

Deetjen's Big Sur Inn  
East Side State Highway 1  
Big Sur  
Monterey County  
California

HABS No. CA-2611

HABS  
CAL  
27-BIGSUR,  
1-

**PHOTOGRAPHS**

**WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA**

**Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Western Region  
Department of the Interior  
San Francisco, California 94107**

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
DEETJEN'S BIG SUR INN

HABS  
CAL  
27-BIGSUR,  
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**Location:** East Side of State Highway 1, Big Sur, Monterey County, California  
U.S.G.S. Partington Ridge, Calif. 7.5' Quadrangle, 1956 (photorevised 1974)  
UTM coordinates: 10-612650-4008620

**Present Owner:** Deetjen's Big Sur Inn Preservation Foundation  
490 Calle Principal  
Monterey CA 93940

**Present Occupants:** Deetjen's Big Sur Inn Preservation Foundation

**Present Use:** Inn and restaurant

**Significance:** Deetjen's Big Sur Inn, at Castro Creek Canyon and State Highway 1 along California's spectacular Big Sur coastline, was one of the first visitor accommodation facilities to offer overnight lodging and meals to travelers as a response to the opening of the Carmel-San Simeon Highway in 1937 (destined to become California's first officially-designated scenic highway in 1966). The Inn's builder, Helmuth Deetjen, employed the vernacular wooden building traditions of his native Norway in its design, carefully integrating the rustic architecture of the inn into the coastal chaparral and stands of redwood trees that characterize its scenic setting in Castro Creek Canyon. The five buildings that form the historic core of the inn, built between 1936 and 1941, possess a high level of integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and association as an historic district. The rustic hand-crafted character of the Inn and its Old World ambiance set a standard for quality in the context of recreational development associated with the opening of the Big Sur to the tourist trade. Its architecture embodies the distinctive characteristics of its vernacular Norwegian sources in type, while its hand-crafted design conveys high artistic value. The strong architectural and historical significance of Deetjen's Big Sur Inn qualified the historic complex for listing in the National Register of Historic Places on September 13, 1990, at the local level of significance.

**Date:** May 1995

## DEETJEN'S BIG SUR INN

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### PART I. PHYSICAL SETTING OF DEETJEN'S BIG SUR INN

By common usage, California's Big Sur is an area of Pacific coastline along the western slopes of the Santa Lucia mountain range, running from the mouth of the Little Sur River (approximately 20 miles south of Carmel), south about 35 miles to Slate's Hot Springs (today known as the Esalen Institute). Local writer, Lillian Boss Ross, whose best-selling novels *The Stranger* and *Blaze Allen* depict the early lifestyle of the region, once wrote that the Big Sur was not so much a country as it was a state of mind. Within this overall setting then, Deetjen's Big Sur Inn nestles within Castro Canyon, its buildings perched--in some cases--on the steep slopes. Mature second-growth coast redwoods mark the canyon itself, while coast live oaks are scattered on the fringes. The complex of buildings that comprises the Inn fronts on the east side of State Highway 1 [the Inn actually stands on the north--inland--side of a curve in the highway, which is a north-south route], and to the west [actually south at this location] the land drops off steeply to the Pacific Ocean.

### PART II. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

The first Anglo settlers came to the rugged and isolated coast in the late 1860s, exercising preemption on public land afforded by farmed what arable land there was, and ran stock in the meadows and along the precipitous ridges of the mountainous landscape. Some logged the redwoods in steep coastal canyons, or shipped tanhark to Santa Cruz and San Francisco from makeshift landings along the rocky shoreline. A few are still represented by fifth- and sixth-generations family members. As late as World War II there were only about 150 permanent residents in the region.

