

Charles Ford: A Watsonville business pioneer



That Was
Watsonville

Betty Lewis

had some success as a miner, ill health forced him to return to the East Coast. He came back to San Francisco in 1850 and went into the mercantile business for two years. He then sold out and headed south, having heard tales of the beautiful Pajaro Valley.

His first act was to rent land in the Amesti Rancho area and plant 200 acres of potatoes, a crop that had been bringing top prices. By harvest time, over-production had caused the bottom to fall out of the potato market and he had the foresight to leave his potatoes rotting in the fields rather than incurring the additional expense of harvesting, sacking and hauling the potatoes to a non-existent market.

Deciding that farming was not for him, Ford went back to what he knew best: the dry goods business. Joining with Barbelden "Little" Barney in partnership with Lucius Sanborn, he established the Ford and Sanborn mercantile store on Main Street near West Third Street in 1852.

"Messrs. Ford & Barney have nearly completed a two-story building — the lower floor of which is to be appropriated to mercantile purposes; the upper floor is designed for a lodge room for the Masonic fraternity, a branch of which order has been established here." — Pacific Sentinel, April 11, 1857.

Ford never married and was the first guest to register at the Mansion House hotel when it opened its doors in 1871 and lived there for some time. It was said that at one time, he owned one fourth of the town of Watsonville.

Ford served one term in the California Legislature as a staunch Republican, but never was to seek another public office. He was said to be bold and aggressive in his undertakings but had a natural tact. He also suffered from liver trouble in his later years, but man-

aged to travel to foreign countries.

Ford and Sanborn continued the business until 1880, when Sanborn retired. At that time, A. A. Morey and James Sidney Menasco were brought into partnership and they soon became responsible for the day-to-day operations of the expanding store.

The name Menasco became synonymous with the Charles Ford Company. Menasco started to work as a clerk in the store in 1875, shortly after his marriage to Mary Tuttle. He continued to run the store after becoming a partner and became president of the company after Ford died. He and his wife had two children, Sidney and Edna Fulmer.

Also joining the Ford team during these early years were Fred Kilburn, Samuel Leask and A. W. Cox, who along with the partners became shareholders upon the incorporation of the Ford company in 1890. During this period, the company continued to grow at the corner of West Third (Beach) and Main streets, supplying the citizens of Watsonville with a wide variety of merchandise. In the early days and continuing into the early 1900s, many farmers had accounts that accumulated charges for a full 12 months. But the rule was that, come the end of the crop year, all accounts had to be paid in full.

In addition to a life's work, the Ford Company provided something else for Menasco — a bride. In 1906, when Sidney Menasco was working as a clerk, he met a young lady who had come to work in the store after coming to Watsonville from San Francisco following the great earthquake. Jennie Hannaford was selected as the Goddess of Liberty in the 1909 Fourth of July parade and she and Menasco were married in 1911.

Menasco, also known as Sid, later followed his father into the

store presidency. The following is from the Evening Pajaronian in 1929: "About 1917, S. T. Menasco was elected president and general manager and the growth of the Charles Ford Company has been phenomenal since that date."

The store became the oldest mercantile store in California after the closing of the City Of Paris in San Francisco.

Sid and Jennie's son, George, became manager of Ford's in 1950 and president of the company in 1962 following in his father and grandfather's footsteps. A third-floor section was added to the southwest corner of the building in 1956 with Ralph Wyckoff as the architect. The Ford company acquired stores in other towns including Salinas, Hollister, Santa Cruz, Gilroy, Morgan Hill, Pacific Grove, Half Moon Bay, San Luis Obispo and King City.

Company picnics were held over the years and in 1921, S. T. Menasco closed down the store for such an event. Employees and their families went off to Thompson's Grove for a fare of chicken and steaks followed by baseball, racing and dancing.

But tragedy struck in 1989 when the Loma Prieta earthquake damaged the Ford building, which had to be torn down in November of that year. A new building was constructed, but financial trouble had been on the horizon for some time. George Tuttle Menasco served as president until January 1991. Jim Vicars, who was brought in to modernize the company in 1991, resigned in August 1992.

From the San Jose Mercury, Oct. 16, 1992: "Rios (mayor) said the possible demise of the town's anchor store has been blamed on financial hardships due to the 1989 earthquake and the recession. However, he believes the near-fatal blow came when a firm hired to revamp the store after

the quake neglected to pay attention to Watsonville's market demand. Unlike the old store, the new Ford's carried a high-end line of cloth and merchandise that failed to attract its old customers."

Now the home of Gottschalks, the old Ford store is long gone and newcomers to Watsonville may never have heard of that store or Charles Ford. A bachelor all his life, though rumor has it that he had a mistress and she was buried beside him in Pioneer Cemetery, but it is pure speculation. In his will he left an estate of \$545,782.61, which appraisers said was the largest estate ever appraised in the county. Most of the money and extensive land holdings went to relatives, but the largest amount went to a Encarnacion Pinedo of San Jose — \$10,000. To his "faithful servant", Ah Moon, he left a mere \$100. One newspaper complained that he did not bequeath money for the benefit of the community.

"It is a settled fact that the Pajaro Beach has been leased by Dr. Chas. Ford, and as soon as possible work will be commenced on the beach, preparing it for campers who may visit there next season and for local visitors. The pavilion will be erected a short distance below the Anderson building and towards the race track and will be on the north or protected side of the sand hills...We confidently look forward to the not distant time when the Watsonville beach will be the camping resort of this part of the State, and it is Dr. Ford's determination to make it such. Success attend him in his good and enterprising work." — Register-Pajaronian, Nov. 3, 1881.

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