Antiques, Bruce Arthur, Jim Byberg, Nancy Campeau, Charles Canfield and the Seaside Company, Eric Fingal and Covello and Covello Photography, Frank Hill, Roy Johnson and Johnson Art Studio, Niels Kisling, Joe Michalak, Linda and Larry Smith, Steve Swift, Nels and Susan Westman, Marybeth Varcados, and "Z Surfer."

Why the 1950s?

Hundreds of once-upon-a-time children can still chirp out the answer to Buffalo Bob's question, "Hey kids, what time is it?" (It's Howdy Doody time!) Legions of former teenagers to this day can feel a stab of pain when they think of James Dean and his silver Porsche 550 Spyder. But how many 1950s youngsters can close their eyes and remember the taste and smell of Babe's fries?

The turn of a new decade in 1950 was one of Capitola's defining moments. After struggling to keep up the requisite amenities of a popular resort—road and wharf repairs and clean water, for example—the community opted in 1949 to incorporate as a municipality. The election passed by a paper-thin edge, 297–243. The act was a radical move and one that worked, but just barely. In 1952, another election to "disincorporate" failed by an equally slender margin.

Elected leaders believed it was worth it to keep the City going. The old Capitola resort was fading. Passenger trains no longer stopped at the depot. Instead, a broad, new highway carved through

familiar old neighborhoods. Young families came by the hundreds, and with their baby boomers came demands for school classrooms and places away from the beach where children could play.

Without becoming sentimental or schmaltzy, “Just Beachy—Capitola in the 1950s” offers visitors of all ages just enough triggers to snap them back in time for a sweet, short tour of the past. From the paddleboats on the lagoon to the horses on the merry-go-round, it’s meant to be a cool little ride.

How the Tiki Came to Capitola

It happened in 1954.

The “tikiana” bar craze—fermented in the years of the Great Depression—had moved from Los Angeles up to the Bay Area by the early Fifties. Victor Bergeron opened “Trader Vic’s,” a San Francisco restaurant decorated with tiki carvings, bamboo, and outrigger canoes.

Brad Macdonald, Capitola’s mayor and the founder of Shadowbrook Restaurant, was a thirty-something entrepreneur who was raised in Capitola and had worked and lived in San Francisco. In 1953, he was young, confident, and brave enough to speculate on a new venture.

Planning to sell Shadowbrook and start a new enterprise with his father, Jack Macdonald, Brad visited Bergeron at Trader Vic’s. Inspired, the two MacDonalds created “Capitola’s Saba and Caribbean Ballroom” with a West Indies theme.

The plan was to combine a trendy dining atmosphere with a profitable entertainment venue. The outmoded Capitola ballroom and skating rink at the end of the Esplanade seemed the perfect site. The ballroom sat on the footprint of the landmark Hotel Capitola that burned in 1929. Although hastily constructed in the mid-1930s, the dance pavilion had seating for up to 1,000 patrons. An adjoining lounge offered sweeping views of Monterey Bay.



The Saba was renovated and ready for its grand opening in 1954. Stretching the bounds of reality with its fanciful décor, the restaurant presented carved tikis inside and out, with walls draped in fishnets, bamboo, and thatched grass adorned with the shells of man-eating clams. A huge swordfish and an outrigger canoe were eye-catching centerpieces. Painted in day-glow colors, the adjacent ballroom radiated with black lights. Behind the orchestra stage was the chimera of lava flowing down a papier-mâché volcano. Tikis, the central icon, were etched even onto the tops of the dining tables.

Brad and Jack both remembered the enormous popularity of Capitola’s nightclubs that had drawn large crowds throughout the 1920s and early 1930s. The era of marathon dancing was a time, however brief, when Capitola enjoyed ranking as a year-round visitor destination. They gambled on their ability to recapture this past fame by booking in celebrated performers.

Times had changed, however. The Macdonalds’ attempt to put Capitola on the circuit of popular bands was a risk that worked, but not to the degree that Brad had hoped. The great names appeared—Dizzy Gillespie, Count Basie, Ella Fitzgerald, Lionel Hampton—but they had to compete with the juke box when it came to attracting younger audiences.

Nonetheless, from 1954 until the Saba burned in 1957, the Macdonalds booked in headline entertainment that added sophistication to Capitola at a time when it was a struggling new municipality with an uncertain economic future.

