



*Fifty years ago, a much smaller Carpinteria lay nestled between the Pacific and the Santa Ynez Mountains. One can see how much the city has grown by comparing the photo above to the one on the cover. Photo courtesy of Ralph Brown.*

# Carpinteria

## Its Present Serenity Belies A Tumultuous Past

California is little known for a sense of tradition or permanence. It is odd, then, that several small communities along the central coastline have preserved their historic ties with an enthusiasm reminiscent of New England's Yankee villages. Carpinteria not only has a fascinating history spanning the 216 years since its naming by Spanish explorer Gaspar de Portolo (in 1769), but it also has an aggressive and spirited Museum of History which has recently completed the addition of a new wing.

The history of Carpinteria has been shaped by two ingredients: natural assets and the difficulty of

access to the area. The assets include a benevolent climate, a beautiful location, fertile soil and an unusual deposit of very pure tar (asphaltum) which was mined from 1880 to 1920. Six saloons along Linden Avenue catered to the miners' needs.

The lack of access was caused by Rincon Mountain and a nearly impassable stretch of coastline where the cliffs plunged steeply into the sea. Passage through the Rincon was the most onerous portion of the famous Camino Real which connected the missions along California's coast.

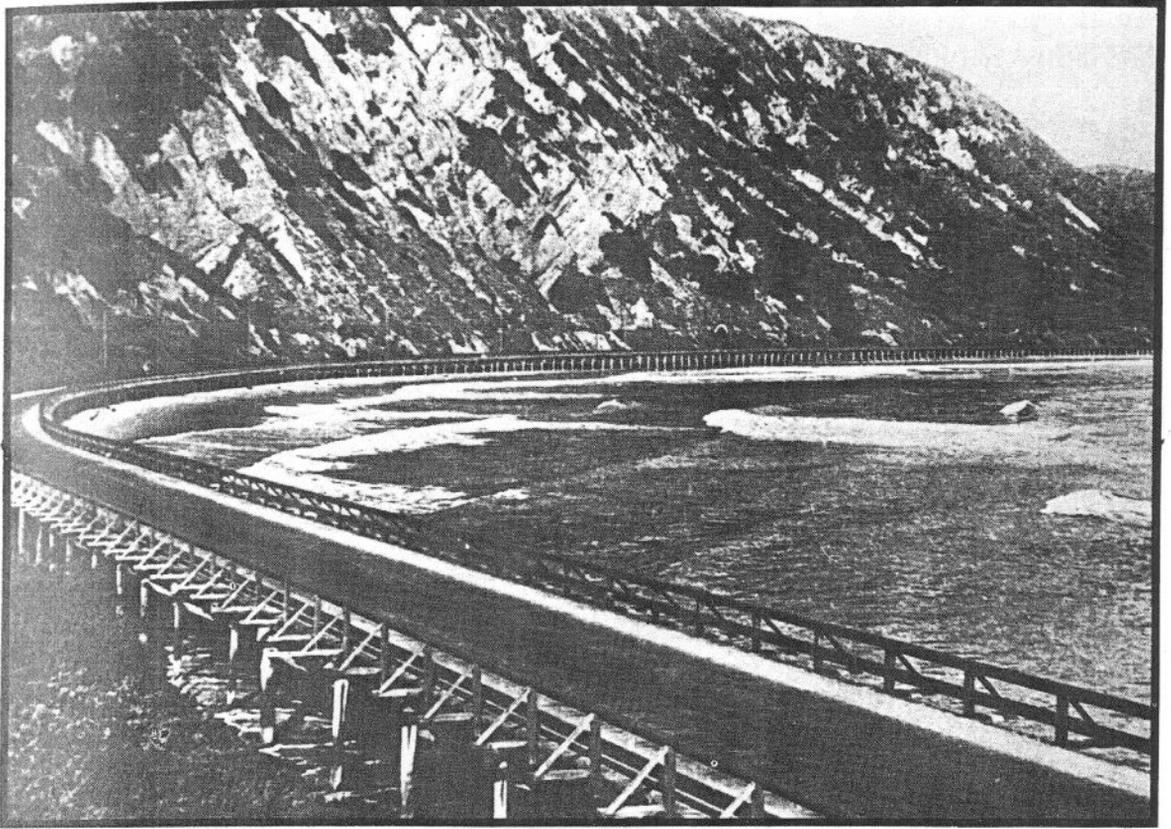
Carpinteria was discovered in

1542 by Juan Cabrillo. The area passed through Spanish, then Mexican, rule and under both governments it was a favored location for land grants, thus postponing the division and development which began in the Mid-Nineteenth Century under American rule.

