

# Begonia Festival Begonia rites of September come full bloom

## And about the Begonia Festival parade ...

9-5-83  
By KEITH MURAOKA  
Sentinel Staff Writer

**T**HE WAIT will soon be over and the work will begin for the builders of 16 floats in Sunday's Capitola Begonia Festival nautical parade.

Some 20,000 spectators are expected to fill every nook and cranny along Soquel Creek in downtown Capitola to view the unique aquatic parade. An estimated 200,000 colorful tuberous begonias will be used to decorate the floats — all of which will utilize storybook themes in following this year's festival theme, "Mother Goose Visits Capitola."

The nautical parade will kick off at 2 p.m., although spectators are urged to arrive early. Metered parking downtown is limited to two hours, while adjacent neighborhoods are off-limits to motorists without parking permits.

The only parking alternative — unless you know a friend with a driveway — are neighborhoods at least two miles from the beach or the city's free beach shuttle lot at Park Avenue and McGregor Drive, adjacent Highway 1. Parking is free and the beach shuttle runs every 15 minutes. However, that lot is expected to be filled by noon.

Spectators can get a sneak preview of the floats Saturday afternoon. Work on the chicken wire-based floats is expected to run throughout Saturday night along the banks of the creek.

Various Capitola Village businesses and residences will also get into the begonia flavor by competing in the home and commercial decorating contest.

All the begonias used will be supplied by Brown Bulb Ranch, which has its headquarters in Capitola. Volunteers will go to the company's Marina fields early Saturday morning to pick.

Floats will again be divided into two categories — commercial and group. The eight commercial entries with their themes include:

Brown Bulb Ranch — To Market, To Market.

Capitola Mall — Humpty Dumpty.

Community Hospital — Three Blind Mice.

El Toro Bravo/Building Works — Jack and Jill.

First Interstate Bank — Little Bo Peep.

Monterey Bay Properties — Little Miss Muffet.

PG&E — Rub-A-Dub-Dub.

White Knight Plumbing — Peter Peter Pumpkin-Eater.

The eight group entries and their themes are:

Camp Fire Boys and Girls — Old Woman in the Shoe.

302 Cherry Street Gang — Mother Goose.

Depot Hill Athletic Society — I Saw a Ship, A-Sailing.

Green Earth Singles — High Diddle Diddle.

Jo Jo and His Kids — Hickory Dickory Dock.

Larry Gordon and Friends — Mary, Mary Quite Contrary.

Pleasure Point Night Fighters — Peter Piper.

Santa Cruz Office of Education — Rock-A-Bye Baby.

On Saturday, the Capitola Junior Lifeguards will sponsor a beach festival on Capitola Beach. Events start at 9 a.m. with a two-mile paddleboard race, followed at 10 a.m. with a two-mile beach run, at 11 a.m. with a run-swim-run, noon by a one-mile ocean swim and 1 p.m. by the popular beach flags competition.

Events are open to the public for a \$2.50 entry fee. Sign-ups will be taken before each event from a table set up on the beach.

The Northern California Men's Beach Volleyball Championship will run both days. More than 60 two-man teams compete for a \$1,100 top prize.

Kent Kitchell of Aptos and Steve Slivkoff of Hermosa Beach are the defending champions, having won the competition for the past six consecutive years. The finals will take place right after the nautical parade Sunday, at around 3:30 p.m.

## Queenly days are far past at Komtaka Rest

By MARYBETH VARCADOS  
Living Section Editor

**Y**UPPIES-COME-LATELY to Capitola probably won't even notice the run-down cottage by the railroad trestle during all the nudging and inching on the path down Soquel Creek Sunday. They'll be more interested in the creekside of the path, and the begonia-laden floats bobbing in the water, waiting a turn in the nautical parading.

But oldtimers will gaze nostalgically upon the cottage. They know the story of the funky placard "Komtaka Rest." They remember when the cottage played an important part in the Begonia Festival time, as a haven for the festival queen and princesses.

They may even remember Peggy Hoyt, owner of the cottage, who couldn't be dubbed anything but Queen Mother — she took such good care of the young women. But Peggy died a few years back, at the age of 100, and Komtaka Rest sags, apparently neglected.

