

Landmark that Grew Up: Hard Childhood Served Charles Ford Well

By Ross Eric Gibson

Many a heart was broken on Valentine's Day when the flagship Charles Ford & Co. store in Watsonville closed its doors for the last time.

Ford's was the oldest mercantile business and department store chain in California, its 12-store empire of Ford's and Riley's affiliates stretching from Half Moon Bay to San Luis Obispo. Yet at the reopening of its Watsonville store after the Loma Prieta earthquake, new, upscale pricing prompted the comment, "Ford's has forgotten this is still a community of farms and farmworkers."

The unlikely founder was Charles Ford, a sickly farm boy born in 1824 in New Brunswick, N.J.

Like his parents, he suffered from lifelong ill health. His mother died when he was a child. And when Charles was 14, his father's death forced him to go to work in a Newark dry-goods store.

Ford's health problems gave him an interest in medicine. He soon was working for a pharmacist, who made it possible for him to open his own drugstore in New York when he was 18. The teen-ager was dubbed "doctor" and within five years owned two drugstores.

Despite having had no childhood, Ford maintained a playful and humorous disposition and spirit.

The gold rush brought him to California in 1849, but in the midst of profitable mining, he was stricken and had to return home to recuperate.

In 1850, he opened a store in San Francisco, and he came to Watsonville in the spud rush of 1852.

The Pajaro Valley was called "Spud Valley" because of all the potato farms established that year. Ford planted potatoes on 200 acres leased from the Amasti Ranch. He also joined a Mr. Barney in building a small Main Street store to serve the spud farmers.

In 1853, disaster struck. Overproduction made potatoes worthless, and, like other farmers, Ford left his crop rotting in the fields.

With farms failing, the future of his farm supply store looked bleak. Many customers could only barter, yet this boosted inventory and sales.

Now Ford's difficult childhood was proving to be the best school of all. He understood the needs and budgets of farmers and farmworkers, providing both supplies and a grocery outlet for farmers' crops, dairy and meats.

He knew the dry-goods business, stocking clothing, housewares and furniture. A pharmacy gave him his customers' patronage in sickness and in health.

Sickness ended Ford's only term in the Legislature in 1861. In 1866, he gave half of his business to his bookkeeper, Lucius Sanborn, for a year's worth of service and renamed the business Ford & Sanborn.

Ford & Sanborn established the Watsonville Mill near Corralitos. He had his lumberyard at his Main Street store, and there was another yard in Pajaro.

Ford's lumber built the 1871 Mansion House hotel across the street from his store. Ford was the first name on its register, and he lived there many years. That same year, he supplied the ties to bring the railroad from Gilroy to Pajaro, which made lumber-shipping more economical.

In 1873, this lucrative enterprise financed a charming two-story brick building to replace his original store, plus the addition of chain stores in Salinas and King City.

When Sanborn retired in 1879, the business became Chas. Ford & Co. It was said Ford eventually owned one-quarter of the town of Watsonville.

Ford traveled extensively in search of relief for his constant illnesses. He helped develop a health resort at Paraiso Springs near Soledad, where missionaries once had received the sick. And in 1881, Ford founded the resort of Camp Goodall (now the Pajaro Dunes site). The hotel and cottages, plus amusements such as a dancing pavilion, restaurant, race track and ballpark, rivaled Santa Cruz as a bathing resort for a time.

In 1883, Ford's main store was expanded to the corner of Main and West Beach streets, and an elegant Eastlake Italianate structure with corner turret was designed by Alex Chalmers. Ford adjoined it with three brick warehouses on Main Street and, in 1884, a two-story expansion to the south.

In 1887, Ford was instrumental in bringing Claus Spreckels' sugar factory to Watsonville, with sugar beets a boon to local farmers. Ford headed the fund-raising committee for the factory site and was the largest donor.

Although a lifelong bachelor, Ford was rumored to have had a mistress on Rodriguez Street who supposedly is buried in the Ford plot.

Ford died in 1890, and a portion of his estate went toward the improvement of Watsonville Plaza, over which his store presided.

As his mourners were leaving Pioneer Cemetery, they were shocked as the band struck up a rousing rendition of "[Ta-Ra-Ra-BOOM-De-Ay](#)"! It was Ford's own request, to end his career on a high note, and those who knew him chuckled at Ford's last laugh.

Sources

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