

Brown's ranch—the world's largest grower of begonias

Live Oak

By CAROLYN SWIFT

Turn-of-the-century Californians were a sort that believed they could do anything, given boldness, imagination — and the right opportunity.

It was such faith that backed a good many speculative schemes in Santa Cruz County. There were naturally a few dreary failures, but others became financial feathers in the caps of the best-known local entrepreneurs.

Frederick Hihn's "Camp Capitola," for example, sunned itself with a fairly plushy image in 1910 — a seasonal demi-paradise, a fanciful spa for the middle-incomed. At the same time, neighboring Live Oak was a non-community of picayune retreats and scrubby farms.

Capitola had a railroad depot, a booming summer population and F.A. Hihn — a financial guardian to personally tend the needs of a budding community identity. Live Oak, on the other hand, grew through a series of economic shrugs. Its character was ill-defined, its interests ignored and its amenities generally unprotected. Nobody really cared much about Live Oak's future.

It's no surprise then, that Live Oak's first and brightest industrial bloom was planted on flat land next door to Capitola. And it is even more predictable that the by-the-sea resort incorporated neighboring success as part of its own self-image — the the small strawberry farm begun on five acres in 1911 expanded over the years to multifarious enterprises requiring just the kind of ingenuity it takes to claim a place in the sun.

Eventually the Live Oak farm gained a reputation far beyond Capitola's tourist clientele. For more than sixty years, Browns Bulb Ranch has been the largest grower of begonias and calla lilies in the world.

Its fame has generated from the inventiveness of a man named James Brown.

Allan Brown, now 72, recalls his father's first visits to Capitola. The family made regular trips to the resort from 1908-1911, and stayed in a large home, on Bay Avenue near the railroad depot.

James Brown had operated a store in Healdsburg, near Santa Rosa, before moving to San Francisco. There he became an agent for Auburn McFarlane Six and the Hupmobile automobile com-

panies. In 1911, he decided to buy flat land near Capitola and moved with his wife, Rura, and two sons, Allan and Worth.

Strawberries were the first crop, harvested by about ten Chinese laborers who lived in a small shack that still stands on the Brown Ranch today as the "China House." Although the Chinese sojourners in California had been victims of discrimination for years, Brown recalls that his father assured customers the berries were not picked by Japanese workers — who were at that time the targets of the most vicious sentiments. Japanese laborers were hired in later years, however.

James Brown abandoned strawberries when it became necessary to continually acquire new lands to sustain the crop. In 1914, he became the first local grower of bulbs for wholesale market — and in so doing influenced the futures of both Capitola and Live Oak. In addition, he provided a vocation for several generations of his own family.

The first bulbs planted on the Brown property next to 41st Avenue were freesia bulbs, popular with the eastern market. The Browns grew yellow and pink callas

and bought freesia bulbs grown by their Live Oak neighbors. About this time, Live Oak was known in places for participation in the flower industry, and was beginning to take strides in chicken ranching.

Once James Brown planted begonias in 1921, the ranch quickly attained its standing as a worldwide producer. That same year, he bought 14 registered heifers imported to the United States from Guernsey, plus a bull, acquired from the estate of a "Judge Lindley," who had started a dairy up Paul Sweet Lane.

Houses built for the dairymen on the Brown Ranch are still standing along the road at the entrance. Workers on the Lucky Store now under construction on former Brown property lately uncovered a cement walkway leading from the houses toward a dairy barn.

Brown sold milk to a creamery for several years, then bottled and delivered milk for sale in Santa Cruz. Brown enterprises then expanded to include shipment of ice cream in pint bottles for use on Southern Pacific Railroad dining cars, and the making of ice-cream. At one time, Brown remembers, the Brown Ranch provided more ice cream in Santa Cruz County than any other dairy.

The ice cream was sold in yet another family business — the "Moo Cow Store." There were fountains on the Esplanade in Capitola, in Gilroy, Salinas, Ben Lomond, Hollister and Watsonville, plus two stores each in San Jose and Santa Cruz. The family operated the stores about five years, and made ice cream for 8-9 years. Allan Brown discontinued the product in 1933 during the Depression.

From 1923 through 1928, ranch staff made daily cart trips to the Capitola Depot with about 1,000 pint bottles of milk. Loaded about 4 p.m., the milk traveled in iced-cases to

the Pajaro Depot at Watsonville for shipment on to Oakland. In the evening, it was enroute to Chicago and served in dining cars of Southern Pacific Railroad.

People used to be amazed, Brown said, when they found Golden Guernsey milk served on the return trip as well as the journey East. There was sometimes enough milk to serve fresh all the way to Chicago and back.

Browns Ranch operated the dairy until World War II, when both production of ice cream and milk were sold to Santa Cruz Beach City Creamery. During the war, one-half the milk was sold in bulk to the naval hospital located at the Casa del Rey in Santa Cruz, while the remainder was shipped on an alternating-day basis to San Francisco.

The milking barn at the ranch is now used for sorting begonia bulbs — and innovations with the bulb industry have progressed with family management. Today the ranch is operated by Allan and Worth Brown and their sons, Barclay, Todd and Joel.

