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Rose Rostron

## Santa Cruz County's First Female Supervisor

by Greg Gardner



Santa Cruz  
Museum of  
Art & History  
at the McPherson Center

Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History  
705 Front Street  
Santa Cruz, CA 95060  
[www.santacruzmah.org](http://www.santacruzmah.org)

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# Rose Rostron

## Santa Cruz County's First Female Supervisor

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Rose Rostron was a woman of her time. The first woman to serve on the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors was appointed to the position in 1930 by Governor Clement Young. She was an advocate for road building and improving the public road network from the Live Oak and Twin Lakes districts through Branciforte to Scotts Valley. Through dignity, hard work, dedication and strong principles she earned the respect of her peers and constituents.



*Rose Rostron at her home on Berkeley Way in 1963. (Courtesy of the Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History, Rose Rostron Collection)*

Who was Rose Rostron? How did she influence our lives today? Many people nowadays, including employees of the county clerk's office, keepers of the county records, and those interested in county history, do not know who Rose was or what her legacy was.

Rose's childhood is cloaked in fog. Although we know she was born in 1874 in Switzerland, we have little information about her biological parents. Her father appears to have dropped out of her life and Rose does not mention him in future interviews.<sup>1</sup> While we do not know the circumstances, her mother appears to have given Rose up to the foster-parent-system (though, her mother does come back into Rose's life later on). Rose was taken in (adopted?) by a German couple whose first names were Christian and Anna. Around 1879, they immigrated to the United States where, upon arrival, they appear to have taken the surname Aichberg. At the turn of the century, Aichberg was not a common surname in the United States and

immigration records show only one woman with that name. But there is a small town in southern Germany called Aichberg. It is likely Christian or Anna once lived near that town and took it as their surname. By 1882, Christian, Anna, and Rose Aichberg had settled in Santa Cruz, where they established a photography studio in the old Ely Building on Pacific Avenue.<sup>2</sup>



*An early photograph of Rose. (Circa 1890, Courtesy of the Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History, Rose Rostron Collection)*

Rose learned some valuable lessons during her early years in Santa Cruz. Like many children, she was quick to learn another language: English. Using her charm and her skill with English and German she became the family and business interpreter and was known around town as the “little interpreter.” Ernest Otto, in an August 22, 1943, *Santa Cruz Sentinel* article, wrote: “Folks enjoyed going to the gallery for a cordial greeting from the child.” Ernest Otto also related in his article: “She came to look after the entire business and all recognized her brilliancy.” In 1888 and 1889, her life took a

decided turn. Her father, Christian, died on November 1, 1888. Then in 1889, with a childhood friend, Addie Braun, she traveled to Germany to visit relatives. During a side trip to Switzerland, her biological mother took action to keep Rose there permanently. We don’t know the motives behind this action and Rose never mentions possible motives in any of her future interviews. Fortunately, the relationships she had built in Santa Cruz helped to bring her back home. The people of Santa Cruz rallied around and signed a petition to the U.S. Consul in Switzerland urging him to take action to get Rose back to Santa Cruz.<sup>3</sup> After about a year, the consul was able to get Rose across the border into Germany. She was soon back home.

After returning to Santa Cruz, Rose settled into a quiet life. She met and married George Rostron in 1899. They created a successful farming business growing grapes and apples. They had two daughters, Marcella, born in 1904, and Vivian, born in 1913. In 1914, Governor Hiram Johnson appointed George to the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors, where he served until his death in 1930. George was a proponent of good roads. As Chairman of the Board, his leadership resulted in the funding and building of the modern Soquel Avenue Bridge in Aptos. Governor Richardson recognized George’s strong advocacy of good roads by appointing him to be the state representative at the 1924 National Convention for the Good Roads Movement held in Albuquerque, New Mexico. On October 18, 1930, George died of arteriosclerosis and hypertension. He was buried at the Santa Cruz IOOF Cemetery.<sup>4</sup>

