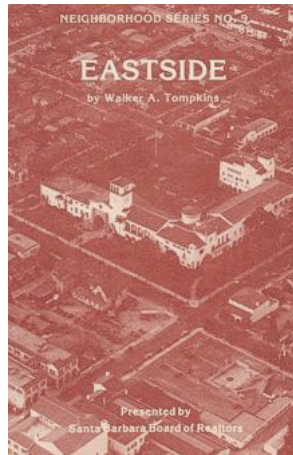




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Eastside History

by Walker A. Tompkins



In the days when Santa Barbara was just beginning to expand across the plain bracketed by the Mesa and the Riviera, there was no “Eastside” or “Westside.” This division was caused in 1851 when State Street was created, bisecting a Mexican pueblo then in the process of changing into an American village. Because of this arbitrary boundary, Santa Barbara’s “birthplace,” the Royal Presidio of 1782, wound up on the Eastside.

The first Spaniards who arrived in the summer of 1769 under Gov. Gaspar de Portola described the site of Santa Barbara as a “dismal place,” utterly without trees except along the creek beds. The entire lower half of the Eastside was a tule-rimmed marsh draining into a tidal lagoon. This prompted Portola to christen the future townsite “La Laguna de la Concepcion.”

Thirteen years would elapse before the Spaniards returned with Coy. Felipe de Neve, Lt. Jose Francisco de Ortega, Junipero Serra OFM and a detachment of leather-jacketed soldiers. Their task was to found a presidio to protect settlers from unfriendly Indians and foreign invaders along the coast from Morro Bay to San Pedro.

The site chosen for the presidio (which proved to be Spain’s last military outpost in the New World) was a rise of ground marked today by the intersection of Canon Perdido and Santa Barbara Streets. The first temporary fort was built of brush. The permanent 330-foot quadrangle

with its chapel, officers' quarters, barracks and granaries was not completed until 1790. Ironically, the Royal Presidio never performed a military function during its entire 64-year existence, until it surrendered to the Americanos in 1846!

The water supply on which the presidio garrison depended for survival was a cluster of artesian springs near the corner of Ortega and Garden Streets. The Presidio Springs later became known as the De la Guerra Wells. Now capped, they are still part of the city's water system. Surrounding them in Spanish days was a ten-acre flower garden, fruit orchards and a vegetable plot. The trail which meandered up to the Old Mission a mile away is now Garden Street, which developed into an avenue of fashionable homes of wealthy Americans during the 1890s.

Throughout the 19th Century the lower Eastside geography was dominated by the "Estero." This was a salt-crustured dry lake bed most of the time, but in wet winters or when sou'easters howled in off the Channel it became a sheet of brine as far inland as today's Anapamu Street.

During the mission period the friars and Indian neophytes farmed the fertile bottomlands watered by Sycamore Creek, raising berries, vegetables, and maize. The Spanish word for maize fields is milpas, which gave the name to the busy street that anchors the Eastside's business district. The flatlands bounded by Haley and Punta Gorda Streets, between Salsipuedes and Voluntario Streets, developed into cultivated five-acre farms, vineyards, dairy pastures and large vegetable gardens tilled by Chinese labor to supply the wholesale and retail market of the South Coast.

By the time California became a State in 1850, the Royal Presidio had crumbled into ruin. Only scant traces remain of the fort the Caneda Adobe on East Canon Perdido Street; the foundations of the chapel which was Santa Barbara's first church from which descended the modern Our Lady of Sorrows; and the grossly over-restored guard's quarters or El Cuartel, Santa Barbara's oldest Spanish adobe. A project to restore the presidio is currently on the drawing boards as a state historical park of the future.

Massive efforts to drain the mosquito-infested sloughs of the lower Eastside so as to reclaim the fertile acres of the Estero began as early as the 1860s when a ten-block-long canal was dug midway between Salsipuedes and Laguna Streets, from Haley on into the ocean. The unlined ditch silted up very quickly and no trace of it remains except the name "Canal Street." This was changed to Olive Street in 1922 when the city planted olive trees on either side of the filled-in drainage ditch. Portions of the Eastside are still plagued by winter flooding, especially in the vicinity of Spring Street, and Eastside drainage remains a City Hall problem.

The lowest area on the Eastside was bounded by Ortega, Milpas, Haley and Olive Streets. For decades this swamp was used as the town dump. Fumes from smoldering garbage in the mucky cesspool remained a health hazard and a public scandal until the 1920s when the bog was cleaned up and converted to such attractive uses as Ortega Park, Santa Barbara Junior High School and one-family homes.

Another long-time junk disposal area was the slowly shrinking bed of the old tidal lagoon. Buried under a mountain of beach sand and rolled flat in 1932, the former dump became Laguna Park, a popular soccer and baseball field where the Los Angeles Dodgers and New York Mets once operated farm clubs in the California League.

