

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY

PERKINS PARK

HALS NO. CA-155

Location: Ocean View Boulevard, Pacific Grove, Monterey County, California.

Perkins Park is sited on a blufftop overlooking Monterey Bay bounded by Lovers Point Park in the east and Esplanade Street in the west - a distance of 0.9 miles.

36.628208, -121.921806 (Site of a city sign describing the history of the park where Sea Palm Avenue meets Ocean View Blvd., Google Earth, WGS84)

Significance: Perkins Park is a significant cultural landscape for its construction as a vernacular garden created to beautify a neglected strip of public land that became one of the most distinctive horticultural features of the Pacific Coast in the early 1960s. Between 1943 and 1957, gardener and self-styled adventurer Hayes Perkins (1874 - 1964) transformed this former poison oak-covered ocean bluff into a dazzling springtime carpet of fluorescent-pink blooms of *Drosanthemum floribundum* succulents, commonly known as Rosea ice plant.¹ Photographs in LIFE and National Geographic magazines, as well as a giant Kodak Colorama display in Grand Central Terminal, New York, attracted tourists from across the globe. The park is described in the City of Pacific Grove Historic Context Statement as “The ‘Magic Carpet.’” Perkins Park remains a popular open space for residents and one of the most visited free tourist attractions on the Monterey Peninsula.

Description: Perkins Park is a narrow (from 6 feet to 100 feet wide), one-mile-long stretch of city-owned clifftop with Monterey Bay² on one side and a residential neighborhood served by Ocean View Blvd on the other. The surface of the park is a flat, sandy bluff above vertical granite cliffs ranging from 10 to 50 feet high. Much of the cliff face is armored with a concrete and rock seawall. In some areas the wall continues to a height of 4 feet above ground level to prevent walkers from stepping off the cliff. Meandering footpaths of decomposed granite follow the edge of the bluff for the length of the park.

¹ The color of *Drosanthemum floribundum* blooms, commonly known as Rosea ice plant, are variously described as purple, pink, lilac, and more by different viewers. Pink will be used for consistency in this document. Rosea is a noninvasive succulent, native to South Africa where it is used for erosion control on steep slopes and is a recommended ground cover for the Central Coast by Cal-IPC (California Invasive Plant Council). It is not related to the familiar “freeway ice plant” or Hottentot fig (*Carpobrotus edulis*), a widely distributed invasive species throughout California, that was introduced in the early 1900s for stabilizing soil along railroad tracks. “Don’t Plant a Pest! Central Coast” Accessed 18 June 2020. <<https://www.cal-ipc.org/solutions/prevention/landscaping/dpp/?region=centcoast>

² This area of Monterey Bay is designated a Marine Protected Area, called the Pacific Grove Marine Conservation Area, by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW).

A city sign describing the history of the park stands near a small parking area where Sea Palm Avenue meets Ocean View Blvd. Sixteen memorial benches lining the main pathway, inscribed with the sponsor's name and a quotation, are managed under a *City Bench Naming Rights Program*.³

Prior to development, vegetation coverage was predominantly poison oak (*Toxicodendron diversilobum*) plus a mix of low-growing, dry-climate native and non-native species. Beginning in 1943, Hayes Perkins began clearing the area and replacing the existing vegetation with a carpet of Rosea ice plant. Over the next 14 years, he added a mix of other low-water usage perennials, aloes, and agaves.

Heavy usage of the paths, loss of many of the species planted by Perkins, lack of attention by the parks department during economic downturns, extended periods of drought, and winter-storm erosion of the cliffs, have resulted in serious deterioration of the plantings and physical landscape.

Most of the area planted by Perkins remains covered with Rosea but much of it is in poor condition. The beds are crisscrossed with random footpaths and in many places are overgrown with "foxtail" grasses that present a health hazard for dogs. Several areas cleared by the city for storm drainage from the highway have been planted with native species, including Seaside daisies (*Erigeron glaucus*) and Hummingbird sage (*Salvia spathacea*) that turn brown and when not maintained present an eyesore for much of the year. *Aloe arborescens* have been allowed to grow untrimmed resulting in large specimens that block views of the ocean and provide habitat for an infestation by ground squirrels. Their burrows loosen the soil, causing overgrown aloes to fall and accelerate erosion of the cliffs.

