

# Dr. Ford would be proud



The Charles Ford Co., California's oldest mercantile store, grew from a wooden shack, to a lively general store (upper left). By the turn of the century (upper right) Ford's dominated the northwest corner of Main and West Beach Streets. The 1979 Pajaro Valley Coin Club medallion commemorates the store and its founder, Dr. Charles Ford. It is for sale at Ford's, at Santi's Camera and Coin Shop, and from club members.

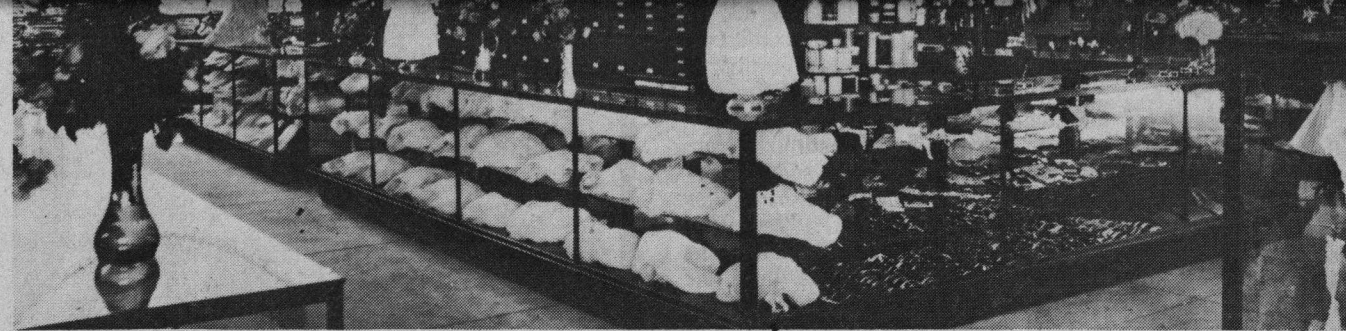
—Photographs courtesy of Betty Lewis and the Pajaro Valley Historical Society.



REFERENCE







# Pioneer merchant's store continues to grow and prosper

Last year, the Pajaro Valley Coin Club printed a medallion of the Mansion House. This year, they commemorate, in bronze and silver, the Mansion House's first guest and the most important mercantile figure in the Pajaro Valley — Charles Ford.

The coins are being sold by Coin Club members for \$1.50 in bronze or \$15 in silver as a prelude to the 14th annual Coin Show. Over 38 professional coin dealers have signed up for the show on Feb. 11 at Watsonville High School cafeteria. It will be open to the public from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

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The history of Charles Ford reveals a man with a certain flair for living. He came to Watsonville from the East Coast by way of the California gold rush fields and San Francisco, and established a department store which has emerged through the years as the most vigorous of its kind in the central coast area. At one time the Charles Ford Co. was the second oldest department store in California. The City of Paris began a little earlier when it started to sell goods off ships docked in the San Francisco harbor. But when the City of Paris closed its doors not too long ago, Ford's became the state's oldest general, or department, store.

Ford was born on Jan. 3, 1824, on a farm near New Brunswick, N.J. At 14 he went to work in a dry goods store in Newark, but soon turned to clerking in an apothecary shop where he learned about dispensing drugs and treating the ill. By age 18, he had moved to New York and opened two drug stores of his own. Thus, the title of "Doctor" was bestowed on him. Druggists in those years often performed some duties of the physician or dentist in their own place of business.

A young man of ambition and adventure, Ford decided to head West after hearing about gold discoveries, and booked passage on the ship Croton, leaving his brother and sisters behind. Their parents had died when they were quite young.

The journey via Cape Horn took 198 days and the ship docked in San Francisco Bay on July 31, 1849. Ford was 25 years old.

He settled a while at Cardaway's Bar on the Yuba River and did fairly well in

trading and mining, but because of hardships, lack of comforts and above all, failing health, he returned to the East Coast. But by the spring of 1850, Ford had returned to San Francisco and was engaged in mercantile business on Jackson Street.