By the early 20th century, what commercial development existed in the Big Sur was devoted to the recreation business, principally in support of hunters and fishermen. This began about 1902 with Pfeiffer's Resort, which was located on the Big Sur River at the site of today's "Village." Its main competition was the Idlewild Hotel on the banks of the Little Sur River. The management of the Idlewild guaranteed a limit of trout, "...even to those who used a bent pin." Both facilities have long since disappeared. Pfeiffer's Resort burned down about 1920 and the family moved their operations further south, constructing the Big Sur Lodge on the Big Sur River at the present location of the Pfeiffer State Park Headquarters. (The State of California purchased the property in 1934, and the original lodge was replaced in 1950.)

At about the same time that John Pfeiffer was building his Big Sur Lodge, the Apple Pie Inn opened on the site of the first Pfeiffer's Resort. It, in turn, became the River Inn in the early 1930s. The Redwood Lodge (ca.1920) and Ripplewood (ca.1925) made up the remainder of Big Sur's principal tourist facilities before the coming of the new highway. Of these early resorts, only the River Inn, the Redwood Lodge (now operating as Fernwood), and Ripplewood remain. Much altered and expanded over time, they would not be recognized today by their builders.

Access to the Big Sur coast was never easy. As late as 1920 a light spring wagon with two good horses took 11 hours to make the 26-mile trip from the Sur to Monterey. For a four-horse team pulling a lumber wagon over the unimproved dirt road, the trip took 13 hours. All that began to change through the single-minded efforts of Dr. John L. Roberts, a Monterey physician and longtime county supervisor. His familiarity with, and love for, the natural beauty of the Big Sur

led him to lobby the State of California to join the county in building a scenic highway through the region, opening it up for the enjoyment of the general public. Roberts' determination, and that of Monterey's state senator, Elmer Rigdon, saw the project initiated in 1919 with the passage of a 1.5 million dollar bond issue. The original funding came only after the proponents changed the road's designation from "Scenic" to Necessary for Defense," allowing use of Military Highway Bond Act moneys.,

Actual construction of the 80-mile road, designated the Carmel-San Simeon Highway, began in 1922. Funds ran out three years later, when the northern approach reached Anderson Canyon. The project lay idle until 1931, when passage of a second bond issue and the use of convict labor enabled resumption of construction. The roadbed was literally blasted out of the steep coastal mountainside. A total of 36 bridges had to be constructed before the project was completed in the summer of 1937, 15 years after its start, and at a final cost of eight million dollars.

The opening of the new highway began an ever-increasing influx of visitors and sightseers to the previously isolated region. It also brought a few artists, writers, and craftsmen who began to augment the existing permanent population., The size of this group remained small due to lack of available housing, and a natural reticence on the part of some older established families to accept the "Bohemian" newcomers. It was in the context of this opening of the Big Sur country to a mobile and rapidly-expanding visiting public that Norwegian craftsman, Helmuth Deetjen and his future wife, Helen Haight began the development of their Big Sur Inn.

Helmuth Deetjen was born in Bergen, Norway in 1892, the son of a German tobacco merchant married to a Norwegian girl. Helmuth, a loner who developed an abiding interest in metaphysics, left school at age eleven or twelve. He immersed himself in literature and pursued self-education, which apparently also included short periods of study at Heidelberg and at the University of Paris. He learned woodworking and land surveying. His travels took him through post-World War I Germany, where he had a peripheral involvement in the tumultuous political ferment of the period.

Deetjen came to the United States in 1920 or 1921, working as a surveyor in the Florida Keys and in Hollywood, California before settling in Carmel-By-The-Sea in the mid-1920s. It was there that he met Helen Haight, daughter of the tenth governor of California. A nurse by training, Helen operated a children's apparel shop. Helmuth became caretaker and maintenance man for her property on Carmel Point. He also built two or three houses in Carmel, as well as additions to Helen's property. In about 1924 they began making trips into the Big Sur. While it is not known when the couple decided to purchase property in the Big Sur, it is known that Helmuth decided it was time to move on when the city finished oiling the streets in Carmel.

