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Community

Reviving a Carnival From a Century Past

*Venetian festival would hark back
to 1800s, spark interest in river*

THE San Lorenzo River, oft-maligned for its exorbitantly high bacteria levels and painful aesthetics, is considered more of an eyesore than a natural resource by many Santa Cruz residents.

Yet not too long ago, the river was pristine and looked "like something out of Huck Finn," said Doug Bodin, a UCSC student currently working with the city planning department.

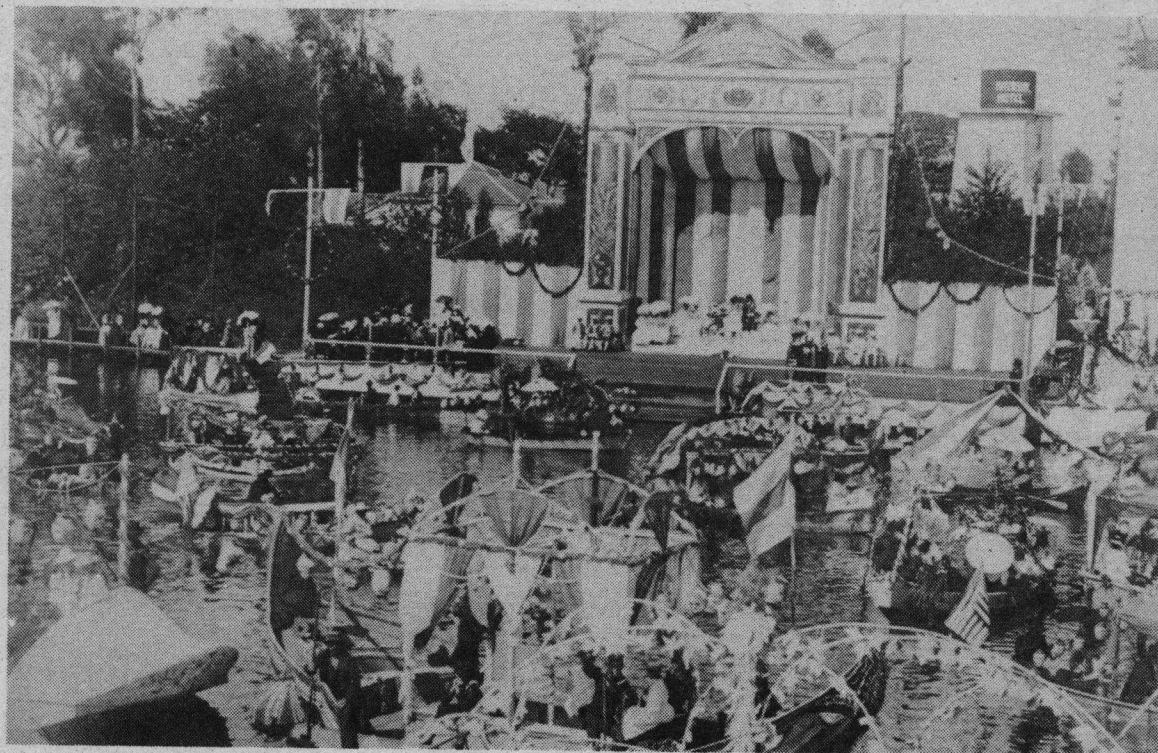
Bodin hopes to stir interest in the river by re-enacting a smaller version of the Venetian Water Carnival, an elaborate four-day event held in Santa Cruz in 1895 and 1896.

The Venetian Water Carnivals are a little-known part of Santa Cruz history. Planned to promote the city and please the San Franciscans who frequented Santa Cruz, Bodin said, the carnivals tried to recreate the pageantry and glamour of early Venice.

During the carnivals, the river mouth was dammed up with sand and an ornate floating stage decorated with flowers hosted musicians, dancers and other performers. Kayak and canoe races, along with swimming contests were held. Electric lights — a novelty back then — were strung across the river. Parades were held from the railroad wharf (now the Municipal Wharf) to the river mouth. Bleachers which held 10,000 people were built along the river for the festivities.

Through his research, Bodin has unearthed numerous photographs and little-known facts about the carnivals. He encourages the public to view the photographs at a reception to be held at the public library March 30. The reception is planned to gauge the interest of the public for a possible carnival.

Although a spring 1989 carnival would by no means be as massive as the early events, Bodin hopes interested individuals will involve themselves with the project. "Right now



Venice-style tourism: Remarkable scene from the 1895-6 Venetian Water Carnival.

we're trying to solicit as much enthusiasm and support as possible," he said.

Joe Hall, senior planner with the city planning department, said the carnival would be an opportunity for Santa Cruzans to let loose.

"It's an idea whose time has come, and it's a chance for people in town to relax a little and have a good time," Hall said. While the 1895-6 carnivals were staged primarily for Bay Area tourists, Bodin envisions a contemporary carnival as a community event. He hopes university students and high schools will implement the initial planning of the carnival. Bodin said the carnival should help bolster school spirit of UCSC, while also helping the tenuous town-gown relations.

Hall agrees, and hopes university students take the initiative in the

project.

"We want to challenge the students at the university to take a lead role in (the carnival)," said Hall.

"We want to call people's attention to the river as a recreation area and a natural resource. I think if they could get a bunch of flowers and build a bunch of floats and paddle around a bit, it'd be a great time."

Hall said that the future carnivals will be more like "a day on the river" rather than the embellished events of 1895-96. Hall said there will be floats and kayak races, but no floating stage with musicians and performers. But ultimately, the scope of the carnival rests with interested Santa Cruzans.

Not coincidentally, plans for the carnival slightly precede plans to transform the river from the asphalt eyesore it is today to a modern promenade as drawn up under the

San Lorenzo River Design Concept Plan.

Under that plan, a small flood wall will be built up on the levee and many trees will be replanted along the banks of the river. A promenade will be installed and potentially, a square with a fountain may also be built around Front Street and Soquel Avenue.

Hall doesn't feel it's hasty to have the river be the site of a carnival in its present state; in fact, he hopes it will help Santa Cruz residents realize the potential of the river.

"We need to get people thinking about (the San Lorenzo River) as a place they want to look at. I think that's exactly why we're (planning a carnival) now, so people will start saying 'Hey, it is time to get it going and get it fixed up.'"

—Rose Dean

