

# Farm families flocked to Free Market

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**F**OR NEARLY 30 years, Saturday was a big day for small-time farmers of Santa Cruz, who brought their goods to sell in the Free Market downtown.

For more than 30 years the farmers' Free Market was a colorful scene on Front Street, not far from the area now proposed for a similar venture when downtown is rebuilt, and around the corner from the current Wednesday Farmers Market at Cathcart Street and Pacific Avenue.

The Free Market started April 11, 1914, and died a lingering death in the 1930s.

In 1912 a French farmer out Branciforte Drive way began writing letters to the Sentinel, suggesting the idea. His name was Isadore Lecureuil, and it took two years of letters before the Santa Cruz Chamber of Commerce's marketing committee decided to extend an invitation to county farmers.

The first instructions were explicit: Farmers were to back up to the curb on Front Street, unhitch their horses, and lift shafts or poles up against their wagons or buggies so as not to block the street. (Buggies had shafts; wagons had poles.) Farmers and their wives arrived in both kinds of vehicles back in the early 1900s, as old photographs show. No instructions were given regarding the horses, but there were plenty of vacant lots in Santa Cruz then. Or the horses could be tied to a nearby hitching rack, with feed bags to keep them happy.

There also were a couple of handy livery stables on Front Street where, for 50 cents or so, a horse could be boarded for the day.

This forerunner of the Farmers' Market opened on the east side of Front Street between Cooper Street and Soquel Avenue. Farmers arrived early on Saturday to set up, and stayed until late in the day. After several years the Free Market moved to the west side of Front Street, below Soquel. The last Market, in the 1930s, was conducted in a U-shaped area with some stalls built near Laurel and Front, and it ex-

tended to the San Lorenzo River.

Customers often bargained for lower prices as they do in today's flea markets. Merchandise included all the kinds of fruits and vegetables grown in the county. Apples were high on the list, plus honey, eggs, fish from Monterey Bay, chickens, turkeys (alive and noisy), rabbits, ducks, geese, piglets, cut flowers, potted plants, puppies and kittens. The women also offered their embroideries, aprons, dish towels, jams, jellies, preserves and knitted sweaters and socks.

In summer on warm Saturdays, the farmers' wives brought umbrellas to shade their goods. In winter they sat in their wagons and buggies with lap robes, keeping warm, and the umbrellas kept off the rain.

It was producer-to-consumer marketing in its purest form, and most of the fruits and veggies were what would be called "organic" today. Almost every farm family, no matter how small its operation, had chickens, a horse and a cow. The animals produced the fertilizer for the crops and nothing was wasted.

Eggs sold for 25 cents a dozen, home-baked bread

went for 10 cents a loaf and other prices were comparative.

In later years, an assortment of Model T trucks and other gasoline vehicles gradually replaced the horses, wagons and buggies. Everything began to move faster with the changes in transportation; a trip that formerly took a farmer down Watsonville way two or three hours to get to Front Street was whittled down to maybe a half-hour or 40 minutes. Farming began to change with the disappearance of the horse-drawn plow and the family milk cow and the introduction of commercial fertilizers. The world was changing.

For a number of years Santa Cruz's old Free Market was almost forgotten. Now, nearly 60 years later, Vision Santa Cruz Planning group and ROMA consultants are suggesting designing a part of Front Street for possible use as a weekly farmers' market. Another example of what goes around, comes around, if you wait long enough.



FARMS

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## Good old free enterprise



Rules stipulated that wagon shafts be raised at the Free Market, on Front Street's west side circa 1915.

Margaret Koch collection