

The Capitola float, June 11, 1895

When Venice was brought to Santa Cruz

By MARGARET KOCH
Sentinel Correspondent

ONCE upon a home-made boat a queen came floating down the San Lorenzo River.

Today there are no boats, home-made or otherwise, and the term "queen" has taken on a new connotation.

Back around the turn of the century, as historians are fond of say-

ing, Venetian Water Carnivals were big in Santa Cruz. News of them spread state-wide and brought hordes of curious and, eventually, delighted visitors.

It started on June 11, 1895, and lasted five days that first time. It was the brainchild of Mrs. Lucy Underwood McCann and was backed by a flood of dollars from the pocketbook of one James Phillip Smith of New York and Paris.

Carnival memories

It was the summer of 1912. Alta Macaulay and Irene Stewart were going into their senior year at Santa Cruz High School. They were what might have been considered the socially elite, being among the chosen few members of the school sorority Omega Nu.

It was a sparkling summer. Parties. Horse trolley rides down Pacific Avenue. And, the San Lorenzo River was to be dammed for a revival of the Venetian Water Carnival.

It probably surprised no one that an Omega Nu girl was named queen of the carnival. Or, that queen Clara Walti chose her sorority sisters as her maids.

Alta, at 91, doesn't leave home much any more, and Irene, who lives just down the street, doubts that she could even find the photographs taken that June 11. They're probably in a forgotten stack of memories. They're not interested in having their pictures taken now, they say. So many years have gone by since, pretty as a picture, they wore long, white gowns, and rode down the river on a two-tiered float.

"A lot of water has gone under the bridge since then," reminds Alta, who was born in this town and raised on Chestnut Street.

Only Alta and Irene are still around from that royal court. Besides them, the maids were Thelma Lilley Phillips, Ruth Barson, Ruby Anderson and Reba Eckhart.

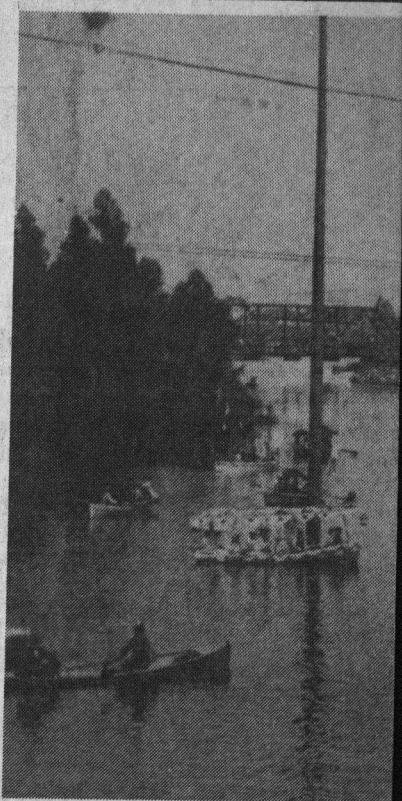
"It was a lovely day — I can see myself in a long white dress, with lace," remembers Irene.

"We all were in high school Omega Nu except Ruth who was visiting her uncle at the old Santa Cruz hotel. She moved here later. Omega Nu was just a social affair then. Then a Panhellenic restriction said that you couldn't have sororities in high school so it was disbanded. Years later," she continues, "another group wanted to take it over, and some of the girls decided to go back and start the charitable organization it has become nowadays."

Alta thinks such days are best left as memories. "I don't think it would fit in with our type of living these days — what with all the oddballs, and all."

— MARYBETH VARCADOS

A glance at



A royal barge with throne Beach Hill had a bird's eye

Smith "discovered" Santa Cruz and purchased the Kittredge home (today it's the McCray Hotel on Beach Hill). He named it Sunshine Villa and installed formal gardens with an elaborate fountain and iron deer, and had extensive remodeling and additions made to the house. He and his wife and step-daughter entertained lavishly, and when he met Mrs. MacCann and heard her idea, he was fired with enthusiasm. Immediately the wheels began to turn.

Smith was a pioneer in a sense, but a very different sense from the earlier local settlers. When he came to Santa Cruz he was already a wealthy businessman with offices abroad and in New York. He built the town's very first casino in 1894, 10 years before the original Neptune Casino was constructed down on the main beach. He also instigated an electric trolley line which ran out Mission Street and down Woodrow to the cliffs. It was part of the trolley line's promotion which brought about the casino located at the corner of Woodrow and Pelton Street.

Behind the casino, Smith had a baseball diamond laid out where the trolley company team, The Electrics, gained baseball fame.