The 2,500-seat grandstand and clubhouse, built with federal money and WPA labor during the Depression, fell victim to City Hall bureaucrats in the late 1960s. Although more, not less, open park space was desperately needed by the crowded lower Eastside, city engineers tore down the Laguna Park grandstand and filled the two city blocks of open space with City Corporation warehouses. The former city yards across Ortega Street are now occupied by the attractive Presidio Springs housing development for senior citizens.

During the last half of the 1800s, large portions of the central and northerly Eastside remained an undeveloped pastoral expanse where family cows were picketed out to graze, often uprooting the 1851 redwood survey stakes marking the corners of city blocks which existed on the map only. A grid of graded, if unpaved streets did not begin to take shape until the mid-1870s.

Thrifty Barbarenos could not allow the vacant salt flats of the Estero to lie idle. The dry lake bed became an agricultural park in the summer of 1886, enclosed by Garden, Montecito and Canal (Olive) Streets and extending to East Beach. A half-mile racetrack paved with cinders was built, and a covered grandstand was erected near the present intersection of Garden and Quinientos. The infield of the oval track was the scene of balloon ascensions, rodeos, stock shows, carnivals, and circuses including Barnum and Bailey and Ringling Brothers. A few pioneer airplane landings on the Estero also set early-day Barbarenos agog.

Agricultural fairs and exhibitions were held every year in a huge pavilion located inside the block bounded by Yanonali, Garden, Mason and Santa Barbara Streets. Its high redwood tower was the dominating architectural landmark of the Eastside until it burned down in 1898 after someone set dried pampas grass decorations ablaze.

The momentous summer of 1887 saw the arrival of the Southern Pacific's branch railroad from Saugus Junction. The rails entered Santa Barbara via Punta Gorda Street. Flanked by Salsipuedes and Quarantina Streets, the tracks veered northward to Gutierrez Street where they turned westward spanning the Eastside swamplands on a long trestle, to cross State Street and Continue westward. Santa Barbara's first railway station was built, along with freight warehouses and maintenance shops, facing Salsipuedes Street between Mason and Carpinteria Streets. Cacique Street was later graded over the long-forgotten depot.

Many newcomers are not aware that UCSB the University of California campus at Santa Barbara had its genesis on the Eastside. In 1803 a philanthropist from Boston, Anna S. C. Blake, established her Sloyd School at De la Guerra and Santa Barbara Streets. It provided free

instruction in manual training and home economics to the city's elementary school children. Gradually, through half a century, the school evolved into a normal, a state teacher's college and eventually became UCSB.

Other long-vanished landmarks of the lower Eastside include the city gas plant on Quarantina, with its enormous storage tank, and the electric streetcar system's original carbarn and shops next door. It served from 1890 until a hangar-sized sheet iron carbarn was erected in 1915 at Pershing Park. After electric trains were replaced by motor busses in 1929 the Westside carbarn was used to store Fiesta parade vehicles until 1972, when it was demolished.

The old electric streetcar system served the Eastside well. Branch lines from State Street ran along Haley as far as Quarantina, and out East Boulevard to the vicinity of the Bird Refuge. Another line followed Victoria, Garden, Mission and Laguna to the foot of the steps of the Old Mission, and after 1815 to the Normal School campus on the Riviera, the tracks now Alameda Padre Serra. One of the most appalling tragedies in the city's history occurred on Easter Sunday 1907 when Streetcar No. 16, designed to carry 48 passengers, took aboard 120 men, women and children who had just emerged from an Easter mass at the Old Mission. Rolling down Laguna Street, the car lost its brakes and began gathering speed. At the 45-degree curve from New Mission onto Garden the hurtling car derailed and slid on its side to crash into a utility pole. Five persons were killed; 30 were injured, 17 seriously. The hoodooed car was taken out of service but it can be seen today, still bearing the scars of its fatal accident, serving as a tool shed in the rear of 830 Bath Street.

In 1914 Margaret Baylor, a wealthy social service worker from Cincinnati, built the Recreation Center at Carrillo and Anacapa Streets to benefit Santa Barbara youth. Upper-floor rooms were rented cheaply to single business and professional women. During World War I the building housed Red Cross headquarters. Next door was built the highrise Margaret Baylor Inn, completed in 1928 to serve as a hotel for single women. Renamed the Lobero Hotel, it now serves as an office building.

Another of the Eastside's proudest assets is the Public Library at Anapamu and Anacapa Streets, built in 1917. In 1979 it was renovated and remodeled to render it earthquake-proof. By the 1920s the Eastside had developed into the racial melting pot of Santa Barbara, reflecting an economic spectrum ranging from poverty to affluence. The area north of Valerio Street and merging into the Old Mission district and the Riviera foothills, filled up with elegant homes, many of them mansions. The upper Eastside has been identified as a bailiwick of the wealthy elite since 1895.

