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A MEDLEY OF MEMORIES

By Irma Oksen Reaves

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ABSTRACT:, Irma Oksen Reaves, a lifelong resident of Watsonville, reminisces at age 90 about her childhood days early in the century. She tells about the baseball games at Schanbacher Park, and presents an inkling of the horrors during a flu, epidemic. We encounter early beach excursions to Camp Goodall and Port Watsonville. And how many recall the Apple Annual that used to be held in Watsonville's old Civic Auditorium, or the establishment of theaters in that city? All of these events are vividly revisited in Irma's "Medley of Memories."

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH: Irma Oksen Reaves was born in Watsonville on 15 January 1906. In 1980, then legally blind, she started recording her memories for curious grandchildren. Soon her writing found its niche in libraries, historical associations, and other archives throughout the state.

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At 90 years of age I am blessed with a wealth of memories of my early days in Watsonville. I would like to share a few with you.

SCHANBACHER BASEBALL PARK

Being that Papa couldn't be with us on Sundays during the summer, Mama would hitch up Topsy, our horse, to the buggy and drive my two brothers and me to Grandma Schanbacher's ball park in the afternoons. It was located in a large lot at the corner of Ford and Walker Streets. But we didn't sit in the bleachers. My younger brothers were too squirmy for that. We had our own private seats." Far on the north side of the baseball field, along Walker Street, were the old tannery buildings that belonged to my Grandfather Schanbacher, then deceased. Mama put apple boxes next to those buildings for our special ring-side seats. And my brothers had more room to run and romp.

Mama was a great baseball fan and enjoyed watching the games. We rooted and clapped for the home team, just like all spectators do. But we kiddies didn't pay attention to the game very long. When sitting became too boring, we played in the nearby creek, catching polywogs and little frogs. A little plum tree nearby provided us with refreshments. They tasted so good.

In order to get to the ball park from our house, Mama frequently drove down Walker Street as it was the shorter route. The Southern Pacific Railroad tracks also ran down this street. When the narrow wheels of the buggy would get into the crevices of the railroad tracks, and screech along the rails, my heart jumped into my throat. I was really frightened, thinking the buggy would overturn. However, Mama knew what she was doing. After several frights I became accustomed to it.

SPANISH INFLUENZA

1918 was a very, very bad year. The influenza epidemic invaded the country. Watsonville was not exempt. Very few families escaped having someone die or at least some of their family down with this illness. In many cases it went through the entire family.

This disease was something to be feared. Little was known about it. The best preventative was to avoid crowded places. The schools were closed as were the movie houses and public gatherings. Everyone that ventured from their home wore a gauze mask covering their nose and mouth. These masks were washed and re-worn over and over as the supply dwindled.

People were dying so fast, often taking the entire family. It was like a plague. The hospital in Watsonville was overcrowded. Some people opened their homes to care for the sick. Even so, the accommodations for the ill were exhausted.

The large Civic Auditorium on Second Street was finally outfitted with beds, blankets and necessities to accommodate the sick patients. Many attendants contracted the flu bug. As I recall, the Red Cross played a large part in caring for the sick.

I don't know how we missed catching the flu, especially Papa who carried people in his taxi all over Watsonville. The good Lord must have been watching over us.

WATSONVILLE APPLE ANNUAL

The first apple show in Watsonville was held in October 1910 and lasted one full week. It was considered a huge success. About 30,000 people attended from all over the state and nation. I can remember our home filled with friends and relatives from other towns.

The Watsonville Civic Auditorium (then quite new but now demolished) was ablaze with light both day and night. The walls and booths on the sides were draped with red, white and blue bunting. The displays in the center of the floor were a sight to behold.

I can recall a large American flag, the high school building in that era, an ocean liner, and an old Dutch windmill, as well as many smaller exhibits all made of beautiful, shiny, red, green and yellow apples as well as round slices of dried apples.

The concession booths that lined the sides of the inner building enticed the spectators with cold drinks, cotton candy and various snacks. This celebration was something that the children looked forward to as well as the grown ups.

The Apple Annual parade was held on the opening day of the celebration. The queen was crowned the night before at a public dance. In the parade, she presided, in all her glory, on a special float. The queen's float was decorated with American flag bunting. Atop was a large, white eagle with wings outspread. Under each wing stood an attendant to the queen. Behind the eagle on an elevated platform was the queen's throne from which she reigned during the parade. At her sides were two small children for handmaidens.