In 1936 Helen purchased 3.95 acres of the Castro Ranch along the northeast side of the new highway, adjacent to Castro Creek Canyon. It had been a favorite camping spot for the couple for many years, and they intended to construct a residence on the property. Sixty-four years earlier, in 1872, David Antonio Castro had filed a claim for government land four miles south of the Post homestead in the Big Sur, and by 1876 he and his brother Espirito had built a two-story wood frame ranch house just west of what is now Highway 1. On November 28, 1877, David married Amanda Vasquez. It was not until 1882 that the land claim was finally approved, by which time the original house had been replaced by an adobe residence with tile roof. The Castros raised eight children at their homestead, located at the end of a sometimes-graded wagon road, from which only a horse trail extended south beyond Castro Canyon.

The Castro family subsisted by ranching, augmenting their small income by furnishing food for the lighthouse keepers at the nearby Point Sur Light Station, and by providing room and board for increasing numbers of travelers and hunters venturing into the Santa Lucia Mountains. By 1932, the ranch property on the east side of the highway had been subdivided, part being sold to the artist, Ralph Newell, and the remainder to Helen; the homestead lands west of the highway were sold as one piece.

In 1936 Helmuth and Helen lived in a tent while he built a barn for their goats. As noted previously, that building would become the nucleus of the Inn. Deetjen used a portion of the barn for his workshop, where he fashioned handmade furniture and wrought iron accessories, some of which are still in use at the Inn today. In 1938 he built living quarters adjacent to the barn, a two-story building with storage below.

As work progressed, more and more visitors began taking advantage of Helmuth and Helen's hospitality for food and lodging. Except for Steve Jaeger's Loma Vista Inn, a gas station and lunchroom built in 1936 on the hillside about four miles north, Deetjen's was the first light in many miles south of Pfeiffer State Park.

In 1939 Barbara Blake, a refined, recently-widowed Englishwoman, assisted the couple in developing the property as a country inn. Blake was taken by the natural beauty of the setting, and had money to invest, a rare commodity at the height of the Great Depression. She leased the barn, expanding it with a shed-roofed addition to the south to enclose a restaurant. She handled interior decoration, including purchase of the lovely old bar from the Smith family ranch at Westmere, and the English patternware table service long in use at the Inn, which was in full operation by 1940. Blake's money was used to construct guest rooms along the northwest rim of Castro Creek Canyon. This work was executed by Helmuth with the help of the Meyrose brothers, in 1941, maintaining the rustic Norwegian vernacular character of the earlier buildings in the complex.

Deetjen's Big Sur Inn became a local tradition as the years passed, one of the haunts of local writers and artists, including Henry Miller. While Helen, always in charge during her lifetime, ran the business, Helmuth added buildings from time to time, always maintaining the rustic Norwegian character of the place. His personal touch was--and is--everywhere, from hand-carved porch balusters to the wood-burned plaques with quotes from world literature or his own homilies (one of which reads, "Open from dawn to dusk, but not always awake").

Much loved in the community, Helen was outgoing and social, while Helmuth remained much the loner, contemplative and spiritual in nature. He also maintained a strong work ethic that he tried to impart to the Inn's mostly younger employees. This included his three A's: Awareness, Alertness, and Attention, which remain some of the clearest memories of those who worked for him.

Prior to the 1960s, work at the Inn was, for the most part, seasonal, though people from the Monterey Peninsula would come down to spend Sunday afternoons. During the 1960s, visitors began to arrive year-round to enjoy the peace and quiet beauty of the location.

Helmuth and Helen eventually married, and as they aged they came to be known to other coastal residents, and to their guests, as "Grandpa" and "Grandma" Deetjen. In the dining room, "Grandpa" Helmuth reserved one of the long tables he had made. He referred to it as the family table, and invited guests to sit down and enjoy dinner with him, sharing conversation and classical music with his company. On a carved board over the nearby record collection he

carved philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche's axiom, "Without music life would be a mistake."

