

Begonia Festival's beginnings. ✓

a little party to liven things up

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By CANDACE ATKINS

Vivian Benais always loved a little excitement. When things were dull in Capitola, she and a friend, Helen Antonelli, had parties to spark things up a bit.

One day, in 1953, Vivian said to Helen, "Why don't we have a begonia festival? We can elect a queen — queen of Begonia Land."

"That was how it started," said Benais, 31 years later. "Helen, she said 'I'll furnish the begonias.' Then we were off."

Benais, who lives at Beverly Manor in Live Oak with John, her husband of 57 years, has retired from all night stints tying begonias on chicken mesh and the endless tasks required to pull off the annual event. For the past few years, she has watched the water parade from the land, happy that others have taken over her job.

"I still attend, every chance I get," she said. "I worked in the festival until we retired. I never wanted to go back and do it again — I don't believe in thinking like that. I can't even guess how many begonias I put on floats. It's in the thousands."

The first year, Benais said, there were 11 floats, mostly sponsored by local businesses. Today, businesses still take part in the parade, and are joined by neighborhood groups and civic organizations.

"Oh, sure, I rode on the floats, it was a thrill," she said. "I get thrilled over a lot of things others don't."

While Benais and her friends decorated floats, her husband, John, used to run errands and do what she called "the heavy work." She remembers most of the festivals were under clear, hot skies, and one of her jobs was to sprinkle the blossoms with water.

"We had some wonderful times," she said. "Sure, it was a lot of work, but it was more fun than work."

For several years, the festival had a queen, a local



Vivian Benais

'Why don't we have a begonia festival?'

young lady who was elected because she sold the most lottery tickets. Benais said it would have been nice to judge the candidates on beauty, talent or intelligence, but she felt the ticket competition was still a lot of fun. In those days, she said nobody protested pageants.

"I always knew the queen," she said. "I knew everybody in town."

She and her husband owned Benais Restaurant, located where The Ark Restaurant is today. They lived above the business and both worked in the restaurant.

At festival-time, Benais also helped adorn business windows with begonias, and one year, she decorated the grass on Lawn Way with begonia garlands. The water parade, with its typical crawling pace, cumbersome floats and blazing heat, was

still her favorite.

Floats, today, are bigger and more extravagant than in the early years, she said.

"Each year they see something they can improve on. It just goes on forever," she said. "I had no idea it would grow like it has, I thought they'd get tired of it, that they'd go on to something else. But then, who would ever turn against a begonia. It just wouldn't seem right."

Most people have no idea the tiny, gray-haired lady watching the water parade had the original idea that sparked the two-week event. That is of no concern to Benais. She wants none of the credit, she only wants to see the festival continue.

"I don't think I deserve anything for it. That's bad thinking," she said. "I just like to see people happy. That's enough."