

The Marin County Fair in Ross

By Gary Scales

In the 1950s, one of summer's highlights for all young boys and girls who lived in Ross was the Marin Art & Garden Fair, usually coinciding with the Fourth of July. Boys delighted in the (then not so illegal) continuous explosion of firecrackers, bottle rockets, and piercing sounds of the Piccolo Pete's that filled the Ross Valley. And then to have a County Fair in our own Town, well, it was almost too much of a good thing.

In August 1945, the newly incorporated Marin Art & Garden Center completed the purchase of the eleven-plus acres of the Kittle property. The family home, once the largest residence in Ross, had been severely damaged by fire in 1931 and the structure was torn down the following year. All that remained was the barn, which became home to the Ross Valley Players and the vacant octagon house, sorely in need of repair. The grounds were unkempt and in a state of neglect.

The Center now had to maintain the grounds and repay the \$25,000 dollars it had borrowed from Caroline Livermore to close the deal. Unquestionably the largest fundraising event and one that boosted the center's profile throughout the county was the annual fair. The "Fiesta" held in 1945 was the seed of the fairs held thereafter. In 1947, the Center began to sponsor what they initially termed the Marin Art and Flower Show. The show brought together not only garden clubs, but commercial exhibitors, landscape architects, and outdoor sculpture displays. Even for us young boys, the man-made ponds, splashing fountains and tens of thousands of arranged flowers were a spectacular, almost breathtaking sight.

But things got even better for us kids. Hot dog stands, soft drinks, cotton candy and popcorn vendors became part of the scene, soon to be followed by pony-rides, shooting galleries, spinning teacups, and finally, the ultimate, a huge Ferris Wheel. Our hard-earned money from cutting lawns and washing cars quickly flowed into the MAGC coffers.

The works of Marin County artists, weavers and pottery makers were on display and for sale. Adults also were entertained by singers and dancers. Volunteer groups offered home-made delicacies and beer and wine concessions soon appeared. Each night, a concert was performed with a full orchestra. It became a magical place on a warm summer evening, sparkling lights in the trees and music filling the grounds.

By the 1950s the event, now known as the County Fair, was largely underwritten by the Board of Supervisors and a grant from the State Fair Board. While not widely known, the money came almost entirely from a tax levied on horse race betting in California. Eventually the Center received over \$15,000 per year in rent. This windfall carried much of the financial overhead.

For twenty-years the Marin Art & Garden Center became the fairgrounds for the County. Finally, the Town and the Center were simply overwhelmed by the Fair's success. Traffic in the Ross Valley moved at a snail's pace the entire long weekend. Parking was impossible and the Fair

could not accommodate the growing number of exhibitors and vendors, nor multitude of visitors that came from the entire Bay Area. The Fair moved to the Civic Center in 1971, thus ending over two decades of the Marin County Fair in Ross.