

## Agricultural Legacy of Serbo-Croatian Community

*By Ross Eric Gibson*

When the former Yugoslavia bleeds, Watsonville aches. The war is far away, in a region smaller than the state of Oregon. But it strikes close to home, in the hearts of the Pajaro Valley's century-old Serbo-Croatian community, which counts friends and relatives in the war's path. Yet in reports of daily horrors, let us not forget how Watsonville's Serbo-Croatian colony has been one of benefit to Santa Cruz County.

The earliest Serbo-Croatians in Santa Cruz were sailors who jumped ship during the Gold Rush to seek their fortunes. At that time, their homeland was part of the Austro-Hungarian empire. A wave of emigration begun in 1870 reached a peak from 1884 to 1914, amounting to 10 percent of that homeland's population. This came mostly from the island-dotted Dalmatian coast, which for about 500 years was an arts and agricultural center of the Venetian Republic.

Emigrants left as subdivisions created plots too small to farm profitably, made worse by high taxes, political turmoil and compulsory military service. Many had been grape and olive growers, and gravitated to farm communities. Watsonville resembled the valley of Konalve with similar climate and coastal mountains, but lacking its rocky soil. They worked for a dollar a day on farms and ranches, then went to school at night to learn English. Coming from a country with a 45 percent illiteracy rate, learning became one of the most prized traditions of Watsonville's Serbo-Croatians.

As they became established, they sent for friends or relatives and helped set them up in business. There were 250 acres of apple orchards in the Pajaro Valley in 1871, when Marco Rabasa planted the first Serbo-Croatian orchard. A devastating outbreak of codling moth and scale in 1873 in Santa Clara Valley orchards caused a boom for the Pajaro Valley apples. In 1883, Nick Branac and 18-year-old Luke Scurich started one of the valley's first fruit packing companies. Scurich was joined by brother Steven in 1884, and planted a 100-acre orchard. Marco Rabasa and L.G. Sresovich established the valley's first large-scale apple packing, shipping and buying enterprise. The Serbo-Croatian farmers continued to hire Chinese workers during the height of the anti-Chinese labor movement.

The colony embraced American values, while retaining close ties as a community. In the pre-Social Security days of 1898, Luke Scurich organized a chapter of the Austrian-American Benevolent Society (still existing but renamed Slavic-American) to see to the needs of this community. Ann Soldo remembers growing up with evening entertainment consisting of stories, food, culture and music from the old country.

In 1875, Steven Martinelli joined with several Serbo-Croatians in forming the Watsonville Band, which at first wore Civil War hats, before acquiring their trademark feather duster plumes. Thereafter, they were dressed as hussars, in uniforms of the Serbo-Croatian cavalry. A band called the Lady Hussars was formed in 1911, and both gained widespread distinction, even performing at world's fairs.

The turn of the century brought the largest wave of Serbo-Croatian settlers to Watsonville. Michell Kalich was one of the first local lettuce growers and shippers in 1908. An apple boom numbered a million trees on 14,000 acres, turning the

valley into the most productive apple region in the world, celebrated for a while with an Apple festival. The 40 packing sheds bore mostly Slavic names. As the colony prospered, handsome downtown buildings lined Main Street named like a roll call of prominent Serbo-Croatian families: The 1911 Lettunich Building; the 1897 Mundhenk Building; the Jefsen Building, and the 1927 Resetar Hotel.

Today, Pajaro Slavs number about 3,000. A part Croatian-language cultural radio program ran from 1948 to 1990. Clubs promoting Slavic culture include the Croatian Fraternal Union, and the 1979 Slavic-American Cultural Association. But agriculture as our county's top industry is the chief Serbo-Croatian legacy.

## Sources

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