Today Perkins's garden is but a sad reflection of its former glory. Although still a popular Monterey Peninsula tourist attraction⁴, the park, as created by Perkins, is in danger of vanishing due to lack of maintenance, rising sea levels accelerating erosion of the coastline, and even campaigns by native-plant enthusiasts to replace the original succulent plantings. The present condition qualifies this unique landscape created by Hayes Perkins 75 years ago as a Vanishing or Lost Landscape for submission as a candidate to the 2020 HALS Challenge.

³ Benches are installed for reasons including memorials to deceased family members, to commemorate charitable organizations, and to otherwise recognize persons and entities.

⁴ Ryan, Allyson "Take a Magic Carpet Ride to See Pacific Grove in Bloom," Blog Monterey, Wednesday, March 20, 2019. seemonterey.com. Accessed 18 June 2020. < <https://www.seemonterey.com/blog/post/take-a-magic-carpet-ride-to-see-pacific-grove-in-bloom/>>

History: The following history is based on an article by David A. Laws, the author of this submission, published in *Eden: The Journal of the California Garden & Landscape History Society*, Winter 2019. Much of the content of that article is derived from Perkins self-published autobiography *Here and There* ⁵. Five original copies are known to exist. ⁶ All quotations without attribution in the following text are taken from a collection of Perkins's letters in the Special Collections & Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA. ⁷

Born on a homestead in the Coquille Valley near the Oregon coastal lumber port of Bandon on February 10, 1878, as a boy Henry Hayes Perkins was fascinated by tales of explorers and their adventures in Africa. He left home at age 15 to escape abuse by his father. He worked his way around the world as a manual laborer, including nearly eight years in Africa and nine on publisher William Randolph Hearst's California properties (Hearst Castle and Wynton) before retiring to Pacific Grove in 1938.

Living in a cabin overlooking Pacific Grove's Lovers Point, in 1943 Perkins noticed that children suffered painful skin rashes from playing in poison oak (*Toxicodendron diversilobum*) growing on the unkempt bluff across Ocean View Boulevard from his home. He began to clear, plant, and hand-water the coastal bluff with a mix of shrubs and Mediterranean-climate succulents that he knew from South Africa. Perkins chose *Drosanthemum floribundum*, a non-invasive succulent that forms a dazzling carpet of pink blooms in spring for the major ground cover planting. He knew it from his visits to Cape Town, South Africa, where it is favored for erosion control on steep slopes with poor soils, as well as being drought and salt tolerant - exactly the conditions that prevail along the Monterey Bay coastline.

John Bonnici, owner of Borg's Motel, allowed Perkins to fill up to 75 buckets of water two days a week from his faucet and hand carry them across the street to irrigate new plantings. He added other plants tolerant of the windy, coastal climate. "Most of the plants in that park are African. I wanted to have something to remind me of the Dark Continent, for somehow I have always loved it over any other land." Other plantings include, Torch aloe (*Aloe arborescens*), a species from southern Africa with tough, green, succulent leaf whorls and scarlet blooms that tower over 6-foot high in late fall, as well as Yarrow (*Achillea*),

⁵ Perkins kept detailed diaries of his life and adventures from 1878 to 1936. A friend arranged for them to be typed in 1961. Five carbon paper copies of over 2,000 pages each were hard-cover bound under the title *Here and There*.

⁶ They are held by the Royal Geographical Society, the National Geographic Society, Pacific Grove Public Library, the Oregon Historical Society Research Library, Portland, OR, and the Special Collections & Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA.

⁷ Perkins claimed to have over 100 correspondents worldwide. His benefactor Frank W. Preston, who arranged for the typing and binding of the diaries, kept a copy of their exchanges for the years 1959 through 1964. Together with her husband's copy of *Here and There*, Jane Preston donated this correspondence (comprising over 200 pages) to the Special Collections & Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA in 1993.

African daisy (*Arctotis*), Calla and Canna lilies, Century plants (*Agave americana*), Dracaena palms, and Speedwell (*Veronica*).

Perkins became a familiar figure to local residents. An article in the *Pacific Grove Tribune* noted that “Any day of the week, if you drive down by the ocean you will see a tall, spare, deeply-suntanned athletic-looking man with no hat and a bald pate working away ... building paths, planting flowers, spading and cultivating.”⁸

By 1947 the garden extended 1,500 feet to the west. The city had given formal permission for the use of public land and neighbors who had originally resisted the change now supported the project. In June, the Service Club, forerunner of the Rotary Club of Pacific Grove, organized a Flower Day to collect funds to further Perkins’s efforts.⁹ He used the check for \$185.15 to augment his personal contributions towards additional plants and supplies.

