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Santa Cruz County's first fair

Fairs - 2000

That Was
Watsonville

Betty Lewis



The first Pajaro Valley Fair, forerunner of the Santa Cruz County Fair, was held in the Watsonville Opera House on East Third Street in October of 1887.

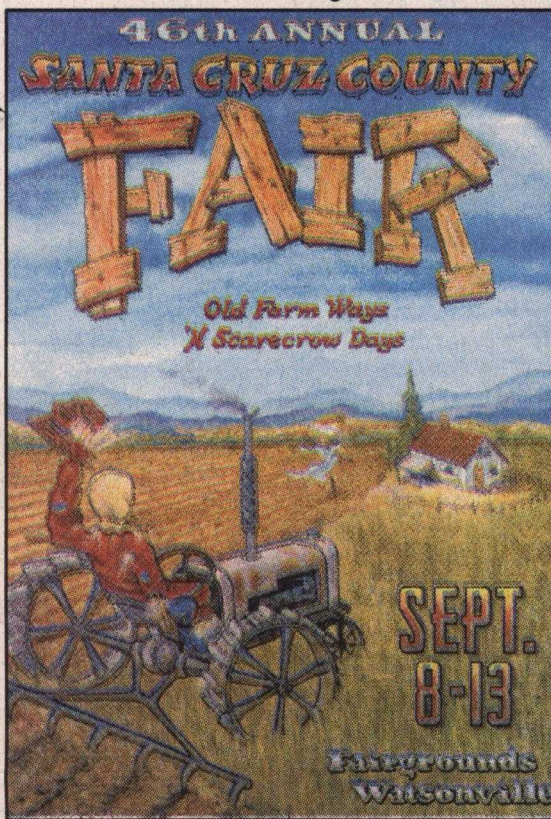
"The fair project whenever suggested, had much opposition to encounter, but its most dangerous foe was apathy and that was the result of satisfaction with 'things as they were.' At last the fair proposition took practical shape. To whom, individually, this credit is due, we do not know as it originated among members of Watsonville Grange at one of its meetings..." — The Pajaronian, Oct. 27, 1887.

Folger's Opera House was across the street from the plaza, where people gathered and witnessed a band parade and concert at 1 p.m. before the fair opened to the public at 2 p.m. Upon entering the building, they were greeted with a beautifully decorated auditorium and stage. Over the stage at the Opera House, or Rink, in letters made of apples was a sign that read Pajaro Valley Products. The work on this colorful sign was attributed to H.S. Fletcher and Milt Tuttle, taken from a design by W.V. Gaffey.

The weather for the opening of the fair was perfect and people from all over flocked to the various indoor exhibits, including the art department, which featured sketches in charcoal, crayon drawings, paintings on satin and china, plus paintings of landscapes and marine life. Photographer A.W. Fell had an exhibit of his photographs, and in the next room, Mrs. C.M. Shepard displayed millinery goods — even the men were noticing the beautiful women's headwear!

Also on display were the valley's agricultural crops: large beets, mammoth-cabbages, potatoes, tomatoes, onions, corn, wheat, watermelons, hops, okra, celery, oats and large sacks of flour.

"Extending the width of the fruit department was the evaporated fruit



A vintage postcard from the 46th Annual Santa Cruz County Fair. The first Pajaro Valley Fair, forerunner of the Santa Cruz County Fair, held in the Watsonville Opera House on East Third Street in October of 1887, placed a heavy emphasis on featuring the valley's agricultural crops, much like current county fairs.

Courtesy of Betty Lewis

display of the Watsonville Fruit Packing Co. It looked so fine that mouths watered and fingers burned, and would compare with the best display of any Santa Clara dryer. Then came the exhibit of pears. They were free from the scale that has blighted the yield of winter varieties for years, and this exhibit was one of the features of the fruit department. Thirteen Vicar of Wakefields weighed 25 lbs. They were raised by Dennis Driscoll." — The Pajaronian, Oct. 27, 1887.

There was also entertainment, including band music, speeches, poetry reading and a baby's reception, plus an ice cream stand hosted by Mrs. Will Burland. The sum of \$195 was realized from this popular booth. W.R. Crowner and P.J. Freiermuth had a booth where a water motor was running a sewing machine and a small windmill, the latter being kept busy pumping water. There was also a telephone on display. In B.A. Osborn's booth was a fine display of buggy robes, blankets and Mexican saddles, plus a single harness that was awarded the first premium. Mr. Osborn was well known for his excellent craftsmanship and had won numerous awards in the past.

Because the Opera House was so crowded inside, the heat was very hard on the babies entered in the

contests but certainly helped the sales at the ice cream stand and the booth of S. Martinelli selling apple cider and soda water. On Oct. 21, the orphans and teachers of the Pajaro Valley Orphan Asylum visited the fair free of charge for the day.

Also happening in Watsonville during fair time: "Thurber & Co. completed the upper Main street block last night and will roll it to-day. The lower block has been graded and graveled, and the work of bituminizing will be commenced as soon as possible. Merchants are becoming anxious to have Main street opened up again." — The Pajaronian, Oct. 1887.

That first fair was a resounding success: great exhibits, good entertainment, wonderful food and many happy memories for those in attendance. The present fairgrounds on East Lake Avenue were used for the first time in 1941. The fair has changed considerably over the passing years and now its entrance is graced with the former home of James Rodgers built in 1870 — as an agriculturist, he was one of the Pajaro Valley's early day farmers.

Betty Lewis, a local historian and Watsonville resident, is a regular columnist for the Register-Pajaronian.