

WATSONVILLE
1985-1989

Watsonville becomes Faircrest



Kurt Ellison

Virginia Poulos stands behind counter of 'Webster's Diner' as crew prepares to shoot scene.

And residents become actors-for-a-day

By JENNIFER KOSS
STAFF WRITER

So-o-o you want to be in the movies ... Well, as Watsonville waitress Virginia Poulos found out this week, you don't have to go to Hollywood.

Poulos, who's worked at Main Street's Miramar restaurant for the past 25 years, was an actress-for-a-day yesterday in an ABC Movie of the Week called "Whisperkill," scheduled to air around May 13 or 14. Poulos plays the part of a waitress/owner of Webster's Diner, which is really the Bake-Rite Bakery in disguise.

"I was nervous as hell," Poulos said during a break in filming, "but now I'm getting it down pretty good."

It was her former boss's turn to be nervous Thursday, Poulos said. Nick Derpich, 87, who ran the Miramar for 41 years until his retirement three years ago, was asked to play the part of a customer in a scene shot inside the Miramar.

"He was sitting at the counter and they told him to drink coffee and read a newspaper, and when they first started, he was staring right into the camera," Poulos recalled with a chuckle.

Eventually Derpich calmed down enough to ignore the camera, she said, and the scene was shot.

As Derpich and Poulos discovered, however, acting is not as easy as it sounds. Poulos walked through her lines again and again yesterday in stifling heat inside the bakery/diner.

"It's hard to do one scene," she said about 2:30

p.m. "We've been here for hours; I've been here since 11:30."

One of the few people in the diner who appeared to keep her cool was Loni Anderson, who stars in the movie with Joe Penny — Jake, of the TV series "Jake and the Fatman" fame.

Poulos said Anderson, who she described as "very nice, very sweet," confided her secret to keeping cool despite the heavy sweater she was wearing.

"She says that she doesn't perspire," Poulos said, "that she psyches herself up, or wills herself, not to perspire."

Like acting, perhaps — easier said than done.

Still, "it's kind of fun," said Craig Comstock, 21-year-old son of Watsonville Finance Director Chuck Comstock.

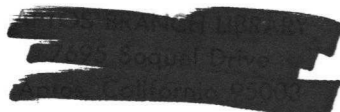
Comstock said he now lives in Los Angeles, but was tickled to return to the area to play several roles as an extra in "Whisperkill." A Santa Cruz High School graduate, Comstock got hooked on acting and has landed a variety of roles since moving south, he said.

Another local espied on the set yesterday was Joanie Moresco, playing the part of a diner customer.

While the filming was taking place, knots of curious onlookers gathered at the Plaza and other adjacent locations to watch the strange goings-on.

Archer Goodman, location manager for the production — which means he scouts ahead for filming locales — said

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almost everyone working on "Whisperkill" is "a local hire," except for the stars and the department heads. It

helps to have a local crew, he said, because they're great at cleaning up a location when filming is completed.

"It's because they live here and they care about their community," Goodman said.

Goodman sang the praises of filming in Watsonville; the

film crew has received nothing but cooperation from city officials, residents, merchants and police, he said, and that's one reason the town was chosen for the movie.

Watsonville police Lt. Mickey Aluffi said police have functioned mainly to direct traffic and keep spectators away from the expensive equipment. The police department has also loaned

out police cars, uniforms and set up barricades, he said.

Goodman said another reason Watsonville was selected for filming is its ambiance.

"Number one, it's beautiful," Goodman said. "It's got that — I don't know if 'small-town charm' is the right word — but it's still got the look of a small, old town."

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Kurt Ellison

Craig Comstock (at left) sits with star Loni Anderson.

MOVIE

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Of course, the name of the town in the movie is Faircrest and the local newspaper is the Faircrest Falcon — located in the Pacific Western Bank offices — but only the names have been changed. Like Watsonville, Faircrest is a small town located south of San Francisco with a downtown surrounding a park.

Although five movies in the past two years have been filmed in Watsonville locations, "Whisperkill" is the first to center on the town, Goodman said. Only a few scenes will be shot outside Watsonville, in county and city of Santa Cruz locations Goodman declined to divulge for fear they'd be swamped by crowds.

The movie is a thriller about a serial killer, co-producer Jody Paonessa said,

and is so named because the murderer threatens his victims over the telephone in a whisper before killing them.

Anderson and Penny play reporters named Liz Bartlett and Dan Walker, who fall in love while investigating the murders and eventually suspect each other, Paonessa said.

June Lockhart also has a role later in the movie as a syndicated news columnist named Winifred Rogers with a "Dear Winnie" column, Goodman said.

Goodman took care to mention that the Bake-Rite Bakery — owned by Ann Johann and run with the help of her son, Jim — has not changed hands. Numerous calls have been received from concerned residents, he said, but the bakery sports the Webster's Diner sign only for the sake of scenes shot from outside.

"We want to assure customers that Bake-Rite, which is a tradition in Watsonville, is still in business," Goodman said.

Produced by Hans Proppe and directed by Christian Nyby II — known for "directing a lot of TV episodic shows," Goodman said — "Whisperkill" began filming March 16 and should wrap up April 7.

By the time the movie crew leaves, it is expected to have spent \$300,000 to \$400,000 in Watsonville alone. That's not counting the cost of food and lodging at Aptos' Seacliff Inn and the cost of shooting at locations outside Watsonville, Goodman said.

So, while Watsonville's cooperative spirit seems to be appreciated by the movie industry — scenes of the city appear in five of the last nine movies filmed in the county — filming also helps the local economy, Goodman said.