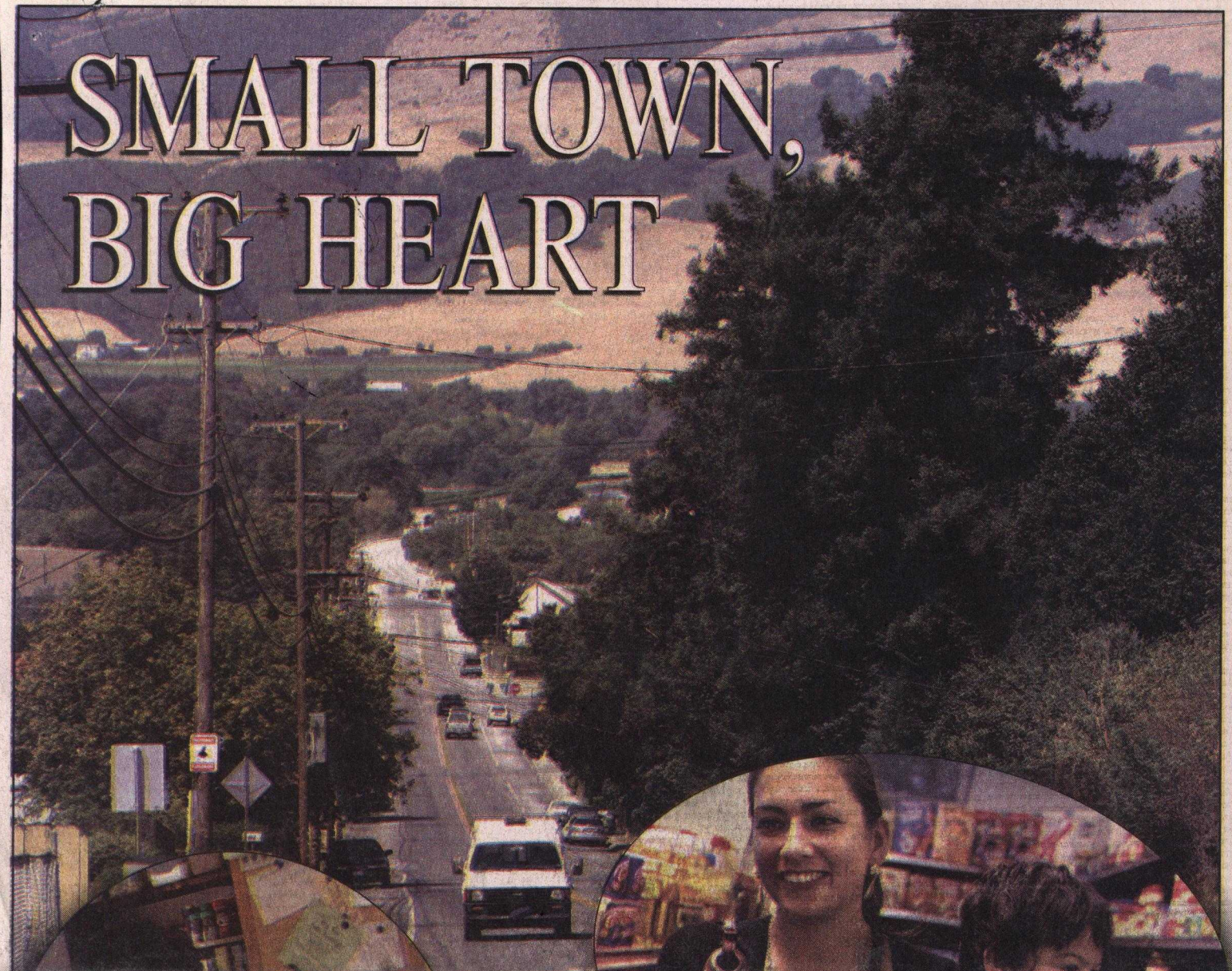


# SMALL TOWN, BIG HEART



Kate Falconer/  
Sentinel  
photos

## Aromas Day a chance for community to celebrate its small-town ways

*Aromas*  
By **DONNA JONES**  
Sentinel staff writer

**TOP:** The town of Aromas sits at the foot of a hill nestled behind trees on Carpenteria Road.

**RIGHT:** Juana Munoz and her 17-month-old son, Roberto, stand in Marshall's Market in the heart of Aromas. Munoz bought the store three years ago.

