

When the San Lorenzo was young, gay and full

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"We came to a river of much water, which we crossed. It was about 54 feet wide. It is the largest stream we have seen in all the journey..."

— Father Crespi, Portola Expedition, 1769.

(The San Lorenzo River)... "which is quite large and has a wide bed, the waters reaching the stirrups (of horseback riders). The banks are well covered with cottonwoods, willows, elders, little poplars and other trees, and near the crossing, close to the mountains, there is much redwood timber..."

— Father Francisco Palou, Rivera Expedition, 1774.

"Without doubt Santa Cruz is the best watered as well as the best lighted town on the Pacific Coast..."

— City Water Works publication, 1915.

TODAY, A HORSEMAN could ford the San Lorenzo River almost anywhere inside the city limits and hardly raise a splash. And what's happened to the "best watered town on the Pacific Coast"? For starters, a very VERY dry year.

The San Lorenzo was once called, with good reason, "the most fished stream in California." Believe it or not.

It's a comparatively short river: 25 miles in length. It is born near Boulder Creek where several creeks join. And most of the year it runs peacefully down the San Lorenzo Valley, through Santa Cruz, to Monterey Bay, providing a portion of the city's water supply.

Occasionally in the past, it has overflowed its banks to protest mankind's handiworks. The flood of '55 is still spoken of in tones of awe. Eight lives were lost in that flood, downtown Santa Cruz was buried under several feet of mud, water and debris, with damage in the millions. A flood control project to repair and restore cost \$4 million. Now we're safe from floods, the San Lorenzo is encased in a concrete flume — and Santa Cruz is rationing water.

BUT ONCE, 93 years ago, the San Lorenzo was the pride of the city and the focal point of an imaginative show that attracted attention statewide.

The first Venetian Water Carnival was staged on a curved lagoon formed by damming the San Lorenzo above the "cut-bias" bridge, near the foot of Third Street. Electric lights were strung, Japanese lanterns hung, bleachers were constructed, a "stone" castle and grandstand were built, elaborate floats were designed and built. Almost everyone in Santa Cruz was involved in some way.

One native was heard to observe that "anything that would float, outside of a washtub, was on that dammed river!"

Women were behind the whole thing. This grand spectacle was the brainstorm of Mrs. Lucy Underwood McCann. She just happened to mention it to Mrs. J.P. Smith, who had recently arrived in town with her millionaire husband and her debutante-age daughter, Anita Gonzales.

The social possibilities of such an event dawned on Mrs. Smith with a brilliance that rivaled the electric lights that later illuminated the river. Venice was a natural for the theme.

Local citizens donated what they could afford, J.P. Smith footed the balance of the bill, and Anita was the queen, naturally, complete with throne, crown and royal barge.

The ladies' imaginations knew no bounds and for five days and nights in June of 1895, carnival events took over the town. A fleet of yachts from San Francisco anchored in the bay and let loose a bombardment of rockets and fireworks that dazzled everyone within miles of town. A Flower Parade down Pacific Avenue featured floats drawn by horses wearing posies. Special excursion trains ran between Santa Cruz and San Francisco and neighboring towns and cities.

Decorated boats paraded on the river-lake. There was a canoe race, a swim race, Kids' Day, a Rose Regatta and a special piece of music, "The Santa Cruz Carnival March," was composed by Professor Alfred Roncovieri of San Francisco.

Professor George Hastings's Band played endlessly and when it ran out of steam, a San Francisco band took over with Roncovieri directing.

Ambrose Bierce, famed early California writer, was a special guest at the carnival. The name of Santa Cruz traveled around the world, according to one enthusiastic reporter.

A SECOND Venetian Water carnival was staged the following year with Josie Turcott as the queen; she was crowned by Sentinel Editor and Publisher Duncan McPherson.

Then apparently everyone rested for a few years. Probably exhausted.

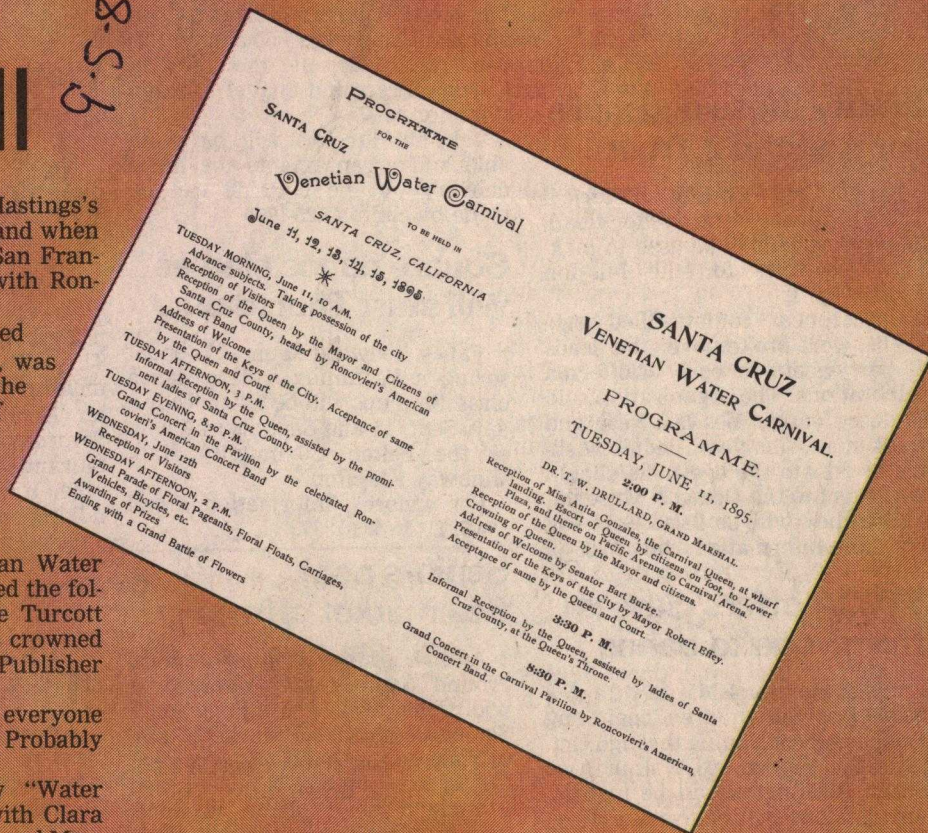
In 1912, a nine-day "Water Pageant" was staged with Clara Walti Pearson as queen and Maytie McPherson as one of her attendants. Two more river shows followed in 1914 and 1928. Wartime, then floodtime, put a stop to the festivals.

But the San Lorenzo has always stirred imaginations more creative than those of the Army Engineers. In 1976, a group of localites tried unsuccessfully to get a water carnival going again.

Former City Public Works Director Bill Fieberling drew up plans for a lagoon with a center fountain, as a start on beautifying our flood-controlled river.

Nothing happened.

Today, while Soquel Creek begins its annual September begonia festival, complete with floating flower-filled floats, the San Lorenzo River sits idle, waiting for another pageant to someday come its way.



Above, original program from the first Venetian Water Carnival. At right, Josephine Turcott was one of the early carnival queens. Below, the San Lorenzo filled with floats during the Venetian Water Fete on June 12, 1895.

