

Capitola's personality is reflected in Begonia Festival

By PEGGY R. TOWNSEND
Sentinel staff writer

THINGS have not always gone smoothly for Capitola's annual begonia festival.

One year, a mixup forced festival officials to crown two queens.

That same year, a riot broke out when local youths objected to festival queens being escorted by a Marine contingent and a fire truck had to be called in to scatter the crowd of Skee-ball-hurling youths with its hoses.

Another year, someone broke into the corporation yard and torched all the float frames.

Still another year, the parade was moved out of the creek and featured swimsuit-clad girls throwing foil-wrapped steaks to the crowd.

But despite its ups and downs, the Begonia Festival went on, and this year the Capitola event is celebrating its history with the publication of a book about its past.

Written by historian and author Carolyn Swift, the 76-page book marks the 40th anniversary of the festival — even though, Swift noted, the festival is really more than 40 years old.

In fact, the first Begonia Festival wasn't even held in Capitola.

It was held on the sidewalks of Pacific Avenue in 1940 and was cancelled after the second year.

But, said Swift, its birth in the late 40s and early 50s in Capitola and its

eventual success made it a strictly Capitola event.

"The Begonia Festival is really tied to the city," said Swift, who worked at the now-defunct Green Sheet newspaper in the '70s and researched the Begonia Festival for the past two years.

It ebbed and flowed with the city's financial fortunes and political squabbles. It changed from exhibitions of synchronized swimming, to the crowing of queens, to elaborate floats, to an emphasis on art and music.

Some years it was threatened with extinction and only extraordinary measures allowed it to survive. Other years, it was enormously successful.

"The Begonia Festival has that bizarre whatever-it-is that Capitola has," said Swift. "It is really kind of marvelous when you see how it fits into the city."

For Swift sees the Begonia Festival as another of the "smart" things Capitola did to give itself a flavor and success like few other cities.

Like grabbing the revenue-rich Capitola Mall from the county in 1975, welcoming car dealers from Santa Cruz and cultivating an artist-colony feeling for the Village, the successful Begonia Festival wasn't just luck, said Swift.

"Capitola is a much smarter community than I thought," she said. Tracing the history of the Begonia Festival, she said, she found a long line of people who consciously planned Capitola to be what it is today.

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Below, Don Patterson, the "Mighty Bosco" lit himself afire and dived off the Stockton Avenue Bridge in 1953.

Begonia Festival

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"It was neat to find evidence about something I had only guessed at," said Swift.

The book is full of anecdotes and pictures from those early days of the Begonia festival and Capitola history.

Among Festival facts:

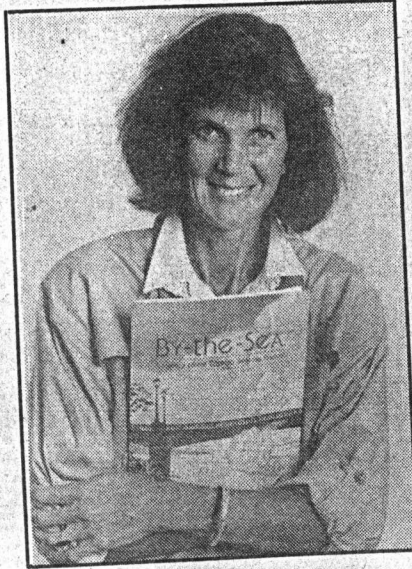
- The nautical parade was actually born in 1950 when synchronized swimmer Peggy Slatter Matthews put on a water carnival complete with swim races, a nighttime water ballet and begonia-decorated floats. The Begonia Festival did not get a name until 1954, but Swift considers the water carnival the mother of the festival.

- The festival's other precursor was a "Gay Nineties" parade with music and floats that started in the late '40s.

- In 1953, the "Mighty Bosco," Don Patterson, lit himself on fire and dived off the Stockton Avenue made a perfect arc of fire as he dove into the water with a great hissing sound and after a moment of silence the crowd burst into applause, the book reports.

- In 1949 Vera Blaeholder was crowned as Capitola's first queen as part of the "Gay Nineties" celebration. She is often mistakenly associated as the first Begonia Festival queen.

- 1962 could be called the year everything went wrong for the Begonia Festival. Not only did the place where festival organizers held the annual dinner burn down, but two queens had to be crowned. Loma Linda Scheffer was crowned queen of the event on the strength of her sales of 25-cent tickets which



Carolyn Swift
Wrote Begonia Festival history

daughter had sold more tickets and after an audit both queens were crowned.

Later, during a street dance on the Esplanade, a riot broke out and as the Sentinel's Wally Trabing described it: "A Capitola volunteer fire department truck nosed in among the crowd and turned two hoses loose, scattering the rioters like wet bees."

- In 1963, the parade moved out of the water and acquired a decidedly masculine-orientation. It featured girls in swimsuits and leis tossing foil-wrapped steaks from a float, South Sea dancers, swimming competition and power boat races.

- In 1972, the festival was almost cancelled because of low water, but intrepid organizers pumped sea water into the lagoon and the parade was saved.

- In 1985, it rained and crowds sat out the soggy show.

This year's Capitola Begonia Festival is sold at the Capitola Regatta Gallery, Aries Arts and the Capitola Book Cafe. All proceeds benefit the Begonia Festival.

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