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West Cliff Drive's scenic erosion | Ross Eric Gibson, Local History



When the lighthouse was moved inland from the point, it overlooked the Lighthouse Natural Bridge, which collapsed in 1888. Today a small crag is all that remains. (Ross Eric Gibson collection)

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If the town's front yard is the boardwalk and beachfront, then West Cliff Drive is its front porch.

The drive has been assembled over the years into what it is today: a linear park, tied together in 1976 with its iconic bike path. In the 1960s, West Cliff Drive had a narrow gravel shoulder impossible to bicycle upon. The era's Car Culture regarded bikes as toys for those without a driver's license. Today the West Cliff Bike Path is a vital corridor for biking, hiking, strolling and sightseeing, without a single cross-road for three miles.

Yet the origins of West Cliff Drive were anything but promising. The first construction on West Cliff was the 1849 Anthony Wharf, designed as a potato chute jutting out from the end of Bay Street. Bought by the lime and cement company in 1853, a massive wharf-side warehouse walled off the cliff front west of Bay Street.

This was referred to as "Warehouse Point." It was speculated that Santa Cruz would become a major shipping port, so lots on West Cliff and the waterfront were bought and sold frequently. But the unsettled condition of land deeds, and the transient nature of the free-flowing Gold Rush population, left the waterfront a low-key shipping destination.

Lighthouse



A Santa Cruz lighthouse was recommended as early as 1852, but no one got around to building it until after the Civil War. Almus Rountree had tried to tame the point's winds by planting a forest of trees, and sold the lighthouse property to the government, with the lighthouse opened in 1869. Lighthouse Avenue was the road to the lighthouse, since each cliffside block was a private estate, owning to the edge of the cliff. Yet those who wanted to enjoy a walk to the lighthouse often followed a footpath along the cliff edge, which crossed private property. To get to the path, you had to go up Bay Street to Lighthouse Avenue, then back down Cowell Street to get around the Cowell property.

Within only a decade the lighthouse had to be moved, as three sea caves under it threatened to collapse. In 1879, the new lighthouse location was just inland of where the road rounds the point, looking out on a natural bridge in a cove. Laura Hecox became lighthouse keeper in 1883. Her studies led to the establishment of a natural history museum, first in her lighthouse home, then in the town. The Lighthouse Natural Bridge collapsed in 1888, leaving a sea stack in the cove.

Meanwhile, the cliff path was eventually enlarged into "Cliff Drive" by 1889, then as the name "East Cliff Drive" came more into use, "West Cliff Drive" was coined to differentiate. The row of homes along the bayside cliff became known as "Newport of the Pacific," although it was not a row of mansions, but of middle-class homes that reminded folks of the Newport waterfront. Cowell's warehouse was shortened in 1940, and West Cliff Drive extended to the Depot. The warehouse was finally demolished in 1959.

The lighthouse was used as a spotting tower during World War II, then demolished in 1948, and replaced with an automatic beacon on a derrick, surrounded by a barbed wire-topped cyclone fence right on the point. As a tribute to a man who died surfing, the Mark Abbott Memorial Lighthouse was constructed in place of the derrick in 1967. This put the new building at the site of the first lighthouse. The new lighthouse became the world's first Surfing Museum in 1986, while the site of the lost natural bridge is now named Laura Hecox Cove.

Wind, wave and erosion

The velocity of winds coming down the coast has led to the planting of numerous windbreaks along West Cliff. The largest of these was the "Forest of Phelan Park," as Lighthouse Field was once called. A special on-site landscape gardener maintained a park-like setting, emphasizing nature. The cliffs were planted with dune plants like "mesembryanthemum" or ice plant. This provided drought-tolerant flowers and greenscape, fire suppression of volatile grasses, cliff-soil conservation, and erosion control. It was adopted by women's clubs at the turn of the century to expand the floral aesthetic.



Succulent flowering dune plants have become a signature of West Cliff Drive since 1885, when first planted around the Forest of Phelan Park (now Lighthouse Field). (Ross Eric Gibson collection)

The shoreline is a horizontal layer-cake of strata, which weathers back in stair-step fashion, producing low reefs, shoreline shelves and crags. But this is coupled with a vertical downward-flow erosion, that sculpts the cliff face into accordion folds. And barriers must include weep-holes to prevent moisture build-up. Early solutions were stacked dry concrete sacks that were wetted.