Helen died in 1962, followed a decade later by Helmuth in 1972, after which the trustee of his estate continued to operate the Inn as before. When the County of Monterey was unable to accept the property for historic park purposes in the late 1980s, a non-profit corporation-- Deetjen's Big Sur Inn Preservation Foundation--was formed. The Foundation's purpose is to maintain and operate the historic Inn as it has been since its inception, in order that the visiting public might experience the feeling and associations of an earlier and slower-paced era on the Big Sur.

In summary, the Big Sur Inn is an excellent representative example of a resort facility in the Big Sur country in the years predating World War II. It has retained its integrity to a remarkable degree while other properties of the same period have been largely altered by continued expansion and remodeling in response to changing recreational market needs. The buildings that constitute the historic core of Deetjen's Big Sur Inn are informally disposed around the mouth of Castro Creek Canyon, along its northwestern edge in a forested setting. Their simple single-wall, board-and-batten construction supported by post-and-beam framing, and embellished with hand-crafted elements including carved porch balusters and posts are characteristic of their vernacular Norwegian sources. The Inn's builder, Helmuth Deetjen was raised in the mountainous coastal town of Bergen, Norway, and available family photographs from his youth show glimpses of similar building forms and materials. Deetjen's early use of the Inn's main building as a workshop for hand-crafted furniture suggests the creative impulses that gave the Inn its high artistic value as a personal expression of his European aesthetic sensibilities.

There have been very few changes made to the buildings over time. Those that have been effected occurred prior to Deetjen's death in 1972, and were executed under the builder's supervision and in keeping with his original intent. Of the existing resort facilities in the Big Sur area, none maintains so well the feeling of time and place as does Deetjen's. The original--and later--buildings of Deetjen's Big Sur Inn are sensitively integrated into the forested mouth of Castro Creek Canyon. Density is low, scale is intimate, and materials are natural, complementing the rugged beauty of the mountainside setting. The road and walkways meander comfortably through the complex. Rock retaining walls line the roads and footpaths cut into the grade. Designed in a vernacular style reminiscent of its builder's native homeland, Deetjen's still retains the intimate environmental relationship established by its designer.

### **PART III. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION**

Deetjen's Big Sur Inn occupies approximately 54 acres of forested mountainside along Castro Creek Canyon in the heart of California's Big Sur country. The physical topography is not unlike that of Norway, homeland of the Inn's builder, Helmuth Deetjen. The original 3.95 acre parcel that comprises the boundaries of the historic district retains the rustic, Norwegian-influenced vernacular buildings as designed and executed by Deetjen, with the help of others, between 1936 and 1941. The five original Inn buildings remain intact, forming a cohesive historic core. There was no formal plan for the Inn. Rather, it evolved in response to necessity--the servicing of an increasing volume of tourist traffic discovering the Big Sur after the opening of the Carmel-San Simeon Highway in 1936--and to its natural setting. Deetjen and his future wife, Helen Haight, lived in a tent on the property while he constructed the first building, a barn, to house their goats. He acquired used redwood lumber from Monterey's fish canneries for use in the barn, which he completed in 1936.

His method of construction was post-and-beam framing, with a single-wall siding of vertical board-and-batten similar to that used in his native Norway for the construction of vacation housing. The original mud sill foundations throughout the complex were later replaced with concrete slab. The standard for construction of resort facilities in the area to that time (1936) had been either balloon frame with horizontal siding (as seen at Pfeiffer's Resort [1902]), or the log cabin siding form of the National Park Rustic style (as seen at River Inn [1936]).

The second building erected, in 1938, was a two-story residence located east of the barn, with the first floor employed for storage. In 1939 an English widow, Barbara Blake, who had experience in running country inns, leased a portion of the property, and with Deetjen as designer/builder, made some additions to the barn and constructed two guest room buildings along the northwest rim of Castro Creek Canyon. (The first story of the building to the rear of the Inn—"Chateau Fiasco"—was probably constructed at this time as well [1939-1940]). These guest rooms were built on the canyon side of what had been the trace of the old county road that curves through the property. A system of pathways, some rock-lined and others with rock retaining walls, connected the various buildings. By 1941 the five buildings that comprise the historic district were in place and the Inn was in operation.