The early 1900s were a time of great social and political change. Starting in 1912, women could legally vote in California and by 1920, across the entire country. Other events of this time included World War I, the Spanish Flu Epidemic, the Roaring Twenties, Prohibition, the Great Depression, and finally World War II. This period provided many examples of increasing activism by women. Annelise Orleck in her article “‘We are that Mythical Thing called the Public’: Militant Housewives during the Great Depression” relates

how Eleanor Roosevelt argued that mothers, through self-sacrifice and creativity would save their families from the worst ravages of the Depression.<sup>5</sup> Women in all areas of the country lived this belief by: 1) picketing for lower food prices and conducting boycotts of butcher shops, 2) organizing to resist evictions, 3) lobbying politicians and running for political office, and 4) creating self-help groups and gardening collectives so that they could barter for clothing and food. In one example from Los Angeles in 1935, women organized and pressed a boycott to force the cost of meat down.<sup>6</sup> There is also evidence, that in the 1930s, women started exercising greater political independence. Up to this time, political party affiliation was generally along family lines. Mary and Verdes Hanson, husband and wife, of Santa Cruz were both registered Republicans in 1930. By 1932, Mary demonstrated her independence by changing her party affiliation to Democrat. This phenomenon even occurred between parents and their children. George and Rose Rostron were long time Republicans, but their daughter Marcella registered as a Democrat.

The political landscape of Santa Cruz County was also undergoing a major shift. As the table on the following page shows, in 1930, eighty percent of the registered voters in the First Supervisory District were Republican, but by 1932, the number of registered Republicans had dropped to almost sixty percent. Helmut Napoth, et. al, in their article “Polls and Elections: The New Deal Realignment in Real Time” studied how American politics in the 1930s and 1940s underwent an electoral realignment. Prior to the 1930s, the Republican Party was dominant and had been since at least the 1890s. During the 1930s and 1940s, the Democratic Party became the dominant party. (We can track this shift in party demographics because starting in 1936 Gallup and other organizations began to conduct political polling.)

This transformation of the political parties resulted in Democratic landslides in 1932 and 1936. Simultaneously women were branching out to what were considered non-traditional careers. For

example, poultry farming was seen as a predominantly male industry; ninety-five percent of the poultry farmers in the first supervisory district on the Santa Cruz County Grand Register identified themselves as men. Some poultry farms may have been run by wives under their husband’s name. But in 1930, women like Elizabeth Owens of Branciforte and Mabel Crews of Santa Cruz broke the mold by openly identifying themselves as poultry farmers.



*Wedding photograph of George and Rose Rostron. (Courtesy of the Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History, Rose Rostron Collection)*

At the same time, women were entering the world of politics from the Superintendent of Schools at the local level, Secretary of Education at the state level, to U.S. representatives at the national level. Lynn Dumenil in her article “The New Woman and the Politics of the 1920s” relates how women across the country were taking on greater public responsibilities.<sup>7</sup> Women were breaking the political barrier and attaining political offices at all levels, especially the local level. Women were also active as

<b>FIRST SUPERVISORY DISTRICT VOTER REGISTRATION</b>		
	<b>1930</b>	<b>1932</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	4,566 Men – 2,406 (52.7%) Women – 2,160 (47.3%)	5,093 Men – 2,679 (52.6%) Women – 2,414 (47.4%)
<b>REPUBLICAN</b>	3,606 (79.0%) Men – 1,899 Women – 1,707	3,094 (60.8%) Men – 1,535 Women – 1,559
<b>DEMOCRAT</b>	732 (16.0%) Men – 403 Women – 329	1,780 (34.9%) Men – 1,027 Women – 753
<b>LIBERTY</b>	None	20 Men – 10 Women – 10
<b>PROHIBITIONIST</b>	55 Men – 14 Women – 41	44 Men – 15 Women – 29
<b>SOCIALIST</b>	22 Men – 13 Women – 9	19 Men – 13 Women – 6
<b>DECLINED TO STATE</b>	151 Men – 77 Women – 74	136 Men – 79 Women – 57