Waves coming down the coast, tend to break directly against certain cliffs in Mitchell Cove. Where the Cypress and Carmel Apartments are were originally "Lighthouse Campground" from 1929 to 1962. It was noted for its butterflies, until the tall trees were removed in 1963. It sat between two peninsulas stretching into the sea. The eastern one was sometimes called Pirate Arch, because the ocean end looks like the profile of a man in a tricorn hat. And just off Columbia Street was the Dagger Double-Arch. After the two arches collapsed, it became known as Bird Rock.

Seasculptors

Between Columbia and Woodrow Avenue is the cliff known in the 1950s as "Sea Sculptors." It was so named because when the waves were high, they hit here on different surfaces that sculpted them into fans, spouts, domes and scrolls. An early water spout eventually wore away, but another one formed on the cliff closer to Woodrow.



"Sea Sculptors" is a section of coast on the east shore of Mitchell Cove, where waves are the most spectacular. (Ross Eric Gibson Collection)

This coastal display was the reason for building the Cliff House of Vue De l'Eau (which old timers often pronounced "Voo de Loo"). It was a pagoda-like trolley terminal for Garfield Avenue (now Woodrow) and an observatory for the waves. The trolley served Garfield Park Christian Campgrounds, which named Crown Arch just west of the Cliff House after their Crown youth league. Mitchell's Cove was originally known as Vue de l'Eau Cove, and included a baseball park, which in 1905 became a zoo and circus headquarters. West of Bethany Creek was the Cliff Museum and Curio Store, run by John and Jennie Moore, selling picnic supplies, souvenirs and pressed seaweed.

Surfside Beach was named by the subdivision it served, extending from Bethany Creek to Sunset Avenue. It used to have a cave that was used as a changing room. In the 1960s, a hole formed in the ceiling, leaving an "oculus" skylight, with the mouth of the cave forming Surfside natural bridge. A giant cypress tree grew on the cliff above the cave. In the 1950s, a sewer-outfall tower was built near the cliff, later turned into a staircase to the beach. The tree toppled over in a storm. The cave was eventually reduced to just one wall, in which a small natural bridge was formed. When this collapsed, it left a crag on the beach. The crag is almost completely gone, leaving little trace of what was once the beach's chief landmark.



When skylights open-up in coastal sea caves, they form natural bridges, as with this one near Surfside Beach. (Ross Eric Gibson Collection)

While the purisima sandstone tends to wear away faster, west of Almar we find the substrata to be a more resistant concretionary mudstone. It shows itself in reefs along the shoreline. The 1905 Phillip P. Bliss House at De La Costa and West Cliff, gives the name "Bliss Point" to the cliff there. A nearby staircase leads, not to a beach, but to Potter's Reef, noted for its "Sea Aquariums," as early locals called the tide pools.

The only house on the cliffside of the road was built in 1937 for cellist Bessie Boyd Miller, and called Tide Cliff Studio. Her Cotswold-style cottage sat to the east, with a music studio to the west containing a grand piano. At the house, she married childhood sweetheart Thomas Douglass Frazer in 1938, a popular California School landscape painter. The main house faces Philbrick Cove, named for a house built at the corner of Fair Street by motorboat king Fred A. Philbrick.

The Shingle cottage at the corner of John Street was built in 1907 for Wm. C. Pendleton, who had a flower nursery on West Cliff Drive. Swift Cove faces Swift Street and Merced Avenue. At the end of Stockton Avenue is "Point Pleiades," whose west face has cliff pigeon cubby holes. The Point was named for the seven Pleiades sisters, who, when pursued by Orion, transformed themselves into a flock of pigeons, becoming the constellation Pleiades.

Auburn Avenue ends in Hall's Cove, a small beach where Hall's Creek empties, sometimes in a waterfall. It was named for the original Richard Harrison Hall family dairy here. When their daughter Stanley married Fred Swanton, he tried subdividing the ranch into Swanton Beach Park in 1908 and then later use it as an airport in 1925. But the sudden updrafts flying in from the cliffs made it a dicey spot to land. It was the frequent heavy winds that got this area from Auburn Avenue to Swanton Avenue dubbed the Ventarron, or place of gales.

Meanwhile, the west arm of Hall's Cove was called Wave Motor Point. A hole was cut in the cliff where incoming tides forced seawater into a tank on a 60-foot tower. The saltwater was used to sprinkle the dirt roads, in order to kill the grasses and wet down the dust. Though a popular place for a view, the tower was removed after 1910, but the blow hole continues to spout to this day.

The famous Natural Bridges at the state beach show the slow rate of decline for this mudstone monument. The wall-like expanse of three arches faced the elements for over a century, yet is slowly becoming shoreline crags and fallen arches.