



Workers at the Stolich and Novacovich Apple Packing Shed in Watsonville in 1913.

Local Slavs featured in exhibit



Diane Varni

Labels from a Yugoslav-operated apple business.

By CANDACE ATKINS
STAFF WRITER

LOCAL residents can thank them for good places to eat, rest and shop — not to mention some of the best-tasting apples ever.

The local Yugoslavian community "is an incredibly energetic and prosperous group. They've really contributed ... They just looked for opportunity and went for it," said Nikki Silva, curator for the current exhibit at Pajaro Valley Gallery, "A History of the Yugoslavian Community in Santa Cruz County."

Picture a life-sized family scrapbook, and you'll have an idea of the exhibit, Silva said.

"It's a collection of things," she said. "It doesn't pretend to be the be-all and end-all history of the Yugoslavians. It's more a 'family of man' feeling."

That seems to be the quality that brings the exhibit alive. With help from four Yugoslavian organizations, Silva was able to compile remembrances — she has even recreated a scene from Jack's Cigar Store, complete with gumball machine and original cash register.



Exhibit curator Nikki Silva adjusts traditional costumes on exhibit.

Diane Varni

"That's where all the men went," she said. "They did business. Business deals went down there."

She's also set up a restaurant scene. In the early and middle 1900s, most of Watsonville's restaurants were owned by Slavs, Silva said. There are still a number of Yugoslavian-owned eateries in the local area, including the Miramar Grill on Main Street and the Del Monte Cafe at Walker and West Beach streets. Slavic culture was kept alive around dinner tables in the ethnic restaurants, and the exhibit contains some mementos of those days.

"We've been given magnificent things," Silva said. There's a collection of apple-box labels from Scurich and other orchards, as well as an apple box-making display.

Silva started working on the exhibit in January. She relied on local Slavs to supply her with information and artifacts, and to spread the word throughout the Yugoslavian community that the exhibit was under way. Yesterday, when the show opened, she was still getting offers to help with the display and to supply exhibit items and memories of days gone by in the Pajaro Valley.

When gathering her data, Silva spent time at Yugoslavian community dinners, barbecues and social functions.

She learned about the young men — immigrants in the late 1800s were usually teenagers or men in their 20s — who

immigrated to better themselves financially, avoid Austrian rule and the military draft, to make a home for their families and to have some adventure in America.

The newcomers soon formed benevolent societies. The members were worried that in sickness or death, there would be nobody to take care of their personal business or notify the families.

The local groups quickly became social as well — and four are still active, Silva said. Most of the members live in the South County. Their immigrant grandfathers, or great-grandfathers, as young men, probably traveled first to the Mother Lode to work in the gold mines and later went to San Francisco to work in restaurants. Dishwashing was a typical job for the Yugoslavian immigrant. They'd hear, Silva said, about orchard jobs in the Pajaro or Santa Clara valleys and would move south.

Pajaro Valley became a permanent home for many. It was something like their homeland, the Konavle Valley near the Dalmatian Coast, Silva said. When settled, they not only sent for wives or parents, they invited brothers, sisters, cousins, uncles and grandparents to the new country.

Their numbers grew quickly in Santa Cruz County. In 1913, Jack London called Pajaro Valley "Little Dalmatia" in his book "Valley of the Moon."

The population has continued to grow. People are still immigrating to the Pajaro Valley, Silva said. Like those before them, they almost always have family awaiting them here.

Silva said there were two major periods of immigration — the late 1800s and post-World War II. Those who arrived after the war are still

referred to as "newcomers."

Some who visited this country returned home, but many more took their place. Silva said the majority of Slavs who settled in the Watsonville area were devout Catholics. They came from big families, and they reared big families in California.

Silva said many Yugoslavians married other Yugoslavians, and huge families resulted. When she put the show together, she said one of the hardest parts was choosing families to feature.

"You don't want to leave anybody out," Silva said. "But it is such a large community, you have to choose."

Some of the names visitors will see are Resetar, Balish and Scurich. There will be traditional costumes and clothing, photos, tools, farm equipment and many artifacts from everyday life as well as from cultural and religious festivals.

Silva credited the Yugoslavian American Cultural Organization, the Croatia Fraternal Union, the Adriatic Croatia Club and the Slavic American Benevolent Society, as well as many individuals, for helping make the history of the Yugoslavian community exhibit an intimate look at the Slavic people in Santa Cruz County.

"A History of the Yugoslavian Community in Santa Cruz County" will run through Aug. 13 at Pajaro Valley Gallery, Porter Building, 10 Maple St., Watsonville.

An opening reception is scheduled for Saturday from 4 to 6 p.m. Refreshments will be provided by members of the Yugoslav-American Cultural Organization. Entertainment will be by the Harmonija Choir.

Further information is available by calling 722-3062.