*From 1930 and 1932 Indices to the Great Register, Santa Cruz County Government Records. (Courtesy of the Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History)*

lobbyists attempting to maintain the Progressive Movement agenda. But there were some positions that women had difficulty breaking into, such as county supervisor. County supervisors in California prior to 1937 were similar to a hands-on blue-collar manager. In 1937, the California Political Code, which specifies the powers and duties of the government positions, listed the maintenance of public roads as one of the primary responsibilities of the County Board of Supervisors. Thus county supervisors were directly responsible for the budget and for expenditures, such as purchasing new stop signs; they appointed the road work supervisor for their district; and they were responsible for the disposal or sale of excess property, such as bridges. These responsibilities contributed to a prejudice against women in these positions; it was felt that women were not competent to oversee the maintenance of roads.

Rose Rostron was not the first woman county supervisor in California; that honor goes to Mildred Green of San Diego in 1918. But Rose was part of the small wave of six women to attain these key local political positions between 1918 and 1935. Four of these women (Mildred Green in 1918, Rosalie Brown in 1920, Rose Rostron in 1930, and Louise Ayer in 1935) initially attained their position through appointment by the governor; only two women (Margaret Morgan in 1920 and Mary French in 1928) were elected to these positions. While the governors at this time were members of the Progressive wing of the Republican Party, there was nothing else in their policies that demonstrated a particular concern for women’s issues.

In November 1930, after a month of consideration and consultation with prominent members of the Santa Cruz County community, Governor Clement

COUNTY	NAME	YEAR	
San Diego	Mildred L. Greene	1918	Appointed by Governor William Stephens to replace her deceased husband
San Francisco	Margaret Mary Morgan	1920	Elected
San Mateo	Rosalie M. Brown	1920	Appointed by Governor William Stephens to replace her deceased husband
San Joaquin	Mary J. French	1928	Elected
Santa Cruz	Rose Rostron	1930	Appointed by Governor Clement Young to replace her deceased husband
Santa Clara	Louise Ayer	1935	Appointed by Governor Frank Merriam to replace her deceased husband

Young decided to appoint Rose Rostron to fill her deceased husband’s seat on the board of supervisors. In Governor Young’s words “It would appear to be especially wise and appropriate that she fill out his unexpired term.”<sup>8</sup> But Rose was not satisfied just to fill a spot, she was going to work hard to support and improve the community.

Before she was sworn into office, Rose went around her district talking to people and in general seeing what work needed to be done. In her words,

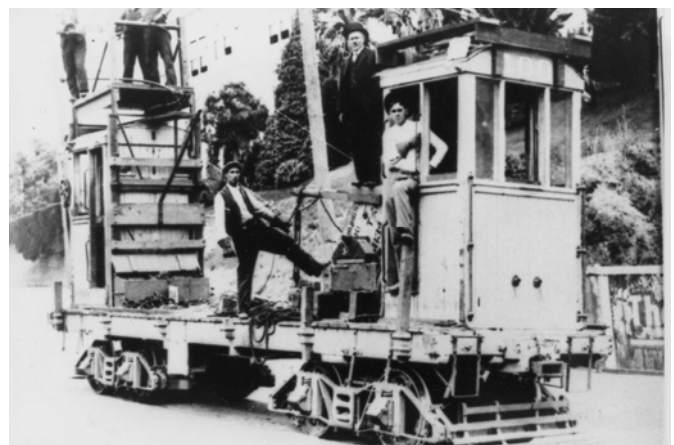
I am intending to give earnest attention to the duties of the office and will hope to become well enough posted and efficient in my work so that no one will say, ever, that it was necessary for me to lean too heavily on my very good friends in the court house for assistance.<sup>9</sup>

In just two years, through hard work and due diligence, Rose earned the respect of her constituents. The following is a typical endorsement in support of her 1932 election campaign:

