

Fair

SANTA CRUZ

# Weekly

PUBLISHED EVERY WEDNESDAY, VOL. 1 NO. 46 SEPTEMBER 16, 1981

## no bad apples at the fair

Karl A. Lamb

THE WATSONVILLE Apple Festival began in the early years of this century as a bucolic celebration of the county's leading crop. Converted into the Santa Cruz County Fair just before World War II, the 40th annual Fair opens this week at the Fairgrounds on Hecker Pass Road outside Watsonville. It is a six day extravaganza of noise, fast foods, carnival rides, daily horse shows, animal exhibits, "home arts" displays, a lumberjack contest, garish lights, and loud music produced by both amateurs and professionals. There are plenty of vegetables on display but few fruits.

For three quarters of a century, the apple enjoyed pride of place in these festivities. This year, when a pair of fertile Mediterranean fruit flies were found in the San Lorenzo Valley, federal officials extended a fruit quarantine to all of the county. The apple was suddenly removed from the center of the Fair's exhibits, creating an embarrassing void in the Harvest Festival Building. Some of the space is used by a unique "scarefly" contest which resulted from the instant conversion of a planned scarecrow design contest. (Scarefly entries were due Monday; they are constructed from any material that strikes the contestant's fancy, except for fruit.) There is also a display of some 100 boxes of apples, but there will be no judging of their quality. Apples can be viewed only under a sufficiently tough cellophane cover to prevent their taste, smell, and theoretical parasites from adding to the ambience of the annual South County celebration.

The inability of the federal government to conceive of a local area smaller

than a county has imposed a kind of solution to the problem that has for decades plagued what old timers still call "the Watsonville Fair": how to involve North County residents in this South County festival, persuading them that we are one county, and that the concerns of one county region should be the concerns of all. This year's rather forced county unity is not likely to comfort the Watsonville area apple growers faced with marketing a multi-million dollar crop branded as suspicious by federal authorities. But the Fair staff consulted growers and won their approval for the scarefly contest, apparently on the theory that the much hyped Medfly problem deserves a little ridicule.

The Fair goes on, and few fairgoers are likely to miss the apple judging contest. Loosely organized under the theme of "Harvest Hoedown," the fair pitches separate appeals to various constituencies within the county. Tuesday, opening day, featured a chicken barbeque with special rates for senior citizens. Wednesday is "Pepsi Family Day," with discounts for purchasers of the soft drink. Thursday sees the Fair hosting visits by classes from the Pajaro Valley schools, while the yellow busses will roll in from Santa Cruz on Friday. Saturday is the biggest day of all, and Sunday features La Fiesta Mexicana, tied in with Watsonville's Fiesta Day parade.

RANDEE FOX/  
ILLUSTRATION

Karl Lamb, a Professor of Politics at UCSC, is an internationally known authority on voter behavior. He served for eight years on the Fair Board, as an appointee of then-governor Ronald Reagan.

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# at the fair

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A conscious effort to achieve county-wide appeal has been made in the selection of professional entertainment. For the third year, professional acts as well as amateur talent have been booked by Bruce and Sharon Miller, who disdain the Lawrence Welk headliners of yesteryear. Operating on a mere \$34,000 budget, the Millers have provided for the full range of contemporary tastes. Performing at 8:00 pm Wednesday night is Australian-born Rick Springfield, whose hit single, "Jessie's Girl," currently tops the charts. Springfield also stars in the television soap opera, "General Hospital." His appeal should be multi-generational. Appearing with Springfield is Thin Ice.

Thursday, also at 8:00, begins what might be billed as earmuff night. While a stock car destruction derby is held at the grandstand, "new wave" rock takes over the main stage, performed by the locally based groups, The Humans and The Batteries. Friday, beginning at 7:00 pm, is Country and Western night, with Rodney Crowell (son-in-law to Johnny Cash) and Ricky Skaggs, along with "our own" Bob Brozman.

