

Irma Oksen Reaves  
c/o Bob Aldridge  
631 Kiely Boulevard  
Santa Clara, CA 95051  
(408) 248-1815

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## REMEMBERING EARLY WATSONVILLE

By Irma Oksen Reaves

This article is an exclusive submission to Santa Cruz County History Journal and has not been previously published.

**ABSTRACT:** Irma Oksen Reaves, on her 89th birthday, recalls events in Watsonville shortly after the turn of the 20th century. In this piece she describes horse-drawn wagons hauling sugar beets down First and Locust Street to a narrow-gauge railroad that operated in those days; purchasing yeast from Palmtag's Brewery on Front Street, near the old wooden bridge which then spanned the Pajaro River; her father's pioneering in transportation, first with hacks and then with horseless carriages; and happy memories of showboats, swimming, and boating at Lake Watsonville, created by a dam in the Pajaro River.

**BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH:** Irma Oksen Reaves was born in Watsonville on 15 January 1906. In 1980 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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Today is January 15, 1995, my eighty-ninth birthday. As I sit here recalling pleasant memories, I feel fortunate to have had so many interesting experiences. Perhaps I can share some of my past with you.

### MY EARLY ROOTS

It was in the middle of the nineteenth century that my maternal great-grandfather and great-grandmother, along with their two children, Oscar and Fredrika Buob, came to the United States from Germany. Fredrika married Albert Schanbacher, also from Germany. My mother, Emma Schanbacher, fifth of their eight children, was born in San Francisco in 1875. When she was six months old they all moved to Watsonville.

My Grandmother and Grandfather Schanbacher purchased a home at 607 Walker Street. It was a large, white, two-story house. Next to them was a small pasture, and on the far side of it my great-grandfather and great-grandmother settled. On the other side of my grandparents spacious home was a tall picket fence separating them from a building which had been the original Spreckles Sugar Factory.

At the end of Walker Street was a tannery that my Grandfather Schanbacher operated for many years. It covered one huge block. He also owned the adjoining property from Ford and Walker Streets to the old Danish Church to the east. This acreage was rented out for ball games, circuses, carnivals, and such. The tannery buildings remained there for many years after my

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grandfather died in 1881.

My Father, Jim Oksen, came from Denmark when he was seventeen years old. His name was originally spelled Ogksen. The "g" it was later dropped and "Oksen" was used. That is the only way that I saw it spelled until a few years back, when I came across his passport from Denmark. On it I saw that the original spelling was Ogksen.

## THE SPRECKLES SUGAR FACTORY

The original Spreckles Sugar Factory, which was next to my Grandparents' home, was a very large building -- quite tall, with many windows. In 1898 this sugar business was moved from Watsonville to a large territory southwest of Salinas, on the west bank of the Salinas River. The new factory was much larger and higher than the old one, and also contained many windows. On the premises were erected numerous silos for storing sugar. The town of Spreckles, which was a company town, soon grew rapidly as the surrounding area filled with houses. I cannot recall furnished jobs for many families.

During my childhood I can remember the large wagons filled with sugar beets and drawn by two horses. They passed my home in Watsonville several times a day. They carried the beets down First and Locust Streets to the railroad yard. There they were loaded onto small trains that ran on narrow-gauge tracks to the new Spreckles factory. The narrow-gauge railroad ran about two miles west of and parallel to the Southern Pacific tracks. It also had its own small trestle over the Pajaro River. My brothers and I retrieved the beets that fell off the wagons, to

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feed to our Jersey cow.

I do not know the date that this huge and well-known sugar factory in Monterey County closed. One by one, the silos fell over or were torn down, and eventually the building itself was demolished.

### PALMTAG'S BREWERY

I have other memories to share. I remember the old Palmtag's Brewery that was located on the north side of the Pajaro River. It was a long, old, wooden structure on Front Street, covered with a shingled roof, and had one step up to a long porch along the front. On the porch were a couple of benches on which passersby or customers could rest. At the east end of Palmtag's Brewery was a very large oak tree which spread out to partially cover the wooden covered bridge spanning the Pajaro River. Just before crossing the bridge was another wooden bench where pedestrians often rested.

My mother often told me stories of her past. One I particularly remember was about when she and her sister, Rosie, were sent to Palmtag's Brewery each week to buy brewers' yeast. They put it into a little cream can that had a tight lid and held approximately two quarts. My grandmother would use the yeast to make her weekly bread. Sometimes she would have to bake twice each week.

On one of these excursions to the brewery, my mother and her sister loitered along the old wooden sidewalk that ran past a Chinese laundry. This laundry seemed to fascinate them very

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much for some reason or other. One particular evening at dusk they decided to peek into the window and see what the laundry man was doing. They got as close as they could to the window and watched him iron some clothes. What amazed them so much was that he would take a mouthful of water and then squirt the clothes with it. This is the way he sprinkled the ironing.

My mother and my Aunt Rosie thought that was so funny that they began giggling. Apparently the laundry man heard them, put his flatiron down on the stove and came over to the window. At that point the girls both scampered. They ran as fast as they could, trying to keep the can of yeast from losing the top which was supposedly secure. That is the last time they ever took that route to the brewery.

Some time later they told my Grandmother about it and she cautioned them to show more respect in the future. In those days children could walk through town without fear of being harmed. People were kind and everyone seemed to know each other in the small town. When my mother and Aunt Rosie went to the brewery to get the yeast they were approximately twelve and fourteen years old, which was considered a safe age to run errands for their mother. How different it is today.