If she doesn’t know how to build a road, she does know how to tactfully eliminate grades and widen roads, and put more mileage of road bed in a safe, travelable condition on the taxpayer’s money, than likely a new supervisor could or would do.<sup>10</sup>

Rose literally did not leave a stone unturned in her pursuit of the best for the entire county. While

driving the roads of her district she was known to suddenly pull over to the side of the road, get a shovel out of her trunk, and clear a clogged drainage ditch. Also, if she observed a road crew not working to its fullest, she would stop and urge them to greater effort.<sup>11</sup> Rose’s efforts to improve the county roads enhanced the mail service by allowing the postal service to expand its rural routes.<sup>12</sup> Her efforts to improve the roads also made them better and safer; the people in the Live Oak and Twin Lakes communities were now able to travel in all weather.<sup>13</sup> Rose let her actions speak for themselves; it was what she accomplished that mattered to the people.



Road paving equipment and crew. (Circa 1920, Courtesy of the Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History, Rose Rostron Collection)

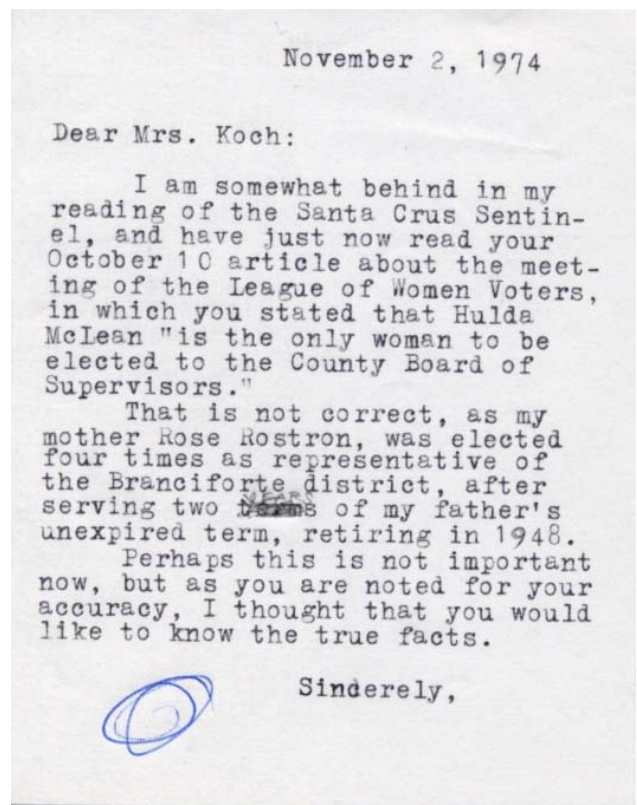


Rose Rostron worked within the system to secure improvements for the community. Jack Stockfleth in his 1932 letter to the *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, noted that she “was not a radical reformer - in fact she is quite conservative.”<sup>14</sup> But, even working within the system, she faced the prejudices of the day, including newspapers not knowing how to address her - in one issue she was called Mrs. Rose Rostron and in the next issue Mrs. George Rostron. The *Santa Cruz Evening News* for the 1932 election stated that women were supporting her and would likely continue to support her. However, the *Evening News* did not back this assumption with anecdotal evidence, such as statements from women voters or accounts of higher than usual turnout of women voters.<sup>15</sup> Because the number of registered women voters in the Branciforte District was less than fifty percent, she needed the votes of at least some men to be elected. During her political career Rose also endured backhanded compliments from her colleagues; in a December 1940 supervisor meeting, Supervisor Charles Pinkham warned, “We will have to keep Mrs. Rostron at home, because every time she goes visiting she gets ideas for spending money.”<sup>16</sup> Rose did not let obstacles slow her down, she proved she could, and did, belong as a representative for the people of her district and the county.

