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Lee Dill Esty: Architect from Soquel

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Lee Dill Esty, Architect (*Santa Cruz Sentinel*)

In 1911, Lee Dill Esty of Soquel was chosen to be the architect of the clubhouse for the Casa del Rey Country Club and Golf Links (later the Pogonip clubhouse). At a time when most architects were trained in the East, the question is: How and where did this young man receive his training? This article postulates that he received some of his training from a local architect, his father-in-law and mentor, Austin D. Houghton.

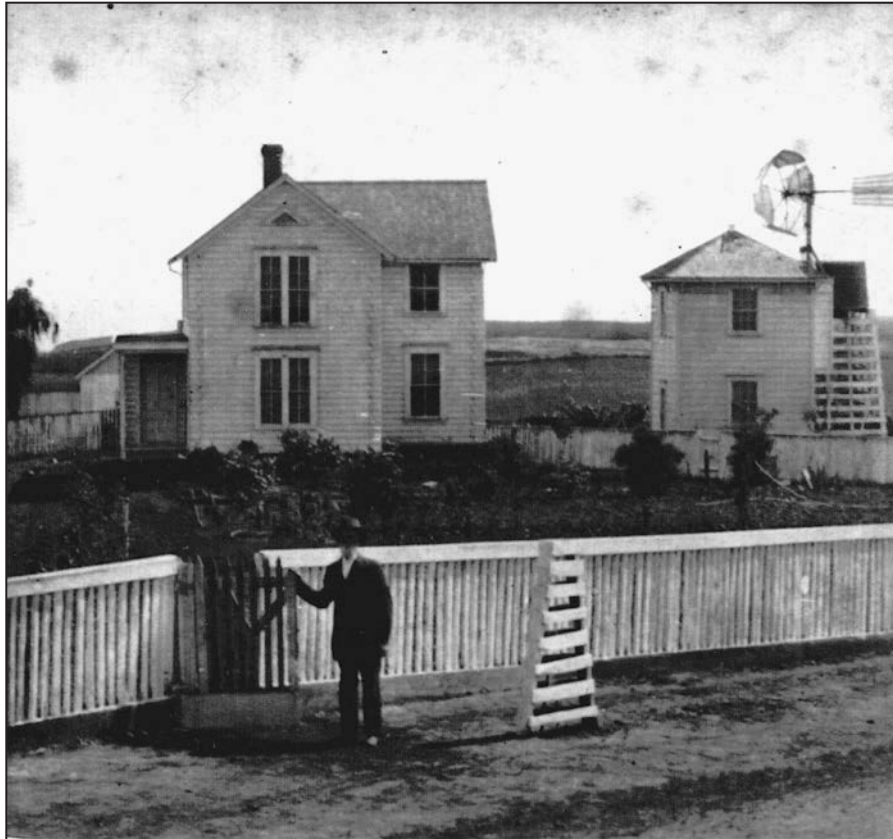
Youth and Early Education

Lee (LeBaron) Dill Esty was born August 19, 1876, in Maine, the eldest son of Jarvis Duncan Esty and Cora Florida Newman. In April 1878, Cora Esty's grandfather, Seward Dill of Maine, purchased about eighteen acres on the county road about a mile east of Soquel.¹ Here he built a home, known as "Rose Acres," for himself and his wife, Shuah. Seward was a retired postmaster and had been a delegate from Maine to the Republican convention

that nominated Abraham Lincoln for president. Between the years 1878 and 1902, the year he died at the age of ninety-four, Seward Dill crossed the continent thirteen times.

In 1879, Seward's granddaughter Cora Esty, her husband Jarvis Esty, and their young son, Lee Dill Esty, joined Seward Dill's family at their house in Soquel. In May 1887, Seward and Shuah granted this property to Cora Esty with the understanding that she and Jarvis would take care of them in their old age. Jarvis Esty was elected to the Board of Supervisors in 1897 and again in 1907. He served until he died in office in 1916. The old Dill-Esty house survives to this day at the corner of Park Avenue and Soquel Drive as the offices of Dr. Randy Baker.²

In Soquel, Lee entered Soquel Elementary School. Early on, Esty exhibited an interest in art. When he was just fifteen, a pupil in the eighth grade, he exhibited a pencil portrait of George Washington



“Rose Acres” built by Seward Dill in 1878. Seward Dill is standing by the gate.
(Harry Dill collection)

in the F. W. Ely furniture store on Pacific Avenue, which was praised in the *Santa Cruz Surf*.³ While it is known that Lee was a member of Santa Cruz High School’s first football team in 1895,⁴ there is no evidence that he graduated from that school. In 1896, the Great Register of voters for Soquel’s Second Precinct describes Lee as being twenty-one years of age, six feet three-quarter inches tall with medium complexion, blue eyes and brown hair. The register indicates that Lee was employed as a farm laborer. Not until 1906, does Lee give his employment as “draftsman.”