The Saba's tikis burned in the fire, but their connection to the whimsical nature of Capitola has made them a suitable icon for revival. This year—fifty years after their disappearance from Capitola's Esplanade, the tiki has returned.

Today's community supports its heritage while it shapes contemporary life. Capitola's personality is that of a successful city stitched on the historic fabric of an easy-going tourist resort. Within its character is an unconventional spirit that surfaces every so often to add a new dimension. Surprising as it may seem, a tiki is part of that characteristic pattern.

President's Corner

By Linda Smith

A new exhibit opening is always a pleasure, and "Just Beachy—Capitola in the 1950s" is one that exceeds expectations. Intended to give meaning "between the lines" to the time when Capitola became a municipality, this show is also as satisfying as a thick milk shake on a hot day.

Complimenting the exhibit is the release of a new Museum t-shirt. Darcy Horton, Museum board vice-president and newsletter editor, assisted by our volunteer coordinator, Niels Kisling, worked together on the design and production of a shirt depicting an updated version of artist Frank Hill's 1954 Saba poster. The results are cool, attractive, and available for a reasonable donation.

As the New Year arrives, the Capitola Museum plans to be involved with the celebration of the City's birthday, and has several more ideas on the drawing board for community events, fundraising, and visitor-pleasing activities. But for now, please "come on down" to see the exhibit, watch a video

of a vintage show (*I Love Lucy, The Honeymooners, The Lone Ranger...*), leaf through a *Life Magazine*, and feel "Just Beachy." All you need to imagine is the scent of coconut oil.

Artist Frank Hill

Remember Walter Cronkite and *You Are There?*, the 1950s television series? Frank Hill has lent a similar perspective to the Capitola Museum's exhibit on the same era.



Hill grew up in Capitola, living with his family near today's Shadowbrook. He even remembers the chalet cabin in its pre-restaurant days, when a realtor once let Hill and his friends go inside for a Halloween spree.

He was in high school in 1947 when Brad Macdonald and Ed Philippet founded their dining establishment. Hill became Shadowbrook's first dishwasher and was soon designing menus on wooden shingles, or painting oak dining tables a bright pink. These were Macdonald's ideas, he remembers, and although they seemed a bit outlandish, they worked.

While Hill was attending the Academy of Art in San Francisco in 1954, he did artwork for Macdonald when home for the weekend. The artist carved tikis from telephone poles, designed menus, painted tabletops, and trimmed the interior décor of the Saba and Caribbean Ballroom.

Hill later continued his art career, working for Charles Schultz, creator of the *Peanuts* comic strip; Frank O'Neal and *Short Ribs*; and Hank Ketcham's *Dennis the Menace*. Hill spent thirty years working with Ketcham's syndicated strip and still writes captions for the Sunday pages.

Washhouse Doors Open

Steve Swift has nearly completed the painting touch ups and put up Plexiglas to cover the openings to the washhouse. The project, representing more than a year of volunteer work by many hands, is finally done. Volunteers will now open the doors as part of their regular shift duties and passersby can get a better view of what summer life was like in Capitola, c1935.

Acknowledgments

Funds received in response to our last newsletter will be used to restore historically significant artifacts in the Museum collection. Many thanks to the following generous people:

- Marian Carlson
- Bud Carney
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- Darcy Horton
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- Kathleen King
- Butch Mudgett
- Emma Rock

- Larry Smith
- Patti Wakefield
- Mark Wheeler

Awash in a Sea of Red Hats

There were red hats everywhere on November 15th when the Museum was visited by women from the local Red Hat Society. Known for their red hats, purple dresses, camaraderie, and sense of fun, they consider themselves members of a “disorganization” that wants nothing to do with rules and bylaws. Their only mission is to gain greater visibility for women over 50 in order to reshape how they are viewed by today's culture. What a pleasure to have them share their style and joy with us.



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Museum Hours: Wednesday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday from 12 to 4 p.m.
Museum Director: Carolyn Swift
Board of Trustees: Linda Smith (President), Darcy Horton (Vice President), Tom McGranahan (Treasurer), Topsy Smalley (Secretary), Gordon van Zuiden, Bob Anderson, and Niels Kisling