

SCENTED PEARLS:
THE HEADY HISTORY
OF THE GILROY GARLIC FESTIVAL

by
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PREPARED FOR THE CALIFORNIA
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PREFACE

In 1979, the town of Gilroy stumbled onto a success story that rocked the nation: the annual Garlic Festival. Since then, local residents have continued to stage the annual celebration of the "scented pearl" to promote a positive image of the community Will Rogers once described as "the only town in America where you can marinate a steak by hanging it on the clothesline."

Gourmet Alley's open-air kitchens and wide variety of foods dominate the event, and using recipes like: 8 tons garlic, 5 tons calamari, 2 tons shrimp. Two hundred other booths vend garlic wine, braids, souvenirs, etc.

But behind the smell is an unusual story about an idea that caught hold and held on for a rollercoaster ride that surprised even the most optimistic civic boosters. This is the history of the festival's first twelve years, from its humble beginnings at a Rotary Club luncheon, through treacherous decision points of trial-and-error, to its present place of prominence as one of the premier food festivals in the world.

Abbondanza.

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The community of Gilroy, 30 miles south of San Jose, is the southern gateway to the fertile Santa Clara Valley. Situated in South Santa Clara County at the crossing of U.S. Highway 101 and State Highway 152, Gilroy is a growing community with a population of 31,000. The City is known for its quiet residential neighborhoods and parks, "11-hole" golf course and recreation programs, and for its "urban forest" or street trees which have won many awards.

But since 1979, Gilroy is best known as the "Garlic Capital of the World" and home of the annual Garlic Festival. Food connoisseurs have thrived on the Gilroy Garlic Festival, which is held annually on the last weekend in July. "Gourmet Alley's" open-air kitchens and wide variety of foods dominate the event, which cooks up to eight tons of garlic, as well as 3500 pounds of shrimp and 10,000 pounds of calamari each year. Two hundred other booths vend garlic wine, braids, souvenirs, etc. It is a full-scale celebration of the "pervasive presence of the stinking rose," and the festival gave Gilroy the title, "Garlic Capital of the World."

GILROY'S AGRICULTURAL ROOTS

The town is named after the area's first non-Spanish settler, John Gilroy. A Scottish sailor, Gilroy separated from his ship in Monterey harbor, and settled on the Ortega rancho, later marrying the heiress to the land on which the town now sits.

Gilroy's inhabitants, buffered by mountain ranges to the east and west, enjoy a mild, temperate climate. Since its incorporation as the City of Gilroy in 1870, the town, once called Pleasant Valley, has flourished.

Gilroy's agricultural roots go back to the end of the last century when the railroad made it an important juncture in the fertile Santa Clara Valley. Regular train service was provided by the Southern Pacific Railroad to the Gilroy depot, where steady stagecoach service picked up guests who sought out the healthful waters and quiet beauty of Gilroy Hot Springs.

Gilroy's growth between 1910 and 1930 was propelled largely by immigrants from southern Italy. Finding the climate similar to their native land, and finding it impossible to acquire land in crowded Italian provinces, they came to California where they saw vast, fertile soil awaiting their farming and dairying talents. This wave of Italian immigration was the beginning of Gilroy's long association with garlic. Similarly, Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos, Hispanic and other ethnic groups were attracted to the valley.

A building boom came in the 1920s. One of the most instrumental philanthropists who funded many of the new buildings was Lin Wheeler, owner of a seed company. Other agricultural businessmen became leaders of the community as it continued to grow.

In the 1960s and 70s, new industry found its way to the valley and new

shopping complexes reached west along Hecker Pass Highway and east along Tenth Street. Mature neighborhoods now blend well with newer homes to create an ambient atmosphere for residential areas, served by nearby schools, parks, and churches, and just the right combination of suburban and rural amenities. And along the streets extending east and west is found a historical heritage and a community spirit as rich as that of any other California city. Knowing they had a community of which they could be proud, civic leaders in the 1970s searched for a way to express their pride.

BIRTH OF THE GARLIC FESTIVAL

Gilroy's annual Garlic Festival began with a "one-time" salute to the city of Gilroy and the garlic processing industry. The first garlic gala was inspired by reports of a tiny French town, Arleux, that drew 70,000 to its yearly garlic fete. Since Gilroy and its surrounding region produced and processed 90 percent of the U.S. garlic crop, in addition to processing imported garlic, why shouldn't Gilroy cash in on some of the action?

The precursor of the festival was a luncheon celebration held at Christopher Ranch, sponsored by the Gilroy Rotary Club in early November 1978. The host, Don Christopher, was one of the nation's leading producers of fresh garlic. The celebration was organized by Gavilan College President Rudy Melone, and featured garlic chef Val Filice and his friend Florio Gennaro. Garlic dishes were served, and spirits soared. Visiting food editors were very impressed. It was clear that community organizers were on to something. It was then that Gilroy proclaimed itself the Garlic Capital of the World, and a legend "sprouted."

Community leaders loaned \$7,000 to a committee to organize a permanent festival. The first public festival, which achieved worldwide headlines, was held on the Bloomfield Ranch property south of Gilroy. About 20,000 people attended, quickly overwhelming the facilities at the site. Chefs quickly ran out of garlic, scampi and other other supplies, and cars were dispatched to obtain more from local stores and restaurants. As if to underscore the staggering success, a 5.9 earthquake rumbled through town the next morning (August 8, 1979).