Nevertheless, as early as 1897 there is evidence that he had professional training. An 1897 newspaper article says Lee is a student in the Partington Artist School in San Francisco and notes that his father has some of his pen sketches. At that time, Lee expressed his desire to be a newspaper illustrator.⁵ The school is listed in the San Francisco City Directory as the “School of Magazine and Newspaper Illustration” at 424 Pine Street. It was destroyed in the 1906

earthquake and presumably its records were also destroyed. There is no record of Lee having attended the University of California, but family tradition holds that he attended an art school in Berkeley. In 1902, Lee is missing from local voter registration records and from family events. It is possible he was away at art school at this time.

Marriage

On October 30, 1903, Lee Dill Esty married Nella Mae Houghton in Waterville, Maine. Nella Mae was the daughter of Austin D. Houghton and Nellie Drew of Maine. At this time, Austin’s parents, William and Dorcas Houghton, were living in Soquel. William Houghton died on January 18, 1903, in Soquel, which suggests that his son Austin and Austin’s family were probably in Soquel about that time. This could account for how Lee met Nella Mae.

In June 1904, Austin Houghton rented a summer cottage in Capitola for his family and in July he made



The Seward Dill-Cora Esty house today, slightly remodeled. (photo by author)

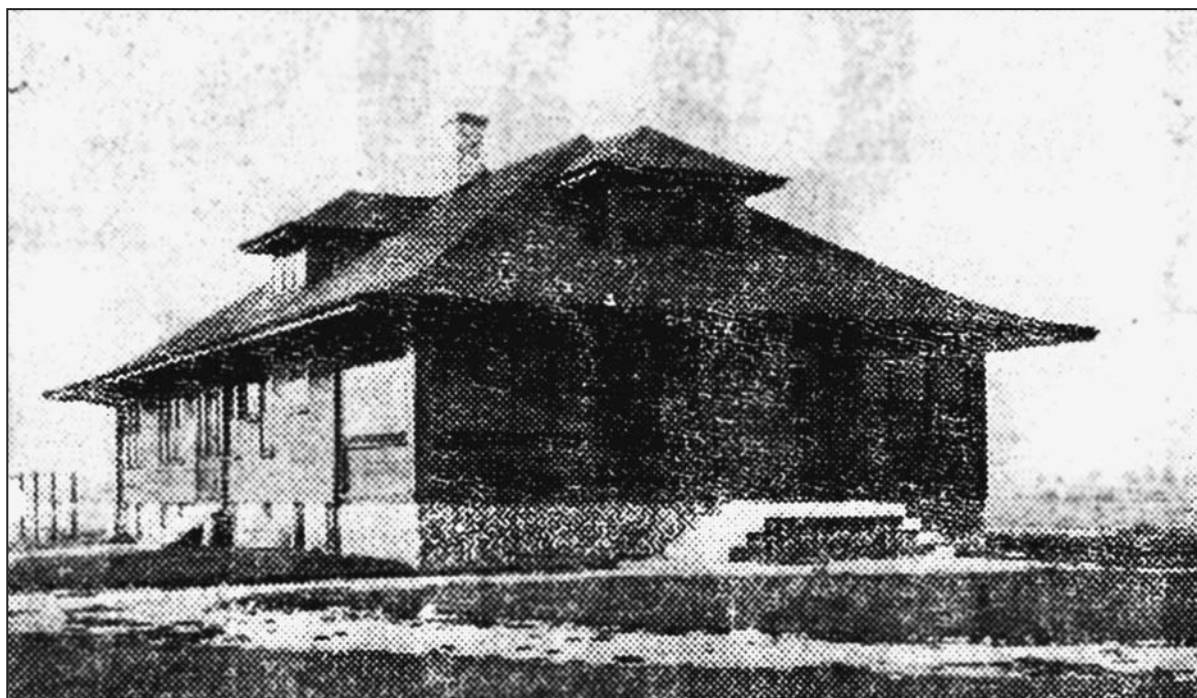
the first of several land purchases at Soquel Point from the Moran family.⁶ Austin designed and built his retirement home on this land, presumably with the assistance of his brother-in-law Leslie Barnes and his new son-in-law Lee Dill Esty. Lee and Nella Mae were also living in Capitola at this time. Their first child was born on August 24, 1904, in one of the row of six houses known as “The Sisters.”⁷

