

Begonia Festival

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The seed for Capitola's Begonia Festival was sown over a cup of coffee in 1953.

Helen Antonelli, wife of Pat Antonelli, one of the owners of the Antonelli Bros. Begonia Gardens, was meeting with her friend, Vivian Benias.

Although there is no record of the conversation that morning, those who are familiar with the festival's history believe it probably followed these lines:

Both ladies were bothered by the fact that the fabulous

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begonia blooms, at their peak in the late summer, are of no use to the begonia growers. The majority of the flowers are grown for their tubers and seeds — not the delicate blossoms. Workers must go through the begonia fields and pick the blossoms, which go to waste.

"They thought of a way for the begonias to be picked and the community would benefit as well," said Ron Graves, who has been closely connected with the Begonia Festival for the past 25 years.

Graves, however, attributes the idea of a community festival with Benias and one of the Vetterles, either Edna or Ella, wives of other begonia growers in La Selva Beach.

Another version of the story emerges, however, from Ella Vetterle. She said the idea for the Begonia Festival came from former Capitola Mayor Harlan Kessler.

He wanted to show off Capitola's begonias, so he arranged for a surfboard, laden with flowers to float down Soquel Creek. Blossoms were also strewn into the Capitola lagoon.

The year after, Vetterle said, the Benias and Antonelli connection took over.

In any case, the festival has blossomed from one surfboard to the myriad of floats and crowds the event has attracted in recent years.

Edna Messini, who has been involved with the festival since the beginning, recalled that the first Begonia Festival in Capitola consisted of adorned surfboards and paddle boards.

"We had a queen in those

days," Messini said. Vera Blaeholder was crowned in the Capitola lagoon in the early '50s.

"We added barges in 1956 and had a coronation dinner dance," she said. "Then we grew from our surfboards to what we have now."

Messini became the festival director in 1958, a watershed year for the Begonia Festival.

Messini went to the University of Oregon that year to inspect a parade being held there. "I went up to find out how the structures are made — with the chicken wire and all that," she said. "My sister went to down south and talked to the officials of the Rose

finance the festival.

There have been hundreds of anecdotes associated with the Begonia Festival over the years.

Messini remembers a float called "The Little White Church of Soquel." The builders of this float carefully measured the space between the water and the bridge. They built the replica's steeple so that it would fit under the bridge.

But on the morning of the nautical parade, Messini recalled that the water in the lagoon wasn't high enough. So she had the city make the water level higher.

When the Little Church of

'This is the party we give ourselves at the end of the summer.'

— Councilman Ron Graves

Parade. She learned a lot from them on how to build the floats."

The floats presented lots of problems for festival organizers. The begonias are very moist, so they can't be glued on to the structure. They must be attached to the chicken wire with stiff wire, a procedure that's still used in today's floats.

That year, 1958, the nautical parade attracted 10,000 people.

"We thought that was the whole United States in those days," she said. "Of course, we get more people now, but back then we were just a little town of 3,000 people."

The first barges were made of heavy oil drums loaned by the oil companies. Later, Styrofoam turned out to be a better material to use for the floats.

Motors were also added to the barges a few years later.

The queen and her court were staples of the Begonia Festival until recent years. The requirements to be in the parade were being a girl between 16 and 19, living in the county and selling tickets. The girl who sold the most tickets — sort of a vote for her as queen — would reign as queen.

Messini admitted this was a bit undemocratic, but proceeds from ticket sales greatly helped

Soquel floated down the river, the steeple caught on the bridge and broke off.

"I went and hid for the rest of the day," Messini recalled.

Graves and his wife, Dianne, can reel off story after story on the Begonia Festival. Both have served as the directors for the festival in various years.

Ron is legendary as "The Voice of the Begonia Festival," a sobriquet he earned after announcing the events of the parade for about 15 years.

"My most vivid recollection," said Dianne, "was the year 1972. Three days before the parade, Antonelli's told us there weren't enough begonias for the festival. I think there was something going on down in Los Angeles for (then U.S. President) Richard Nixon and they shipped 300,000 blooms down there."

"Well, we were just devastated. We didn't know what we were going to do. Then at 10:00 at night, my phone rang and it was Mr. Brown (from Browns Bulb Ranch). He said he had a field of begonias in Marina and we could pick all we wanted — none of us knew that the Browns had these fields. So that saved the day. At the last minute, everything came together."

There were two years when the parade was on the street

instead of on the river, but both Graves agreed the effect wasn't the same.

"It's magical having it on the water," Dianne said.

Ron recalled the year Dianne, the director, got the entire Watsonville Marching Band on a float.

"I didn't think she could pull it off," he said. "But she did. She got a big barge from Moss Landing. The only problem was that it was so heavy that it couldn't maneuver in the river."

The couple has vivid memories about some of the floats in years past.

"Dominican Hospital had one the year the circus was the theme," Ron said. "It was an ambulance with a clown lying in it. Near the lagoon, the boat started to sink. Only the theatrics of the clown carried it off — everybody thought the sinking was part of the act."

