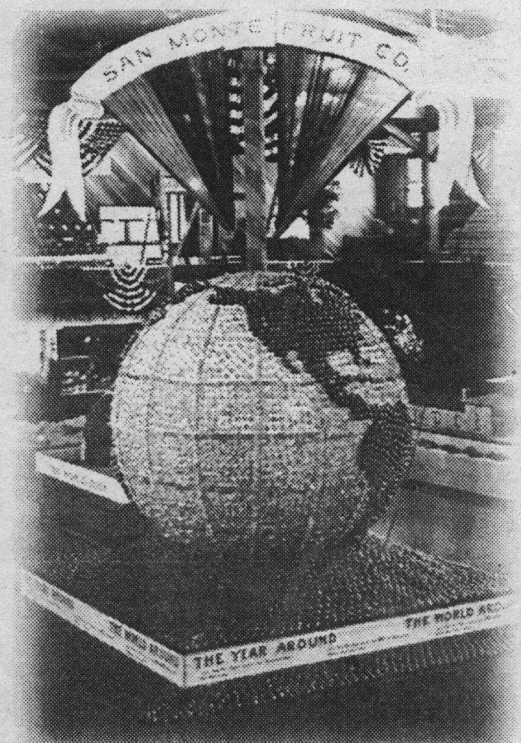




Left: Two 4-H enthusiasts display their award-winning sheep at the 1951 fair.



Right: A globe made entirely of apples was a centerpiece of the 1913 Apple Annual, the predecessor of today's county fair.

Celebrating a Century

The County Fair turns 100

Photos courtesy of Covello & Covello, Santa Cruz County Fair, Pajaro Valley Historical Assoc.

by Richie Begin

A blustery September afternoon in Santa Cruz County was framed by a sapphire sky dotted with puffs of white clouds. In the distance, there are apple orchards as far as the eye can see, and in the foreground a team of draft horses are competing in a tractor pull. Aunt Mary has baked three of her blue-ribbon Langford apple pies — one for show, one for the family and one just for you. You can smell them in the hamper as you scramble up, your mouth watering in anticipation, for the one-hour horse and buggy ride to Watsonville. It's County Fair time!

The year was 1895. The place was the Watsonville Civic Auditorium, where the 14th District Agricultural Association had just announced the official inauguration of the first-ever Santa Cruz County Fair. Prior to this time, the fair had been a part of an agricultural traveling tent show, a tri-county fall celebration that involved San Benito, Monterey and Santa Cruz counties. But this was the first year Santa Cruz could lay claim to having its very own county fair.

The apple of our eye

Imagine not having a county fair. There was a time when many counties, including ours, didn't have one. A county first needed to have something to celebrate, and Santa Cruz was lucky in that respect. The fertile Pajaro Valley was widely touted as

the center of the apple industry. Acre for acre, it was hailed as the "richest spot on earth."

Then we had an active 14th Agricultural District and an industry vitally interested in promoting a specific crop. Although the Pajaro Valley was perfect for any crop (among them potatoes and hops), the town fathers made sure that when you thought of Watsonville, you thought of apples.

According to County Fair manager and historian John Kegebain, it wasn't until the advent of pari-mutual betting on horse races in 1937 (and the statewide expenditure of funds raised as a result of a 25 percent revenue tax) that many California counties could afford fairs.

Santa Cruz was well ahead of the game. By virtue of the amazing apple, it had one of the longest running county fairs in the state. From 1905 to 1915, the apple reigned supreme in Santa Cruz County as the number one farm export. Indeed, there was a time when almost every parcel of land in the county was planted with apple orchards. The state paid homage to the fruit in the form of the first Apple Annual, a celebration that became the high spot of Watsonville's community life for the next five years.

Watsonville apples showed up in 1909 at the state exhibition in Oakland. When Governor James N. Gillet formally opened the apple pavilion, he was presented with an apple pie three feet wide. It was billed as the largest apple pie ever baked.

The second Apple Annual was bigger than the first with 60,000 in attendance. The third one was bigger yet and included a U.S. navy cruiser and two submarines anchored in Monterey Bay, while the "finest parade ever held in Watsonville" stepped smartly off with San Francisco's 12th Regiment at its head.

