

# The WATSONVILLE PLAZA

By Watsonville Historian Betty Lewis

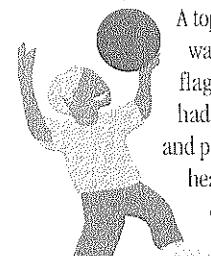
*"The Plaza is the only deserted spot in town. The most prosperous man in the world would have the blues if he rested there a minute. It would be an improvement if the next lightening storm would spend its furl upon the plaza trees."* — The Pajaronian 1888

Don Sebastian Rodriguez owned the land grant, Bolsa del Pajaro, on which the city of Watsonville now rests. Some historians say he gave the area now known as the city plaza to the people of Watsonville in 1860, but Sebastian died in 1855 and his will says nothing about the plaza. There are reports that he deeded it over before his death and others say his heirs donated the land. It is interesting to note that in the local newspaper in 1908 the following was said about the plaza:

*"In 1868, a legal notice, duly authorized by the board of town trustees was printed for ten consecutive weeks in the Pajaronian calling on any person who had any objections to the fencing of the plaza according to specifications by James Waters, a member of the board, to come forward and make such objection known. Nobody made any objection and the plaza was duly fenced and thereafter claimed by the city and that is all there is to the apparently complicated question as to the ownership of the plaza that agitated the public mind here a couple of years ago. The city simply squatted on the plaza and claimed it and no one disputed the claim and so it remained the property of the city."*

Whatever the legal ramifications, the public square has been used, abused and has afforded the local citizenry with many topics of conversation. It has been the central hub of Watsonville all through the years. Cattle have roamed through it grazing on the weeds and grass; concerts have filled the evening air with music such as the Martinelli's Swiss Band and the Watsonville City Band, conducted by Frank Rodgers.

The plaza was the scene of Christmas decorations and festivities, fairs and exhibits, seeing boys off to war, boys playing baseball and marbles. The plaza's main fountain was donated by the Butterfly Club and was dedicated on the 4th of July in 1880. The drinking fountain near Main Street was donated by the Native Daughters of the Golden West in 1893 where the "small fry" could get a sampling of "Corralitos on draft." The first bandstand was constructed in 1880. The present bandstand, built in 1906, was designed by William H. Weeks.

A top was put on it in 1916 designed by architect Ralph Wyckoff and this was replaced by the present one in 1965 by architect Robert Wong. In 1854, a liberty pole was built and replaced in 1871. Gas was laid in 1883 and electric lighting came to the plaza in 1904. It was in 1925 that holes were drilled around the plaza for flags to be displayed on various holidays and for special events. The cannon rode the deck of the mail ship Oregon in 1850 and signaled the news that California had been admitted to the Union. Watsonville borrowed the cannon in 1876 for a 4th of July celebration. It was eventually "lost" and then found behind city hall and placed back in the plaza. The field artillery on at the southwest corner of the plaza was cast in 1899 just after the Spanish American War. In 1903-04 a hot and heavy debate raged over the construction of a Carnegie library and where to build—the center of the plaza? It was finally agreed to build the library at the corner of Union and Trafton. Over the years, people have suggested several changes in the plaza including a parking lot and an underground aquarium. After a suggestion in 1966 that 76 parking places be constructed in the plaza, an editorial by Frank Orr in the *Register-Pajaronian* stated, in part:

*"A fat headed idea, at the very least. This plaza, under its deed restrictions, was to be kept always for public use for just that purpose. Every few decades someone gets a silly idea for putting this 'waste space' to some other use. A good many decades ago, if our memory is correct, this editor's grandfather had to seize title to the plaza in order to forestall some commercial scheme of the time, and then return the title immediately to the city."*

A beautiful plaza in the heart of town; we are more fortunate to have this beauty spot where people can meet and talk or just rest a few minutes and be on their way. We should be very grateful that "cooler heads" have prevailed over the years and the plaza has remained a gathering place for the people of Watsonville and the Pajaro Valley.