



Begonia Festival is Scentimental Journey

by Carolyn Swift

Capitola was primed for a hot season in the summer '53. The weather was nice and warm and the crowds big. The city's only menaces were the stray dogs and a recent "infestation" of homeless cats.

Brad Macdonald was mayor of this four-year-old city, which had just survived an attempt to disincorporate. Capitola was beginning to tackle the challenges of a municipality—a sewer system, street lights, guard rails on the cliffs, a dial system for the phones and local delivery for mail.

The moment was ripe for a seasonal tradition, something to make Capitola memorable for Santa Cruz County tourists.

The village will be forever grateful to Pat Antonelli and Vivian Benias for the coffee they enjoyed together one day that summer (for it is mentioned in every story ever written about the Capitola Begonia Festival).

Antonelli, owner of Antonelli's Begonia Gardens, and Benias, proprietor of Benias Restaurant, came up with the idea of floating end-of-the-season blossoms on surfboards

down Soquel Creek. This was done, much to the delight of locals who had no idea they were witnessing the seedling of a newly planted tradition.

Vera Blacholder reigned as queen of the first water parade (but was not the first Begonia Festival queen.)

The next year, Mrs. Benias saw to it the event was recreated. Jeanette Hayford was honored as queen of the first actual festival, backed by the Chamber of Commerce.

By 1956, Capitola was becoming aware of the event's commercial potential. The chamber went to the council asking permission to run power boats at the mouth of the creek. The problem? Capitola had just approved an ordinance (July 12, 1954), prohibiting power boats in the recreational lagoon.

But council members readily amended their earlier decision, and allowed special events "under certain conditions" to include power boats.

Tourists flew to Capitola Airport and arrived in herds by car for the late summer pageant. Marian Bradbury was director of a central committee that actually had money in its budget. Queens were now chosen through aggressive sales of "popularity tickets."



Significant to the festival's early years was the role of the late Olive ("Peggy") Hoyt, the festival's "Queen Mother."

She had moved to Capitola in middle age for her health, and was quite elderly by the time the pageant started. Her home, Komtaka Rest Court on Soquel Creek, was to be "grand central" for festival operations and headquarters for the queen and her court.

Many Capitolans put in endless hours to keep the festival going from year to year. John Bell, Edna Messini, Ann Lamothe, Emil Hinz and Peggy Slater Matthew were among the directors of the first decade.

They were the ones who stayed up most of the night before the event, brewing coffee, handing out sandwiches, running after wire and pliers, cheering on an increasingly fierce competition. Each season the floats, bursting with color, were more inventive than the last.

Creating floats was so much fun that Joe Tabacchini, Capitola's mayor in 1957, suggested the city have its own, built by the Street Department.

That year, Macdonald—as owner of the Saba Nightclub—set up a gala coronation dinner for the begonia queen. Tickets were \$3.50, and 75¢ of each went to the Festival Committee.

Edna Messini made the next pilgrimage to the council in '58, asking for space to park a 50-trailer caravan somewhere in the Village. The council suggested this was not a city problem to solve; however, it did authorize another city float, and approved installation of "Begonia Gardens" directional signs.



Tuberous Begonias and their donors—Antonelli's Begonia Gardens, Vetterli's Nursery and Brown Bulb Ranch (all near 41st Avenue), were becoming "internationally famous" as Capitola deemed itself "Begonia Capital of the World." Hardly anyone needed convincing. Ann Lamothe came up with the title "Capitola National Begonia Festival" and obtained help from officials of the Pasadena Tournament of Roses to establish formal rules for pageant entries.

But the late 50s were becoming difficult for the still young city. Capitola business still centered on family oriented fun—rubber rafts and merry-go-rounds, bowling and pinball, hot dogs and snowcones. Tainted slightly by a five-and-dime atmosphere, the village was also a draw for off-beat types who favored spots like the Coffee Cabaret (today's Margaritaville.)

Hintz, festival director of 1959, asked the city to raise the water level in the lagoon that summer. Rather than its typical eagerness to please, the council was more ambivalent, and further more, decided this year to simply re-enter the same float as the year before!

The Council remained supportive, but was itself distracted by the growing demands of cityhood—drunks on the beach, parking problems, cliff erosion, fire hazards and sanitation problems. Capitola was growing up.

Nonetheless, crowds at the 1960-61 Begonia Festival were so large that Police Chief Marty Bergthold complained about trouble policing the events.

Macdonald's Saba had burned down at the end of the decade, but he was no less interested in the festival.

In 1963-64, he convinced organizers to try floats on land. Folks decided it was nice enough, but they preferred the water pageant. Leadership fell to the Capitola Lions Club in 1965, and the Capitola Businessmen's Association took a turn in '66.

But the problem now was a beach town without a beach. Capitola's had been lost after the Santa Cruz Yacht Harbor was opened in May, 1964. The harbor obstructed the sand moving southward with the current.

As a result, the harbor choked with sand while Capitola's drifted to sea. Without sand, the tourist season had wilted, year after year.

The Capitola Begonia Festival, on or off the water, worked to stay afloat as a visitor attraction. In '67, the Capitola National Begonia Festival was formed as a

chartered corporation to publicize (and help revive) the event. Lew Deasy was elected President.

In 1968, things appeared much better. Assemblyman Frank Murphy consented to act as master of ceremonies, and was the hero of the day for his sponsorship of the Capitola Beach Restoration Bill. This bill was awaiting the governor's signature when the festival's annual souvenir program was written.

"Passage of the bill means that years of frustration, stud-

One last time, the begonia festival was a landlubber parade.

The successful festival of 1970 was a memorable year. Village business had survived a hard transition from a beach-oriented community to one of creative, professional shops and attractive restaurants. On 41st Avenue, the begonias began to disappear as nursery lands made way for a budding business district, but the pageant managed to secure enough blooms for every season.



Gary Geyer before butterfly appears.

ies, and waiting, have finally ended, and with financial help of the Estate and federal governments, Capitola will have an extensive rock groin, or jetty, to retain the seasonal flow of sand, which many old-time residents have observed over the years to have diminished since the advent of the Santa Cruz Yacht Harbor," it read.

Ultimately, it cost more than \$160,000 to get the sand back, the mammoth share paid by the state. The solution was a 250 groin at the eastern end of the beach, consisting

The anticipated "most unusual entry" was a peace float conceived by Mick Routh.

of 5,500 tons of rock. The beach was replaced with 2,000 truckloads of sand.

Everything should have been set right on the water for the festival of 1969, but this was the year high coliform counts in Soquel Creek forced the health department to recommend against the creek pageant.

More than 5,000 people were expected at the 17th annual festival which included events ranging from sail boat races to a diaper derby and surfing contest.

The festival program actually listed the restored beach as "a popular and long-awaited attraction," now owned by the City of Capitola.

The anticipated "most unusual entry" of the 1970 event was a "peace float" conceived by Mick Routh, water activities chairman, and Jack Luft, a decorated Marine veteran of Vietnam. Businessman Gary Geyer introduced the Begonia Festival Art Show, which closed San Jose Avenue to automobile traffic for three days.

Throughout the past 20 years, tender petals of the begonia have floated in affectionate farewell to season after season of sunstrokes and stimulated sweat glands, row boating on scented waters, evening jazz concerts, art shows, sidewalk sales and endless "to go" containers salted on the beach.

And while the festival attracts visitors nine-deep and elbow-to-elbow, this is still the greatest thrill of all to local people who know, more than ever, the Capitola Begonia Festival is our oldest, most loved, homegrown tradition. □

Courtesy Carolyn Swift