Many politicians have stated that they would not compromise their principles for politics - Rose lived this belief. In 1935, concerned about the safety of drivers on the roads in Live Oak she proposed to the board of supervisors that a stop sign be installed on Chanticleer and lower Capitola Roads. Initially her proposal was voted down; Supervisor George Ley stated “They do no good, and I don’t think they should be installed.”<sup>17</sup> But, persevering, she was able to get a new vote and persuaded enough of her colleagues to approve the sign. To celebrate her success the *Santa Cruz Evening News* headlined an article: “Rose Rostron Wins Live Oak ‘Stop’ Sign.”<sup>18</sup> She also took politically unpopular stands. Frequently speaking out and voting against dance hall and extended hour drinking permits even for people, organizations, or businesses in her district.<sup>19</sup> She



Rose passing on the keys of office to Lloyd Foster in 1949. (Santa Cruz Sentinel, January 4, 1949)



A 1974 letter from Vivian Rostron to Margaret Koch. (Courtesy of the Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History, Vivian Rostron Collection)

believed that more dance halls or extended drinking hours promoted drinking and driving and resulted in more people being injured or killed. Despite being on the losing side of this and other votes taken by her fellow supervisors, she stood by her principles.

Rose went on to be re-elected county supervisor three times. In 1944, she ran for office unopposed. While in office, she continued her work to improve roads and transportation throughout her district. When the old East Cliff Drive was threatened by severe erosion, she planned and had built a new East Cliff Drive.<sup>20</sup> She also had the 17<sup>th</sup> Avenue Extension built to connect the lower Capitola Road with the Santa Cruz – Watsonville Highway.<sup>21</sup> Besides improving transportation in her district she left other legacies for the future. Most notably she replaced the Glen Canyon covered bridge (recognized as one of the entry points to Santa Cruz) with a modern structure and preserved this historic covered bridge as part of De Laveaga Park in Santa Cruz.<sup>22</sup> After serving in office for eighteen years Rose retired in 1948.

Rose supported the community in and out of office. She was a long term member of the First Congregational Church of Santa Cruz, and the Rebekahs (the female auxiliary of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows), and a founding member of the De Laveaga Home Extension Group. She advanced civic responsibilities among women as secretary, treasurer, and program hostess for the Business and Professional Women’s Club (BPWC). She chaired the local political promotion committee tasked with finding qualified women to run for political office. For all of her efforts, on December 11, 1963, Rose was awarded a lifetime membership scroll by the BPWC.<sup>23</sup> In addition, she exercised her civic responsibilities as a member of the Association of County Supervisors, endorsing local political candidates, and writing letters to, or visiting, the board of supervisors.<sup>24</sup> Rose remained active in the community until her death on September 30, 1970, at the age of 90. She is buried alongside her husband, George, at the Santa Cruz IOOF Cemetery.

Rose Rostron was an exceptional person in an exceptional time. She set a standard of accomplishment for all who followed her. She knew how precious the right to vote was and urged others to be more politically involved. Rose’s daughter, Vivian, did her part to preserve Rose’s legacy, such as in one instance when Vivian wrote a letter to Margaret Koch correcting Ms. Koch on who was the first woman supervisor of Santa Cruz County – it was Rose Rostron, not Hulda McLean. Through dedication, dignity, and hard work, she inspires us all to step forward, to learn, to grow, and to do our part to make ours a better community.

### Author Biography

Greg Gardner was in the Air Force and has been a volunteer archivist for the Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History since April 2013. He has a bachelor’s degree in chemistry from San Jose State University, a master’s degree in management from Webster University, and a master’s degree in library science with a concentration in archives from San Jose State University. This paraphrased quote from Allen Weinstein, previously the Archivist of the United States, “For the Archivist, this role is a result of his obligation to preserve and assure timely and maximum access to our records in the evolving historic saga of the people.” synthesizes Greg’s belief in the role of archivists in society.

### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> M. A. Smith, “From Rose Rostron’s Family Album: Some Never-Before-Published,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel* (Santa Cruz, CA), April 7, 1963, 24:1-8.

<sup>2</sup> “Fair Notes: Exhibitors and Exhibition,” *Santa Cruz Weekly Sentinel*, October 21, 1882, 3:5.