Increased publicity generated more activity along the waterfront paths. Not all users were respectful. In 1949 Perkins announced that “discouraged by careless or deliberate vandalism ... he could no longer continue work ... and plans to leave town.”¹⁰ Fortunately, he did not follow-up on this threat and in 1950 the city named the waterfront area Perkins Park. The mayor and other dignitaries posed with Perkins for a photograph in front of a bronze plaque mounted on a large boulder in his honor. He commented, “I appreciated it all, but I didn’t want it. I don’t believe in personal advertising.”¹¹

In 1952, Perkins made a proposal to extend the park by another 1,200 feet. He requested that the city add water pipes and that he be given a helper. In 1953 the council authorized a budget of \$2,700 per year for manpower, water, and equipment. He accepted payment of \$14.75 per month “to give me a modicum of authority to hold back vandals, dog owners who trained their pets in the park, and bicyclists.” By 1954 the *Monterey Herald* reported that, assisted by city employee Manuel Rego, the garden had been extended five-eighths of a mile and another 1,100 feet cleared for future planting.

In 1957 Perkins moved to Forest Hill Manor, a senior retirement home one mile inland. Daily he walked down the hill to continue working on the garden but, despite his concerns about the quality of the city maintenance, its fame had spread. Photographs showing the springtime carpet of bloom appeared in *National Geographic* (November 1959), *Life* (October 1962), *United Airlines Mainliner* magazine (1962) and numerous other publications. Union Pacific Railway featured the scene on menus for the Domeliner breakfast service. The

⁸ “P.G. Honors Hayes Perkins for Civic Beautification” *Pacific Grove Tribune*, 30 May 1947 p. 1

⁹ “Town Honors Perkins” *Pacific Grove Tribune*, June 6, 1947 p.

¹⁰ “Plans to leave,” *Pacific Grove Tribune*, March 11, 1949 p. 1

¹¹ “Perkins Park & the Man who Created it,” *Monterey Peninsula Herald*, August 30, 1954 Section II, p. 1

garden's fame inspired international imitators. In 1963 the Monterey Herald photographed Perkins supervising the shipping of succulent cuttings to the coastal city of Bahía de Caráquez, Ecuador.

“Many cars per hour, to say nothing of the huge transcontinental buses” loaded with tourists stopped to photograph the scene. Postcard views mailed across the world attracted even more attention. In 1961, Kodak sent photographer Peter Gales to shoot the image for an 18 by 60-foot Colorama mural in Grand Central Terminal that featured changing views of scenic America. Titled “Teenagers on Bikes,” Perkins declined to pose for the picture in protest against showcasing his hated hordes of cyclists in the picture.¹²

A storm in February 1960 did considerable damage to the park. The city allocated \$9,000 for repairs that included building concrete seawalls but for the rest of his life Perkins engaged in constant battles with city hall to improve maintenance, repair damage by dogs and cyclists, and prosecute plant thieves. “I’ll bet I get in the can some of these days, the way I keep hounding the authorities.”

He was particularly incensed when the superintendent of parks, a man Perkins claimed knew little about landscape gardening and was appointed through political connections, did not replace his assistant and attempted to take credit for ongoing public acclaim for the garden. “If they will only keep it up, they can name it for the devil himself,” he said.

Perkins passed away on April 30, 1964. A few years earlier he had written, “For 14 years I toiled to make true a dream I have entertained since I was a small boy. I wished to have a beautiful garden beside the sea and ... have made it come true.” Vern Yeadon, curator of the Pacific Grove Museum of Natural History, said in an obituary in the *Monterey Herald*, “He alone was responsible for the beautiful shoreline garden. No one else can claim credit for it.” He left his entire estate of \$6,507.01 to purchase books for the library

A commitment by Mayor A. B. Wells that “The city will maintain the coastal area in his memory” proved difficult to honor through economic challenges in later years.¹³ Volunteer weed-pulls organized by neighbors attempted to replace maintenance abandoned by the city but could not prevent long term decline of the garden due to drought and neglect.^{14 15} Patches of iridescent color continue

¹² High-resolution image file archived in the George Eastman Museum, Rochester, New York, as Colorama #303 (Teenagers on Bikes) dated 11 March, 1968. Photographer Peter Gale made the original image in 1961.

