

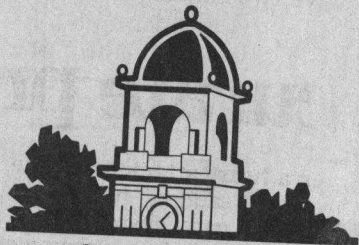
Santa Cruz's rich, poor loved 'Sport of Kings'

13
Horse Racing
BY ROSS ERIC GIBSON

Special to the Mercury News

Although called "The Sport of Kings," horse racing has been popular at all levels of society. In the 1800s, horses were the engine of all transportation, whether by saddle, carriage, wagon, stagecoach or trolley. And appreciation of the sport was keener then, with equine behavior, breeding and training the common knowledge of the day.

The sport came to Santa Cruz in 1797, when the Spanish town of Branciforte was established where Branciforte School now stands. Branciforte Avenue was laid out arrow-straight and double wide to serve as a racetrack. Its soil was ideal, said not to be dusty in summer or muddy in winter.



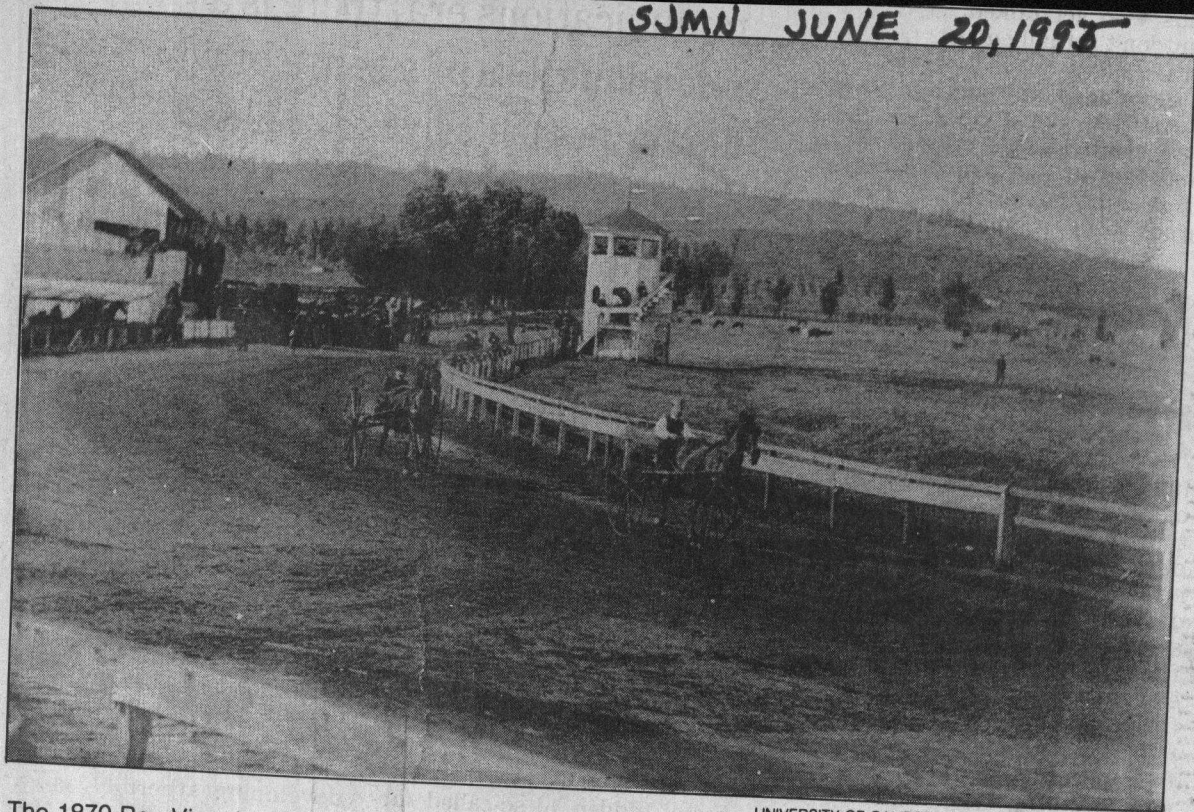
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Historic Perspective

And like the rodeos, where the Spanish showed off ranching, herding and horse-breaking skills, racing was a practical display of speed and horsemanship.