**ABOVE:** Wilma Brumit cuts peaches for canning in her kitchen as part of her Aromas Day preparations.

### AROMAS

✓ **W**ilma Brumit was in the middle of canning peaches when two strangers knocked on her door on a recent afternoon, but she didn't hesitate a minute before pushing open the screen door and inviting them in to talk.

That's Aromas, a town that prides itself on being a friendly, neighborly place.

8-27-06  
"I couldn't live in a place where neighbors didn't look after one another," said Brumit, who's lived in her Carpenteria Road home for 30 years.

The community will celebrate its small-town ways today at Aromas Day.

Tucked into the rural junction of three counties — Santa Cruz, Monterey and San Benito — Aromas retains the nostalgic feel of a time when most Americans lived in small towns or on the farms that surrounded them.

Aromas sits just off Highway 129, about halfway between Watsonville and San Juan Bautista. The proximity

# Aromas

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of Highway 101 has attracted commuters from Salinas, Gilroy and even San Jose, driving up the population from a few hundred to about 3,000 during the past three decades.

The village boasts a couple of small grocery stores, a cafe and a gas station. On side streets, roses spill over white picket fences in front of homes built early in the last century and fruit trees in yards provide fodder for projects like Brumit's.

A few blocks farther, newer, bigger homes sit on large parcels. To the south and east are rolling hills, where horses can be found grazing. To the west the land flattens, and fields are planted with lettuce and strawberries.

Community life centers on the fire station, the Baptist church, the Aromas Community Grange, and Aromas School, where children from three counties attend kindergarten through eighth grade.

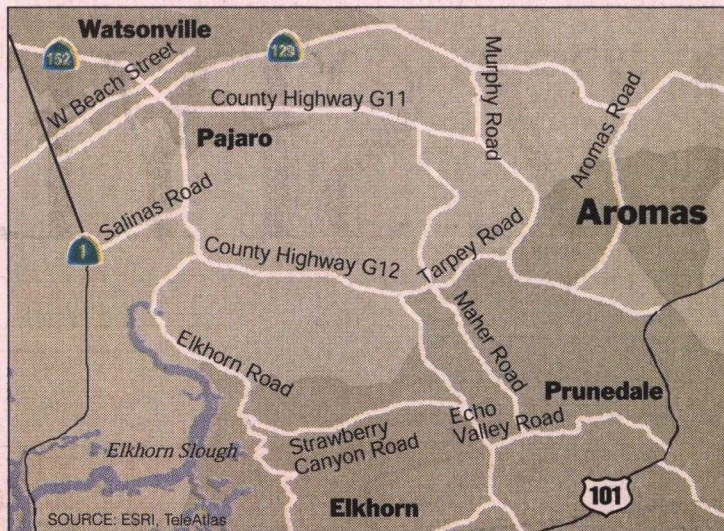
"It's a place where people say hello and they say hello back," said Juana Munoz, who three years ago bought Marshall's Market from the family that ran it for two generations.

## Growing town

Aromas got its start at the tail end of the 19th century, when the owner of the general store successfully lobbied for a post office to serve the 20 families in the area. It's first growth spurt came just a few years later, when Granite Rock Co. started mining its namesake material nearby.

Bruce Woolpert, chief executive officer and president, said Graniterock incorporated in 1900, and in the early days the young single men who toiled with shovels and pickaxes in the quarry lived in bunkhouses on the property. Later, as the workers grew older and married, the company built homes on its property to house their families. More time passed and the homes were moved to town.

Only 19 quarry workers live in Aromas today, though there are a fair number of retirees in town. But the original homes, with their siding of narrow wooden slats,



Max DeNike/Sentinel graphic

Aromas sits just off Highway 129, about halfway between Watsonville and San Juan Bautista.

can be spotted along Carpenteria Road. Graniterock's presence also can be detected in public projects built with the company's help.

Woolpert said Graniterock has never thought of Aromas as a company town.

"It's a community," he said, "and we're part of that community."

## Community values

Woolpert's favorite quarry story tells a lot about the town. It's a tale more than 80 years old, concerning a curious little boy who decided to cross a railroad trestle on quarry property just about the time a steam locomotive was barreling down the tracks. A nearby resident, a Mrs. Doolittle, rushed from her home and, dress a-flapping, ran down the track, snatched up the boy and carried him to safety.