Austin D. Houghton, Architect

Lee Esty’s father-in-law, Austin D. Houghton, A.B., M.E., L.L.D., and PhD, had a stellar career. Details of this career were published by the *Journal* of Lewiston, Maine, in 1901 and were reprinted in his obituaries. After graduating from the University of Maine as a mechanical engineer and working for local businesses, he became superintendent of industrial training in southern schools and colleges for the John F. Slater fund for “negro” education with headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia. He remained in this position for six years. Then, for three years

he was a contractor and architect specializing in college construction projects from North Carolina to Texas. After an engagement with the U. S. Navy in the Spanish-American War, he was given a contract to build nine granite college buildings in Richmond, Virginia, and he also was in charge of building projects for Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania and Wellesley College in Massachusetts.

Houghton bought land in Santa Cruz County in 1904, but he was still working on projects in the East. In 1906 he was John D. Rockefeller’s head architect. Rockefeller was building a fourteen-story building in New York City and, at the same time, the new University of Chicago. Houghton was in charge of both projects. He told George Cardiff that he would spend the day in New York and then take the 20th Century Limited to Chicago where he would work on plans for the University. According to Cardiff, Houghton “said he went back and forth every day between New York and Chicago” and suffered a nervous breakdown as a result. That was the reason



“The Owls” was designed by Austin D. Houghton as his family home. The house burned to the ground December 14, 1915. (*Santa Cruz Sentinel*)

he moved to California. In 1908 Houghton went into business with George Cardiff as Houghton & Cardiff. They managed the retail end of the San Vicente Lumber Company.⁸

In 1904, Houghton, having bought land in Soquel, designed and built his house on Soquel Point. This house, known as “The Owls” was brown-shingled with overhanging eaves and dormer windows in the second floor.⁹ The design of “The Owls” is similar to that of another house within sight just down the street known as “The Roadhouse,” which stood until it was torn down on September 26, 2008. It is possible that either Houghton designed “The Roadhouse” or that its design was influenced by the Houghton house. The Owls had a large basement, which was later Pleasure Point Plunge. The first floor of The Roadhouse was one large empty room like the basement of The Owls. In the 1920s, The Roadhouse was a grocery store.

The Association of Esty and Houghton

Houghton & Cardiff, lumber dealers, had an office at 226 Pacific Avenue. In April 1911, Houghton’s business was incorporated as Central Lumber and Fuel with offices at 147 Pacific Avenue.

Lee Dill Esty worked as an architectural draftsman for his father-in-law at both these firms. During these years, Lee and his wife lived with Austin in the house known as The Owls.

In January 1913, there was a fire at the Houghton home. Fortunately, it was extinguished with pails of milk as the water pipes had frozen. Unfortunately, two years later on December 14, 1915, the Houghton house burned to the ground. After the fire, the Pleasure Point Plunge, a popular indoor swimming pool, was built on the site in the old basement. (Lee and his family had moved back to Capitola before the fire.) Austin Houghton then moved to Wood Street near his sister, Augusta Barnes. Tragedy struck again on January 12, 1916, when Augusta’s husband, Leslie Barnes, was electrocuted at the site of the old Houghton place. Apparently, he touched downed phone lines that had become entangled with high voltage lines during a windstorm. On June 4, 1916, Austin Houghton died of a chronic illness at age fifty-one. Then, on August 14 of the same year, Lee’s father Jarvis Esty, died. He lacked only four months of holding office on the Board of Supervisors for sixteen years.