The original barn became the Inn proper, while the Deetjen residence came to be called the "Hayloft" building. The small building to the rear of the Inn, which gained a second floor addition in 1960-1961, is known as "Chateau Fiasco" (after the Bay of Pigs disaster in Cuba). The guest units along Castro Creek Canyon became known as the "Antique" Building, as Deetjen ran a small antique business out of the lower apartment for a period of time, with the building behind "Antique" called "Champagne."

Between 1940 and 1961 Deetjen built several other buildings on the property, all on the opposite (south) side of Castro Creek Canyon from the earlier buildings. These include the "Creek House" from the late 1940s or early 1950s, and "Top House" located on a hill top about a quarter mile to the east of the Inn complex, built by 1940 as the Deetjens' new residence. All building design and construction during the historic period was carried out or supervised by Helmuth Deetjen.

The original buildings and their associated landscape features retain a strong sense of time and place. Individually, all of these structures retain a high level of integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and association. After the death of Helmuth Deetjen in 1972, his estate operated the Inn. In 1978 a preservation consultant was hired to see that continuing repair and maintenance work carried out on the Inn complex conforms to the *Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation and Guidelines for Rehabilitating Historic Buildings*. Deetjen's Big Sur Inn Preservation Foundation was established in 1990 to ensure that the Inn will continue to operate in its historic use in order to preserve a significant part of Big Sur history for the enjoyment of present and future generations. The following inventory briefly describes each original structure within the district.

#### **"Big Sur Inn" Building (1936-1940, with 1961 addition) [HABS No. CA-2611-A]**

The Big Sur Inn is a two-story building, irregular in plan, with a combination of gable and hipped roof forms. The building is framed in redwood post-and-beam, and has an exterior sheathing of vertical redwood board-and-batten, and its roof deck was incorporated with a low, rustic wood rail designed and carved by Deetjen. This design element appears on three of the five buildings in the historic complex, helping unify the ensemble. While the Inn was originally

constructed on redwood mud sills, a concrete slab was laid when the restaurant wing was added, extending to the southeast to provide open patio space. The public portion of the interior of the Inn consists of four dining areas on the ground floor. Inn offices occupy the upper floors of this building.

**"Hayloft" Building (1938-1940s) [HABS No. CA-2610-B]**

The "Hayloft" Building is a two-story building, irregular in plan, with a combination of gable and shed roof forms. It is framed in redwood post-and-beam, and has an exterior sheathing of vertical redwood board-and-batten. The ground floor consists of a two-bay garage, now used for storage. The second story, housing guest rooms, is side-gabled, with a shed-roofed extension to the rear and a shed-roofed projection over the northernmost garage bay. A roof deck is above the second garage bay, with a low hand-carved wood railing similar to the one found on the Big Sur Inn.

A pent-roofed entry on the north end of the building at the top of the stairs opens into a small hallway. Guest rooms "Van Gogh" and "Fireplace" are at the right (west) end of the hallway, with guest rooms "Petite Cuisine," "Little," and "Honeymoon" at the left (east) end. Guest rooms are rustic in nature, with exposed beam ceilings, board-and-batten walls, and generally simple furniture.

**"Chateau Fiasco" (1939-1961; non-contributing; not photographed)**

"Chateau Fiasco" is a two-story building irregular in plan, with a combination of hipped and shed roof forms. It is framed in redwood post-and-beam, and has an exterior sheathing of vertical redwood board-and-batten. This building rests on a stone perimeter foundation. Originally designed as a one-story guest cottage, the building gained a second-story addition at the time of the kitchen extension to the Inn in 1961.

