

Old Watsonville: Sound familiar?

By CHELA ZABIN
STAFF WRITER

IT WAS A TOWN troubled by reckless drivers, drug addicts, drunks and unruly youth. A newly built jail wasn't big enough to hold violators. A contagious disease was spreading and had to be contained. Animals roamed the streets. Streets, sewers and water mains were in need of serious attention. Racial tension was rising.

When Watsonville's city fathers first took office in 1868, they had their work cut out for them. Documents on file in the City Clerk's office reveal a local government as concerned with those seemingly modern-day social problems as with setting up the beginnings of a city infrastructure.

Perhaps to give themselves a breather before plunging into the problems of their time, the five-member board of trustees, as the governing body was then called, kept things simple at its first meeting in May of that year.

At that meeting, the trustees established a monthly meeting time and place — "in the building known as Snodgrass' Block in the town of Watsonville ... upon Monday June the 1st, 1868, at 7½ o'clock p.m. and upon the 1st Monday in each

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and every month thereafter at the same place and time" — and adjourned.

At the second meeting, however, they got down to business. They defined the roles of the president of the board, the city clerk and the marshal, and authorized money for the building of a "calaboose," or jail. Then they passed a flurry of ordinances aimed at bringing the townsfolk into line.

"It shall be unlawful for any owner or owners of cattle, horses, mules, jacks, sheep, swine or goats to allow the same to run at large in the public highways, alleys or squares within the limits of the Town of Watsonville," read Ordinance No. 3.

Ordinance No. 4 made illegal "indecent conduct, either in words or actions, or of loud and boisterous noises or riotous conduct ... or unnecessary firing of

See CITY page 7 ►

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► From Page 1

any gun or pistol," and being so drunk in public "from the effects of spirituous malt or other liquors which produce drunkenness that he or she is rendered unable to walk or so stupefied as to be incapable of self-locomotion."

The ordinance also made it a punishable offense to be unemployed and turn down work or to "roam about without any lawful business."

Ordinance No. 5 outlawed the "riding or driving" of "any horse or mule in a violent or furious manner."

Subsequent ordinances made it a misdemeanor to leave teams of horses or mules unattended, "ride or roll a velocipede on sidewalks," and outlawed horse and foot racing and other noisy games on Sundays and "the playing of Stud Horse Poker ... or other percentage games for money."

Over the next several years, ordinances were passed outlawing prostitution, punishing opium smokers and owners of opium dens, and prohibiting the use of slingshots, and were later repealed by other ordinances. In 1880, the board established a chain gang and authorized the marshal to purchase "chains, balls or other means necessary for the security of all persons under his charge."

One ordinance passed in 1876, entitled "Our Boy's (sic)," was specifically geared toward curbing unruly youth. It outlawed "noisy or disorderly conduct" by "any boy or boys under the age of 18," set a curfew of 8 p.m. unless the boy had been sent by his parents or guardian on business, and prohibited boys from visiting or loitering around places where "spirituous, viscous or malt liquors are sold."

Another early ordinance required doctors to report cases of small pox so that it could be contained.

Apparently the new laws were being enforced. As early as January 1869, the board decided to levy a property tax of half a percent because the new town lockup was too small and was "entirely unsuitable for the confinement of prisoners." The fire department also needed some funds.

Relations between whites and

Chinese laborers, who first came to the Pajaro Valley two years before Watsonville was incorporated, were never completely smooth, but in 1885, the town followed the lead of many other cities and outlawed the operation of laundries. The "ironing, sprinkling or folding of clothes or the preparing (sic) of them to be washed shall not be construed as the business of a laundry," the ordinance read.

Chinese laundry operators were allowed to wash the clothes in Pajaro at a site owned by John T. Porter, who owned Watsonville's Chinatown. Later, all of Chinatown was moved across the river.

Opening, graveling and grading streets also took a major portion of the board's time. At its third meeting, the board was approached by three landowners who wanted a road running through their property declared public. Another group asked the board to "take preparatory steps to lay out and open a street beginning at the northwest corner of the land of Thomas Hildreth running in a northwest direction into the county road leading to Santa Cruz."

Ordinances were passed declaring Main Street a public highway and establishing its grade, authorizing the construction of sidewalks, gutters and water mains for the downtown area. The board also had the City Plaza fenced, awarding the work to William Ostrander, who had proposed to do it for 32 cents a foot.

Specifications for the graveling of "the roadway of Pajaro" — a name that was used interchangeably with Main Street for a number of the city's early years — were a depth of 12 inches in the center of the street and six inches on the sides. Curbs were to be constructed of "two inch redwood planks, not less than 10 inches wide, placed edgewise ten feet from the line of the street, and posts 4 by 6, six feet apart, to be placed firmly in the ground to hold said curb."

In 1870 a commission was formed to oversee Main Street improvements.

Despite the amount of work needed to get the city started, the minutes show that the board's meetings were canceled on many occasions in the early years for lack of a quorum.