

Santa Cruz

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The Polack Brothers-Shrine Circus last week attracted large crowds at every performance, thus verifying the statement that "Santa Cruz is a good circus town." That boast has held true through the years.

The circus' appearance here brought back memories of the early day circuses which played Santa Cruz.

The nearest thing to an indoor circus in the old days was a band of Japanese performers who appeared in the Anthony Hall at the corner of Mission and Water streets. The Japanese wore their native costumes with flowing sleeves. The band included acrobats, contortionists, and sleight-of-hand performers.

The first real circus remembered by the writer was the Montgomery Queen outfit, which came here around 1876. In those days there were no railroads to Santa Cruz, so the circus came overland by what amounted to a caravan.

As now, the circus' appearance was heralded several weeks ahead of time by the advance agent. He could be spotted easily by his jewelry, including brilliant diamonds, perhaps a large scarf pin, or a large horseshoe design set solid with diamonds. He also had a hankering for fancy vests.

After the advance agent arrived in town, he lost little time in getting large redwood billboards erected in various vacant lots to advertise the circus. The largest lot here was at the corner of Cooper street, where the billboards told what was going to occur on Circus Day. Circus Day ranked next in importance to July 4 in the mind of a small boy.

To get back to the Montgomery Queen circus. It set up on the vacant lot which is now the site of the Rittenhouse building. The lot extended around the corner to the Cottage Restaurant on Church street. The side show and menagerie were located on Pacific avenue. In the rear was the one-ring circus tent and the dressing room. The remainder of the lot was occupied by the kitchen, dining tent, and quarters for the animals.

There were plenty of horses with the circus, since they were used to pull the wagons from town to town.

The star bareback rider with the Montgomery Queen circus was Mollie Brown. The writer well remembers the day she came down the lane to the west of the present First Methodist church and admired the flowers in the Otto gardens. One of the writer's sisters gave the circus star some red roses. Miss Brown wore the roses when she appeared in the ring and the Otto children were very proud that she had done so.

The band leader was George Hastings, a cornet player who saw Santa Cruz for the first time when he came here with the circus. He chose Santa Cruz as his future place of residence and after locating here became an important part of the community's musical life. He was the leader of the Hastings band and also led the orchestra at all dances and at the Opera House. His band was the leader at the various parades. At one time every member was also a member of the Knights of Pythias and when the band played at Grand Lodges, they were sure to return with the top honors.

Hastings had an orchestra composed of 50 of his pupils and an orchestra of juniors known as the Brownies. Many a youngster who achieved some measure of fame as a musician in later life at one time had been a student of Hastings. He was also the organist and leader of the Congregational church choir and his monthly concerts filled the large sanctuary. In addition to the various musical groups listed here, Hastings also conducted the large Sunday school orchestra.

His daughter, Mrs. Orene Hastings Smith, resides at the family home at 329 Lincoln. She still has her father's diary, which describes the trip to Santa Cruz and the beauty of the mountains and trees. Hastings also refers to the Franklin House, which adjoined the Santa Cruz House.

Wells Drury, in his book, "An Editor On the Comstock Lode," refers to the Montgomery Queen circus when it played at Carson City. The book points out: "A series of circuses came to Carson. Most notable was the Montgomery Queen circus. Also made Virginia City.

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Drury's book continues: "It is sorrowful to record that this . . . coliseum and great moral spectacle was wrecked not long after on the rocks of bankruptcy."

Another circus which played here in the middle seventies was "Cooks and Bailey's." It appeared on another Pacific avenue lot. The Bailey section of the circus later joined P. T. Barnum and still later merged with Ringling Brothers.

For several years, "Sherman's Educated Horses" appeared at Cooper's lot. From start to finish it was a marvelous show.

These were the last circuses to appear on Pacific avenue.

Other circuses will be discussed in subsequent articles.