

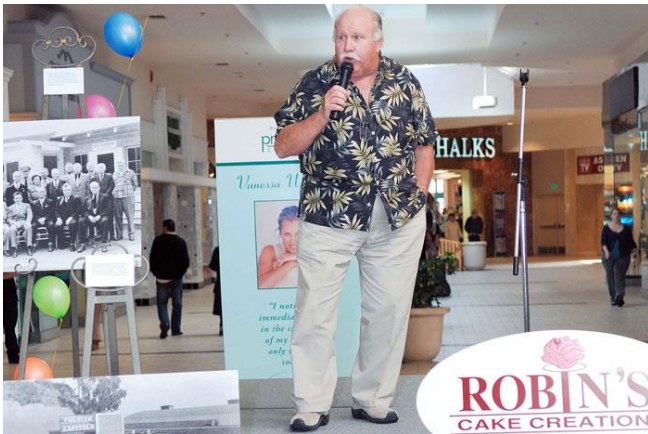
# CAPITOLA SUNSET

March 2009, Volume 3, Issue 1

## Capitola's 60<sup>th</sup> Birthday Celebrations Begin with City-Sized Cake

A blasting horn atop the fire station heralded the triumphant victory of Capitola's incorporation election on the night of January 4, 1949.

On January 11 of this year—the city's official 60<sup>th</sup> birthday—the community's festive spirit was re-ignited when Lynsey Niizawa of the Capitola Mall set up a super-sized party near the Food Court. Everyone was encouraged to celebrate. City officials sliced into a Robin's Cake Creation masterpiece at least six feet wide, with a sweeping panoramic view traced with icing.



Council member Ron Graves helps Capitola celebrate its birthday.

Eight photographs of Capitola in the 1950s, blown up and enhanced by Larry Smith, were set on easels below the speaker's stand. City Manager Rich Hill started the festivities by introducing a series of speakers, including Capitola-Soquel Chamber of Commerce Director Toni Castro, Museum Director Carolyn Swift, Vice-Mayor Sam Storey, and Council member Ron Graves. Remembering the challenges and triumphs of his thirty-two year career, Graves—who won his first Council election in

1968—only had time to tell a few stories of how Capitola has changed and grown. Even so, he was able to chart some of the giant strides forward the city has achieved in six decades.

Capitola's birthday observance picked up steam again in February with performances of "Smoke," the popular cabaret by Joe Ortiz. Singer Lori Rivera presented a total of three shows, each benefiting the Capitola birthday fundraising effort.

Fast approaching now is the big weekend of events scheduled May 15–17<sup>th</sup>, starting off with an evening of history on Friday at the New Brighton Middle School performing arts hall. Sandy Lydon and Carolyn Swift have agreed to set aside their (sometimes opposing) historical viewpoints and together present "Secret Capitola—Untold Mysteries and Whispered Legends from the City By-The-Sea." A \$5 donation is requested for the evening's festivities to begin at 6 p.m. with a reception and performance by the Santa Cruz Youth Symphony musicians, to be followed by the history talk from 7 to 9 p.m.

Weekend entertainment to follow will include a concert, beach movie, bounce house, dunk tank, pie-eating contest, and vintage car parade through the village.

## Surprised and Grateful

Linda Smith, museum board president, and Carolyn Swift, museum director, had some great news in early March. Both received word from the Capitola-Soquel Chamber that they were to be honored at the annual awards ceremony on March 20.

Linda and her husband, Larry Smith, are Chamber Volunteers-of-the-Year, recognized for work not only with the museum, but the Capitola Begonia

Festival, the City's 60<sup>th</sup> Birthday Committee, and numerous other city projects.

Carolyn, observing her 15<sup>th</sup> year as museum director, was chosen Woman-of-the-Year. She feels that the honor demonstrates how well the Chamber and the community appreciate the museum, and that Capitola Historical Museum volunteers, exhibit designers, donors, and the Board of Directors all deserve to share in the tribute. For the museum, the City of Capitola's 60<sup>th</sup> birthday year has really become something to celebrate!



Linda Smith and Carolyn Swift

## Tough Times, Tougher People

**“There is no cause to worry. The high tide of prosperity will continue”**

**– Andrew W. Mellon, Secretary of the Treasury.  
September 1929**

Even before the stock market crashed of October 29, 1929, Capitola was steeped in worry.

The resort's owner, H. Allen Rispin, had made lavish expansion promises while, at the same time, he withdrew support for community services. The water system had been sold off, the sewers needed repair, and the fire equipment was from another century. Capitola was also just far enough into the countryside during Prohibition to attract some

hard-hitting drinkers—imbibers who got into trouble so often that the place was becoming known for its “rough element.”

Shortly before the big crash, the Capitola village business district—consisting mostly of apartment and restaurant managers, real estate agents, and store proprietors—had joined with their Soquel counterparts to try for joint city incorporation. But the attempt was abandoned when the proponents couldn't agree, and as Capitola sailed toward the end of 1929 vacation season, residents watched their worst fears materialize.

Rispin announced an on-the-beach auction of his remaining holdings in July. Everyone believed he was facing foreclosure. No one knew how greatly these financial losses would impact the village economy.

