

Santa Cruz water fairs in 100th year

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SANTA CRUZ
Historic Perspective

SUNDAY begins the week-long San Lorenzo Centennial River Festival, marking the 100th year of the famous Santa Cruz water carnivals.

The festival promotes river restoration plans, featuring a hike to the source of the San Lorenzo, exhibits, activities and lectures, plus a banquet Sept. 30 with a slide show on the history of the "Water-fairs," and historic river songs.

The water fairs began when a fire destroyed two-thirds of the downtown in 1894. Rebuilding efforts sought to upgrade the image of the town with Renaissance and Roman-

esque architecture, promoting the city as "The Florence of the West."

To overcome the impression Santa Cruz still lay in ruins, millionaire J. Philip Smith proposed and financed the week-long "Santa Cruz Venetian Water Carnival." It received widespread praise from such notables as authors Ambrose Bierce and Frank Norris, and became an annual event.

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Water carnivals started in 1895

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river bend, with a stage on the opposite shore. The riverbank near the bleachers was named "Waterfair Square," with the "Palm Theatre" built north of it for costume balls and coronation of the carnival queen.

People got their first sight of ships from the new all-steel Pacific Fleet, which opened the festival by "bombarding" the city in a mock battle. But when the fleet sent launches ashore, the carnival queen and her attendants met them at the beach, pelting them with flowers until they surrendered. The queen then led a floral parade down Pacific Avenue, as the band played "The Santa Cruz Carnival March."

The river was dammed to create a lagoon, and bleachers were built at the Beach Hill river bend.

A Rose Regatta of decorated boats paraded on the river, to music and entertainment from

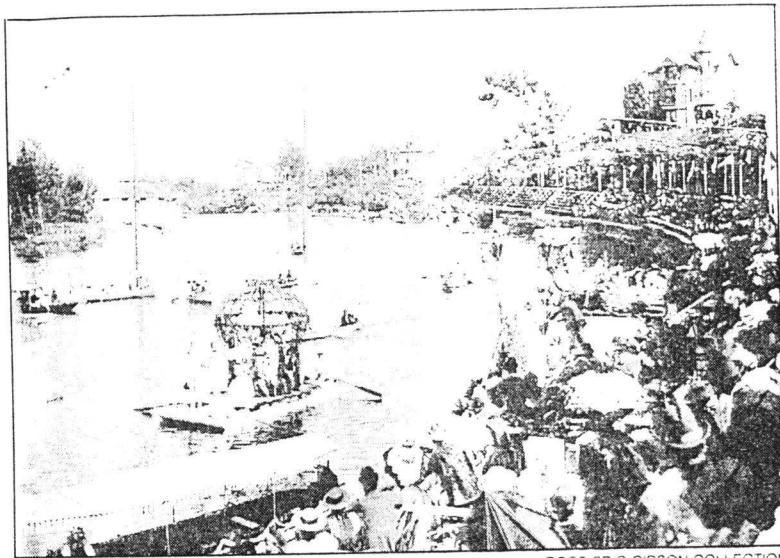
the River Stage. A year before the first modern Olympics, the festival included a water Olympics, which included canoeing, yachting, swimming, diving and retrieving sunken objects, in amateur and professional heats.

The carnival included a historic exhibition. The early ones included re-creations of the battle of Bunker Hill, and the Monitor and the Merrimac, which were excuses to use fireworks. But after 1912, the carnivals were staged on an island at the mouth of the San Lorenzo called "The Opera Island" after the operas performed there.

In 1914, the 100-foot island was landscaped to include a beach, reeds, a pine forest and some buildings.

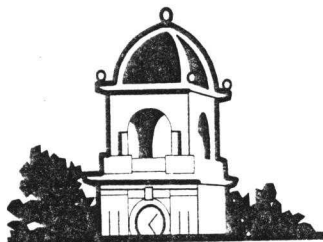
Screenwriter Perry Newberry wrote three plays. "The Padres" and "The Pathfinder" interpreted events in local history, partly staged on ships and on horseback. Youngsters performed the third play, "Aladdin," which included high schooler ZaSu Pitts, who later became a movie star.

The carnival tried to depict every kind of boat possible. Canoes, gondolas, catamarans and Chinese boats could be seen on the river, while masted



ROSS ERIC GIBSON COLLECTION

Floats and bleachers decorated the Beach Hill river bend for the first "Santa Cruz Venetian Water Carnival" in 1895.



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sailing ships and iron battle-ships joined fishing and speed-boats in the bay.

The Corinthian Boat Club began annual yacht races from San Francisco to Santa Cruz. In 1912, navy submarines gave

underwater rides in the bay. At the same time, pioneer aviators Roy Francis and Frank Bryant gave historic exhibitions of flying and river-landings in their "hydroplanes."

Before the carnival ended came "Hi-Jinks Day," a masquerade and burlesque. A fat man in a dress was crowned "hobo queen," entering on a garbage scow, while bloomer girls sang "The Hobo Queen of Santa Cruz."

On closing day, the carnival queen regained her throne during an evening boat parade under strings of lights over the river. Bands gave "illustrated concerts" to slides projected on the river stage, which ended with fireworks.