The City by the Bay was an unpredictable place in those Gold Rush years. Fortunes were being made and lost; fires periodically swept through the hastily-built structures. But Charles Ford prospered in his business. In the evenings at the boarding house he heard men talk of the fertile Pajaro Valley and the top prices being paid for potatoes.

Records vary as to when Ford left The City and came to Watsonville (then called Pajaro), but eventually he pursued the farming opportunities here. With W.W. Stowe and two other men, he leased a portion of the Amesti Rancho and planted 200 acres of potatoes. But the bottom dropped out of the potato market due to overproduction and farmers were harvesting, sacking and hauling their potatoes to a non-existent market.

Ford left his crop rotting in the field to save the expense of harvesting and turned back to the mercantile business, setting up in 1852 a store in a wooden shack near the corner of what now is West Beach and Main Streets. The corner lot was owned by Thomas Cooper whose own store was located across the street, now the site of Monterey Savings and Loan.

Ford's first business partner was Marbelden "Little Barney" Barney. The "Pacific Sentinel" newspaper of April 11, 1857 reported:

"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."

In 1862, Lucius Sanborn became Ford's partner and the firm, now 10 years old, became Ford and Sanborn. Neither owner was paid, according to early accounts. Each drew what cash he needed and charged his account.

Accounts written in the 1930's and 40's say that Ford, who never married, lived at the Mansion House, built in 1871 on

land he had owned and where the Pacific Exchange Hotel originally stood. Supposedly, Ford's name was the first entered on the Mansion House register.

He did live for a time at Scott's boarding house on Union Street across from the Plaza and dined there with such men as Judge Watson, Jesse D. Carr and

factory, causing some hard feelings around town.

In 1889, Ford became owner of Paraiso Hot Springs near Soledad and directed many improvements to the popular health spa.

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Charles Ford's Store grew from a little

**This account has been compiled from histories assembled by Betty Lewis, Deane Kramer, Ruth Irish and the late Edward P. Robinson.**

Captain James Brennan. Ford served one term in the California Legislature but did not seek other public office. Ill health plagued him, and because of this he traveled extensively, to South America, Europe and Hawaii.

Along with the store, Ford tried his hand at other businesses. He had invested heavily in Watsonville real estate and it was said that at one time he owned one-fourth of the town. He also owned an area called the Garden Tract in San Jose which was sold for a tidy sum.

With partners, he established the Watsonville Mill and Lumber Co., three sawmills and two shingle mills. In 1885 the firm was succeeded by the Loma Prieta Lumber Co.

With other leading citizens of the town, he founded the Bank of Watsonville in 1874 and was president until 1887.

In 1881, Ford leased property from the Pacific Coast Navigation Co. and founded Camp Goodall, a resort area with a hotel, cottages, race track and bathing facilities, today the site of Pajaro Dunes South. The popular resort became known for its clam bakes.

Ford was instrumental in persuading Claus Spreckels to build a sugar beet factory in Watsonville in 1888, a boost to the sagging economy and an addition to the job market. The 25-acre site on Walker Street was purchased for \$13,000 by local citizens and Ford's donation of \$1,000 topped the list. When Spreckels left, after 10 years, the land was sold and pocketed by owners of the sugar beet

wooden shack, expanding as years went by to accommodate items necessary to the public. Early inventories showed medicine, groceries, liquor, dry goods, shoes, grain, wood, coal, guns, blasting powder, farm implements and fuel. As times changed, so did the stock.

A brick warehouse was built adjoining the store in 1864 and in 1868 additional property was purchased for \$750 and the store was further enlarged.

In 1868, branch stores were opened in Salinas and King City; neither exists today.

The old wooden buildings were moved off the store property in 1873 and a two-story brick structure was erected in their place. In 1879, Sanborn retired; A.A. Morey and James Sidney Menasco were taken into partnership. The store name was changed to the Charles Ford Co.