Those were the days when being a "queen" was a great honor, accompanied by rhinestone tiara and dreams of further glory, and people didn't look askance at swim suit competition, according to Lewis Deasy, a village keeper of historical tidbits. The bits of Begonia Festival history have never been pieced together adequately, but Deasy



The late queen mother, Peggy Hoyt, and friend.

keeps the ingredients in a cardboard box at Capitola Museum, a little red schoolhouse-type building not far from Komtaka Rest. He loves to talk, and random facts sprout throughout his conversations.

"One queen's daughter was a queen ... And I heard, years later, that one queen died ... in 1935, there was a flower festival here and the audience elected the queen out of 40 candidates. They clapped their

hands, and the one that got the loudest applause won ... I discovered by accident there was a rose festival one year in Soquel ... one queen runner-up went all the way to Miss Santa Cruz County ..."

A history was written for programs in the '60s of the "Capitola National Begonia Festival, a mecca and a must for all flower lovers, held

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# Begonia queens

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yearly during the first part of September." The event is traced to 1953, when Helen Antonelli and Vivian Benias were sipping coffee and dreaming of surfboards adorned with begonia blossoms floating in the lagoon. Vera Blaeholder was queen of the surfboard parade.

The next year, Capitola businessmen saw the public relations possibilities and began to back the festival. Benias became director. Jeanette Hayford was the queen.

In 1955, Capitola Chamber of Commerce became festival sponsor, and directors Mr. and Mrs. John Hesketh changed the surfboard base of floats to barges. Mary Hurst was the queen.

The almighty dollar entered the scene in 1956, and queen contestants sold popularity buttons to help pay the bills. Marian Bradbury became director; Rosemary Walpole sold the most buttons and became queen.

Decorating the floats became a contest in 1957; queen Clara Gomes reigned not only at the festival but at a benefit box supper and dance at Soquel Grange Hall. John Bell was director.

Edna Messini had been involved in the festival all along, but in 1958 she became director and took a systematic approach to the parade.

By telephone this week from Lake Tahoe, she thought back to those days. "Oh, it was so neat and so super," she said of Komtaka Rest. "Peggy had the girls there in all their finery. The queen's boat was anchored there in front, and the Naval Reserve was in full regalia as the escort. The whole Watsonville Band was there, where Margaritaville is, on the porch outside on the river. I was with the emcee up on the roof.

"We had a river marshal who had some cards, and each float had a big card with a number on it. When the entry float — the Chamber of Commerce float — started to come down the river, the marshal would flash the card to me, and the emcee would start his speech. Then I would flash my card down to the band, and they would start the national anthem as the float came down the river and made the big turn."



Susan Jean Wright, center, 1970 Begonia Festival Queen, with her princesses

The queen contest announcement dinner, said Messini, was "Big, the biggie of the year. It was at Aptos Beach Inn before it burned down, and there was a band, the press and dignitaries from all over the county."

Messini directed the affair through 1961, when outboard motors were added to the barges and Hoyt was crowned Queen Mother, and in 1967. Queens in those years were Pat Conrad, Maureen Trent, Adele Antonelli and Virginia Jackson. Jackson, in 1961, reigned over a record number of float entries — 90.

For 22 years, young women from the county over became Begonia queens. Pat Conrad, a Santa Cruz High senior, sold \$548 worth of 25-

cent buttons. Deasy said the button-selling ended after the year the committee discovered a candidate's father had purchased all her buttons so she'd win.

One float drifts yet through Messini's memory: "The queen sat in a decorated shell — pink begonias inside and white on the outside. We were elected to enter it in the rodeo parade in Salinas. It took many years to get into that parade...we never made the Rose Parade."

Queens paraded on, through 1974. Loma Linda Scheffer and Karen Carol shared one year because of a miscount. Susan Olivieri, Pat Nelson, Janice Marie Rothruss, Blythe Harrison. A name isn't listed

for 1967. Laura Anderson, Blythe Harrison, Sandy Katz, Patricia Merritt, Susan Jean Wright.

Then interest in the contest started to wane. Vicky Humphreys was queen for three years. And Teri Lee Bennett was the last to wear the crown, in 1974.

"There just wasn't enough enthusiasm. I don't really know why," said Messini.

A newspaper account from Sept. 2, 1975, explains: "Nobody wanted to enter the queen contest." A spokesman for the festival said the rules had been cut back to make entry simple, and the bathing suit contest had even been eliminated. Although scholarship money was offered, girls ages 16-21 just wouldn't go for it, so a junior queen contest was set up. But nobody voted. So there was no queen, and that was the end of the reigning begonia monarchs.

"They were so beautiful," Messini sighed. "The boys were just ga-ga over them."