

100-year-old Aptos man takes a long look back

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APTOS RESIDENT Paul Johnston remembers when fruit packing was big business in Aptos, when Midcounty had a semi-pro baseball team called the Soquel Giants and when Claus Spreckles' Soquel Sugar Beet Factory operated near Capitola Village.

Johnston remembers because he was there. Born in 1889, Johnston will pass the century mark on Aug. 26, and 100 years makes for a lot of memories.

"It's a long time," he said. "I've seen a lot going on, that's for sure."

Most of those years, Johnston lived in Aptos, moving there in 1905 to work in the fruit-packing industry. Before that, he lived in Capitola after moving with his mother, brother and sister from Washington state, where he was born. Johnston's father had gone to the Alaskan Klondike during the Gold Rush and it was two years before they heard from him.

"We thought he was dead," Johnston said.

Johnston was about 10 years old at the time of the family's big move. As it turned out, his

father had been sick and in a hospital for most of the time spent away from his family, Johnston said.

Meanwhile, Johnston attended the school that is Soquel Elementary School today and sold popcorn for several years on Capitola Beach in the Village, referred to at that time as "the flats." Popcorn "crisp" — similar to popcorn balls, but shaped into little cakes and wrapped in paraffin paper — was a popular item, he said.

"They used to smell awful good in the afternoon when you'd go down to the beach," Johnston said.

His boss, a man named "Shorty," rented his popcorn concession from F.A. Hihn, the man who developed "Camp Capitola" as a vacation resort and built the luxurious Capitola Hotel on the beach below Depot Hill. The resort was a hit and people would flock to Capitola from miles around during the summer months, Johnston said.

"In those days, you couldn't get on the beach," he said.

The hotel later caught fire and local fire departments were not equipped to fight such a big



Kurt Ellison

Paul Johnston has watched Aptos grow up.

fire, Johnston said. Onlookers could do little but watch the Capitola Hotel burn to the ground.

"There was an immense crowd around there," Johnston said. "That was a big hotel."

Johnston moved to Aptos after several years of selling popcorn and began his career in the fruit-packing industry. With his wife, Henrietta, whom he married when both were in their mid-20s, he traveled around the state packing apples and oranges for shipping as the crops were harvested. In those days, the fruit was individually wrapped and carefully packed in boxes, he said, and he and his wife were so good at it they made as much as \$25 a day — big money at that time.

Johnston spent much of the off-season building boxes for the next harvest. He was one of the fastest professional box-makers in the area, he said, and competed in box-making contests in Watsonville.

"Watsonville used to be the apple center of the state, you know," Johnston said.

It was also where Spreckles eventually moved his sugar-beet factory, to be nearer the fields where farmers grew most of the sugar beets he used.

Johnston and his wife rented a Soquel Drive frame house, where Johnston still lives, for \$5 a month, Johnston said. They eventually bought the house and land stretching to where Cafe Sparrow is now for "a few hundred dollars," he said.

It was there they raised their daughter, Anne. She married and had two daughters of her own, and now lives in Salinas.

After his wife tired of the fruit-packing business, they opened the Aptos Restaurant on the property. It was the first restaurant in Aptos, Johnston said, and tourists from Capitola used to flock there for a taste of his wife's fruit pies. His wife died about 25 years ago.

Johnston also worked for many years as a rural mail carrier in Aptos and later operated the Aptos Village Garage. During his time in the fruit-packing industry, he also worked in Soquel during the cherry season and for the Ewell Fruit Co., which had a dryer and fruit shed across from the Averon home, near where the Capitola

Mansion Apartments on Capitola Avenue are today.

Johnston was a crack marksman with a rifle and won countless awards over the years. He was a member of the California State Rifle Team for several years and held all the range records in Northern California during that time. His longtime friend Harry Hooper was a great marksman with a shotgun, Johnston said. The two men often hunted in the gully behind Johnston's home.

"Harry Hooper and I used to hunt together for years," he said. "There used to be thousands of quail back in this gully."

Hooper was a Hall of Fame baseball player, starting with the Boston Red Sox in 1909 and ending his career in 1925 with the Chicago White Sox. He later returned to Capitola to serve as postmaster.

When Johnston was a boy and later as a young man, he and Hooper played for the semi-pro Soquel Giants. Johnston still has a baseball from those years, which Hooper autographed in 1910.

"He was one of the three greatest outfielders in baseball history," Johnston said.

Johnston never lost his love of hunting and also enjoyed fishing for many years. He used his skill as a photographer to immortalize innumerable deer and trout shot and caught farther afield than Aptos. A boar's head hangs in his living room, near a wall of medals and trophies he won for marksmanship.

Another of Johnston's loves is Aptos, the place he's lived most of his life.

"I've been away, but I came back fast," he said. "This is the finest place in the country to live - right here."

As he reminisced about his life and the life of the town around him, Johnston said it's hard to believe, sometimes, how fast the time has passed.

"I don't feel like 100 years old," he said. "When you start figuring back things that happened, then you start realizing how long ago it was."