

Today's news photo is tomorrow's history

Photographer saves images of the times

A NEWSPAPER photographer is necessarily focused on the present — capturing today's events and rushing to make tomorrow's deadline. These days, many newspaper photographs are barely run through the fixer on their way to the print shop; they start to fade away in just a matter of months.

But thanks to the foresight of a number of local people, the photographs from several newspaper files in Santa Cruz County are being preserved as a lively and full record of community life.

Probably the most impressive collection of local press photography is found not in any museum or newspaper file, but in the hands of a Santa Cruz photo studio, Covello and Covello. Although the collection was acquired by the Covellos when they bought the studio in 1979, and although it includes work by several photographers, it is still known informally to most local historians as "The Vester Dick Collection." Over a period of more than three decades, it was Vester Dick who truly recognized and developed the potential of this collection.

VESTER DICK remembers his first photograph. "It was taken

with a box camera from a moving train: the Great Wall of China." Not bad for a kid whose childhood ambition was to become a "Life" photographer. At the time, Dick was living with his family in rural China where, his parents were missionaries.

Later faced with growing political unrest in China, the family returned to the U.S. in 1934 and settled in the Reedy area, near Fresno. There, while finishing high school and junior college, Dick cultivated his serious interest in photography with yearbook and publicity work. His graduation coincided with the beginning of World War II, and his photographic skills led to a new



Vester Dick

Still taking photographs

neous. Good studio work is planned and deliberate."

Looking back over his own years as a Sentinel photographer, Dick says, "It was an interesting period. As a news photographer, you really get to see what's going on. My

Pieces of history

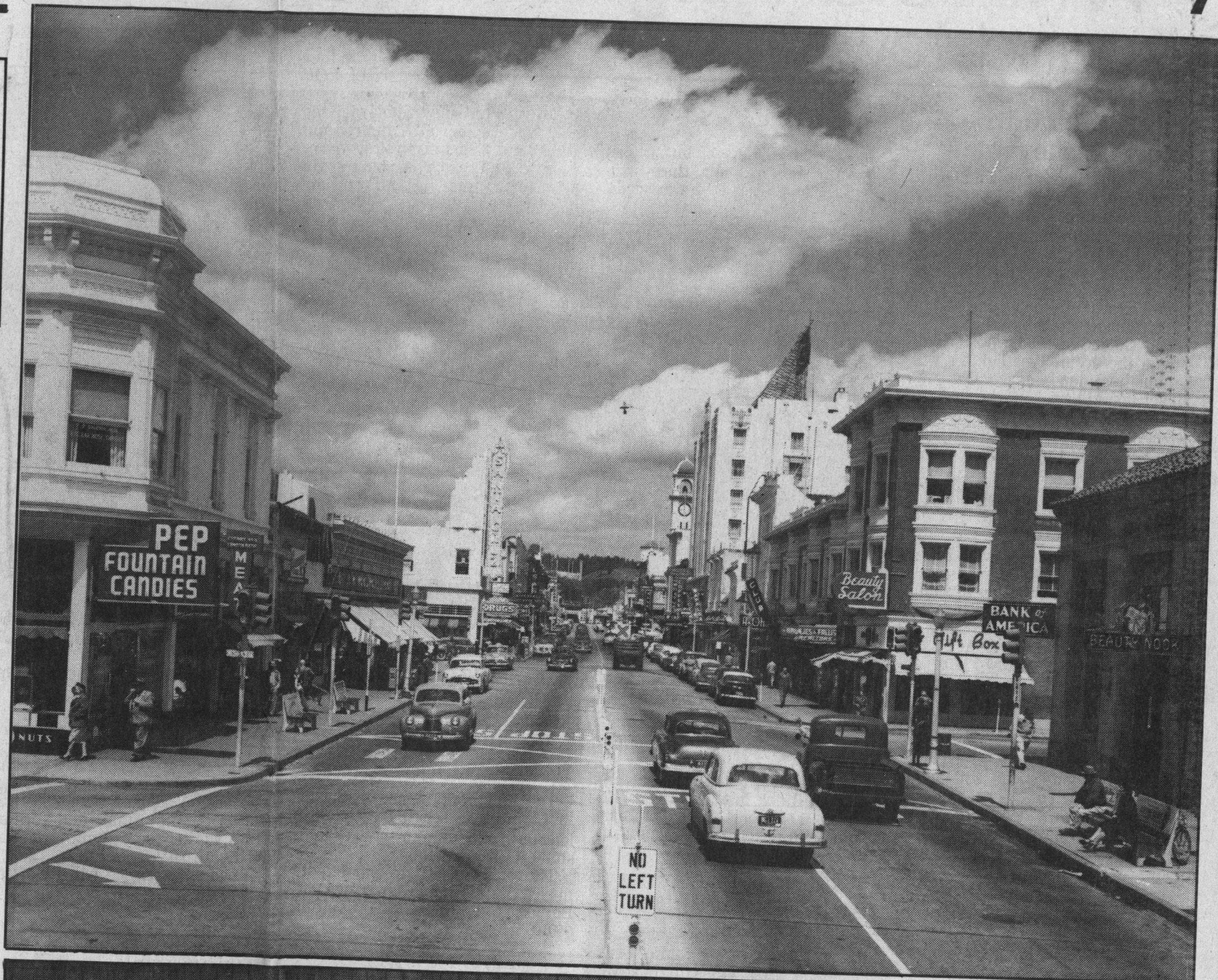


Cynthia Mathews

he had learned at another studio, allowing the retrieval of photos by date, subject or customer.

