

Gorman Woody—A Life in Live Oak

News release

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While the Capitola Museum looks like a little red schoolhouse tucked next to an old train trestle, in reality it is a modest 1920s farmhouse that once existed in the neighboring community of Live Oak. This winter, the museum will celebrate its “roots” with an exhibit about the life of photographer and artist Gorman Woody, a man who spent many years in the community historically known for egg laying contests and the cultivation of bulbs and flowers.

Gorman Woody—A Life in Live Oak unites a landscape with the talent and character of a gifted craftsman. Born in Kansas in 1907, Woody came to Santa Cruz in 1924 as a teenager with an avid interest in art. Attending Santa Cruz High School the following year, he made lasting friendships with a number of classmates who were also to lead remarkable lives. Among them were Don Patterson, famed as the Seaside Company’s “Mighty Bosco,” Robert Hale Merriman, the Spanish Civil War Lincoln Brigade Commander characterized in Ernest Hemingway’s “For Whom the Bell Tolls,” and Esther Fields Rice, who along with her husband, Russell, became manager of airports at Capitola and Scotts Valley.

In the barnstorming era of “aeroplanes,” Woody developed a passion for flying, but not as a pilot. He was happiest as a passenger with his hands on a camera. Leaning over the side of a Waco OX5 piloted by Ray Gillen, he captured on film amazing aerial views of the coastline from Santa Cruz to Aptos. One momentous flight took place

nearly 75 years ago, on January 22, 1930, when the pair flew over and photographed the concrete ship U.S.S. Palo Alto on its approach to Monterey Bay. Woody later shot the boat as it was anchored forever at Seacliff Beach, its interior transformed, briefly, into an amusement ship.

Woody was living in Live Oak in 1931 when he met and married Lorena Daniel, a sales clerk at the Metropolitan Chain Store in Santa Cruz. He had started a career as a metal worker, employed in the Santa Cruz studio of “Otar the Lampmaker.” John Otter was famed as the creator of original and exquisite hand wrought iron and brass lamps, gates, fixtures, and decorative screens.



In the late 1930s, Woody moved on to become a master cabinet maker. He formed a partnership with contractor Darrow Palmer. For many years, the company known as the Palmer Shop was located near the Woody home on Chanticleer Avenue. Some of the firm's projects included Pasatiempo homes designed by noted architect

William W. Wurster, the Scotts Valley home of movie director Alfred Hitchcock, and the Bonny Doon residence of eminent historian Page Smith and his wife, artist Eloise Smith.

Life in Live Oak, particularly one near the frontage road beside the new highway, gave the Woodys and their daughter, Noreen, a clear vision of their community’s future. Gradually, the tract around them known as “the chicken district,” once filled with small vegetable truck farms and poultry ranches, was developed with subdivision homes. Acres of bulbs were cleared for houses and shopping centers. Woody, who had been a volunteer fireman in the 1940s, took a seat as a Live Oak Elementary School District trustee in the late 1950s, just as the district was

faced with the pressures of overcrowding, and is credited with helping to expand the number of schools.

As the Capitola Museum exhibit traces Gorman Woody’s life, it also views—often through his own eyes—the place he called home. Nearing retirement, the artist returned to his love of drawing, studied oil painting, and produced a series of works that spotlight local landmarks as well as his own much loved landscapes.

Gorman Woody—A Life in Live Oak will host a public reception at noon December 11 in the museum, 410 Capitola Avenue. The show will continue through mid-April. Museum hours are noon to 4 p.m., Friday through Sunday, and admission is free.