

She sets enthusiasm level for County Fair on 'high'

MABLE HENRI, if you talk to her for more than three minutes, transmits the strong impression that, in case you haven't got something ready to display in the Santa Cruz County Fair, you'd better get cracking.

She's in charge of the Home Arts Department for the fair, which this year will run from Sept. 13-18. And she loves to see people enter the things they have made.

"The fair belongs to the people," is her motto. And she courts prospective entrants all the year around.

The brisk and cheery veteran of 23 county fairs here says one secret of her division's success is to keep abreast of the times in the areas of needlework, canning and preserving and such.

"I keep an eye on what groups are doing," she says.

For instance, Henri says macrame on its way out and so is candlemaking.

But quilting, in its most exquisite forms, is very definitely 'in.'

So is specialty canning and preserving.

"When I started with the fair 23 years ago," Henri says, "our department had mostly sewing and baking. In those days, if you saw a quilt it would be more for utility. Now, we see quilts that are insured for large amounts — they're made for hanging on the walls as an art form. They must not be touched — I have to be careful to cover them for display because they are valuable works of art.

Henri says rug braiding, weaving and spinning are coming on strong, with the Embroiderer's Guild helping to organize and display their category.

"The Stroke Center and the Skill Center will compete with their weaving work this year — they'll compete against others with no special consideration," Henri says. "I've gone out and I've looked for these people. I tell them, 'Hey! Come on, let's see what you can do!' And they come!"

Henri says she a stickler on having lots of home arts demonstrations.

"It's no good to see a quilt on the wall and not know how people did it," she says.

"I tell them, 'We have a public that needs educating. Educate us! Show us!'"

And so, there will be demonstrations of a variety of skills going on all through fair week.

Mable says food preserving is always a 'hot' item — and not so much 'utility' canning but specialty items like preserved kiwi fruit and cactus.

"Some of my best canners are men," Henri says, "and some men are into needlework, too. Some are tops. In fact, men are winners all the way through the fair."

One new category in the food section this year is a Deli Division. In it will be items one might find in a deli. For instance, Henri says she has learned there are a lot of cheesemakers in the county — who make cheese from goat milk as well as from cows' milk. She's urging them to submit entries in that division. Homemade yogurt will fit in there, as well.

She's proud of the junior division in Home Arts, especially because it gives kids who don't belong to 4-H a place to enter their specialties. There are prizes and prize money awaiting the winners there, too.

A long-time judge of canning and preserving divisions in other area county fairs, Henri says she has some advice for entrants.

"The most common mistake I see made is a poor seal on canning jars," she says. "That and the cleanliness of the jar. Some people will undercook fruit and underboil it in the water bath so the fruit will keep its shape and firmness. But after a few days at the fair, the seal may pop — and risk botulism, too.

"It turns me off when I see something brought to the fair, dirty. I'll open it and I'll judge it — but I won't like it. And it's very common."

Sometimes disasters occur.

Henri relates the time when a woman, entering for the first time, won a blue ribbon for her pickles. She and her family were so proud, and her husband took a picture of her, holding the jar. Just then, the baby reached over and knocked the jar out of her hand, crashing it to the floor.

"She came back next day with another jar," Henri adds.

And then there was the day when a volunteer, carrying in a beautifully decorated cake entry, dropped it on the floor.

But that's life.

Henri will still be stirring up interest in the Home Arts Department in the next weeks and invites those interested to call her at 724-8535.

"We have a public that needs educating — educate us! Show us!" This is what Mable Henri, with the Santa Cruz County Fair for 23 years, says in her pep talks to people she hopes to talk into entering and demonstrating their skilled handiwork. Fair week will be Sept. 13-18.

