

# Watsonville reaches the ripe old age of 140 this year

By BETTY LEWIS  
CORRESPONDENT

*When a native of Watsonville dies and wakes up in glory, he finds it hard work to convince himself that he has left home.*

—Anonymous

WATSONVILLE IS enjoying its 140th year of existence this year and can look back with pride on what has been accomplished in those years — the mixture of many ethnic groups and their cultures, the growth of education and businesses, and the diversity of products — despite all the hardships along the way.

This fertile valley beckoned men from far and near and, by 1852, a portion of the Rodriguez land grant was being laid out for a village. Tents and wooden structures sprang up along the old stage coach road and this small western town was soon

dubbed "Watsonville" after "Judge" John Howard Watson, who had purchased land from the Rodriguez family, cut it up into lots and sold them off to businessmen and settlers.

The judge didn't stay around for very long; the grass was always greener on the other side of the mountain. He went off the Nevada to find his fortune and ended up a pauper, never returning to Watsonville.

□

John Hernandez built a ferry to haul wagons across the Pajaro River, and Charles Ford opened the doors to his mercantile establishment in 1852. Across the street, the Pacific Exchange Hotel (later the Mansion House) was soon offering a bed to the weary traveler or local bachelor. Schools were built and church congregations organized, the first being the Methodist Church, which is also celebrating its 140th anniversary

in this community.

The hub of the growing community was the plaza, which was given to the city in 1860 by the Rodriguez family. This focal

## That was Watsonville

point in the heart of the city metamorphosed through the years from a grazing site for cattle to the scene of celebrations, speeches, fairs and other community gatherings.

The Opera House was built across what is now East Beach Street from the plaza and such well-known persons as John Philip Sousa, General Tom Thumb and Susan B. Anthony appeared on its stage.

Meanwhile, agriculture, the economic mainstay of the community, flourished. Fields were planted in sugar beets, wheat,

hops, lettuce, berries, and more. Orchards of apples, apricots and cherries sprang up. Roads were built over which to transport the produce and soon the "iron

horse" made its way through Chittenden Pass to provide an even more reliable transportation system.

Within 40 years of its founding, the community had electricity, telephones, a domestic water system and other modern amenities.

But the Pajaro Valley always had a charm all its own from the days when Spanish adobes graced the hillsides. The Pajaro River was dammed and became "Lake Watsonville" in the summer. Gaily colored boats

skimmed lazily down the river to the strains of music coming from the floating bandstand.

There was Port Watsonville, near what is now Sunset Beach and Pajaro Dunes. It had a long pier, a dancing pavilion, cottages and sailing vessels. A person could board a streetcar in town and ride down Beach Road to the port for 5 cents. Hailed originally as the largest port on the West Coast and a mecca for the resort-minded, it soon became a financial bust and passed into oblivion in 1913 after a rocky but fascinating 10 years.

A big event was the coming of the Spreckels sugar factory, which was built in 1888 and provided employment for many Watsonville men.

□

Of course, politics has always been around, in many shapes and forms, with a host of dedicated and colorful people serving the community over the

years. An old-timer once said that an early-day politician was "so crooked he had to screw his socks on." Well, could be: One man ran for office by whirling around town on roller skates distributing his campaign literature. He lost.

Sons and fathers marched off to wars — Spanish-American, the expedition against Pancho Villa, World Wars I and II — while clubs and organizations back home raised funds and sent off packages filled by loving hands.

Larger and better buildings went up; packing sheds and canneries were erected to fill a need, and in time, the community became a major processor of frozen foods. Watsonville had become known for its apples, berries, flowers, mushrooms, lettuce and specialty crops.

All in all, it's been a fruitful 140 years.

RY  
1990  
2000  
WATSONVILLE