On Saturday night, nostalgia reigns—nostalgia at least for those slipping down the over-thirty slope. Rain presents its tribute to the Beatles, and Daddy-O revives the tunes of the late 1950's and early '60s.

Throughout the Fair, live entertainment appears on three different stages, often simultaneously. There is no charge beyond the price of admission to the Fairgrounds, which is \$3.00 for adults and \$1.00 for children from six to (not through) twelve. The exception is a fifty cent admission charge to the Pickle Family Circus, a show appealing to "children of all ages" in a manner so tasteful that its tour has been partially subsidized by the California Arts Council.

This array of entertainment should not lead the fairgoer to overlook the cliched scenes one expects to find at a county fair. One is the wide-eyed child on the kiddie ride. Another is the array of plump pies and caloric cakes, each with a tiny

slice extracted for the judges to taste. A third is the misty-eyed 4-H girl giving her prize lamb a last hug before he is led to slaughter.

Although 4-H and Future Farmers of America members also raise swine and cattle for their animal husbandry projects, bonds of affection do not seem so deep between rural maidens and their pigs. The annual 4-H auction will be held in the livestock judging arena on Saturday at 10:00 am. Swine, sheep, and beef will be on the block, in that order. Successful bidders can take delivery of the animals live or have them processed; or they can have the animals resold on the commercial market and donate the price difference. Call the Livestock Office at the Fairgrounds if you are interested in buying some meat—and perhaps arranging a tax deduction.

Contrary to earlier reports, this year's Fair has a full

complement of carnival rides for all ages and tastes, supplied by Larry Davis, one of the cleaner operators in an often shoddy industry. The mechanical bucking horse is back to test the stamina of drugstore cowboys.

The Fair Board had wanted to keep the rides but eliminate the fairway game booths, where unwary youngsters try to throw a baseball at the lead-weighted bottles or toss a dime onto a tiny saucer. Ride operators insisted on bringing the game booths, which are sure money makers. As a compromise, the Fair enlisted twelve county service organizations to operate the game booths, while the traveling carnies operators have been cut back by 40 percent. Perhaps the service clubs will be accused of fraud as often as the out-of-towners.

Connoisseurs of California fairs praise the Santa Cruz version by comparing it both to the great urban operations like the Los Angeles County Fair and boondocks fiestas like Stanislaus County. The Los Angeles fair is strictly commercial—as plastic and impersonal as any flowering of corporate America. In Watsonville, community involvement is the key. Local growers and stockmen exhibit; local youth groups participate; and local service clubs serve up hamburgers and corn on the cob. You may find your neighbor handing you a beer from behind the counter of the Lions Club booth. With 63,000 or more paid admissions expected this year, the challenge is to

maintain the down home atmosphere. Service club game booths on the midway may be part of the answer.

In contrast to the smaller fairs, the hundred acre grounds in Watsonville provide year-around usage as a recreational park and cultural center. The modest user fees provide a financial base. At fair time, flower beds are brought to their peak by John Kegebine, the chief maintenance man, and his helpers; and the grounds remain remarkably tidy, considering the crowds they serve.

The regular fair offerings celebrate the diverse population base of Santa Cruz County. This results in commercial exhibits for every interest (check out the big tent) and hobbyists eager to

display their results (see the home arts and photography exhibits in the J.J. Crosetti Expo Hall), as well as a first class horse show and crafts produced by local cottage industries.

The Santa Cruz County Fair has seen a remarkable development since it began as the Watsonville Apple Festival. The 1981 Fair may prove that apples are no longer essential. Ideally, the Fair will forge a link between the often contending regions of the county that goes beyond the mutual annoyance of the Medfly. Although the Fair has always been scheduled to coincide with apple harvest time, the Fair Board could decide that this tradition should no longer be regarded as sacred. ■

## Vanity Fair

John Hummel

FROM MODEST BEGINNINGS, THE Santa Cruz County Fair has grown into a large and complicated enterprise. Its origins lie in a political maneuver designed to open the state to pari-mutual betting; it has been radically changed by the one-man-one-vote movement of the 1950's, and by the increasing political and economic clout of the northern half of the county, but it is still the only show of its sort in town.