By 1915, Watsonville's pride in its apples had taken center stage at the Pan Pacific Exposition in San Francisco. But it was the year after WW I had started, and the war had taken its toll on exports. The crop was far under par. Gone were the golden years of the Apple Annual. What

remained was a grand tradition and an agricultural county fair of which residents were genuinely proud.

Things weren't always rosy for the fair. There were years (notably the war years 1942-45) when the fair shut down completely.

In 1940, a 100-acre tract of land on Hecker Pass Road was purchased with Department of Agriculture funds raised through the pari-mutual tax, and permanent improvements were added over the next decade. Prior to that, the fair was always held in tents in varying locations. From 1946 to 1956 the bulk of the permanent improvements took place, resulting in a standard half-mile race track and horse show arena, a horse show barn with 42 stalls, a string of 30 race horse stalls, a poultry building, redwood pole and lathe house for floriculture, cattle exhibit building, water system, fences, restrooms and landscaping. The Crosetti Building and the Home Arts Building were added in the early '70s.

Something New

One hundred years is a long time for a county fair to be in business, and no one is prouder of the fair's heritage than its current manager. In

charge of grounds maintenance for 22 years, Kegebain has also served for three years as the livestock chairman and six years as the exhibit chairman for the Agricultural History Project, overseeing exhibits and displays. This will be his fifth year as fair manager. He, the fair volunteers and staff are justifiably proud of a 100-year tradition. They are buzzing with anticipation over the new Agricultural History Project Museum, which will be constructed at the entrance to the fairgrounds this October.

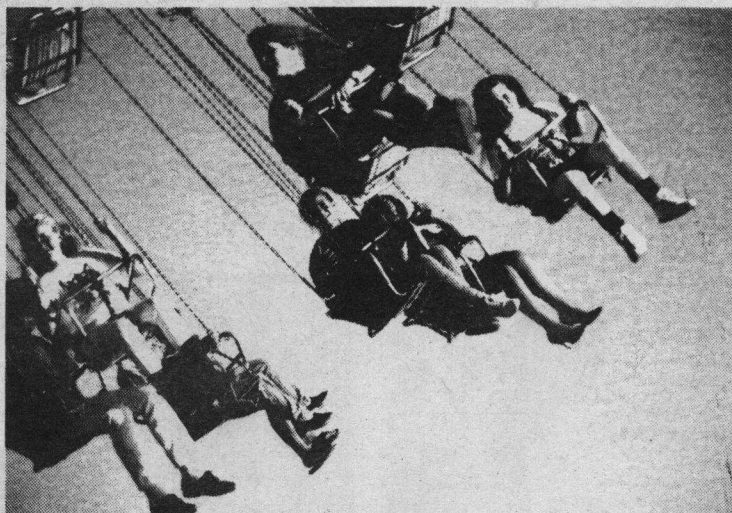
"We have a 1.3-acre parcel that has been generously endowed by money donated by Mrs. Tom Porter's family to the fair and the Ag Project," says Kegebain. "In it, we will house all manner of artifacts and displays pertaining both to the fair and to the agricultural history of the area. It is so rich in history that we need to preserve as much as we can so future generations can appreciate just what they have here. Already in place at the proposed site is a 1970 Illinois Central caboose donated by the Maceo family of Santa Cruz."

The '90s version of the County Fair combines the best of today with an appreciation for the past. State-of-the-art agricultural tools and techniques are on display in the ag buildings, while "Yesterday's Farm" highlights farm equipment and techniques from years past. World-class displays of fruit and vegetables from the Pajaro Valley are on view, as is the handiwork of the county's most valuable resource — its residents — in the Home Arts Building.

The fair has grown in size and scope but remains true to its original intent in calling attention to one of the nation's most productive agricultural areas — which just happens to be in the greatest county in California in which to live — Santa Cruz!

It doesn't seem fair!

The S.C. County Fair runs Sept. 12-17 at the County Fairgrounds in Watsonville, admission is \$6, \$3 for kids 5-11, \$4 for seniors, free for kids 4 and under. Call 724-5671.



At more recent county fairs, midway rides have been a big attraction.