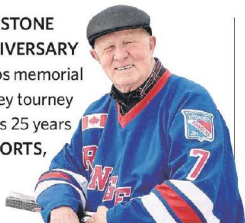


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TRAVEL

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Tall tales in Lompoc: where history meets sea

ANNE Z. COOKE
TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE

LOMPOC, CALIF.—I thought I'd seen everything.

Then I discovered a remarkable collection of the world's oldest pictorial art hiding out in Lompoc, a modest hamlet perched on the wave-dashed coast of California, north of Santa Barbara.

Murals are what I mean, 36 huge paintings on the walls in the Old Town district, an art whose origins reach back 35,000 years — or more — to figures drawn on cave walls in Europe and elsewhere.

According to Vicki Andersen, administrator of the Lompoc Mural Society and a painter in her own right, Lompoc needed a boost after 1989, when Vandenberg Air Force Base, the community's biggest employer and customer, shut down the shuttle launch program.

Murals were suggested. But the residents wanted more than a disjointed array of big pictures. Instead, they chose a single theme: the story of Lompoc, from its earliest inhabitants — the Chumash Indians — to the present.

Naysayers wondered if a town of 43,400 people, straddling a rocky shore on a lonely corner of the coastline, had much to tell. But Lompoc surprised them.

Taken together — think of them as a contemporary "book of hours" — the murals are as fascinating as any medieval manuscript.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

The solution was obvious. A weekend in town, where I met Ken Ostini, six-foot-six and rangy, and president of the Lompoc Tourism Council. A tireless local historian, he volunteered to show me around.

"I'm pretty good with a self-guided map, as long as it has street names and numbers," I assured him when we met in the hotel parking lot. "I can navigate this by myself."

"No worries, no worries," he replied, pumping my hand. "I always learn something from touring people around. Lompoc is home, so showing it off keeps me up to date."

He pointed east, toward the valley. "I was born on a farm right out there, next to that hill, so I know most of the folks here. Ask all the questions you want." He paused, the soul of honesty. "And if there's something I can't answer, I know who to call."

I could picture his parents' farm. It'd come that way, north-west from Santa Barbara on U.S. Highway 101. Turning off on State Route 1 was the first surprise: no urban sprawl, the bane of Southern California.



DREAMSTIME

Naysayers wondered if a town of 43,400 people, straddling a rocky shore on a lonely corner of the coastline, had much to tell. But Lompoc surprised them.

The highway crossing the valley wound between open meadows, flowering hedges, stands of white oaks, white farmhouses, neatly hoed vegetable plots, vineyards planted in geometric rows, and all of it framed by the gold-and-green Santa Rita Hills.

Thirty-odd kilometres later, approaching the town, a rainbow appeared overhead. Glittering through a misty veil, it shed a glow on the empty lots and dimly repair shops that clutter the outskirts of almost every small town.

And there was Ostini, in the Hilton Garden Inn's parking lot, proposing that we start at the South Side Coffee Co., a funky Old Town hangout at the corner of Ocean Avenue and South H Street. Finding a booth, we sat over a latte and studied the mural map, then walked south to the centre of Old Town.

Since wall space becomes available at different times, the

murals aren't painted in sequence. The "Flower industry," for instance, by artist Art Mortimer — celebrating the 1960s and '70s when Lompoc's flower seed business was the nation's largest — is on one corner, while the mural "Chumash Indians," where the history actually starts, is on another.

The La Purisima Mission ("purisima" is one of several Chumash languages), is depicted twice and the name of the town — founded in 1884 as a temperance community — also remembers its origins. "Lompoc" is a Chumash word for "lagoon," or "still water."

Other murals illustrate pioneer families, the first mayor, first fire chief and first family to open a general store. Disasters are equally storied. In 1909, a wooden barge sank on the rocks at Surf Beach, with two dead, and in 1923, seven U.S. navy destroyers ran up on submerged rocks at Honda Point, sinking

and drowning 23, the navy's worst peacetime accident.

"When a new mural is planned, we request bids and choose a painter through a jurying process," said Andersen, who manages each stage of the project along with a team of volunteers.

Ending the day at Sissy's Uptown Cafe (don't miss this place, the town's top-rated restaurant), notable for painter John Pugh's trompe l'oeil ship, which seems to be crashing through the wall, we talked about other tourist attractions. I'd noticed that Lompoc has two golf courses. The biggest draw, Ostini said, are the vineyards, which offer wine tours and tasting rooms.

Known for outstanding pinot noirs and Chardonnays, the Rita Hill vineyards have earned their own AVA wine appellation.

The next most popular is the partially restored and wonderfully ancient La Purisima Mission, which I visited the next morning, joining a tour with guide Parker Grand through the workshops and the garden. Since the 2,000-acre state historic park's next door has 40 kilometres of hiking trails, the place is always busy.

I loved the back-to-grandma memories on the Fabing-McKay-Spanne house tour, a restored Victorian property and blacksmith shop, but missed the Lompoc Museum, now located in the former Carnegie Library, a 1910 colonial revival gem. Next time, I hope.