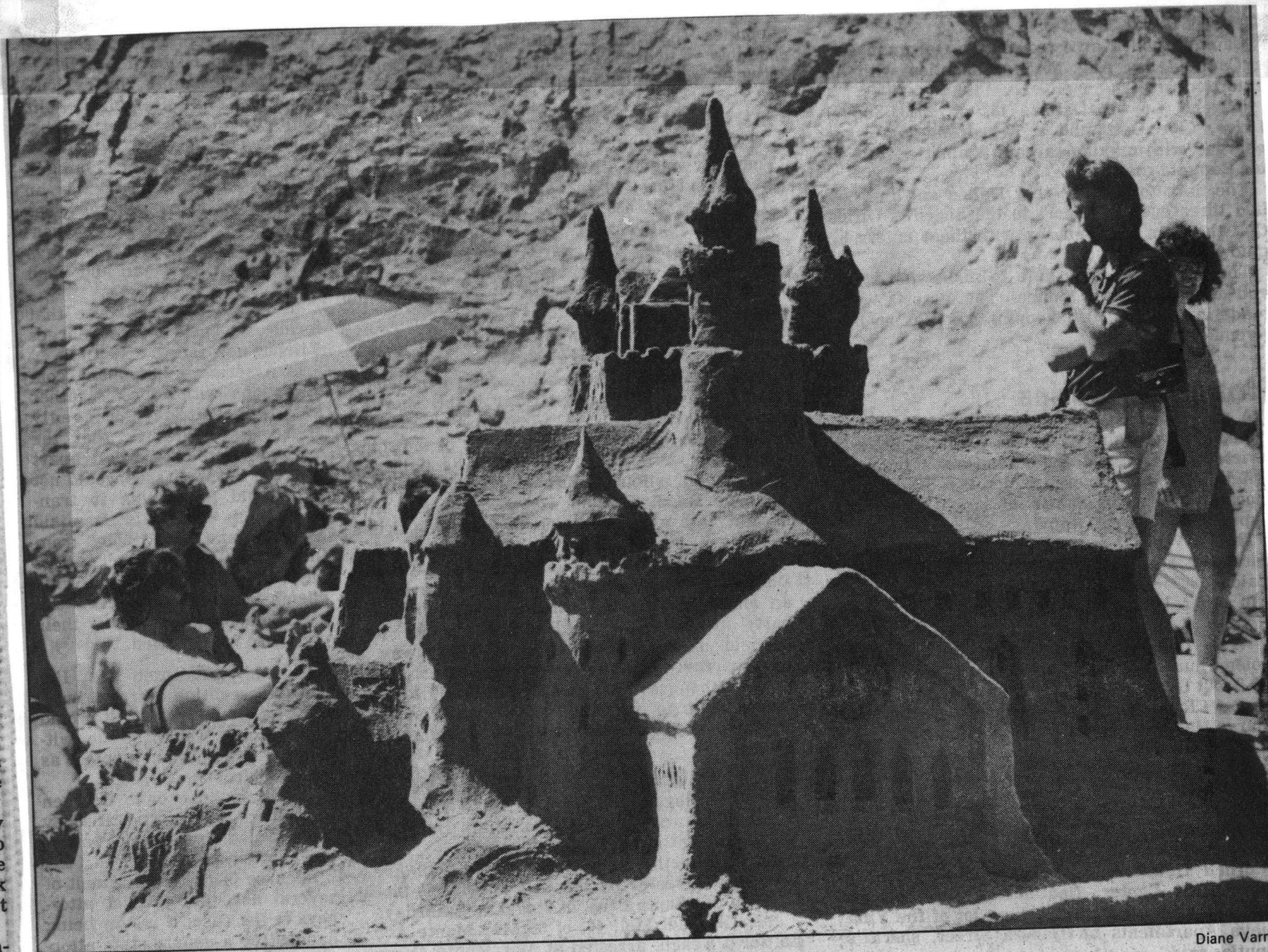
Both have fond memories of a 20-foot-long dragon that breathed fire, a biplane that could be maneuvered and a replica of the Capitola Wharf that included surfers in the ocean.

Of course, there have been "characters" associated with the Begonia Festival over the years.

Ron remembered Peggy Hoyt, who died a few years ago at age 92, who was known as the Queen Mother because she took care of the queen and her court at her house along the river.

"It has always been a community effort," Dianne said. "It's just everybody's energy that pulls it off each year. If it wasn't for all the people willing to volunteer their time, it wouldn't happen."

Ron agreed. "This is the party we give ourselves at the end of the summer."



Diane Varni

Sunday's sand-sculpture contest on the Capitola Beach marked the beginning of the annual Begonia Festival. This castle, entitled 'Schloss O'Brien,' was

the grand sweepstakes winner. The castle was built by a consortium of beach artists from the San Francisco Bay area.