In 1883, Ford purchased the Cooper lot on the corner for \$4,000 and a new brick building was constructed in 1885, extending the store to the corner. Four cottages also were built along the north side of West Beach Street in back of the store and Ford moved to one of these from his previous residences on Rodriguez Street.

In 1890, the store was incorporated. After Ford's death that year, there followed a series of presidents: Lucius Sanborn, F.A. Kilburn, J.S. Menasco, H.D. Tuttle, S.T. Menasco, Victor H. Tuttle and finally George Menasco who is president today. Harold Hyde is vice-president.

Charles Ford died on Nov. 16, 1890 at age 66, with an estate estimated at \$500,000. The bulk of his estate went to his brother and sister in Newark, but he remembered many other people, including his servant, Ah Moon. The largest bequest was \$10,000 to a Spanish lady in San Jose who, some say, was once Ford's mistress.

The Pajaronian's obituary read:

"Soon after midnight last Friday night, Dr. Charles Ford breathed his last at his house on Third Street and the long, busy and useful life of Pajaro Valley's foremost citizen was ended. The funeral took place on Sunday afternoon under the management of the Pajaro Lodge. Long before the time set for the funeral, the streets near the Ford cottage were crowded with vehicles while the sidewalks were thronged with people. The Masons and the Watsonville fire department led the funeral line, and over 150 vehicles were in the procession that followed the remains to the cemetery. The funeral was the largest ever witnessed in the valley. He was a man of strong convictions, one who expressed himself forcibly and who acted upon his convictions . . ."

He was buried in Pioneer Cemetery. According to Ford's last request, the town band marched at the head of the funeral procession, playing a dirge on the way to the burial ground, and "Ta-ra-boom-dee-ay" on the way back to town.

Since the death of Ford, his mercantile business has continued to expand, enlarge and modernize. In 1897 a cash system was introduced and in 1901 a tea and coffee department. In 1915 a modern telephone system was installed in all departments.

The 1906 earthquake caused considerable damage to the store. Cornices of the building crashed down and shelves of crockery fell to the floor. The plate glass windows all broke and dry goods and clothing were scattered. Damage was estimated at nearly \$2,500. There was flood danger in 1911 and 1914 but sandbags were used to keep the water out. No serious fires have occurred at the store.

In 1929 Ford's became a three-story store, selling ladies and gents' apparel, furniture, hardware and kitchenware.

Also in the 20's, the old general store became a thing of the past when check-out stands were set up and a "pay and take" operation began with Shorty Sherwood as manager.

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In more recent years the store has become increasingly modernized. The solid "block" front and side we see today was erected in 1956. The parking lot was expanded in the years 1971 to 1973, taking in land where the Studebaker-Packard Garage had stood along with other buildings that were demolished. Some of that space has been acquired for Longs Drug Store. The State Theater and Eagles Hall on West Beach Street were taken over to provide storage for incoming freight. In late 1968, three other stores were established north on Main Street.

In 1974 the Porter and Irvine Department Store in Salinas was taken over by Ford's and by 1977, Brown's Department Store was also acquired there. In 1975, Baughman's Department Store in Hollister was purchased. Ford's two stores in Santa Cruz were acquired in 1970 and its latest addition was made in Gilroy last year.

Through the years, the company picnic has been a tradition, bringing employees closer together. A particularly memorable one occurred in 1921 when S.T. Menasco closed the store for the day and employees and their families went to Thompson's Grove for a picnic. They ate roast chicken and steaks then enjoyed dancing, racing and baseball.

Last year, the picnic was held on the Fourth of July at Royal Oaks Park and over 200 employees and families from all store branches played games and enjoyed barbecued chicken and roasts of beef.

"In this day of retailing giants and impersonalized computers, Ford's people know the way of life in the Monterey Bay Area," observes Hyde, "and they try to meet merchandising needs with friendly service and selection."

Times have changed since days when a person could exchange a load of produce for dry goods at Ford's. In those days, each customer had a passbook for recording transactions and at the end of the year, after paying any debit, customers were allowed to go out to the liquor room and have a free shot of whiskey!