Meanwhile, the hottest moneymaker in town was threatening to pack up and leave. The Hawaiian Garden Nightclub, although not a speakeasy, was an all-night dance venue that attracted a party-hardy clientele. The audiences spent enough to help both Capitola and Soquel in the off-season. When asked by the police commission to close at midnight, nightclub owner Frank Blake warned that he would close up and move unless he got his way. The commission backed off.

When the Great Depression began that October, the construction boom that had carried Capitola through the 1920s came to an abrupt end. Work stopped on the Venetian Court and other apartments. Then on the afternoon of Dec. 16, the landmark Hotel Capitola caught fire. It burned in less than two hours in a blaze of mysterious origin. An estimated 5,000 spectators came to watch.

Four years later, late one night in February 1933, another fire started at the Capitola Theater on San Jose Avenue. This time, the whole block between San Jose and Stockton Avenues, including the prized Hawaiian Garden, was reduced to ashes.

How did Capitola survive the tough years of the Depression? Amazingly, much of Capitola's strength came from the disciplined business approach of its developer and original owner, Frederick Augustus Hihn, who guided the resort's fortunes with strict control from 1874 until he died in 1913.

His rigid standards gave the vacation retreat a lasting model to follow from season to season. Capitola had upscale accommodations and refined entertainments, but it was primarily an affordable resort for families. That meant reasonably priced rooms, public pathways, free concerts, dances, beach games, paddleboats, and lots of opportunities to go fishing.

Hihn's pattern for Capitola gave the community something to fall back on when the bottom fell out.

Capitola came through the Great Depression under the guidance of community leaders who sacrificed money, skills, and time to do the work that had to be done to prepare for the next summer season.

Plumbers came after work to fix leaks in the antiquated sewer system. Carpenters volunteered time and again to repair the wharf. Clubs held card parties to raise money for fire equipment. Laborers helped to smooth the roads, dam the lagoon, and clean the beach of debris. And every summer, when the shoreline was crowded with vacationers, hard times were forgotten.

## President's Corner

While the economy isn't seeing its brightest days, the Capitola Museum Board of Trustees wishes to thank its supporters, who have stayed with us during this period of uncertainty.

Our newsletter, the *Capitola Sunset*, now in its second year of publication, continues to be well received and to generate benefits. Among these rewards are donations of Capitola artifacts, help with research, as well as financial donations.

Many visitors have come to the museum or made contact by e-mail, sharing about the history and other newsletter articles. Inspired by this response, we are keener than ever in our efforts to make each newsletter entertaining and informative.



To all of our financial supporters, thank you. Your contributions help create a "community memory" for Capitola that will continue in the future to enrich the experience of vacationers, new residents, old timers, and children.

**We need your help to keep the Capitola Historical Museum open.** Recently we've had to close the museum on several occasions because we didn't have a volunteer available. If you'd like to help out by becoming a volunteer, contact Niels Kisling at [nkisling@pacbell.net](mailto:nkisling@pacbell.net) or 332-7454.

## 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:

- Carla Carstens
- Tony and Kathryn Gualtieri
- Carin and Glen Hanna
- Marvin Jensen

- Robert and Elda McLean
- Ron Olmstead
- Joe and Gayle Ortiz
- Paul Parsons
- Ettamae Shaffer
- Nels and Susan Westman

## New Acquisitions

Several friends of the museum dropped by last month with superb treasures, including old maps, postcards, a photograph, and one very unique copy of the original *Capitola Sunset*, the historic newspaper that has inspired the title of this newsletter.

The edition is in great shape, and comes to the museum as a long-term loan from Thomas L. Delay of Salinas. He found it tucked in a book years ago and decided it to share it with Capitola visitors.

This 1897 paper, distributed mostly to summertime visitors, had praised Capitola as “One of the Prettiest of Nature’s Gifts to the Golden State.” (The Village’s reputation has evidently remained secure for the last 112 years, since the March 2009 edition of *Sunset* magazine lists it as one of “the West’s 20 best small towns.”)

Marvin Jensen has also provided the archive with the first three issues of another rare newspaper, *The Capitolan* published in 1973 by John and Pat Bakalian. Several days after the issues arrived, John was encountered sipping coffee at Gayle’s Bakery. He confided that three issues were about all that were ever printed. A friend started *The Aptos Voice* about the same time, he said, and the two weeklies decided not to compete with one another.

The generous packet of paper ephemera from Jensen also included a real surprise—an envelope from the Hotel Capitola and a single piece of stationary with the letterhead of Mrs. Frank (Patty

Reed) Lewis. The famed Donner Party survivor had managed Capitola hotels from 1888–1897.

John Nicol, a third generation Capitolan, has shared some astonishing and sharp, crisp photos taken over a range of time from c1893–1897. Many have never been seen before, and appear to be the work of S.W. Watrous, a Soquel resident and talented photographer who leased the camp photo studio from owner Frederick Hihn. The images show the resort as it appeared just before construction of the large Hotel Capitola, and then panoramic scenes of the period between 1895–1897, when the first hotel wing is done but the second is not yet completed.

Our cutest “photo of the month” comes from Mary Lee Lincoln. Pictured in this 1926 China Beach photograph are Jane Mathews, age 2, wearing the Capitola swimsuit, and, left to right, Theodora (Daw) Mathews Phillipsen, Don Mathews, and Jean Lincoln. The children were relatives of Athol “Thomas” Lindsay, who leased the beach for fishing and built cabins below the bluff at what is today New Brighton Beach State Park.



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