One year my cousin, Viola Oksen, was one of the attendants. The attendant on the other side of the float was Norine Kane. That year the queen was Ruby Waite.

The parade consisted of many other beautiful floats, decorated cars, bands, marching units, horses and other entries that make up a gala event.

On the empty lot on Rodriguez and Second Streets, adjacent to the auditorium, there was always a carnival. The merry-go-round and ferris wheel were the main attractions to us kiddies. Of course, there were booths where one could try their luck at winning a Kewpie doll, a vase or dish, or some other trinket. Most of the time the nickels and dimes were ill-spent.

The Watsonville Apple Annual was considered the largest and best apple show ever held in the history of the world, and took place in Watsonville for four years. It was said "There is something doing every minute" during the short time that the apple reigned in the Pajaro Valley. There will forever remain happy memories for those who were fortunate enough to enjoy the historical Apple Annual.

By the request and urging of the manager, Harry Perkins, the apple show was moved to San Francisco in 1914. A statewide show was being held there and Watsonville products became a part of it.

In 1915 the Panama Pacific International Exposition was a huge event in San Francisco. Local growers displayed their fruits at the county and state booths.

In 1916 the war in Europe had taken its toll in the export market and the domestic crops were below par. Thus, the Apple Annual went into seclusion.

Some local folks are trying hard to revive the Apple Annual. Unfortunately, it's not as it

was in the years of the past. How sad that we let that beautiful show slip out of our hold.

In the mid-1800s there were approximately 4,000 varieties of apples being picked and consumed in this country.

MOVIE THEATERS

Being a native of Watsonville, I can remember one of the first theaters of my home town. Its name was "Lyric Theater." It was located in the 400 block on the east side of Main Street. The first and only motion picture that I remember seeing at this theater was entitled Baby Violet. I do not know the name of the little star. This dates back to 1911 or 1912.

The T&D Theater, built sometime later on West Third Street (now called West Beach Street) was a delightful place for the town's younger set on a Sunday afternoon. Pearl White's weekly and exciting serial was a great drawing card for youngsters of all ages. Of course, each episode ended at a most crucial point. We could barely wait until the following Sunday to know if the heroine, who had been bound and left on the railroad track, had been rescued before the locomotive came around the bend -- or if she had been saved from some other disaster.

Another thrilling and bloodcurdling serial, shown at this movie house on Sundays, was episodes of Tom Mix and his horse, Tony. Some of the hair-raising events shown in these cowboy pictures kept the young audience on the edges of their seats.

The Sunday vaudeville acts at the T&D Theater attracted many Watsonville residents. I can still see the beautiful women dancers, singers, and acrobats bedecked in glittering jewel-like attire. As the bright, various-colored lights illuminated the performers on stage, their costumes shimmered and glistened like diamonds. Their eyes even sparkled. The eyes of the men also sparkled as they did their soft shoe, magical tricks and other acts, dressed in tails, bow ties and top hats.

I looked forward to attending these Sunday matinees as a child. The admission was 10 cents for children. Of course we always managed to have some pennies for an "all-day sucker" (candy on a stick) as well as a nickel for popcorn. Sometimes we shared our bag of popcorn with others. (I almost believe that popcorn has been around since the beginning of time.)

In my teen years the T&D Theater was considered a most elaborate movie house for a small town. It acquired its name from Mr. Turner and Mr. Dankan. Alma Dankan, the owner's daughter and a cute child dancer, often performed on the stage. Mr. Dankan was the projectionist. My Uncle Eugene Kuehnis, an electrician from San Jose, did the entire wiring for that theater.

I can well remember when the Fox Theater was built in the early 1920's. The early pictures were all black and white films. Several that I was deeply impressed with were *The Miracle Man* starring Thomas Meighan; Janet Gaynor and Charles Farrel in *Seventh Heaven*; and Norma Talmadge in *Smilin' Through*. I cried all the way through the latter. It was so sad.

Edward Kelly was the organist at the wonderful, big pipe organ at the Fox Theater. Arthur Ranier, a local man, was the projectionist.

Some time later colored movies were introduced. Everyone was so excited to see movies in color. However, it took several years before they were perfected.