James Brown's sons also developed the inventive bent of their father. Allan developed a process for drying bulbs in a tunnel, and then used trays, while about the same time he devised a drum for a dehydration process with apple pumice.

Using the same principle for the making of feed from sugar beets, Brown found the apple product was sweeter and favored by cattle. From 1936-1943, Allan ran a similar plant in Fresno with grapes. Feed produced in Fresno and Santa Cruz was then shipped to Los Angeles and the San Joaquin Valley.

The apple product is still made at Browns Bulb Ranch, although once the cows were gone, in the late 1950's, the product was sold to the California Spray Chemical Company, a subsidiary of Standard Oil. The firms sells the product to make snail bait and horse feed.

This year, Browns Bulb Ranch planted about 47 acres of begonias. Its major competition is in Germany and Belgium, where 200-300 growers operate farms of ½-1 acre. While some of the European product is sold in the United States, Brown said, the quality is inferior because the smaller farms have no way to match the growing techniques, record-keeping and quality control of the Santa Cruz County firm.

Todd Brown is in charge of the family's growing operation. Browns Bulb has two ranches near the beach at Marina; another in Baja, where there are harvests of artichoke-like "puffs," to be dyed and distributed at the local ranch; a distribution center started in 1954 in Seattle, Wash.; and the Capitola-Live Oak head-quarters.

According to Brown, there are only a few places in the United States where begonias can be grown outdoors from seed. One site is at the entrance to San Francisco Bay — land covered by buildings. The other spot is Marina Beach.

Because of economics, land availability and water and soil conditions, Marina is the best site, he said. Capitola's climate is too warm, and growing from a lath house is too expensive. The Brown family has utilized the Marina site since the 1930's, and now grows 96 percent of U.S. begonias. The other four percent are grown by Antonelli's Begonia Gardens.

Antonelli's is the only remaining firm of four that joined Brown in the enterprise in the 1920's. There were once the farms of H. A. Hyde in Watsonville, the Vetterli Brothers of Live Oak-Capitola, and Rene Bochex who farmed land off Clares Street near Capitola Heights.

One of the adaptations of the Brown family business has been an endeavor of Allan Brown for more than 30 years, and the work of Todd for some 15 years. They have developed what nurseries will say doesn't exist — the red calla lily.

About 11 years ago, the Browns decided to sell part of their lands because costly lath

houses were needed for Capitola soil, the total was no longer used for cultivation, and taxes were rising. They sold forty acres to Sutter Hill Properties, Ltd., for construction of a Bank of America and Sears store.

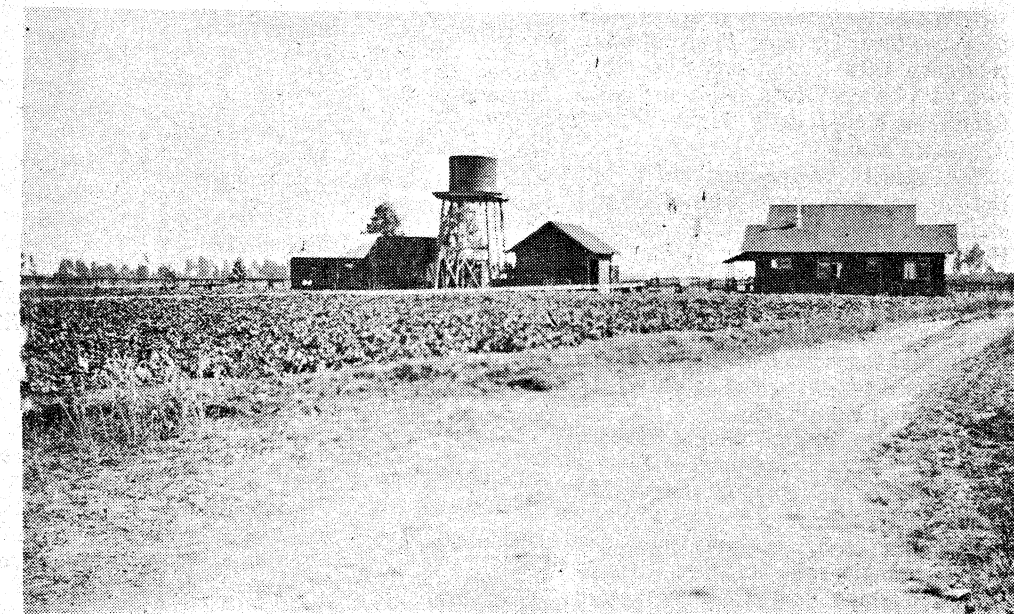
Sears, Roebuck and Company was the first major retailer to locate in Sutter Hill's regional shopping center — and Browns Bulb Ranch had been a major supplier to Sears for more than 35 years prior to the store's opening in 1971.

Sutter Hill Properties had trouble obtaining approval for the development from the county, and construction was delayed until the Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) finally okayed annexation to Capitola — since the city was far more anxious to obtain the additional revenue.

The city of Capitola, billing itself as "Begonia Capitol of the World," in the previous decade, has at last absorbed a good part of the ranch that has given the resort a bit of glory from Live Oak through the years.



James Brown at the beach, date unknown.



View of the ranch, planted in strawberries, 1912.