

The Hall that Apples Built

By Ross Eric Gibson

At 2 1/2 million boxes of apples in 1909, the Pajaro Valley was producing and shipping more apples than any area in the world. For a brief time, Watsonville's annual apple show was a popular celebration drawing statewide attention and eventually opening in a world's fair.

Watsonville mostly ignored the red apple market dominated by East Coast orchards and concentrated on "golden" varieties, chiefly Bellflower and Newton Pippin. It was once proposed that a "golden" apple be mounted on the Plaza bandstand. Top-grade apples were individually wrapped, and gold and silver gilt was sprinkled on the top layer of fancy boxes from P.N. and Mateo Lettunich, builders of Watsonville's first packing shed in 1895. By the boom year of 1908, the town had 40 packing sheds, including apple driers and vinegar plants. Many sheds had artistic facades, giving train passengers a positive impression of Watsonville.

The boom year saw one million trees on 14,000 acres. Growers decided an apple exhibition was needed to broadcast Watsonville's success, so the Apple Annual Association was organized in 1909, to model the event after Spokane's National Apple Show. Watsonville architect William Weeks designed the neoclassical Apple Annual Hall, built on Second Street between Rodriguez and Walker streets, in the packing-shed district. Its 30-by-100-foot stage was one of the largest on the coast, in a theater seating 3,000.

In 1910, the show was promoted with exhibits at the state fair in Sacramento and in San Francisco's Ferry Building. Billed as "An Apple Show Where Apples Grow," the weeklong event started Oct. 10 with the raising an 18-foot-long flag, made by the Native Daughters of the Golden West. California Gov. James Gillett attended and was given a giant wooden spoon and a pie three feet in diameter.

With 15 counties represented and displaying 26 boxcar loads of apples, exhibits overflowed the auditorium into three circus tents. The show included a giant clock with swinging apple pendulum.

In the "Orchard Sciences" tent were displays of insecticides and sprayers, boxes and chests, orchard implements and machinery. Some were Watsonville inventions, such as Thomas Beck's patented fruit drier and an insecticide by W.H. Volck and E.E. Luther, which saved the valley's apple industry from the codling moth in 1900. In the products room was another valley invention: Martinelli's sparkling cider, called the non-alcoholic champagne since 1866.

Parades marched through a Watsonville bedecked in flags and banners, then marchers performed at Apple Annual Hall between speeches and vaudeville numbers. Locally composed songs included "When It's Apple Picking Time In Watsonville," "Apple Blossoms," and "El Pajaro's Refrain." Watsonville school children sang the hymn-like "Beautiful Valley of Pajaro." Folks competed in apple-crate making, apple packing, and horse racing, capping the week with a Mardi Gras.

The 30,000 people in attendance topped all known apple fairs and overflowed local hotels into private homes and surrounding towns. The Appleton Hotel and Theater was opened in 1911 to serve the growing Apple Annual throngs and provide a stage for events.

A Navy cruiser and two submarines visited Port Watsonville for the 1912 Apple Annual, with one submarine grounding itself. Watsonville saw its first auto parade with 125 decorated vehicles. In the evening parade, a lantern procession of 1,000 Japanese drew the most applause.

In 1913, marathon runner Louis Corthay ran 108 miles from San Francisco to bring greetings from that city's 1915 World's Fair. As the World's Fair pavilions began rising in 1914, the Apple Annual moved to three tents in San Francisco at Eighth and Market streets. The Apple Annual became part of the World's Fair in 1915, with county and state exhibits in the California Building. Thus, the Apple Annuals ended in a blaze of glory, with World War I ending interest in them.

Sources

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