CAMP GOOD-ALL AND PORT WATSONVILLE

It was about 1914 that Papa rented a little cottage for Mama, my two younger brothers and me at Camp Goodall. Papa either rode his bicycle or drove out each evening to spend the nights with us. His business kept him in town during the daytime.

Camp Goodall, established in the 1890s, was located about five miles from Watsonville, on the south side of Beach Road where it meets the sand dunes -- which is now known as Pajaro Dunes. To be near the ocean and play in the sand was a definite contrast from the mountains, where we usually spent the summers. Only the miniature mountain range of sand dunes was between us and the ocean. But we were not allowed to wade in the water unless Mama or Papa were with us.

Our little cabin had only two rooms -- the kitchen and sleeping quarters. It was definitely unfurnished. We slept on a couple of mattresses thrown on the floor. The kitchen contained a small cook stove. The landlord gave us an old table at which we ate our meals. How good Mama's meals tasted. We used boxes to serve as chairs. On our kitchen table we always had a pretty little bouquet of yellow and blue lupines that I gathered from near the sand dunes. After breakfast each morning we three children would gather driftwood from the beach. This was always plentiful. We also looked for the palatable ripe beach apples. (ice plant fruit) growing on the dunes. They are ripe when they turn purple.

One thing that we did not anticipate was having mice run across our beds at night. Papa brought us some mouse traps to eliminate them. We three kiddies would set the traps with cheese or bacon each night. In the mornings we would race to see who was going to check the traps. We soon got rid of the mouse situation.

One of the highlights of our stay at Camp Goodall was to play in the old, dilapidated dance hall, in which there was an ancient baby grand piano with a tinny sound and terribly out of tune. Here we would enact plays and dances with other campers' children. These childish performances were long remembered.

Across the road from the long dance hall, and against the line of sand dunes, was an old, abandoned, two-story rooming house in which all the windows were either broken or boarded up. What fun it was to play hide and seek, running up and down the rickety stairs! Mama did become concerned at times.

Camp Goodall later became known as Palm Beach. All the old, memorable buildings have long been demolished. In the 1960s that area was renamed Pajaro Dunes and developed for beach houses.

A few miles north of Camp Goodall was Port Watsonville, formerly called Port Rodgers. A wharf, built shortly after the turn of the century, reached out a quarter mile into Monterey Bay where vessels could dock.

Electric trolley tracks had been laid from town to Port Watsonville, and right out onto the wharf. I can remember riding in these street cars when I was six or seven years old. That was a happy experience for me. The tracks remained intact in town for several decades after the line was discontinued.

One of the first ships to haul cargo as well as passengers was the *F.A. Kilburn*. This new

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steamer made its maiden voyage from San Francisco to Port Rodgers in the spring of 1904. Over a thousand people thronged to the beach on the electric trolley cars to see the new steamer arrive. Many local residents enjoyed a cruise around Monterey Bay for 50 cents, then returned to Watsonville on the street cars for 5 cents.

It was for only a short time that ships docked at this wharf to carry produce from the Pajaro Valley to other coastal points. In November 1904 heavy seas and high winds washed away about 200 feet of the wharf which had been weakened by worms. The wharf was later rebuilt but was again swept away by stormy seas. As I remember, in about 1913 or 1914 there was only a small portion left. A few pilings still protruded out of the ocean in the early 1930's.

Atop the sand dunes at Port Watsonville stood a dance pavilion which was built some time later than the dance hall at Camp Goodall. Mr. Frank Oliver owned several partly-furnished cottages at this resort. Papa rented one of these around 1918 so that Mama, my grandmother, my two brothers, and I could spend two weeks of our vacation at the seashore. I was then about twelve years old.

Our cottage was located a short distance from the fenced arena that in earlier years had been a baseball field and race track. Nearby were a couple dilapidated concession stands. A short distance down the grass-covered road, stood an old, square house where Manuel Silva once lived. At this date the street car tracks were still there but the electric cars had discontinued running several years earlier.

Mr. Oliver had an old horse which he let us three kiddies ride each day. We thought this was great fun. Each day we went wading in the surf but to swim was taboo. Many swimmers and clammers have drowned at these two beaches, due to the treacherous rip tides and undertows.

Port Watsonville was situated at the southern end of what is now Sunset Beach. This state park now has lovely campsites surrounded by beautiful pine trees. There are also inviting picnic areas at this beautiful beach.

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