

REMEMBERING AVILA

by

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The new 1949 Chevy rounded the southbound curve of US 101 at Shell Beach, and Mother had her first glimpse of the Pacific Ocean.

“Mygod, look at that,” she said. “It’s huge! It’s beautiful! Look at those rocks.”

Our family had packed up several days previously and set out for California. All of us anticipated the excitement of our trip and the adventure of starting new lives in a new place. But for Mother, nothing along the way or at our destination could rival finally viewing the Pacific.

To an untraveled Nebraska farm girl, that long-awaited peek at the ocean represented all unknown wonders beyond the confines of monotonous midwestern cornfields. For Mother, the ocean never lost that original “wow” factor. Consequently, our family never missed an opportunity to go beachcombing at Oceano, clamming at Pismo, or picnicking at Point Sal. We fished from the Port San Luis pier. We watched San Simeon sunsets. We camped in the dunes. But Avila Beach was a special place. It held an irresistible attraction that continued through decades.

Standing on the sidewalk above the retaining wall, looking toward the ocean, modern Avila beachgoers see water, sand, rocks, the south-curving coastline. It’s a picture-perfect postcard scene that could have been lifted right out of the 1940s. Mother Nature changes slowly and beaches endure. The surf beats tirelessly a billion times upon a shell-littered shore. Gulls and pelicans wheel and dive. Rhythmic collisions of breaking waves, the swishing, hissing pull of water returning to sea, shrill cries of shorebirds and excited children comprise a seaside symphony. Smoky smells of beach barbecues mingle with salt air and suntan lotion, creating an olfactory experience unique to beaches. Those sensory cues don’t change.

Yet when beachgoers turn inland, the modern Avila they see bears no resemblance to Avila of yesteryear.

To the north, a former oak-studded hillside lies invisible under a hulking resort hotel that looms pinkly in the distance. Below, a sleek new bridge spans San Luis Creek as it flows to sea. Children frolic on a state-of-the-art playground; few of them use old metal swings which still occupy their timeworn location in sand near the pier.

The pier itself has undergone a succession of changes. Mother bought my childhood friends and me snow cones and penny candy from flimsy wood shacks built at the foot of the pier. Vendors conducted business behind the splintered counters of these structures which leaned precariously over the sand on rickety

stilts. Among pier pilings, rubber surf riders—precursors to modern boogie boards—and colorful beach umbrellas stood available for rent.

Avila's pier divided the beach into two distinct parts. Northward, families congregated near playground equipment. Swings and slides provided an alternative to constructing sand castles and chasing waves. Teenagers claimed territory south of the pier. Radios blasted rock and roll as baby-oil-slathered bodies baked on towels. We girls nonchalantly flipped pages of the latest *Seventeen* Magazine, hoping to catch the eye of a cute surfer.

In the mid '50s, the dilapidated snack food huts relocated across Front Street into more respectable buildings. Sandy's Munchies, Pete's Seaside Cafe, Barbara's By the Sea, and The Jetty comprised a new lineup. The Weenie Queen hawked hot dogs from a sidewalk cart. My teenage daughter found summer employment slinging hamburgers at Sandy's, on the corner just up from the laundromat. Locals preferred worn stools at Pete's counter or shabby booths next door at Barbara's. Tourists with more formal dining in mind occupied picnic-style tables in The Jetty, or walked farther along Front to dine at The Old Custom House. Originally serving as headquarters for customs agents assigned to Harford Pier, The Custom House, along with Mr. Rick's, were two moderately upscale businesses in Avila.

Cracked, narrow sidewalks, a grocery that doubled as post office, slightly seedy storefronts, public bathrooms with ancient fixtures and wet cement floors, all contributed to the town's unique personality. A San Francisco *Chronicle* travel article referred to Old Avila as an "endearing mishmash" of tired shops and cafes patronized by "kayakers, boogie boarders and hippies."

Oil leakage from Unocal storage tanks and old underground pipelines led to a recent cleanup and redevelopment of Avila Beach. Giant excavators erased forever the funky charm of "the last authentic California beach town." Longtime residents of the ramshackle trailer park and doomed apartments mourned the destruction when massive earth movers bulldozed everything but memories. Four hundred thousand gallons of oil and gasoline were sucked from beneath the sand. The heart and soul of Avila disappeared along with it.

Today's beachgoer looks at that four-block-long stretch of downtown and sees nothing that resembles the Avila that Mother knew. A pedestrian promenade replaced Front Street. It features trendy stamped concrete walkways and low walls dotted with fake cement starfish, protruding just enough to discourage skateboard grinding.

Mr. Rick's and the new Custom House occupy prominent spaces on the promenade. Along with the grocery, these survivors of annihilation are unrecognizable in their reincarnations. Lining the pedestrian boulevard, new stores and hotels present developers' versions of cute, colorful Cape Cod architecture. Tidy clapboard edifices mimic tony Carmel or Laguna Beach. The Lighthouse Suites offers five-hundred-count Egyptian cotton linens and Bath & Body Works toiletries in every room; never mind that the nearest lighthouse sits several miles away, hidden behind the Irish Hills. A summer weekend here runs \$379 to \$749 per night. These immaculate structures, fronted by inevitable palm trees and meticulous flower gardens, face a new pier entrance, a grand staircase

descending beachward on one side with state-of-the-art public restrooms on the other.

Mother's great-grandchildren love Avila. They chase waves and dig in sand, collect shells and delight in peering into bait buckets on the pier. The fundamentals of this place—sunshine, waves, sand, seagulls, tourists—are as familiar to these children as they were to her.

I miss the charm and character of Old Avila, but it is pointless to project my attitude onto a generation for whom this slick new beach town is familiar and friendly. Avila will prosper and endure in its transformation. Those age-old attractions of sand and surf will complement its modern visage and captivate all those unfortunate folks who never had the pleasure of knowing eccentric, unsophisticated, genuine Avila.