The town of Santa Cruz grew up around the abandoned mission in the 1840s. Mission

See **HISTORY**, Page 2B



The 1870 Bay View track can still be seen in a bend in Fair Street, where it follows the old track.

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Rich and poor in Santa Cruz loved the 'Sport of Kings'

■ HISTORY

from Page 1B

Street was used as a racetrack in the 1850s, until complaints by residents closed it down. After that, the area west of Bay Street and south of Mission Street gained an identity as the horse-racing district.

Fans aplenty

The first west side track was on Younglove Street, then known as Ruffner's Lane, part of Joseph Ruffner's dairy farm. It opened in 1865 and proved so popular the Santa Cruz Homestead and Real Estate Association built a professional, mile-long oval race-track. The place was called "Ocean View," "Fair View," and finally "Bay View," for which the district and school were named.

There was concern that professional horsemen from the Bay Area would take over the races, squeezing the locals out. But restricting the track to county horsemen was feared an affront to the loyal tourist population, so the only entry fee charged was to out-of-county participants. This open competition made the track an important link in the horse-race circuit, and visitors remarked it was the best track in the state.

Home-grown talent

But the county hardly lacked for its own professionals. Scheduled to appear at the opening was George M. Patchen Jr., a horse from one of the 19th century's most celebrated dynasty of trotters. A half-dozen Currier & Ives lithographs depicted the racehorses George M. Patchen Senior and Junior, and Victor Patchen. The horses were even celebrated in the song, "The Mighty Patchen," whose chorus went, "Soon there's no catchin', up to old Patchen, champion of the race!" Their owner lived in the Santa Cruz Mountains and their namesake became Patchen Pass at the summit and the old town of Patchen.

Names live on

In 1875 Sen. James Fair was connecting the Santa Cruz railroad to his line over the mountains, and Elias J. Swift opened the Pacific Avenue Horsecar Trolley. Both men were racing enthusiasts honored in street names. Swift bred horses for his trolley line. Swift was the proprietor of the Pacific Ocean House down town, the Pope House on Mis-



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Historic Perspective

sion, and the Kittredge House on Beach Hill. In 1878 he built the Racetrack Hotel, popular with jockeys and owners. A cupola provided ocean and race-track views. During "race week" the hotels filled and the schools emptied as boys played hooky to attend, sneaking over the bleachers.

Traffic to the park looked like the Oklahoma Land Rush. Hotels provided special coaches and Swift hoped to extend his trolley line to the race-track. A circus atmosphere gripped the town, and repertory companies performed at the local Opera House, taking advantage of the race crowds.

Lively saloon

Under the bleachers was the Racetrack Tavern, with a long mahogany bar. Gambling was not prohibited and bets were laid on the horses, cards and roulette wheel. Boys with no money emulated the men by betting tops or marbles on the race. The main food was a tamale concession operated by Dario Amayas, with the snacks wrapped in corn leaves.

The judges' stand was a two-story gazebo by the starting line. A big bell was used for a starter. The races opened with the trotters, pulling two-wheeled sulkies. An unlikely favorite was a swaybacked horse named Nell Broidy. Then came the pacers, and finally the running races, always the flashiest, with colorfully dressed jockeys. The jockeys went from track to track with races often run in conjunction with a county fair or a circus.

Swift never received permission for his racetrack trolley extension, until after the track was subdivided in 1887. He died unexpectedly in 1889 at age 41. The hotel was moved to Weeks Street around World War I, where it still stands.

Local historian, architectural consultant and author Ross Eric Gibson writes a weekly history column for the Santa Cruz/Monterey edition.