“The Roadhouse” just down the road and similar in design to “The Owls.” After a long battle to preserve it, the building was demolished September 26, 2008. (photo by author)

Lee Dill Esty, Architect On His Own

In 1906, Lee Dill Esty had given his profession as draftsman. In the 1910 census his profession is, for the first time, given as architect. He was at that time working in Austin Houghton's office. In 1911, still working in his father-in-law's office, he was selected as the architect for the new Casa del Rey Country Club and Golf Links clubhouse, a large public building.

The clubhouse, later to be the clubhouse for the Pogonip Polo Club, was a two-story brown-shingled Craftsman building. The second story had dormer windows and a balcony overlooking the golf course. It was described in an article of the time as

...an attractive and well arranged structure, including two large rooms at either end of the building in which are lockers and baths for men and women players. The main room downstairs, into which you enter from the front door, is immense in size and will be heated by the fires that will crackle and sputter in the big stone fireplace immediately across the room from the door.¹⁰

The door opened to a porch, and windows in that wall looked out to the golf links.

This earliest design of Esty's is reminiscent of the Houghton house, “The Owls,” in that it has a low second story with dormers, is brown-shingled, and has a large downstairs room. It differs in having a balcony and porch. At this time Esty was still working in the Craftsman style.

In 1914, Lee moved his business as architect-draftsman to his own office in the County National Bank Building on Pacific Avenue. There is a noticeable gap in his projects after 1916, the year Lee lost both his father and his father-in-law. He apparently worked as a shipbuilder during World War I, probably in San Francisco or Oakland.

Lee and his family were living in Berkeley in 1920 where Lee was employed as a draftsman. Possibly he was there to take additional classes. The California Architects Board was created in 1901 to regulate the practice of architecture by standardizing examinations and granting licenses. Up until that time most architects trained in art schools. After 1901, architecture courses were



The clubhouse Lee Dill Esty designed for the Casa del Rey Country Club and Golf Links (later the Santa Cruz Golf and Country Club). Notice the marker for the 18th hole on the left. (Special Collections, University Library, UC Santa Cruz)

developed in association with engineering programs at universities. It is possible that Lee Esty's move to Berkeley was to further his education so he could be granted a license to practice his trade as an architect.¹¹

He remained in Berkeley into 1922. Returning to Santa Cruz that year, he now called himself an architect, working at first out of the lumberyard where his mother-in-law still had an interest.¹²

About this time, Esty abandoned his earlier Craftsman style and began to work primarily in stucco. And he began taking on large projects. In 1923 he designed a building at 1100 Soquel Avenue for the East Side branch of the First National Bank. This building on the corner of Soquel and Cayuga is today an entertainment venue known as the Cayuga Vault.

His next design was the Hanly Hospital at Bay Street and West Cliff Drive in 1924. The Hanly Hospital was the dream of Mary Jane Hanly, a nurse who had some money put away and wanted to build a hospital to be used for charity. Her friend George Cardiff helped her to buy the land for the hospital from S. H. (Harry) Cowell. Cardiff, who had been

in business with Austin Houghton, chose Esty as the architect and helped Miss Hanly raise money for construction. Later, in 1938, after Miss Hanly's death, the hospital was deeded to the Dominican Sisters of Adrian, Michigan, who renamed it Sisters Hospital.¹³ A year after designing the Hanly Hospital, he designed another hospital, the Santa Cruz County Hospital; it would be completed in 1926.¹⁴


In 1925, the same year he designed the County Hospital, Esty again branched out on his own, opening an office in the Alta Building on Walnut Avenue.¹⁵

In 1928 he designed the Odd Fellows Lodge in Soquel, a three-story building still standing on Soquel Drive near the corner of Main and Soquel. It is no longer owned by the IOOF and was, for a while, the site of the Staircase Theatre. In 1926 he designed a house for Attorney and Mrs. Bert B. Snyder. A Spanish Colonial Revival style, stucco house with a tile roof, it was built on a slanting lot with three stories in the rear, two in front. The large living room had a fireplace on one wall and windows overlooking the bay on the other. All the

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An advertisement for the architect, L. D. Esty, now working out of his mother-in-law's lumber firm. (*Santa Cruz Evening News*, September 16, 1922)

L. D. Esty

Designer and Architectural Engineer
Rooms 10 and 11 Alta Building

Has designed many of the better homes of this vicinity and can be of service to you in designing yours.