Smith's casino venture was never a big success but his Venetian water carnivals ensured his fame for all time in local annals. He paid to have the San Lorenzo River dammed below the "cut-bias" bridge — today it's that only to oldtimers, this bridge that connects Riverside Avenue to Third Street.

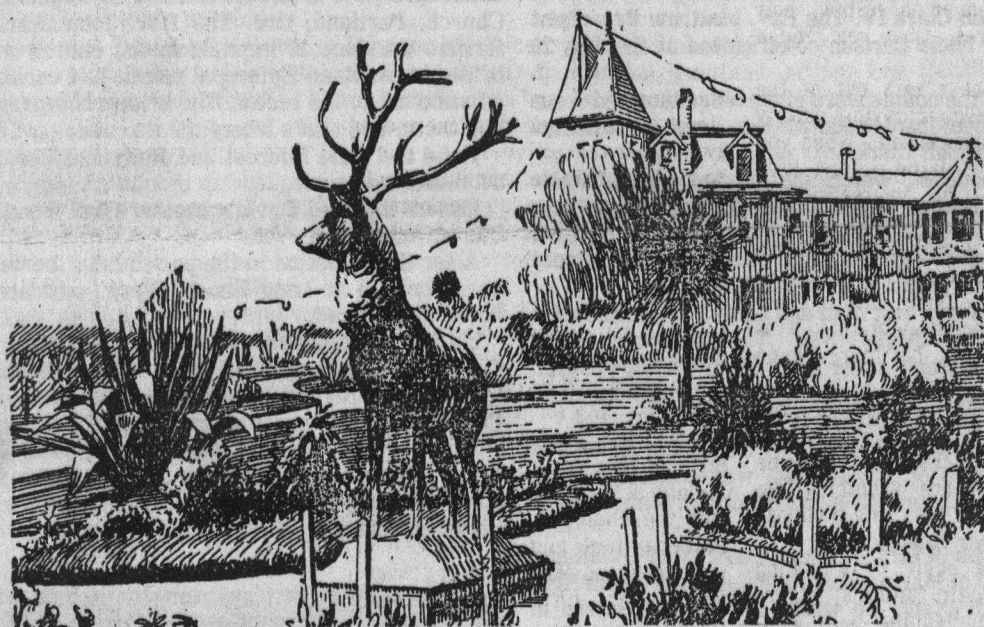
A lake was formed in the river which backed up to a point opposite Laurel Street and the entire river bank along the Beach Hill side was built up with wood bleachers and a throne stand for the queen.

J.F. Coope had charge of all river features for the carnival and Smith's step-daughter, Anita Gonzalez, was the first queen with her mother as dowager queen. Anita's gown, made in Paris, was heavy white satin with silver thread embroidery.

Smith also had constructed a huge ballroom called the Floral Pavilion



carried Queen Anita Gonzales in the first Venetian Water Carnival. Residents of view of the extravaganza.



The Beach Hill residence and gardens of J.P. Smith

on property he owned at the corner of Pacific Avenue and Laurel.

Opening carnival day featured a Battle of the Flowers with floral floats of many sizes and kinds parading on the river. At night, there were fireworks as well as strings of those new-fangled electric lights looped along the river banks.

Other events included Kids' Day, a Rose Regatta, band concerts and even lantern slides on a screen built out over the river. Local citizens donated to expenses with Smith making up the balance with his personal check.

Crowds flooded into Santa Cruz from San Francisco and points north and south to view the spectacle. Thousands of people, whole families, came to spend a day or more of the

five-day event.

That first Venetian Water Carnival was such a huge success that a Santa Cruz Water Carnival Association was formed with G. Bowman as director-general and the second carnival was held the following year. Josie Turcot was queen and editor-owner of The Sentinel, Duncan McPherson, as the Doge of Venice, placed the crown on her head.

A few years passed before anyone felt the urge to work do hard again, but in 1912 a carnival was staged on the island which then existed in the middle of the last loop of the San Lorenzo before it enters Monterey Bay. Clara Walti was the queen and her maids of honor included two girls who still reside in Santa Cruz today: Alta Macaulay and Irene Stewart.

Clara came floating down the San Lorenzo in a huge sea shell barge with King Neptune as her escort.

In 1914 a historical pageant was staged with Samuel Leask as chairman. About \$10,000 was raised and a stage and grandstand were constructed on property just north of Laurel Street and east of Front Street. Calls went out for 500 local actors, singers and dancers. In that extravaganza, Indian canoes, Spanish galleons and frigates came sailing down the San Lorenzo. Four plays were put on and the queen of the historical pageant was a poor Santa Cruz High School graduate who didn't know it, but she was destined to become a real queen — a queen of the silver screen. Her name was Zasu Pitts.