¹³ “Hayes Perkins, PG’s Honored Gardener Dies,” *Monterey Peninsula Herald*, April 30, 1964 p. 4

¹⁴ “Weeds, Litter and Age Tarnish Floral Carpet,” *Monterey Peninsula Herald*, February 23, 1982 p. 19

¹⁵ “Volunteers Tackle Weeding, Pruning Along P.G.’s Famed ‘Magic Carpet,’” *Monterey Peninsula Herald*, March 30, 1982 p. 13

to brighten the bluff in spring but do not compare to the visions portrayed on postcards, posters and national publications from the 1960s. In a letter to the Monterey Herald, the late John F. Limper of Pacific Grove recalled Perkins's prescient comment, "When I am dead, the city will let all my work go to hell."

Pacific Grove Public Works Director, Daniel Gho, manages the City's efforts maintain the park. For the first time in many years, his 2017/18 budget allowed hiring a part-time landscape employee dedicated to Perkins Park. His efforts to date have included reducing weeds, trimming bushes and cypress trees, installing decomposed granite on the trails, and repairing sections of the irrigation system.

In 2020 the city commissioned ECI, a professional landscape design firm, to recommend a program for restoration of the park. ECI presented several alternative designs at a public meeting on 28 May, 2020. The council will review the result of this work in October 2020. The economy of Pacific Grove is heavily dependent on tourism. The serious impact of the 2020 COVID 19 pandemic on the city budget will likely delay any funding of restoration work for many years. In the meantime, the state of Perkins Park continues to deteriorate - the cliff edge is crumbling, the plantings are overgrown or dying, and a recent heavy influx of visitors from the San Francisco Bay Area escaping the "stay in place" restrictions of the pandemic is further damaging the paths.

- Sources: Laws, David A. "Hayes Perkins "The Magic Carpet' Man," The Journal of the California Garden & Landscape History Society, Vol 22 Number 1, pp. 4-15.
- Perkins, Hayes. *Here and There*. Privately published for Perkins in 1961 by Frank W. Preston. Copy at the Pacific Grove Public Library.
- "Hayes Perkins San Simeon Diaries" Collection, Cal Poly, Kennedy Library Archive, San Luis Obispo. CA.
- City of Pacific Grove Historic Context Statement – Final City of Pacific Grove Historic Context (1927 – 1945), 31 October 2011, p. 205.
- Pacific Grove Marine Gardens State Marine Conservation Area. Accessed 20 June 2020
<<https://nrm.dfg.ca.gov/FileHandler.ashx?DocumentID=96731&inline>>
- "Perkins Park Planting & Vegetation Management Plan," City of Pacific Grove Public Works Department. May 28, 2020 Accessed 18 June 2020.
<<https://perkins-park.com/Perkins-Park-Vegetation-MGMT-Planting-Schematics.pdf>>

Historian: David A. Laws, California Garden & Landscape History Society.
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2020 HALS Challenge Entry: Vanishing or Lost Landscapes



Panoramic view of the rocky coast along Perkins Park at low tide.
(Photograph by the author David A. Laws 6.12.2020)



Plaque in appreciation of Perkins "beautification of the waterfront" placed in 1950
(Photograph by the author David A. Laws 6.12.2020)



Park entrance. In earlier years pink blooms would have filled this whole area
(Photograph by the author David A. Laws 6.12.2020)



Sign describing the history of the park where Sea Palm Avenue meets Ocean View Blvd.
(Photograph by the author David A. Laws 6.12.2)



The widest section of the park. Most of the blooms have faded this late in the season.
Note foxtail grasses invading the ice plant area.
(Photograph by the author David A. Laws 6.12.2020)



Close up of above area in 2002. Note much greater ice plant coverage 18 years ago.
(Photograph by the author David A. Laws 4.15.2002)



Narrow stretch of the park, showing erosion of the path.
(Photograph by the author David A. Laws 6.12.2020)



Aloe arborescens blooms in January
(Photograph by the author David A. Laws 1.8.2020)



One of several stairways to beach coves
(Photograph by the author David A. Laws 1.8.2020)



Perkins Park has been featured in numerous magazines and promotional materials from 1959 on.
(Photograph by the author David A. Laws 6.18.20)