In the 1930's California was still predominately rural—enough so that the city slickers who wanted horse-racing and pari-mutual betting had to court the rural vote by offering a portion of the state's take to support local fairs. The County Fair here still receives \$50,000 a year from this source—as it has for years; the fact that the amount has remained constant reflects the increasing urbanization of California, and a growing city population which is not much concerned with the doings of the countryside. This is one of the factors that makes the Fair important, says Manny Santana, a member of the Fair Board: "Lots of people are starting to lose sight of where their food is coming from. The Fair makes them realize how important agriculture is."

The ten member Board on which Mr. Santana serves is one of the last vestiges of pure political patronage in the state: Directors are appointed by the Governor (with the advice, one presumes, of the County Central Committee, and the local legislators). Directors are not paid, though, and their perks are small—tickets for a few guests for the opening-day barbecue, travel expenses to the Western Fairs Association convention, and free admission for life when they retire—while their responsibilities are pretty real.

One of them, agricultural entrepreneur J.J. Crosetti, has been on the Board since its inception in 1939. A Democrat-turned-Republican, Mr. Crosetti's reappointment was questioned by Governor Brown—until the County Democratic Committee informed him in no uncertain terms that, apostate or not, the fair was unthinkable without Crosetti on the Board. One of the major exposition halls on the grounds is named in Mr. Crosetti's honor, and his service is valuable indeed. Crosetti remembers helping to arrange the purchase of the present fairgrounds—over 100 acres—for about \$20,000, and being roundly criticized for doing so. "It was just a hayfield then," he says, "and a poor hayfield at that. People around here thought we were crazy for buying it."

It was people around Watsonville that dominated the Board, and the Fair, for a long time. Recent appointments, particularly those

made by Governor Brown, have tended to broaden the base and include more participation from the more urban, less agricultural, north county area. Local columnist Bruce Bratton is now the Secretary-Treasurer of the Board, for example, and John Tuck, a Santa Cruz social worker, is its President.

The inclusion of people whose agricultural interests are peripheral has not been accomplished without a certain amount of friction, although Tuck says it has been "healthy friction" and the Board works well as a group. The potential for discord between Young Turks and Old Guard has been avoided, largely because the Old Guard turned out to be a lot less crusty, a lot more open to new ideas than might have been the case. Manny Santana says he was "pleasantly surprised" at the openness of the old Watsonville hands. "It's more a question of style, rather than substance," he says.

There have been issues of substance—the nature of the entertainment to be offered is a case in point—and the Board, which once was able to operate entirely by consensus, has had to learn to live with divided votes on certain issues, and with a fair amount of give and take. But north county interest in the fair is increasing, and the coalition seems to be working well.

The Board's most important decision is the hiring of the manager, who operates the grounds year-round, and handles the vast administrative problem of the fair itself. Gil Mello (a cousin of Senator Henry Mello) has held the job for the past four years; he supervises a year-round staff of six, which balloons up to several thousand (counting volunteers) at Fair time. With a shift in legislative power to the cities under the one-man-one-vote principle, there has been increasing reluctance on the part of the legislature to pour large amounts of money into agricultural fairs, and the year-round use of the facilities is one of the means by which the budget is balanced. The Fair is a non-profit organization, and except for the \$50,000 subvention from the state, and some help for capital improvement, it is pretty much on its own.

This year Mello is projecting a paid attendance of about 65,000, with another 50,000 or so who will attend free under the auspices of various "days": senior citizens' day, students' days, and the like. Then the grounds will go back to their interim uses—wedding receptions, motorcycle and auto racing, rock concerts, and the like—while Mello and his Board will begin planning immediately for next year's Fair. ■

