

When apple packing sheds proliferated in Watsonville

Agriculture

RP 12-27-11

That was
Watsonville



Betty Lewis

The apple packinghouses in Watsonville sprang up like mushrooms after the turn of the century. Walker Street had become the appleman's Mecca. As to the actual operation of the business, 30 to 40 men were employed to pick and haul the apples in large boxes to the packinghouse. The apples were then given to the sorters, about a dozen young women who carefully went over the apples and took out the culls. Next in line were the packers who sat on low stools with the apples on one side and the squares of wrapping paper on the other.

About 60 boxes of apples were packed in one day. In September of 1903, the ladies walked off the job as they had been promised wages of \$1 for a nine-hour workday and some packers were only paying \$1 for a 10-hour workday. The strike was soon settled to the ladies' satisfaction.

At the Simpson & Hack packing plant the Chinese packers walked off the job because they were not allowed to smoke while working. The plant manager stated that the white man was not allowed to smoke so neither could the Chinese who proceeded to walk off the job.



Courtesy of Betty Lewis

An old postcard from Watsonville dramatizes the area's apple industry.

The Earl Fruit packing shed, near the depot, had convenient turntables along the miniature car track which greatly facilitated fruit handling. The first apple packing shed to be built in Watsonville was that for P. N. and Mateo Lettunich in 1895 near the Watsonville depot on Walker Street. In 1900, the Lettunich Company employed several girls to grade apples and the newspaper noted at the time: "It is a branch of work at which girls excel and if apples are perfectly graded to start with the pack is apt to be all right."

Disaster struck in May of 1903 when three large packinghouses were burned to the ground including the Lettunich's. These fires were discovered to be of incendiary origin and the small 4-inch water mains were insufficient to put out the flames. Mr. Lettunich was able to save four newly painted fruit wagons out of the debacle. Work was soon under way to rebuild the packing sheds, and the Dewey Brand wrapper was soon being placed on the top grade apples. On extra fancy stock for export the top layer of fruit was

sprinkled with gold and silver gilt making for a very attractive box.

In 1900, the Lettunich's handled about 100,000 boxes of apples and shipped 110 cars of fruit to local and eastern points. But, today, it is the strawberry growing that is the biggest in the world. Apples have taken the back seat in the agricultural world.

•••

Betty Lewis, a local historian and Watsonville resident, was a regular columnist for the Register-Pajaronian until her death.