<sup>3</sup> “Little Rosa,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, August 16, 1889, 3:2.

<sup>4</sup> Burial Permit, Santa Cruz County Government Records, Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History Archives.

<sup>5</sup> Annelise Orleck, “We are that Mythical Thing Called the Public: Militant Housewives during the Great Depression,” *Feminist Studies* 19, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 147-173.

<sup>6</sup> “High Meat Prices Hit in L.A.: Housewives Press Boycott to Force Cost Down,” *Santa Cruz Evening News*, March 28, 1935, 1:7.



<sup>7</sup> Lynn Dumenil, “The New Woman and the Politics of the 1920s,” *Organization of American Historians Magazine of History*, (July 2007): 22-26.

<sup>8</sup> “Gov. Young Says Her Selection is Wisest for Place,” *Santa Cruz Evening News*, November 8, 1930, 1:1.

<sup>9</sup> “County’s New Supervisor Picks D. Tefertiller as District Road Work Head,” *Santa Cruz Evening News*, November 12, 1930, 3:6-7.

<sup>10</sup> J. Stockfleth, “Wants Voters to Appreciate Good Work,” *Santa Cruz Evening News*, August 27, 1932, 4:1-3.

<sup>11</sup> “Caught on the Fly,” *Santa Cruz Evening News*, December 27, 1940, 1:1.

<sup>12</sup> “Rostron Aid Brings Mail to District,” *Santa Cruz Evening News*, August 2, 1936, 7:1.

<sup>13</sup> “Areas’ Growth Laid to Road Improvements,” *Santa Cruz Evening News*, August 13, 1936, 2:4 & “Mrs. Rostron Shows Ability as Road Maker,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, August 4, 1936, 2:4.

<sup>14</sup> J. Stockfleth, “Wants Voters to Appreciate Good Work,” *Santa Cruz Evening News*, August 27, 1932, 4:1-3.

<sup>15</sup> “Count on Vote Will be Slow,” *Santa Cruz Evening News*, November 7, 1932, 1:4.

<sup>16</sup> “Supervisors to Replace F.R.’s Photo with U.S., State Flags,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, December 8, 1940, 1:5-6.

<sup>17</sup> “Stop Sign in Live Oak Meets Opposition,” *Santa Cruz Evening News*, September 24, 1935, 2:1.

<sup>18</sup> “Rose Rostron Wins Live Oak “Stop” Sign,” *Santa Cruz Evening News*, October 8, 1935, 8:4.

<sup>19</sup> “Too Many Dance Halls in County Says Mrs. Rostron,” *Santa Cruz Evening News*, May 8, 1935, 2:5. and “Late Dancing Permits Given Three Halls,” *Santa Cruz Evening News*, August 9, 1932, 4:4.

<sup>20</sup> “Areas Growth Laid to Road Improvements,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, August 13, 1936, 6:2: “Editorial: Our Recommendations,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, August 23, 1936, 12:1: “As We See It: News and Views of the Sentinel,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, January 7, 1941, 1:1 & “Brief Statement of the Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors of the County of Santa Cruz State of California,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, July 10, 1942, 19:5.

<sup>21</sup> “Heavy Traffic Flow along 17th Ave. Extension,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, December 2, 1936, 8:6.

<sup>22</sup> “Plan to Move Glen Canyon Bridge Aided,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, May 20, 1939, 1:4: “Old Glen Canyon Bridge Reaches New Park Site,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, September 18, 1939, 1:1: “De Laveaga Playground to Open Sunday,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, August 21, 1940, 1:4. & “Glen Canyon Covered Bridge Narrowly Missed Demolition,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, July 17, 1966, 2:4-6.

<sup>23</sup> “BPW Presents Life Membership,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, December 11, 1963, 5:4.

<sup>24</sup> “Rose Rostron Visits Board of Supervisors,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, March 18, 1953, 1:1. & “Brief Statement of the Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors of the County of Santa Cruz State of California,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, December 13, 1967, 14:1.