**"Antique" Building (1940-1941) [HABS No. CA-2610-C]**

The "Antique" Building combines one, one and one-half, and two-story elements in linear sequence, and is generally rectangular in plan. Aligned on a generally southwest-northeast axis, it parallels the rim of Castro Creek Canyon and faces onto the old county road, across from the "Hayloft" building. It has hipped, shed, and low-pitched gable roof forms. The building is framed in redwood post-and-beam, and has an exterior sheathing of vertical board-and-batten. The central, one and one-half story component was the first portion, constructed, in 1940. Later that year or in 1941, the two-story, hip-roofed square tower and a shed-roofed projection on the canyon side were completed at the southwest end of the first rooms. Around 1946, as tourist traffic increased following the end of World War II, a shed roof was extended from the tower over a portion of the guest rooms to create more second floor guest room space. The single story "New Room" was constructed at the opposite (north) end of the building at about the same time.

From southwest to northeast, guest rooms include "Grandpa's" room, with "Top Antique" above it in the hip-roofed tower, "Thirteen," "Antique Apartment," and "New Room." As with guest rooms throughout the Inn, the rooms are rustic in nature, with exposed beam ceilings, board-and-batten walls, and generally simple furniture.

## **"Champagne" Building (1940-1941) [HABS No. CA-2610-D]**

"Champagne" Building is a two-story building, basically square in plan, with a low-pitched side-gable roof. It is framed in redwood post-and-beam, and has exterior sheathing of vertical redwood board-and-batten. This was the last building in the original complex, and contains guest rooms "Champagne" downstairs, and "Chalet" upstairs. As with guest rooms throughout the Inn, the rooms are rustic in nature, with exposed beam ceilings, board-and-batten walls, and generally simple furniture.

## **PART IV. SOURCES OF INFORMATION**

### **Books and Pamphlets**

Miller, Henry. *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch*. New York: New Directions Publishing Co., 1957.

Seavey, Kent L. *Big Sur Inn: A Brief History*. Big Sur: Deetjen's, Inc., 1992.

White, E., and P. Roberts. *The Big Sur Guide*. n.p., 1954.

Woolfenden, John. *Big Sur: A Battle for the Wilderness, 1869-1981*. Pacific Grove, California: The Boxwood Press, 1981.

### **Newspapers**

*Carmel Pacific Spectator Journal*, September 1955, pp.17-59.

*The Carmel Pine Cone*, October 11, 1962, November 2, 1972.

*The New York Times*, November 10, 1985.

*San Jose Mercury News*, October 3, 1986.

### **Personal Interviews**

Mr. Robert De Ford, chef at Big Sur Inn and personal friend of the Deetjens from 1962-1968, February 14, 1990.

Mr. William De Groot, chef at Big Sur Inn and personal friend of the Deetjens, 1968-1990, February 2, 1990.

Mr. Douglas Madsen, longtime Big Sur resident and personal friend of Barbara Blake, who first visited Big Sur Inn in 1941, February 18, 1990.

Mr. Don McQueen, longtime Big Sur resident who worked as a carpenter on the restaurant wing of Big Sur Inn in 1939, February 16, 1990.