By contrast, the southern and eastern portions of the Eastside were where the minorities gravitated, nourishing their cultural heritages apart from each other. Mexican lemon workers at the huge Johnston Fruit Company packing plant on the Estero built homes for their families in that area, while a large Italian enclave grew up around Mason and Canada Streets and Diana Lane with Arnoldi's as a social center. The black community focused along Haley Street.

Chinatown, which flourished from the 1870s until an urban housing renewal project erased it in the late 1930s, concentrated along the first block of East Canon Perdido. Today's large Mexican population, spreading eastward of Milpas, has its social and political headquarters at La Casa de la Raza at 601 East Montecito Street. The younger generation prefers the names "Chicano" or "Latino" rather than Mexican.

Smokeless industries and service-related businesses such as lumber yards, auto wreckers, home furnishing centers, paint and coffin factories, machine shops, electronics firms, van and storage warehouses, commercial laundries and similar enterprises are concentrated in the strip of the lower Eastside south of Haley Street.

Metropolitan commercial districts are never scenically attractive. Due to the route of the crosstown freeway and the railroad, visitors arriving from the south enter Santa Barbara through the kitchen instead of the parlor, their first impressions of the lovely Channel City being of a bustling commercial-industrial complex.

The Eastside's crowning glory is the seat of county government, the Moorish-Byzantine-Spanish County Courthouse, said to be the most handsome government building in the United States, and certainly one of the most-photographed and most-visited by tourists. It was built just before the stock market crash of 1929 for a paltry \$1,500,000. Such an ornate government structure will never be built again anywhere. It replaced the 1872 Roman-domed courthouse which fell in the 1925 earthquake.

Another important county government complex on the Eastside was the original County Hospital and Poor Farm at Cacique and Salinas Streets, where early-day paupers went to die. Fire hazards, fraud in food procurement for charity patients, and unspeakable sanitary conditions triggered a community scandal which led to the formation of a citizen's committee led by Miss Pearl Chase, who in 1917 was hitting her stride as a crusader dedicated to civic betterment. The old pesthouse at the foot of Eucalyptus Hill was sold to the Billings estate and a new county hospital built west of the city.

The lower Eastside figured in the only catastrophic epidemic in Santa Barbara's past. In the fall of 1918, citizens in all parts of the town began dying of a mysterious digestive ailment similar to typhoid. Dr. R.R. Winchester, was unable to cope with the disaster. It remained for an epidemiologist from Sacramento to trace the lethal outbreak to its source. For three days during the epidemic the city had closed off its Mission Tunnel source of water while the mission reservoir was being cleaned. During that three day period the city pumped its water from the historic De la Guerra Wells. The adjacent water table had been contaminated by surface pollution from outhouses and garbage pits. In all, the epidemic claimed 44 lives. Victims of a salmonella bacteria. As a direct result of this tragedy.

Santa Barbara built its first sewage disposal plant with an outfall into the channel off East Beach. Santa Barbara's famous community playhouse, the Lobero Theater at Canon Perdido and Anacapa Streets, was built in 1924 on the site of the adobe opera house erected in 1872 by saloonkeeper and impresario Jose Lobero. His theater established Santa Barbara as a cultural center years ahead of Los Angeles or San Diego.

In 1924 Santa Barbara moved its senior high school from De la Vina and Anapamu Streets (the campus now a lawn bowling green) to its present location on East Anapamu at Nopal. The new plant weathered the cataclysmic earthquake the following spring with virtually no structural damage. The president of the school board at the time, Arrow Shirt tycoon Frederick Forrest Peabody, donated Peabody Stadium to Santa Barbara High School shortly before his death in 1927.

For decades thereafter Santa Barbara High athletic teams, the Dons, dominated local sports, thanks to their recruitment monopoly of athletic talent coming out of the elementary school system. But when San Marcos and Dos Pueblos High Schools came along to serve a population shift toward the Goleta Valley in the early 1960s, SBHS and its Olive and Gold teams had to share the fruits of victory with their crosstown rivals, the Royals and Chargers.

Emerging in the decade of the 1970s, economic and social pressures unrelated to the athletic fields began to occupy the attention of concerned administrators at both the Santa Barbara junior and senior high schools. As elsewhere in Southern California, conflicts developed between ethnic minorities on campus. Vandalism and juvenile crime increased dramatically. A growing trend of applications by Anglo students for transfer to other high schools on the South Coast hinted at the onset of "white flight," an ominous development in racially imbalanced schools everywhere.

City planners regard the Eastside as perhaps the most important factor in Santa Barbara's growth as it approaches the voter-mandated maximum population of 84,000. More undeveloped space and a higher percentage of older one-family homes exist on the Eastside than in other city neighborhoods. Forecasters at City Hall do not rule out apartment complexes or even condominiums on the Eastside, although admitting that such growth would generate traffic congestion and air pollution to offset increased tax revenues. These prophets are undecided as to the ultimate destiny of the Eastside as the pivotal year 2000 looms ever nearer on the horizon.