

# Beginnings of the downtown plaza go back to Watsonville's first days

Watsonville's city plaza rests on a portion of the Bolsa del Pajaro Spanish Land Grant which was originally owned by the Rodriguez family. This plot of ground in the center of town was given to the people of Watsonville by Sebastian Rodriguez in 1860 through his heirs. In its beginning, the plaza was little more than a pasture land where cattle grazed at will and children hid from one another behind the tall grasses. Little by little, improvements were made — a fence was erected around the plaza to keep the cattle out and, in 1880, a wooden grandstand was built designed by Alex Chalmers. Fountains were donated, a liberty pole was constructed and walks were laid out.

In May of 1883, the Pajaronian noted: "Under the management of the Plaza Committee, gas has been introduced in the plaza pavilion and it can now be used for public gatherings or by the local bands. We are informed that the gas company does itself handsome by donating the gas, and the local bands are willing to donate the music; hence on moonlight nights we may expect the plaza to become a very popular resort for our town people."

The first American flag to be hoisted up the flag pole arrived in time for the 4th of July celebration in 1892 — it measured 36-by-70 feet with a streamer that measured 70



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That was Watsonville

feet in length. The subject of trees in the plaza came up frequently — either to plant them or chop them down! The following is from the Pajaronian in 1893 when the population of Watsonville was around 3,000: "The Trustees have been attempting a crusade against the trees which border the sidewalks of many parts of town. As an earnest of their efforts they might start the reform by cutting out the unsightly trees which do anything but adorn the Main Street front of the plaza. They are neither ornamental or useful and afford a ludicrous contrast to many of the semi-tropic shrubs which are growing in their vicinity."

Over the years many changes have been suggested for the plaza that went down to defeat such as an aquarium in the bandstand basement; an underground parking lot and building the old Carnegie Library in the center of the plaza. Many changes did much to beautify the area such as the one in 1904



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when a pole was erected and from the top a circle projected carrying electric lights of red, white and blue. From this circle, lines of lights also extended to shorter poles placed at each corner of the park. This was done in time for the 4th of July festivities after which, the lights were used for Saturday night band concerts and other special occasions.

All of this led to the need for a bigger and better bandstand, so architect William Weeks was hired to draw up plans in 1905. In May of 1906 the Granite Rock Company was awarded the contract to build it at a cost of \$1,730. The actual construction was halted due to the

earthquake on April 18, 1906 but work was underway soon after. The cover was designed by Ralph Wyckoff in 1916 with a replacement designed by Robert Wong in 1965.

Yes, the plaza has been the scene of many happenings as in 1915 when the Honorable William Jennings Bryan spoke before a large crowd and when Watsonville celebrated the nation's centennial and borrowed the cannon which was to find a permanent home in the plaza. It had ridden on the deck of the mail ship Oregon which, on October 18, 1850, sailed into San Francisco Bay signaling the news that California had been admitted to the union. The

field artillery cannon that stands on the southwest corner of the plaza was cast in 1899 at the tail end of the Spanish-American War.

The town plaza hosted many band concerts, fund raisers, seeing the boys off to war, tug-of-war contests, rallies, fund raisers, dedications and when, in 1908, Bob Mann and John Carr made a bet of \$20 on the outcome of Mann eating two soda crackers while Carr ran around the plaza — the following is from the Pajaronian: "Maybe Carr galloped instead of cantering, or, possibly, he shaved the pole pretty close at the half and quarters. At any rate, he came down the home

stretch with head up, neck level and ears laid back and passed under the wire just as Bob had taken a large but far from juicy mouthful out of his second cracker."

Watsonville is indeed fortunate to still have the plaza and to have it kept in such beautiful condition right in the heart of the city. From the Pajaronian in 1905: "Saturday evenings, when the electric lights are lit and the excellent city band is discoursing melodious music, it (the plaza) presents the appearance of a scene in fairyland." — 1905

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