

Water Carnival was Social Event of the Season in 1890s

By Ross Eric Gibson

In 1894, fire gutted the heart of downtown Santa Cruz north and south of Cooper Street. City fathers decided to rebuild the civic center in Renaissance styles. And billing the new Santa Cruz the "Florence of the West," they jumped at an idea proposed and sponsored by James Philip Smith, who had recently converted the Kittredge Hotel on Beach Hill into his private home. His wife named it the "Sunshine Villa" and gave him the idea to create a lagoon on the lower San Lorenzo River and host the weeklong "Santa Cruz Venetian Water Carnival." The 1895 event would be an extension of the floral fairs that were an annual event at the 1883 Fair Pavilion, on fairgrounds bounded by Pacific Avenue, Laurel Street, the river and Beach Hill.

A floral pavilion with French lattice facade was constructed for costume balls and the coronation of Anita Gonzales (the sponsor's stepdaughter) as carnival queen. Anchored in the harbor were ships from the new all-steel Pacific Fleet, which replaced the wooden galleons and were seen by many for the first time. At the opening of the fair, the ships "bombarded" the city in a mock battle and sent launches ashore, only to be met at the beach by Queen Anita and her attendants, who pelted the invaders with flowers until they surrendered to this gentle monarch. Anita proclaimed: "Peace shall prevail this carnival week!" She led a floral parade down Pacific Avenue to band music called "The Santa Cruz Carnival March."

Bleachers were constructed at the Beach Hill river bend, and a "Rose Regatta" of decorated boats paraded to music and entertainment from the River Stage, which was built on the opposite bank. The "Aquatic Sports of the Water Olympics" was held—a year before the first modern Olympics—and included swimming, diving, canoeing and yachting. At a West Cliff Drive athletic field, a velodrome was constructed to host a major cycling event.



Miss Anita Gonzales, 1895

The day before the carnival ended was "Hi-Jinks Day," featuring masquerade and burlesque. A fat man in a dress was crowned "hobo queen." He entered on a garbage scow and was hoisted onto the throne by rope and tackle while bloomer "girls" sang "The Hobo Queen of Santa Cruz!" And everywhere, yellow and white bunting and banners brightened the burned-out town in carnival colors. Fred Swanton ran strings of electric lights over the river for evening boating and outlined downtown buildings in lights. Bands gave "illustrated concerts" to slides projected on the river stage, which ended with fireworks displays. These included set pieces on the riverbank, such as "The Eruption of Mount Pelee" and "Bombardment of the Castle Fort."



1895, Queen Anita's Barge and Gondolas Coming Up the River

Author Ambrose Bierce was among the journalists nationwide who spread the fame of this event, helping to make the Water Carnival an annual festival and California's "social event of the season" for the 1890s.

Plans were made for improving Waterfair Square with neoclassical facilities and a Laurel Street bridge, based on designs at Chicago's 1893 World's Fair. But disputes over extending Front Street through the fairgrounds, and who controlled the fair association, scuttled these plans.

On his own, Swanton created the 1903 "New Santa Cruz" plan for Schooner Flats, which is today's Beach Flats, and the waterfront. This included a Moorish-style boardwalk, a tent campground and "Neptune Park" at the last bend in the river. These were to be the permanent fairgrounds for the water carnivals and included an onion-dome boathouse on the island at the first river bend.

However, when the boardwalk opened in 1904, so did Venice, Calif. Santa Cruzans feared the fame of the local event would be eclipsed by a superior development of the theme to the south. So in desperation, a Methodist syndicate bought coastal property in 1905, overlooking Wood's Lagoon, today's yacht harbor, and announced plans for "Venetian Village." The 1906 earthquake brought an end to that dream, but Twin Lakes Beach was known as Venice Beach for many years.

Swanton rebuilt the casino and plunge after the quake in even more elaborate Moorish style. He moved the water carnival to Neptune Park in 1912, with a stage built on the river island. Carmen Edington recalled singing in the chorus of Gilbert and Sullivan operas there, with her friend Zasu Pitts, who grew up to be a movie star. This was called the "Opera Island" until the 1950s, when the levees made it a part of the boardwalk parking lot.



The Elks Float, 1912

Swanton revised his Neptune Park plan to incorporate what the Venetian Village plan attempted to do, though without duplicating Venetian landmarks. In 1912, projections suggested a Moorish version of Coney Island's Luna Park. But Swanton sold the boardwalk a year or two later to the Seaside Co., and the Moorish towers of the Auto Racers and River Bathhouse were the only part of this plan executed, shifted beachside by the river mouth.

The 1927 water carnival was the last, although Skip Littlefield kept the spirit alive in his famous "Plunge Water Carnivals" of the 1930s. Capitola began its begonia festivals in 1954 on much the same premise as the Santa Cruz water carnivals.

Today, the last echo of those early water fairs can be heard in the theme song "Floating Down the San Lorenzo River," recently released on the tape album "*My Heart's in Santa Cruz, 100 Years of Old Songs About Santa Cruz County.*"

Sources

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