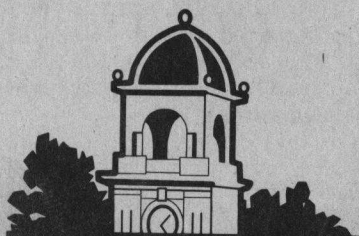


# When Santa Cruz pulled the rug

Ragtime dancing considered immoral by city's leaders

BY ROSS ERIC GIBSON  
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Historic Perspective

SEVERAL YEARS before Santa Cruz began promoting itself as Northern California's leading rag and jazz club resort, it had banned rag dancing in 1912 to prevent the supposed moral corruption caused by a "rag-time apocalypse."

Ragtime music had been popular since 1897, but rag dancing didn't begin until 1910, and rag band music wasn't available until 1912. Boardwalk founder Fred Swanton hoped to debut this feature at the boardwalk's season-opening ball June 8. But

the Women's Christian Temperance Union, which had previously helped ban iridescent phantom waltzes like "the Grand Capitola," called rag dances immorally suggestive. They noticed "ragging" couples unhindered at the boardwalk's 5-cent dance hall.

The precarious finances from the boardwalk's post-1906-quake rebuilding meant Swanton couldn't afford con-

trovery. The well-organized moralists could destroy the boardwalk's family image. But the boardwalk risked looking backward if it ignored public demand for popular music. Swanton's solution was to confine ragging to special dances so each group could enjoy their preferences in peace.

Swanton felt ragging was not fully understood by its detractors. He hoped to correct some misconceptions through "high society" rag exhibitions, as taught locally at Loraine Montgomery's school for "polite ragging." He said those who objected to it as Negro bordello music tended to cite the "junk rags" written by whites for the mass market. These favored a frenetic tempo, in contrast to the authentic rag, as written by such blacks

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In 1912, vigilant Santa Cruz residents watched from the balcony of the Casino Ballroom to guard against illegal 'rag' dancing.

## Santa Cruz banned 'immoral' dance in 1912

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as Scott Joplin.

Joplin learned his writing style imitating player-piano music, not realizing that piano rolls were designed to sound like a full orchestra in a manner unplayable by a solo pianist. Joplin created rich and complex compositions in a wide range of expressions that were missing in "junk rags." Rag enthusiasts called Joplin the J.S. Bach of American counterpoint.

To show ragtime's classical side, Swanton arranged for no less a man than Charles De Young to perform ragtime dances at the Casino's season-opening ball. Chronicle publisher De Young had worked with Swanton to bring the World's Fair to San Francisco in 1894 and 1915 and was known in that city for his rag dancing. As Swanton said, "When (de Young) executes the Texas Tommy, Bunny Hug



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or Turkey Trot, it is done with a finish to place it in the realm of art, (without) any offensive features."

De Young's exhibition was politely received, but on July 4, both boardwalk dance halls overflowed, and despite "NO RAGGING EXCEPT BY PERMISSION" signs, an epidemic of wanton ragging was observed. Soon, every church had submitted petitions to the city council to demand ragging be banned. The Santa Cruz Musicians Union supported a ban, saying it distressed their mem-

bers when forced to play rags (a view not shared by the boardwalk band's younger members). They noted Oregon's governor declared martial law in a resort town that didn't suppress ragging.

When a reporter asked what Swanton thought of a city ban, he said, "the directors feel it would simplify their position." The city council then banned ragging with a maximum penalty of a \$100 fine and/or 30 days in jail. Feeling Swanton might be blamed for initiating the ban, one councilman said, "We had the idea long before Swanton commented on it, and in fact Swanton never suggested a ban, but defended ragging as a 'misunderstood art.'"

Swanton agreed, promising to give another society raggers' exhibition. Vigilant moralists posted themselves like gods in the horseshoe balcony overlooking the Casino Ballroom. An "incident" finally occurred at midnight on Aug. 22

when the ballroom's floor manager, Rady Caspers, was arrested for asking the band to play a rag, to which raggers danced.

Although put on \$10 bail and charged a small fine, Caspers refused to leave jail and demanded a jury trial. Caspers told a packed courtroom it was not illegal to play a rag, only to dance to it, which he hadn't. And whose complaint brought the arrest? A pro-ragging member of the band, who did it as a joke. The case was dismissed, Santa Cruz was embarrassed in the national press, and the ragging ban was never used again.

The following year, Swanton brought the St. Francis Hotel's Art Hickman Band, called the nation's first modern dance band, and made ragtime respectable. The Casino Dance Orchestra produced their own rags, such as "The Santa Cruz Burlesque," "The Boulder Creek Fox Trot" and "The Boardwalk Rag."