

# Pajaro Valley finally finds its political niche

**I** DOUBT THAT the three judges who created the new politically correct 28th Assembly District knew just how historically correct they were when they combined northern Monterey, San Benito, and part of southern Santa Clara counties with the Pajaro Valley. Since Feb. 18, 1850, the day Santa Cruz County was officially born, the people living in the northern part of the Pajaro Valley have been looking south and east wondering how they could get out of Santa Cruz County. The new district does not create a new county, but it certainly does combine an area of common interest. (The exact boundaries of the new district are still a bit sketchy, but the accompanying map outlines the general idea of the district.)

Ironically, the judges used ethnicity as the basis for forming the new district, and it was ethnicity that started the whole mess in the first place.

When Mariano Vallejo drew the first county boundaries for the Monterey Bay region in late 1849, he included the entire sweep of the central coast in one huge Monterey County. The watersheds of the San Lorenzo, Pajaro, Salinas and Carmel Rivers were included in the county, which stretched all the way from San Luis Obispo County on the south to San Francisco County on the north, Santa Clara County on the northeast and Mariposa County on the east. (Mariposa was originally a monster county covering approximately one-third of the interior of California — there are now nine counties out there now.)

The large non-Hispanic population on the north side of Monterey Bay quickly objected to the proposed Monterey County, and during the first couple of weeks of 1850 they convinced the state legislature meeting in San Jose (by all accounts, perpetually drunk), that a separate county should be formed. (The petition begging for the new county was filled with forged signatures and exaggerated claims of potential hardship.) On Feb. 18, 1850, Santa Cruz County was born, although it was named Branciforte County for the first six weeks.

One of the primary motives for forming Santa Cruz county was the desire on the part of local resi-

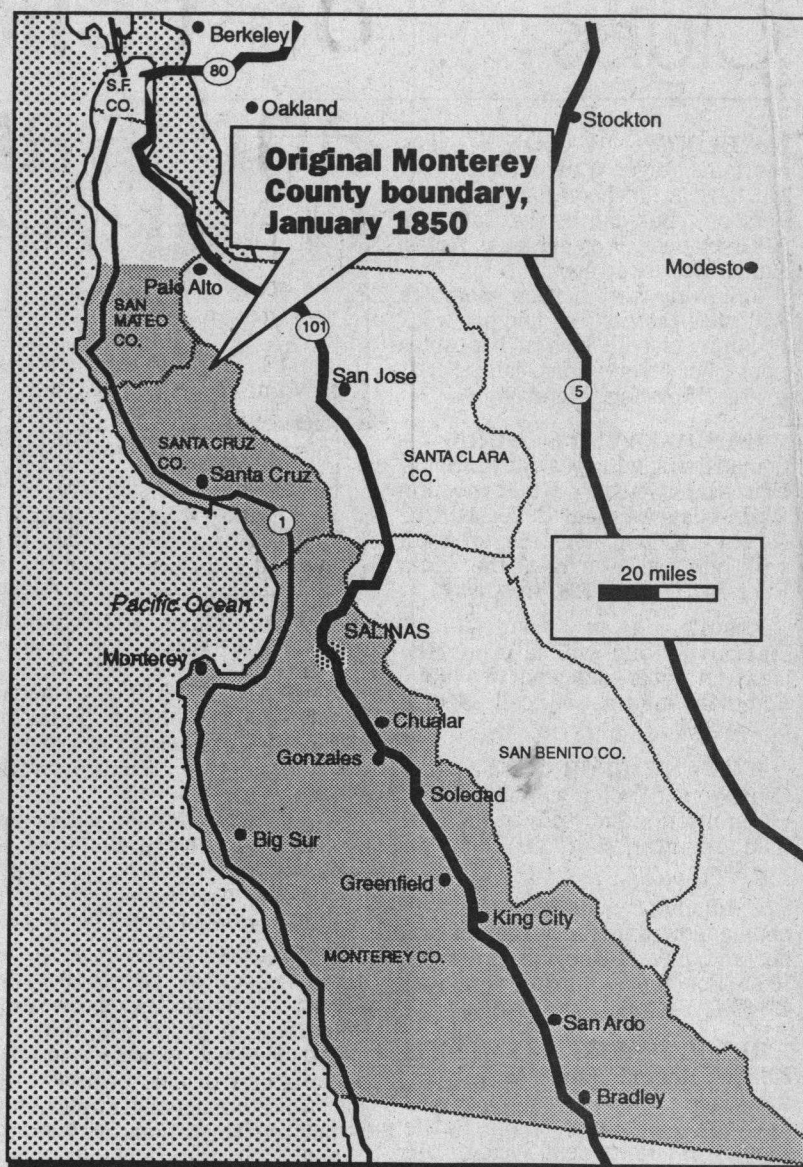
dents to be separated from Mexican Monterey. Monterey represented the old days — Spanish was still the language of the old capital, and the town's adobe walls still rang with weekend bull and bear fights.

