

The Great Tide Pool

TALES OF PACIFIC GROVE, CALIFORNIA

by local award-winning author, Brad Herzog

THE OCTAGON

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If you've ever walked by the tiny, adjunct building that sits next to The BookWorks, Pacific Grove's beloved coffee shop and bookstore at the corner of Park Street and Lighthouse Avenue, you might have barely paid it any notice. But surely, if you've strolled through Jewell Park, perhaps during the every-Monday Farmers Market, you've smiled at the charming white gazebo there. What do the two have in common? Their uncommon shape - an octagon, which has a strangely ubiquitous presence throughout PG's history.

It started with, well, architectural beginnings. Long ago (mid-19th century) instructions for the construction of what would become Point Pinos Lighthouse, the longest continuously operated lighthouse on the Pacific Coast, included this directive: "On the roof of the tower is to be a wrought iron lantern, sufficient in height and diameter to contain six lights in each octagon 16 by 24 inches..."

A couple of decades later, when Pacific Grove was in its infancy in the form of a Methodist Retreat, the area of what would become Jewell Park was the site of an open-air temple - a stage and benches, all arranged in the shape of an octagon.

I found a similar shapely mention regarding construction of The Plunge, the original saltwater pool at Lovers Point, which existed from 1935 to 1972. According to The Board & Batten, the quarterly newsletter of the Heritage Society of Pacific Grove, The Plunge included "an octagon shaped boiler room and pump house with a tall chimney stack."

Generally, I would greet such information with a shrug. But an octagon? It's such a specific and unusual shape - so much so that "octagon buildings" has its own entry on Wikipedia. In fact, in California, I have come across only a handful of such buildings - a brick structure in Santa Cruz, a redwood barn in San Luis Obispo, a home in Big Sur, a graffiti-riddled abandoned house off a hiking trail in San Francisco.



The octagon was a short-lived architectural trend in the late 19th century, the idea being that a circle maximized space... and it was a heck of a lot easier to construct a near-circle in the shape of an octagon. The fad made its way to Pacific Grove in the form of two historically important buildings.

One was what was originally known as the Chautauqua Museum, designed around a collection of natural specimens that were used during early Chautauqua lectures. The first museum was housed in a small octagonal building in... yep, Jewell Park. This was the forerunner to the Natural History Museum, which houses (among its myriad fascinating artifacts) a tiny replica of the original octagon.

PG's other original octagonal building original stood in front of El Carmelo Hotel (later called the Pacific Grove Hotel), which opened in 1887 and survived three decades before being dismantled, its wood used to reconstructed the fire-damaged Lodge at Pebble Beach. (The empty block where the hotel stood? It became the site of Holman's Department Store). There was a tiny eight-sided edifice behind the old hotel, likely used as a smoker's retreat. Later, it was moved to the front of the hotel and used as a bandstand.

When the hotel was dismantled in 1918, the local Woman's Civic Club salvaged the octagon, placed it on the corner of Grand and Central avenues, and donated it to the city, for which it served another purpose - it housed the original Chamber of Commerce. Photos from the time show lettering on the side of the building touting PG as a "Winter Paradise." It stood there until 1932, when it was moved to the new Pacific Grove Golf Links and used as a temporary clubhouse.

So the octagon has been an oddly consistent player in Pacific Grove's past and present. But what does it all mean? Perhaps nothing. It could be just a series of eight-sided coincidences. Or maybe not.

In feng shui, the octagon is said to draw in positive energy from all (eight) directions. In China, it's associated with good fortune and health. In Buddhism, it symbolizes completion. And in sacred geometry, the study of geometric shapes and ratios that are believed to have spiritual and symbolic meaning, the octagon is believed to balance and unify two entries - heaven (represented by a circle) and earth (a square).

So I choose to interpret Pacific Grove's octagonal obsession as a combination of all of the above. Good fortune. A healthy environment. Positive vibes. Heaven on earth.