

Spending the Fourth on Lake Watsonville

By BETTY LEWIS

"The launching of the 'Roosevelt,' a trim little dispatch boat to do duty on Lake Watsonville for the 4th of July Water Carnival, took place today. It signalized the smoothing over of the last trace of ill-feeling between the North and South as represented by the two great political parties. The owners are, respectively, J.S. Menasco, a modern Democrat, and A. N. Judd, a Union Republican." — The Evening Pajaronian, July 4, 1907.

Watsonville has celebrated Independence Day in many ways down through the years, with parades, baseball games, speeches in the plaza, dances, fireworks, picnics and, at Lake Watsonville.

In May of 1907, the Pajaronian was urging Watsonville to take advantage of one of its natural resources, the Pajaro River, and make it into a lake to be used as a summer recreation area. The suggestion was to build a sand dam with a sluice gate, forming a long narrow lake extending from the Pajaro bridge to the Salsipuedes bridge — or farther.

The idea was accepted and, by June, "Dam Builder General J. E. Ostrander," a local house mover, was busy with his crew clearing out brush and using scrapers to build up the dam. It was even suggested that the flour mill on lower Main street be turned into a casino but this never materialized. Soon the new pleasure resort boasted a floating bandstand, springboards, docks, grandstand, bathing house, picnic areas, shaded walks and, the boats.

"You are not in the swim unless you have a boat on Lake Watsonville. Numerous parties were afloat on the lake yesterday and all keenly enjoyed the novel amusement, though some of the ladies have not yet overcome the fear of shipwreck and are inclined to become nervous."

— Evening Pajaronian, June 27, 1907.

Local men were busy building and painting their crafts for the upcoming Water Carnival when the gaily decorated fleet would be a prominent part of the show. The Queen's barge built in Honolulu of teak, measured 27 feet in length, 10 feet in beam and could carry up to 40 people. It was brought to Lake Watsonville by way of Moss Landing. Another notable entry in the "fleet" was a converted submarine, the inspiration of Ben Osborn who painted his boat a patriotic red, white and blue.

The Water Carnival was held at night under strings of lights which glowed and shimmered over the water. Strains of the band's tunes floated out from the bandstand and the pop, flash and flare of the roman candles delighted the young and old alike. People crowded the edges of the lake to watch the festivities and gasped with delight as the Queen's gondola came into view. Mrs. Harry

Peckham was crowned Queen and she was decked out in patriotic splendor.

Misfortune struck the next month as the Queen's boat hit a snag in the lake, filled with water and sank. It was raised and beached by means of block and tackle plus mule power, but was soon replaced by a new sidewheel steamer built by Frank Balestier and Joe Silva. This handsome craft was 21 feet long with a 6-foot beam and could churn along at 5 to 6 knots.

In October, as the good weather was on the wane, Lake Watsonville disappeared and was not rebuilt until the next June, in 1908.

"L. W. Helfer, who last year was swimming and boating instructor on the river, is constructing a boat house at the foot of Union street and has put a gang of men at work to hurry the construction so that it will be ready for use by tomorrow afternoon. He will have a launch for hire and will rent bathing suits. Mr. Helfer is doing this at his own expense. He has the courage that deserves success." — July 3, 1908.

Other added attractions were resting places under the shade trees, more docks and a tea garden. The aquatic races were the big treat on the 4th of July including rowing races, swimming races, a water baseball game, tug-o-war and tub races. Again, people were drawn to the lake, also called "Laguna de Pajaro," to cheer on their favorite team.

When it was time again to say adieu to Lake Watsonville, the following appeared in the Pajaronian on Oct. 22, 1908:

"The dam officials say that they are going to permit the dam sand to be hauled away from the dammed river, and have asked us to put 'some sort of dam notice in the paper,' so that people who want to get river sand will know that they are welcome to haul it from the sand dam at any time."

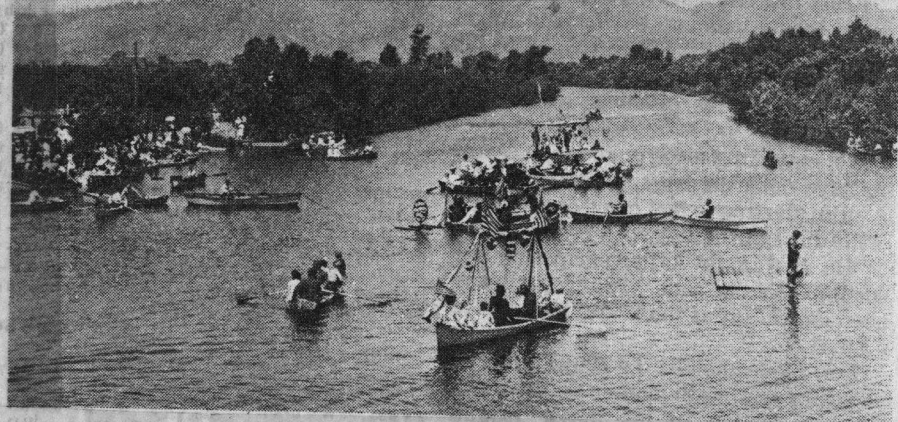
The Pajaro River pleasure resort grew in popularity. Many a child learned to swim at the lake and each summer boat owners would haul out their crafts, fix them up and slide them back into the water again. The carefree days of summer were often spent in or on the popular lake. But when World War I came along, the practice of damming the river was discontinued and unaccountably, has never been resumed since.

"Sedate grandfathers and grandmothers can spend the day quietly on the pacific waters of the lake, fathers and mothers can furnish their children no better outing than a boat ride, and love-sick beaux can be found, as usual, billing and cooing to their sweethearts while they glide over the lake in a row boat built for two." — Evening Pajaronian, June 24, 1909.

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Holiday celebration on Lake Watsonville, marked by water carnival; note what appears to be queen's barge, center left. Pictures courtesy of the Pajaro Valley Historical Association



Early-day postcard shows decorated boats on lake