A small agricultural town named Watsonville sprouted on the north side of the Pajaro River, and the residents in the town quickly felt more of a kinship with their agricultural brethren around San Juan Bautista (then a part of Monterey County) and in the slough country of the lower Salinas Valley than they did with the burgeoning manufacturing inter-

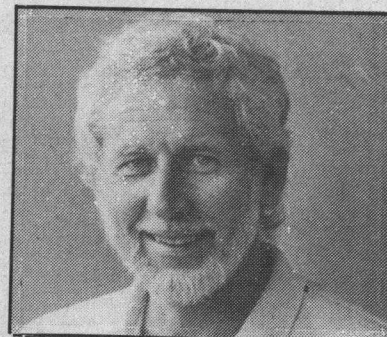
ests in Santa Cruz.

In 1854 the first formal proposal to form a new "Pajara" County was presented to the state legislature. Pajara (yes, I know, but that's the way they spelled it) County would have encompassed the southern part of Santa Clara County, the entire Pajaro Valley and northern Monterey county including San Juan Bautista. Pajara County was rejected by the legislature that year, so in 1855, a similar proposal came before the legislature (this time with the spelling 'Pajaro'), but the legislature rejected it because the existing counties had too much indebtedness.

But, the dream was born. And as



## Hindsight



Sandy Lydon

the years passed, Watsonville's fears about being trapped in Santa Cruz County were realized. Year after year the Pajaro Valley provided up to a third of the tax revenue, but received a mere fraction of the roads and bridges built by the county.

Watsonville's best opportunity to break away came in the early 1870s. A burgeoning Yankee population in the San Juan Valley and around the newly-formed town of Hollister (I don't care what you name this place, said one of the founders, but don't give it a Spanish name!) was working to secede from Monterey County. Several of the plans being proposed included the "dream county" of Pajaro, and Watsonville tried to piggyback on the San Juan Valley's momentum.

The legislature's main argument against Watsonville leaving Santa Cruz County was that the remaining county would be too small to justify its existence. So in 1871, the Watsonville newspaper proposed a

bold solution — eliminate Santa Cruz County altogether. The northern part could be given to San Mateo County, the city of Santa Cruz could be given to Santa Clara County and the Pajaro Valley would be forever joined in its dream "Pajaro" County. Because Santa Cruz County was governed "by a few selfish persons for their own personal financial advancement" argued the newspaper, the county "should cease to exist."

Take it apart, sell the assets and shut the county down.

The Pajaro Valley folks couldn't convince anyone of the wisdom of their dream, and in 1874, when San Benito County was finally formed, it left the Pajaro Valley behind, each side forever orphaned in their respective counties. Every now and then someone in Watsonville or Pajaro would get frustrated enough to rekindle the dream of "Pajaro County," ("Aromas County" was an alternative name) but the reality of forming a new county was never really there.

Over the years, however, the common bond of an agricultural economy kept the triangle of Hollister, San Juan, Salinas and Watsonville connected. Some businesses reflected the reality of the Pajaro region, and I can remember the toot of the PV Bakery truck that rolled out from Watsonville to Hollister each morning. Despite being in three different counties, those cities had much more in common than they did with their neighbors. Before Cabrillo College was opened in 1959, several generations of college students from Watsonville went to junior college in Salinas, and for most people, the county line down the Pajaro River

didn't matter much in their daily lives.

The common agricultural economy also helped shape the ethnicities of the folks living in the triangle cities, and as each group of farm workers moved into and then out of the fields — Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos, Okies and Mexicans — the complexion of the cities reflected those changes. It is the common bond of ethnicity that formed the nucleus of the new assembly district, a current bond that reflects the deeper historic bond going back over a century.

There is a wonderful irony in the formation of this new 28th Assembly District. Both the cities of Hollister and Salinas were founded by groups of Yankees trying to escape Hispanic California. (In Hollister's case they were pushing off San Juan Bautista, while Salinas was offered as an alternative to Mexican Monterey.) Today, according to the 1990 census, Hispanic residents are a majority in both those cities.

The formation of this new Assembly district now means that all federal and state representation (both the 15th state Senate district and the 17th Congressional district already encompass the triangle) treats the agricultural heart of the region as a unit. In light of all the wrangling going on in Monterey County over redrawing supervisorial districts, maybe it's time to warm up the idea of a new county again.

Aromas County. Kind of catchy isn't it?

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