Buildings other than residences now under construction which I designed include, Extension Hall records; County Hospital Buildings; Huston & Weymouth Garage and Crowe & Sons Garage.

Estimates Furnished and Plans
Drafted

An advertisement for L. D. Esty, designer and architectural engineer, now out on his own. (*Santa Cruz Evening News*, April 22, 1925)



The Chaminade Boys School. (Chaminade collection)

lighting fixtures were designed by John Otter, known as Otter the Lampmaker, who was famous in his day as a creator of wrought iron and brass lamps.¹⁶

In 1930, Daniel McPhetres (a civil engineer not to be confused with the carpenter-builder, John S. McPhetres) joined Lee in the Alta office. 1930 was a big year. Lee Esty did a remodel of the Concrete Ship and wharf at Seacliff. His next project, the Chaminade Boys School, was one of Esty's proudest accomplishments. Built for the Society of Mary, the school was a two-story, stucco, Mission style building in DeLaveaga Heights.¹⁷ The Chaminade building still stands off Paul Sweet Road. Now extensively remodeled, it is the center of a resort and hotel complex used for conferences and weddings.

That same year he worked on the design for a semi-circular building with a 132-foot tower that was to mark the entrance to the Municipal Wharf.¹⁸ This grand design was never built.

In 1930, Esty designed a Spanish Colonial Revival style, stucco house to replace the original farmhouse on the 75-acre Soquel estate of William Henry "Pat" Oliver. This house featured the large main room that characterized so many of Esty's designs. As in

the Snyder house, Otter the Lampmaker designed the lighting fixtures.¹⁹

In 1931, Esty expanded his firm as Ryland, Esty and McPhetres.²⁰ Still located in the Alta Building, Esty and McPhetres were joined by the architect Columbus J. Ryland of Monterey. A major project for the new firm was the Santa Cruz Mission replica.²¹ In 1932, they designed several houses, including residences for Hiram Gosliner and Dr. Frederic Shenk. Both houses were built above Escalona Drive and required significant excavation. The Shenk house on Escalona Drive was typical of Esty's designs: stucco with a tile roof, balconies, and wrought iron work.²²

In 1934 Esty designed a house for a member of his wife's family.²³ Her brother Robert A. Houghton and his wife Lena lived with Lena's mother, Ella Nelson, in a house at 129 Rathburn Way. The house was a gift to Ella Nelson from the actor Stanley Laurel of "Laurel and Hardy." Laurel was, at the time, married to Ella Nelson's daughter, Lois. The Esty family had fond memories of Laurel's visits to this house.²⁴ The small rustic house has a large main room with high, beamed ceilings, a fireplace on one long wall, and French doors and windows looking out to the view



Lee Dill Esty design for a grand entrance to the Municipal Wharf. (Photo by author, original in Santa Cruz City Planning Department)

on the opposite wall.

However, the downturn in the economy continued and the firm dissolved. McPhetres went to work for the Municipal Wharf; Ryland remained in Monterey; and Esty relocated to Aptos with an office in Seascape. One of Esty's last projects was a small five-unit tile-roofed stucco apartment on East Cliff Drive, built in 1936. His last known project was the H. H. Ledyard house at Ledyard Acres near Aptos. Once again, the design features a large main room with a fireplace on one wall and picture windows on the other.²⁵

Lee Dill Esty died July 23, 1943 in Santa Cruz at the age of sixty-six.²⁶ He was survived by his wife and two sons and a daughter. His wife, Nella Mae, married again to an Oscar Morgan from Alameda.

Summary

The found evidence indicates that Lee Esty's training began as an illustration student at an art school, which probably included drafting skills. His association with his father-in-law, the architect Austin D. Houghton, both at the lumberyards and living with him implies his influence. After Austin's untimely death in 1916, Lee moved to Berkeley for several years, not returning to Santa Cruz until

1922. After his return, he began to work primarily in stucco and to take on large projects, but his residential designs continued to show the early influence of Austin Houghton.



