

# Wally Trabing's Mostly about People



## Santa Cruz Was Circus Town

**F**RANCIS CARNEY CAUGHT circus fever early.

Born and reared in town (came damn near being born in a box car), he grew up poor and attended his first show at about 12 by carrying water for the elephants and carrying tent stakes.

That would have been the Sells-Floto Circus around 1913. When the Al Barnes Show came to town in 1915, local kids were dressed as clowns — big grotesque heads were set on their shoulders and they rode on circus wagons for the parade down Pacific Avenue.

"The big tents were put up at the beach in those days, on a lot near the railroad trestle. I remember that the elephants and camels had such a great time in the San Lorenzo River."

Adults were charged 50 cents then — kids, 25.

Buffalo Bill played here twice, once with his own show in 1910 featuring Indian battle scenes, wild bucking broncos and a "Congress of Rough Riders." He appeared the last time with Sells-Floto in 1915, and Carney remembers him riding with great dignity in a buggy down Pacific Avenue.

"It was like seein' God," said Carney, his voice still tinged with some awe. Buffalo Bill was getting old then. Died two years later in 1917.

Apparently a cousin of his lived here. He wrote to his wife, Julia, that, "I had a delightful visit with Cousin Lydia. . . Lydia and Rosa came to the show. She has a nice little home and I am sending you these

leaves of flowers from her garden. . ."

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Carney, soon to turn 79, and a resident of Scotts Valley, has deep, deep roots in Santa Cruz.

He may stand alone with the longest line of ancestors living in this area.

His great grandfather was baptized at the original Santa Cruz Mission. Mauricio Rodriques was born near Paul Sweet Lane and Rodeo Gulch in 1827.

His parents also may have been born here, but Francis could not read the Spanish scrawl on Mission documents, now kept in Monterey.

When Mauricio was born, Villa Branciforte was 30 years old. (Mission town). He was baptized at the Mission by Father Lopez. He married Buena Ventura, also probably a native. The descendants, all on his mother's side, lived in the Santa Cruz area.

She married Thomas Patrick Carney, whose father came from County Roscommon, Ireland. The Carneys lived up near Paradise Park way before 1874.

Francis' father worked in the dangerous Carney Powder Mill. His uncle, Bill Kearney, was blown up there in an explosion.

"Santa Cruz was a small town — quiet," said Francis, "with horses walking around. A street car went by once in a while.

Around the turn of the century, Santa Cruz was considered a great circus town. Maybe it was because of its isolation, but the locals filled the tents.

Even the "greatest shows on earth," rolled into this seaside resort — like Ringlings in September 1901 and through to 1908.

Barnum and Bailey put up their gigantic tent near the beach in September 1905.

Carney has compiled the history of circus in Santa Cruz.

It goes back to 1857 when the American Circus set up in the Plaza (where the Mall and Front come together.) This was in June. In September the Pioneer Circus played. Every year they came.

In May of '60 it was Nathan & Co.'s Elephant Exhibition. In '61 it was the Combined Circuses of Bassett and Bartholomew.

Elli Zovara, equestrienne, was the star of Wilson and Zoyara's Great Circus in June, '64. In September of that year the kids became excited over Lee & Ryland's Equescurriculum and Camel Show.

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They came from Europe. Paris Exposition Circus appeared in '68. Chiraini's Royal Italian Circus came in September with 1,500 attending.

Most of the circuses came by rail, but by road came the San Francisco Circus and Collection of Performing Animals. There were 17 star performers headed by Princess Mollie an elephant, in 1874.

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Col. Woods Tent Circus was a combination variety and "minstrelsy" show. His reports showed that it "left a train of unpaid bills and the show finally went to pieces in Castroville."

In 1882, the Robinson's Show was booked here but couldn't make it because the railroad to Santa Cruz was narrow gauge.

Records show that in 1885, S. H. Barrett's Monster Railroad Shows played San Jose July 22, Monterey on the 25th, Santa Cruz on the 27th and Watsonville on the 28th.

John Robinson's Show, set up on the Blackburn lot, Chestnut and Walnut, Sept. 1887. Locals never seemed to tire of the twice yearly shows.

The Walter Mains three ring circus in 1899 brought with it not an elephant or a high wire sensation as its star attraction, but the first automobile ever seen in Santa Cruz.

"It was run up and down Pacific Avenue smoothly."

# The Sentinel

Sunday, Aug. 29 1982 — Santa Cruz Sentinel—33

The first Ringlings tent went up near Dolphin grounds on Sept. 28, 1901.

"What nobody knows," said Carney, "was the local relationship with the Norris and Rowe Circus. It made Santa Cruz its winter quarters from 1906 to 1909. They were located in the big wooden Vue De L'Eau Hotel at the end of Woodrow Avenue. It was an avenue of dirt then and reached by a trolley car. Right on West Cliff Drive.

When the Norris circus started coming here about 1902, it came on an eight car train. That year it rained on the circus and hurt business. A tiger escaped and was captured up near the Branciforte School hill.

The 1905 show train included two advertising cars, two diners, two sleepers and circus car flats. The circus trains usually unloaded on Chestnut Street.

Hard times hit the show in 1906. One could understand. It's tent was blown down in Omaha, it was wrecked in the San Francisco earthquake, one of its pole wagons collided with a street car in Spokane and it was involved in a railroad accident.

However, the next year it opened its season in Santa Cruz on what was to become the present Santa Cruz High School football field. Land for the circus in Santa Cruz was bought for \$1,700 from funds raised by a local booster group. That's how much they liked the circus hereabouts.

After leaving Santa Cruz, Norris and Rowe traveled throughout the U.S., Canada and to Mexico City before returning here. The local paper reported in 1907 that a \$389 suit was filed by the U.S. Tent and Awning Co. of Chicago for default on payment.

However, the season opened again with a parade down Pacific and then back on Front for shows on a Myrtle Street lot.

But in 1909, the circus was sold at auction and that was the end of its Santa Cruz connection. It was taken over by creditors in 1910. It became the Wallace-Hagenbach show.

The Sells-Floto shows were popular locally from 1912 through 1919. Howes came over from London in 1911 and Buffalo Bill presented his Peerless Pageant of Pleasure here, near the end of his career. All Barnes and the Cole Bros. shows knew Santa Cruz audiences.

Carney recently attended the Circus Vargas in Scotts Valley.

"It sure wasn't like it use to be," he said shaking his head.

"The music wasn't real circus music and too loud. It was more like a musical than a circus."

And, of course, there was no parade.

Circuses stopped their parades in the late twenties with the elephants and calliopes bringing up the rear.

"It's just gone forever."



Buffalo Bill rides down Pacific Avenue to open 1915 circus



Band rode atop Norris & Rowe Circus wagon





Barnum and Bailey Circus parades down Pacific Avenue in 1909