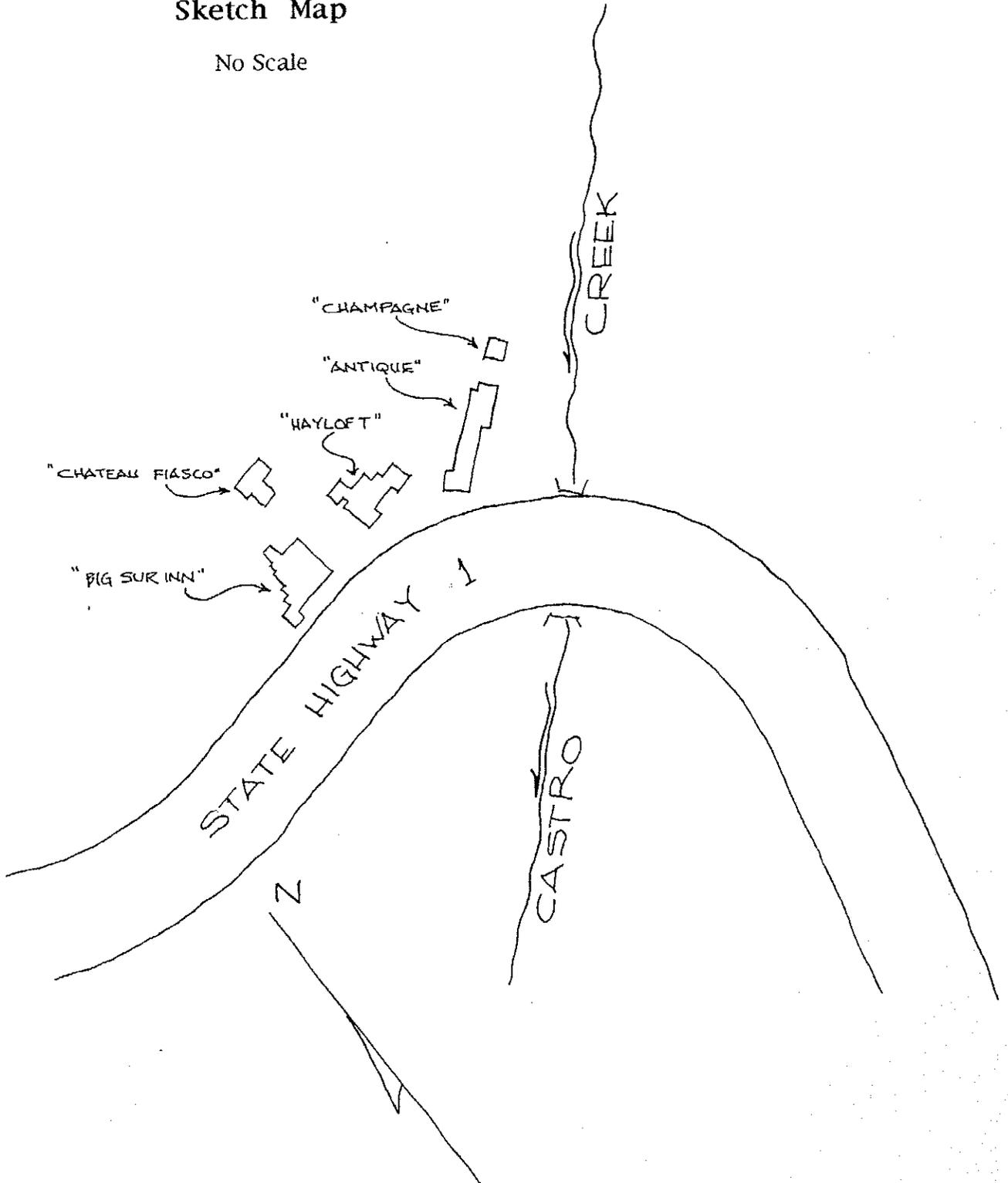
## **PART V. PROJECT INFORMATION**

Until such time as the Deetjen's Big Sur Inn Preservation Foundation can obtain measured drawings of the Inn as protection against loss of the buildings to fire, the accompanying photos were made to provide a visual record, with scale included. The descriptive and historic data included herein is taken directly from the National Register nomination prepared for the Inn. The Foundation herewith makes a gift submittal of this documentation set to HABS.

# DEETJEN'S BIG SUR INN

## Sketch Map

No Scale



ADDENDUM TO:  
DEETJEN'S BIG SUR INN  
East Side of State Highway 1  
Big Sur vicinity  
Monterey County  
California

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*HABS CAL,27-BIGSUR,1-*

FIELD RECORDS

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
1849 C Street NW  
Washington, DC 20240-0001