He knows the story is true, Woolpert said, because about five years ago, an elderly visitor showed up at Graniterock headquarters in Watsonville looking to find the woman who saved his life.

Brumit and others say that even though the town has grown and become more of a bedroom community than in years past, the value of neighbors watching out for neighbors and coming together in a crisis remains.

"Like after the (1989 Loma Prieta) earthquake, if you had food or water, you shared," Brumit said.

June Cushingham settled in

Aromas in 1967, thinking she'd stay just until she found a place she liked. Nearly 30 years, she said she hadn't found anyplace better. She likes living in the country, and the weather — warmer than the foggy coast, cooler than inland towns to the east — can't be beat, she said.

To be sure, the community has tripled in size since Cushingham arrived, and she no longer knows everybody in town, but she can still count on help when she needs it. On Monday, one of her neighbors visited with his tractor and spent the afternoon spreading base rock on her driveway. And she's hosting another neighbor's sheep.

"All I can tell you is I can't think of any place I'd rather live," Cushingham said.

## Divided community

That's not to say all is harmonious all the time in Aromas, but when conflicts arise they seem like family squabbles.

Bonnie Mahler has lived in Aromas her entire life. Until a few months ago, she ran the Ducky Deli, a town fixture, but then, at 72, she decided to retire.

Mahler said she was on the losing end of a spat over the little park in the center of town last year. Some community members wanted to trim back shrubs and trees, add lighting and install a concrete path. Mahler and her allies, volunteers who had been



Workers take a break after tending to an Aromas yard.

Kate Falconer/  
Sentinel

maintaining the park for years, didn't see the need for a change.

In the end, the Monterey County Parks Commission handed over the park to the new group.

Today, Mahler shrugs off the defeat, saying she has no problem working with a fellow school board member from the other side.

"Having lived in a small town all my life, I've learned sometimes you're on the same side and sometimes you're not. It depends on what the issue is," she said.

But the dispute also highlights one of the quirks of Aromas: its three-county split. The dividing line between San Benito and Monterey runs down the middle of Carpenteria Road. Santa Cruz is to the north, just across the Pajaro River.

Mahler lives on the San Benito side of town. The park, and the commission with the decision-making power, lies in Monterey, a place where she said she has no political voice.

Others agree navigating the three-county territory can be tricky.

Alisa Elden and Patty Thompson, co-owners of Country Property & Estates, said home buyers have to be aware of different zoning regulations. One county, for example, might allow one horse per acre, while just across the road — and county line — residents can have two.

Graniterock's Woolpert recalled an incident involving a suspicious person parked on company property in San Benito County. When company security guards showed up, the man drove off into Monterey County and the guards called Monterey County deputies. But then the man drove back to San Benito County. Situations like this require and get cooperation among law enforcement agencies, he said.

"It's not really a hard line down the middle of the street," Woolpert said.

## Changing times

Today, when longtime residents look around, they recognize the town is slowly changing. It's not just the shuttering of the Ducky Deli, or the fact that the Marshalls no longer operate the market that bears the family name.

It's that the population seems to be graying and younger people don't seem to have as much time to get involved in the small-town life, said Joel Wiley, who's lived in Aromas for more than two decades.

He blames the cost of housing, more than a lack of community spirit, for a dearth of younger people in various community organizations. Twenty years ago, the school was a launching pad for young newcomers to get involved in the community. The current

## Aromas Day

**WHAT:** Community celebrates small-town life with breakfast, arts and crafts, live music, parade and food festival.

**WHEN:** 7 a.m. to 4 p.m. today.

**WHERE:** Carpenteria Road and Blohm Avenue. From Watsonville, take Highway 129 east and turn right at Rogge Lane.

**ADMISSION:** Free.

**INFORMATION:** 726-7183.

crop, strapped with high mortgage payments, finds it harder to be active outside work, said Wiley, whose wife teaches seventh grade at the school.

More mature residents pick up the slack, raising funds the school and other community projects, he said. Though their own children have moved on, the older residents care about future generations. Wiley himself is a founding member of the Aromas Community Center Foundation, which raised money to buy 18.5 acres at the corner of Aromas Road and Blohm with the goal of building a park.

"People participating ... that's what keeps communities going," Wiley said. "I guess that's why I get involved. I'm proud of where I live. We come together to do really good things."

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