Notes

- 1 Deed from Hattie B. Fuller to Seward Dill recorded at Santa Cruz County, April 15, 1878 in Vol. 25 of Deeds, page 512.
- 2 "Lithograph On Display At Historic Midcounty Home," *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, September 18, 1966, p. 3.
- 3 *Santa Cruz Surf*, May 21, 1892, p.3; and *Santa Cruz Surf*, June 6, 1892, p 4.
- 4 "Santa Cruz Yesterdays, 'High School Football Team of 1895,'" *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, November 6, 1949, p. 13.
- 5 "Rapid Artistic Progress," *Surf*, November 1, 1897, p. 4.
- 6 "A. D. Houghton and family...have a cottage..." *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, June 9, 1904, p. 3; and Deed, book 157, page 304, July 29, 1904, Grantor: Josephine Moran & Fannie Hunolt, Grantee Houghton, Nellie D., 90 acres.
- 7 Charlene Duvall research documents; email from Colleen Knudsen and telephone interview with Gene H. Campbell, February 2002.



Exterior view of Oliver house, built in 1930. (Photo by author)

- 8 George H. Cardiff, *Santa Cruz and the Cowell Ranch, 1890-1964*, Interview with Elizabeth Calciano, Regional History Project, UC Santa Cruz, pp. 61-64.
- 9 "The Owls of Pleasure Point," *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, October 23, 1966, p. 6.
- 10 "Esty Draws Plans For Golf Club House," *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, November 11, 1911, p. 4.
- 11 The California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland has no record of Esty ever being a student.
- 12 Directories: Polk-Husted Directory of Oakland "Esty Lee D draftsman Union Constr Co, Brkly;" Polk-Husted Directory of Oakland, "Esty L D draftsman 2131 Grant Berkeley;" Thurston's Santa Cruz County, "Esty L D. archt Central Lbr & Fuel Co."
- 13 George H. Cardiff, *Santa Cruz and the Cowell Ranch*, pp. 97-102, 106; and "History of the County's Emeline Street Facility," Local History, Santa Cruz Public Libraries web site.
- 14 Advertisement, *Santa Cruz Evening News*, April 22, 1925, p. 10.
- 15 "Miss Esty Marries..." *Santa Cruz Evening News*, August 21, 1925, p. 6.
- 16 Jewel E. Woods, "Bert Snyder Home Has Lasting Charm," *Santa Cruz Sentinel-News*, June 8, 1949, p. 6; and Sarah Weston, "Otar's Magic Lamps," *Mid-County Post*, January 9, 2007.
- 17 Margaret Koch, "Chaminade Has Gone From School To Seminary," *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, April 16, 1967, p. 2.
- 18 "132 Foot Tower To Grace Beach Building," *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, May 3, 1930, p. 8; and "Plans For New Beach Resort Are Approved," *Santa Cruz Evening News*, May 31, 1930, p. 8.
- 19 Jewel E. Woods, "Oliver Ranch..." *Santa Cruz Sentinel-News*, February 2, 1949, p. 4.
- 20 "Architects and Engineers Form New Firm Here," *Santa Cruz Evening News*, September 15, 1931, p. 4.
- 21 John Chase, *The Sidewalk Companion to Santa Cruz Architecture*, 3rd edition, (Santa Cruz: Museum of Art & History, 2005), pp. 101-102.
- 22 Jewel E. Woods, "Excavation Proved Well Worth While," *Santa Cruz Sentinel-News*, December 29, 1948, p. 4; and "Two New Homes Being Erected On Escalona Drive," *Santa Cruz Evening News*, August 11, 1932, p. 7.
- 23 An article in the *Santa Cruz Sentinel* (February 23, 1949, p. 4) attributes the design of the Ella Nelson house to "Architects Ryland and Esty of Carmel." Ryland was at that time a partner in the firm, Ryland, Esty, and McPhetres of Santa Cruz, but he primarily worked in Monterey.
- 24 "Stan Laurel Built Santa Cruz Home For Mother-In-Law," *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, January 23, 1944, p. 2.
- 25 Jewel E. Woods, "H. H. Ledyard Home Has Scenic Hilltop Site," *Santa Cruz Sentinel-News*, March 16, 1949, p. 11.
- 26 "Lee D. Esty, Son of Soquel Pioneer, Dead," *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, July 25, 1943, p. 2.

For a list of buildings attributed to Lee Dill Esty, see the printed version of *Pathways to the Past: Adventures in Santa Cruz County History* (Santa Cruz County History Journal Number 6), pages 233-234. It is available in Santa Cruz area libraries or may be purchased at the Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History, in Santa Cruz area bookstores, or online through Amazon.com.



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