

Old 5th Street - The 1900's Morro Bay Boulevard

Morro Bay Boulevard, a staple road in Morro Bay, is remembered by the locals as Old Fifth Street. In the 1900's, Old 5th Street was the heart of the town, where locals, troops, and visitors would spend their time. A home to many shops that helped to develop the city, the boulevard serves as a reminder of the past that will not be forgotten. As Morro Bay increases its popularity, the Boulevard connects the town to Highway 1 and takes its visitors on a journey through the town and its history.



Figure 1 Looking West down Fifth Street in the 1950's, capturing the Bay Theater and the top of Morro Bay Rock

At the intersection of Morro Bay Boulevard and Market Avenue is the Centennial Staircase that connects the Boulevard to Centennial Parkway and the water. Prior to the staircase, Old 5th street ended at an overhang above the bay. The city was dedicated to their residents and, in 1971¹, it proposed the construction of the stairwell at the head of the Boulevard. The project was completed in 1975 and provided easy access from the Boulevard to the Embarcadero². At the top of the staircase, a plaque marks the establishment of the Centennial Staircase and the town of Morro Bay.



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| A - Centennial Staircase | D - Bea Armstrong's Rock Cafe | G - Bay Theater |
| B - First Drug Store | E - Original Theater and Dance House | H - Caccia House |
| C - First Department Store | F - Original Post Office and Variety Store | |

Figure 4 Layout of above referenced establishments on Fifth Street through the 1900's

Walking East towards town, you'll come across 315 Morro Bay Boulevard, the location of Morro bay's first drug store³. Next door, at 325 Morro Bay Boulevard, you'll also find the location of the first department store⁴. The establishment of these buildings was convenient for the locals and helped grow the town's civilization.

Just down the block at 355 Morro Bay Boulevard was Bea Armstrong's Rock Cafe⁵, a popular dining spot during World War II. In 1940, the US Navy had established the Morro Bay Amphibious Base⁶ where troops

would train in island invasion tactics. After a long day, the troops would go to the Rock Cafe to socialize.

¹ "Centennial Parkway | City Of Morro Bay - Official Website"

² "Morro Bay Trained Island Invaders During World War II"

³ "Morro Bay Trained Island Invaders During World War II"

⁴ "Historical Walking Tour | MBNEP - Official Website"

⁵ Moses, 15-20

⁶ "Morro Bay Trained Island Invaders During World War II"

Next door to the cafe was Morro's original theater and dance hall. According to the current owner, the theater opened in 1904 and was used for vaudeville productions⁷. The town also held community dances at the theater productions in the early 1900's. Locals gathered to watch the performances until the building was closed and repurposed for retail store fronts. Although it is no longer a theater, the owners kept the original stage and projector room as part of the building. If you go in today, be careful as the theater is rumored to be haunted -- some residents have reported hearing ghostly moans echo across the stage at night.

Continuing East another block, at 407 Morro Bay Boulevard, the original Post Office and Variety Store building remains in tact. The Variety store was owned and run by Harriet and Bill Payne in the 1950's. A regular place for locals in to visit, Harriet recalls how people would frequently meet friends there⁸. The exterior of the building still captures the authentic brickwork where the post office and dry goods store signage originally hung⁹. Modifications to the building's structure were made for safety but the owners of the building kept the exposed brick in the interior. The wooden headers of the old windows and doors as well as the original flooring are all visible if you enter the building.



Figure 2 The Variety store in the 1950's



Figure 3 The Bay Theater in 1942

Across the street from the variety store stands the Bay Theater. Built in 1941 by the Army Corps of Engineers¹⁰, it functioned as the town's main theater once the original closed down. The Jannaopoulos family has owned and operated the building since 1975 and aimed to preserve the building's original candor¹¹. The single screen theater continues to show movies weekly and offer audio description and closed captioning to any of their viewers.

The final landmark on Old 5th Street is the Caccia House. Ettore (Ed) Caccia and his parents were dairy farmers and entrepreneurs in the city of Morro Bay. Ed lived in the residence at 560 Fifth Street that was built in 1905 by Alva Paul and purchased by Ed Caccia in 1917¹². His parents lived next door in the more famous Caccia house, which housed three generations of Caccias. Remodeled multiple times and most recently converted into store fronts, their history is remembered through a plaquered attached to the front of the building.

⁷ Frawley

⁸ Moses, 15-20

⁹ "Art Gallery Interview"

¹⁰ "Bay Theater Associate"

¹¹ "Morro Bay - Website"

¹² Castle, 120

While Morro Bay Boulevard replaced the name of Fifth Street, the history of the “old” street will remain alive. Old Fifth Street was where a good portion of the development of Morro Bay began. As you walk down what is now Morro Bay Boulevard, remember you are walking on a little piece of Morro Bay’s history that you can see in some of the landmarks and original structures.