

# 'Spud Rush' made Watsonville a potato capital

*Gibson, Ross*  
**S**QUATTERS, SPUDS and hard times turned a cow pasture into the town of Watsonville.

In 1851, Judge John Watson and D.S. Gregory filed an "adverse claim" against Sebastian Rodriguez for a portion of his land grant along the main road (now Main Street) from the Pajaro River to the Plaza. Rodriguez called these potato farmers squatters, and spent the decade trying to prove his claim.

Then in 1852, Sierra gold miners suffering from an unending diet of beans, began buying potatoes for a dollar each, paid in gold dust. Potato vendors from Santa Cruz were making more gold than the miners. The 1852 "Spud Rush" sent many failed gold miners to the agricultural counties to plant potatoes. Downtown Santa Cruz was leased for \$100 an acre, and a boomtown sprang up on Pacific Avenue.

Judge Watson also leased his land to potato farmers, and a boomtown of shanties and tent-frame structures rose at the junction of Main and Beach streets. Beach led to the warehouse at Captain Berry's Landing, where potatoes were shipped. The settlement was referred to as "Pajaro," but most people dealt with Watson, and called it "Wat-



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sonville."

Yet the valley had no fences, and huge herds of wild Spanish cattle made it dangerous to leave Watsonville except on horseback. So Watsonville was fenced in like a corral for people. Two gates were on Main at Maple and East Lake, with another gate on Beach Street. The roads were so dusty that many people wore long linen "dusters" to keep their clothes clean.

The Plaza served as fairgrounds, though it was overgrown with weeds, bushes and trees. The first merchant was Llewellyn Thrift facing the Plaza. Al Striblon built his store at the corner next to Mr. Thrift's, with shelves attached to the flimsy walls. The weight of the merchandise caused the roof to sag! Spanish ranchers came in ox carts to marvel at the variety of goods.

There were barely half-a-dozen women in a community of mostly college-age bachelors. Like Watson, many were Southerners, some with slaves working to buy their freedom in the county's largest black population. The large Indian population helped in the huge potato harvest, even wading into the surf with sacks of potatoes on their shoulders, to load skiffs sent out to the schooners. At 100 bushels an acre, the first year's crop made fortunes for many farmers. Those who grew other crops jumped on the bandwagon to plant potatoes only, until the area was nick-named "Spud Valley."

The people crop yielded Pajaro King on Oct. 14, the first American born in the valley, son of actress Sarah Bernhardt's brother, Kingsley King. Soon, Alabama Tyus and Julia Stoesser vied to be called the valley's first-born American girl.

Sundays were passed watching horse races down Main Street, or bullfights at Moses Soto's First-and-Main corral. Men bet on the events with potatoes, which were "good as gold." The Methodists held the first religious services in a cottonwood grove by the Pajaro River.

However, moral influence was slight, and

crime was up. So, that November, Watsonville's first election selected a peace officer. Several men were hung for horse theft, and one was lynched for shooting the town bully.

That winter, road mud was sticky as tar, and the river became a torrent. Jose Sanchez died in the quicksand trying to cross the river on Christmas Eve, leaving his wife \$85,000 in gold. Due to such dangers, no stranger was ever denied shelter or a meal. These early homes had movable walls to enlarge a room for guests. After dinner, a dishpan turned the table into the kitchen sink. Meat grease was saved from every meal, to render tallow for candles.

In 1853, there were seven stores at the Main-and-Beach junction. Watsonville rejoiced in its bumper crop of potatoes, until it learned overproduction had rendered potatoes worthless. Countywide, potatoes were left rotting in fields or warehouses, or dumped by the roadside. Watson estimated there were enough potatoes to fence the valley five sacks high. Prices plummeted to \$1 a sack, though the sack was worth more than the potatoes, and those gambling with potatoes thought the loser better off. Many went

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broke and were stranded in Watsonville, giving the town an instant population. "No Credit" signs went up in local stores, so failed farmer Charles Ford started his famous store on barter.

In 1854 the town put down roots. "Mother" Scott's Union Boarding House created a homey atmosphere for local bachelors who missed home-cooking. A post office was established, and a Methodist Church rose beside Ford's store. But the town's many Southerners wouldn't accept a church with black members and abolitionist sermons, so in 1855 the Methodist Church South was constructed next door. Services were periodically drowned out by the Main Street horse races and crowds. When the Scotts opened the first school at their boarding house, the issue of integration soon caused a rival school to open at the Methodist Church South.

In 1860, the courts declared Watsonville belonged to Sebastian Rodriguez, who then donated the plaza to the new town.

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