## KENNEDY & OKSEN HACK SERVICE

In the early part of the 1900s my father went into the hack business with William Kennedy. I can remember there being five or six horse-drawn hacks in the business. The hacks were kept in a barn on First Street, adjoining a stable for the horses. There was a paddock

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between Mr. Kennedy's house and the stables. Some of the hacks had the driver's seat on the outside and passengers were enclosed. In one or two of the hacks the passengers and driver were seated more or less together. The hacks made all train connections at the Watsonville Depot and Pajaro Junction, as well as providing transportation for private parties, funerals, weddings, and other functions.

The accompanying picture of a Kennedy and Oksen hack must have been taken about 1909 or 1910. The driver's identity is unknown but the hack is parked on Main Street at about mid-block along the Plaza -- about where the drinking fountain (donated by the Womens' Christian Temperance Union) now stands. The IOOF building is in the background with its four tower clocks. That building was severely damaged during the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, and later demolished, but the clocks were salvaged for future use. The other houses to the right of the IOOF building have since been demolished or moved. Part of the old Mansion House can be seen at the left of the picture, behind the palm trees. At the extreme right of the picture, just to the right of the park benches, you can see half of the bandstand where I can remember concerts being held every Saturday night. A roof was added to the bandstand later.

My father and Mr. Kennedy remained partners in the hack business until automobiles came into use. Then they changed from hacks to horseless carriages. The first automobile that I remember them possessing was a Winton limousine. "Kennedy and Oksen" provided the first taxi transportation in Watsonville.

After Mr. Kennedy lost his eyesight in about 1919, my father continued with the business

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until 1924. At that time he had to give it up due to his health. My father passed away in November 1924.

## LAKE WATSONVILLE

I recall one particular evening when I was about five years old. My Papa, as I called him in my younger years, took me for a little walk to the bridge over the Pajaro River, which had been dammed up and was then called Lake Watsonville. As Papa and I stood on the catwalk of the old, wooden, covered bridge, it squeaked and groaned when horses and carriages drove across.

In the middle of the lake was a beautifully 'decorated showboat, all lit up. We had come to see Buffalo Bill Cody perform on that boat with his magnificent, white horse, King. What impressed me most at that age was when Buffalo Bill gave King a drink of water out of his hat. He also let King eat little tidbits from a silver cup.

Lake Watsonville seemed very large to me at that time, and quite wide across. I wish I could paint a picture of these memories of the lake and the showboat which are so indelibly etched in my mind. I was only five years old at the time, but those memories are still so clear that I can now tell you about this event which happened eighty-four years ago.

## THE BEAUTIFUL PAJARO RIVER

By the time I was eleven (in 1917) the dam which made Lake Watsonville was gone. Nevertheless, living fairly close to the Pajaro River made it convenient for my two brothers and

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their playmates to take an occasional skinny dip (swim in the nude) when it met their fancy. In those days the water was crystal clear and running freely with no pollutants dumped into the river, as has been done in later years.

My way of thinking was, "What is good for the gander is good for the goose" (a proverb reversed). One Saturday afternoon, three of my girl friends -- Elsie, Mable, Winnie and I decided to go for a swim. If the boys could skinny dip, why couldn't we? Unbeknown to my mother, I quietly slipped into the large linen closet and took out four nice, white bath towels.

There were several good wading pools in the Pajaro River but none too deep. The best spots were by the narrow-gauge railroad trestle, about a mile from our house. The banks of the river were lined with wild blackberry vines, much brush, poison oak and large willow trees. We girls really felt grown-up as we disrobed and hung our clothes on the willow tree branches. However, I can truthfully say that a feeling of guilt came over me. But it was too late to back out now. In fact, wasn't I the one who suggested this swim?

Elsie, a year older than the rest of us, got "cold feet" and would not undress in spite of our coaxing. Her reason may have been that her father worked for the Southern Pacific Railroad, which crossed the river farther east. The remaining three of us were having so much fun. We paddled around in one hole after another, running down the river like little naked water nymphs. Now I could see why my brothers and their friends loved to wallow around in the river.

We wandered farther and farther away from our clothes, hanging on the willow tree. Elsie followed us on the river bank. Just beyond the narrow-gauge trestle we found a hole that was

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waist-deep. Here we played until three boys walked onto the trestle with B-B guns. As soon as we saw them we squatted down in the water. When they discovered us, they started shooting all around us, splattering the water. Needless to say that we were really frightened.

Elsie, bless her heart, called to them and said, "I'm going to call my father. He's working on the tracks nearby." Of course he wasn't on the narrow-gauge tracks, but the boys didn't know that. Elsie ran back and brought our clothes and towels to us. By that time the boys had left the scene. We were forever grateful to Elsie. That one and only skinny dip in the Pajaro River was enough for us. The boys could have our share of that fun. My mother never knew about this escapade until I told hersome time later. After that confession I had a free conscience.

Some time later, about 1918 or 1919, the Pajaro River was dammed up again and Lake Watsonville once more became a popular place for the young people. Boating and swimming were again enjoyed there. My friends and I would meet there after school for a dip in the river (properly attired, of course) or to take a boat ride. We thought this was great fun. The beach itself was almost directly under the concrete Pajaro Bridge, which replaced the wooden bridge in 1916. I presume there were other beaches on up the river, but this was where our crowd gathered. I do not know exactly where the dam was built, but I do know that it made a beautiful lake for the people of Watsonville to enjoy.

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