Dick recalls the assignments of those days. "I did everything from pig farms to fashion shows ... all in one day." During the 1950s, Dick left for several years to pursue independent work and during this time, Pete Amos joined Webber to take on some of the commercial and press work. Dick returned in 1958 and purchased the commercial side of the business in 1960. He continued with the Sentinel press contract through 1969, when he opened his new studio and the Sentinel hired Amos as its first staff photographer.

"It was time to separate the two," says Dick. "Press work by its nature is erratic, hurried, sponta-



Covello and Covello

Above, Pacific Avenue looked far different in 1953.



Left, The Soquel Giants were tough to beat in 1931.

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photographic skills led to a new round of practical experience during his four years in the Army.

By 1948, Dick and his wife, Esther, had decided to put down roots in Santa Cruz, and Dick began to work with Ed Webber's Photo Shop doing commercial work and press coverage.

Oddly enough, Dick explains, the Sentinel did not have a staff photographer of its own at this time. Since 1938, the Sentinel had been contracting with Webber for press photography services. During this period, virtually all the photographs were taken with big 4-by-5 negatives, and negatives for some special occasion or group shots could get as big as 10-by-20 inches.

It was useful to keep the negatives: People occasionally ordered extra prints for their own use, providing an additional source of income for the studio. So each negative was kept and filed in alphabetical order. When Dick joined Webber's in 1948, he volunteered to convert the files to a more versatile cataloging system

ly go to see what's going on. My time as a Sentinel photographer included the construction of the Yacht Harbor, Cabrillo College and UCSC." There's even a whole collection on Miss California, representing Dick's 30-year contract as official photographer for the Miss California Pageant. Talk about social change.

ANOTHER POPULAR feature of the Sentinel throughout this time was the publication of historic photographs. Local residents made their old photos available for the Sentinel's use and the studio would shoot a copy negative in the process, with the owner's permission. These historic photographs, taken from an untold number of private collections, formed the nucleus of the studio's remarkable historical archives.

In the '70s, Dick notes, there was a surge of interest in the historic photographs. He added to the original selection by visiting public and private collections throughout the state, making copies with permission of the owners.

Today, there are several shelves

of fat binders behind the desk at Covello and Covello, each crammed with historic photographs arranged by subject. There are, for example, lumber, downtown, mountains, celebrations, wharf and waterfront. Dick estimates that about 400 scenes are in the historical collection, and the Covellos continue to add to it.

"I could always see the value of the file," Dick says, "especially having it available and accessible. The strange thing is I was never much of a collector. I just kind of fell into it. I don't know that we ever really made much money off of it. I really saw it more as public service."

To which local historians and history buffs can only add, "Thanks."

Today, Dick remains actively involved with photography and the studio, continuing to work with a few long-term clients. And what about that childhood dream of becoming a "Life" photographer? Dick laughs. "Years ago I had the chance to actually meet a "Life" photographer. It turns out his

dream was to settle down with his own studio in a small town."

IN RECENT years several other newspaper photo files have been finding their way into historical archives. The Watsonville Register-Pajaronian has had a long-standing arrangement with the Pajaro Valley Historical Association, donating its obsolete photos rather than throwing them away. Last summer, a similar arrangement was established between the Sentinel and the Historical Trust.

And just over two years ago, with the demise of the weekly newspaper, "The Sun," that paper's photo archives were donated to the Historical Trust. The Trust's exhibits curator Nikki Silva is thrilled at the influx of new material. "This is high-caliber work by talented people," she says. "Each photographer and each newspaper has a distinctive style or emphasis. Taken together, they present a vibrant record of our contemporary community. They also emphasize our philosophy that history is an ongoing process; it starts as far

back as we can take it and continues right up to the present day."

(A final observation on the contemporary news photos: Most of them are not permanently fixed to prevent fading. The Historical Trust would welcome the volunteer assistance of local photographers to run these prints through a complete fixing cycle for long-term protection. For more information about this project or if you have items of historical interest to share, call the Historical Trust at 425-3499.)

Cynthia Mathews has been active for many years with the Santa Cruz County Historical Trust and is currently involved with plans for the McPherson Center for Art and History.