WATSONVILLE HISTORY

General Tom and troupe come to town

Betty Lewis

That was Watsonville

As the train pulled into the station at Pajaro on a June day in 1877, many Watsonville people were on hand to see the arrival of General Tom Thumb and company, who were to appear at the Opera House in Watsonville.

After alighting from the train, they were taken by coach to the Mansion House Hotel, which was then located on the corner of Main and East Third (Beach) streets. D.M. Aldrich, the genial proprietor of the hostelry, greeted the troupe, which consisted of General Thumb and wife, Miss Minnie Warren, Major Newell and their manager, Sylvester Bleeker.

Housed in the barn at the back of the hotel were the tiny coach and ponies which had been presented to the Thumbs by Queen Victoria and they were viewed with avid interest by the local townspeople. The general was noted for his prowess at the billiard table and took on quite a few of the local lads and beat them!

The following appeared in the Pajaronian on June 21, 1877: *"All the dead walls around town are pasted over with large colored posters of General Tom Thumb and party. The general and party will be here on Friday afternoon and evening, the 29th instant. The party embraces Tom Thumb and wife; Minnie Warren and Major Newell. They are the only troupe of small people traveling, and as their reputation is long and firmly established, we expect to see full houses on that day. We have seen Tom Thumb and party, and can assure our citizens that it is an interesting entertainment, and one well worth seeing. Admission 75 cents for reserved seats and 50 and 25 cents for regular seats."*

Charles Sherwood Stratton was born on July 15, 1838, and by the age of 7 months, his growth was very minimal. At the age of 4, he was 25 inches tall.

Phineas Taylor Barnum was brought to the Stratton home when Charles was 4 years old and decided to teach and train the midget and then show him to the public. It was Barnum who gave him the name Tom Thumb.

General Tom Thumb

Mrs. Tom Thumb

Tom was dressed in miniature costumes, learned to sing and dance and charmed his audiences throughout the world. In that year of 1877, when he came to Watsonville, his height had increased to 3 feet, 4 inches and he was 39 years old. According to the Encarta Encyclopedia, the term midget is usually applied to physically well-proportioned dwarfs.

"At the Rink — positively one day only — the great original and renowned General Tom Thumb and wife (he had married Lavinia in 1863), together with the infinitesimal Minnie Warren and the Skatorial phenomenon and comic genius Major Newell, will appear in a variety of new and fascinating performances, consisting of songs, duets, dialogues, dances, comic acts and laughable sketches. Ladies and children are considerately advised to attend the day exhibition and thus avoid the crowd and confusion of the evening performance." — The Pajaronian, June 28, 1877.

These very small women were dressed in elegant and colorful costumes while wearing dazzling diamonds. The troupe presented their dances, songs, comedy and dialogues to the overflowing crowds. A hilarious skit entitled "The Mischievous Monkey" was a big hit and the audience laughed until their sides hurt, according to legend.

General Tom Thumb died in 1883, just six years after appearing locally — he was 45 years old at the time of his death. Mrs. General Tom Thumb came back to Watsonville in 1892, the second time as the wife of an Italian dwarf, Count Primo Magri, who stood 38 inches in height.

Lavinia died on November 25, 1919, at the age of 78 and was buried beside Tom Thumb in a child's casket.

A statue of Tom Thumb stands at Mountain Grove Cemetery in Bridgeport, Conn., and his friend, Barnum, is buried across the road.

General Tom Thumb's presence in Watsonville for only that one, brief day's appearance was historically significant. Watsonville was off the beaten path, travel was slow and it was all for such a brief appearance. Local agent George Peck scored a real coup when he was able to arrange for the troupe to come to the Pajaro Valley, where the population then was about 2,000.

Local people long remembered those tiny little people with their tiny coach and ponies parading down the main street — what a great sight that would have been to see!

REFERENCE