The first American rancher was Russell Heath who acquired 52 acres of orchard land in 1858. He later expanded his holdings to several hundred acres on which he planted the world's largest walnut grove. This was the first of a series of remarkable local horticultural achievements. Carpinteria was the

*(please turn page)*

805/684-4121  
Ralph Brown



*An early photograph of the Rincon Causeway near Sea Cliff shows the eucalyptus pole pilings and elaborate carpentry involved in making the safety railings. Except for its asphalt road bed, the entire structure was wood. Photo courtesy of Ralph Brown.*

## Carpinteria — A historical perspective

home of the world's largest grapevine. It was planted in 1815 and survived until the early 1920s. The vine grew on an arbor which covered two acres of ground and it yielded an average of 10 tons of grapes per year!

Carpinteria was the first place in

the world to grow lima beans commercially. The beans are native to Guatemala. In the late 1860s Robert McAlister brought 10 pounds of beans ashore from a passing merchant ship and he made a test planting. The yield was astonishing. Plants were selected for

desirable characteristics such as bean quality and early ripening, and by the 1880s 1,000 acres of beans were under cultivation. Carpinteria had become "the lima bean capital of the world."

Asphalt beds are a very unusual natural asset and a significant one to early Carpinteria. The beds (or tar pits) were located along a 300-foot strip of ocean frontage running from Linden Avenue on the west to the bluff area just past the present Casitas Pier, the oil company's service facility. The asphalt covered 10 acres to a depth of 80 feet, which permitted strip mining methods.

Mining of asphalt began in 1875, and by 1880 40 men were working the pits. Soon thereafter a force of 200 men were working three shifts 24 hours a day.

### A Methodist-Baptist Church?

The inscription at the bottom of the window reads, "First Methodist in Santa Barbara," in spite of the fact that it is part of a Baptist church which is located at Eighth Street and Linden Avenue in Carpinteria.

The entire structure was, in fact, moved to Carpinteria from Santa Barbara. It was constructed of redwood in 1887 as a Methodist church, for a cost of \$2,000. It was

then sold in 1892 for the attractive price of \$600, and hauled in three pieces on a 20-horse wagon to its present location. Even the stone foundation was moved.

It remained Methodist until 1971 when the Baptists bought the building. It is now the oldest in-use Protestant church in California. The pastor is Gary Golike, who conducts services every Sunday morning at 10:30.

*(please turn page)*

## The Southern Pacific Railroad provided the first access to Carpinteria

The tar was unusually pure, which permitted its use to extend beyond paving and roofing to the more exotic application as an ingredient in printers ink, varnish and artists colors. The mines were abandoned in the early 1920s, but you can still see outcroppings bubbling to the surface as the warm summer sun softens the tar.

### Access

Prior to the arrival of the first train in 1887, Carpinteria found itself on very few vacation itineraries. Access by sea was limited to Serena Wharf, an adequate facility (better, after being rebuilt in 1878) located opposite the site of the present polo fields. But most ships carried cargo rather than passengers. (Early exports were mainly nuts and lima beans.)

The loose rubble along the shore where Rincon Mountain meets the

sea made it impossible to maintain a roadbed for the stage coaches. Further, the waves, which today create fine surfing conditions, were then a continuous threat to passage. At the best of times the stagecoach to Los Angeles had to await low tide.

The first successful attack on the Rincon was by Southern Pacific Railroad, which blasted a mile-long ledge for track out of the side of the mountain. When the first train arrived on August 19, 1887, there were 5,000 people on hand in Carpinteria for the celebration. The track only went to Elwood (a few miles past Isla Vista) but it did connect Carpinteria with Santa Barbara (a 10-mile run at 30 miles per hour for 70 cents in 1888).

The other end of the track terminated at Newhall where there were mainline north/south connections.

The population of Carpinteria in 1888 was over 800 and there were two hotels.

### Then the Automobile

The Rincon Causeway was built by men of vision and daring to whom eucalyptus stilts were state-of-the-art construction material. The bridge around the Rincon spanned 6,100 feet over the water, and consisted of three-inch-thick wood planks laid over 1,200 eucalyptus pilings.

When the roadway opened in 1912, Carpinteria became accessible to the more adventuresome drivers from Los Angeles. The planks rattled, the nails popped and it was not uncommon for a motorist to make three or four stops on the Rincon to patch his thin automobile tires. The causeway lasted only 10 years before being replaced by concrete. ■

*In 1887, the first passenger train travelled through Carpinteria en route to Santa Barbara. The elaborately decorated vehicle signalled the arrival of more prosperous times for the little city. Photo courtesy of Ralph Brown.*