THE FORMULA

In 1980, festival organizers wisely switched locations to Gilroy's Christmas Hill Park, and quickly drew up the plan which would serve for years to come: a world-class food fair, over the course of one weekend (then in early August), combining gourmet cooking demonstrations and tastings with entertainment and frolicking good fun.

Garlic Festival entertainment is continuous daily on four stages scattered throughout the creekside park setting. Fine arts and crafts are offered in a special section, and visitors can learn about Gilroy's \$50 million-a-year garlic industry at the "Garlic Grove" exhibits.

Gourmet Alley is the heart of the festival's food showcase. There, local chefs prepare garlic-laced delicacies ranging from calamari, pepper steak sandwiches, stir-fried vegetables, scampi, pasta con pesto, artichokes with garlic, and mountains of garlic bread. The food booths and Gourmet Alley use about 8 tons of fresh garlic annually. Wines of the Santa Clara Valley are available and over 30,000 gallons of beer are quaffed annually. (The proceeds

from the beer booth alone are enough to fund the city's Chamber of Commerce.)

A highlight of every year's Garlic Festival is the annual Great Garlic Cook-Off. Cash prizes and national recognition provide the incentive for the contestants. Cooking demonstrations by celebrities and local chefs have been added to the Cook-Off to entertain and inform the crowds throughout three days of the festival.

Other special events precede the festival (during the garlic "harvest") and help promote the 3-day bash at the culmination of the picking season. These events include a golf tournament, an N.C.T.A.-sanctioned tennis tournament, the Garlic Queen pageant, the "Tour de Garlique" bicycle tour, the 10K Garlic Gallop, and the Garlic Squeeze Barn Dance.

The beauty of the Garlic Festival is the community spirit that motivates it and keeps it running. Large commercial sponsors are eschewed, in order to keep the local, volunteer spirit alive. Annual proceeds for the festival are shared among 150 non-profit groups, who work an average of 37,000 volunteer-hours each year. To date, the festival has given away well over \$2 million to the community's charitable and non-profit groups, as well as community improvement projects.

By adhering strictly to the garlic theme in the 200 booths operated throughout the grounds by community, service, and philanthropic groups, the all-volunteer Festival Committee has as its primary goal providing "the ultimate in summer food fairs" each year.

"Fine tuning" of the formula took place over the ensuing years: an extra day (Friday) was added in 1982, along with 8 extra acres (and extra porta-potties). The dates were pushed up into late July to avoid conflict with the Santa Clara County Fair.

Though minor improvements have been made each year, the basic "formula" of the festival has really never changed.

A CLOVE OF GARLIC, A JUG OF WINE AND THOU

With the onset of visitors to the Festival, and the establishment of tourism as the number one growth industry in California during the 1980's, the Gilroy Chamber of Commerce requested funding from the City Council to develop a Visitors' Bureau in 1983. Organized as an advisory committee of the Gilroy Chamber of Commerce, the Visitors' Bureau is funded by the transient occupancy tax assessed travelers by the City of Gilroy.

The major focus of the Gilroy Visitors' Bureau has not been the Garlic Festival, as one might expect, but instead has been Gilroy's Wine Country, which is one of the foremost natural resources in the area of tourism. In addition to sponsoring day or weekend motor coach tours to the 16 area wineries and their 14 tasting rooms, the Visitors' Bureau periodically sponsors rally tours of the Wine Country and arranges private group tours of individual wineries.

The wineries are always well-represented at the Garlic Festival, where a special wine tent allows festival-goers to sample all of their wares in one location. Gilroy winery owner John Rapazzini was the first to create "garlic wine" which sells well as a novelty item but has received mixed reviews from connoisseurs and critics.

Gilroy is the center of burgeoning new industry - Garlic specialty products, most of which originated in corporate laboratories. Gilroy boasts four shops devoted entirely to these speciality products, gourmet cooking

equipment and accessories, fresh garlic and produce. In 1990, specialty packages of garlic related products were distributed in a nationwide media blitz to further promote the festival and its host city. Gilroy prides itself on being the home of garlic and wine, with a rich heritage and promising future.

ATTENDANCE

Attendance at this world-renowned food fair celebration has multiplied tenfold, from the 1979 attendance of over 20,000 to an annual peak of 152,000 in 1987. As the calculations below show, the attendance is often over five times the population of the town.

GARLIC FESTIVAL ATTENDANCE AND DISBURSEMENTS TO NON-PROFIT GROUPS

	YEAR	GARLIC FESTIVAL ATTENDANCE	GILROY POPULATION	FACTOR	MONEY RAISED
2 days	1979	25,000	19,900	1.25	\$12,000
	1980	60,000	21,550	2.78	69,000
	1981	90,000	22,193	4.05	80,000
3 days	1982	110,000	22,948	4.80	27,000
	1983	120,000	24,330	4.93	202,000
	1984	125,000	25,543	4.89	218,148
	1985	134,000	26,132	5.12	219,280
	1986	142,000	26,892	5.28	230,224
	1987	152,000	27,459	5.54	253,883
	1988	140,000	28,847	4.85	255,990
	1989	129,000	29,543	4.36	261,867
	1990	137,000	30,000	4.56	266,650

CHRISTMAS HILL PARK

Gilroy's oak and eucalyptus-shaded Christmas Hill Park has been home to the festival since 1980. Bordered by Uvas creek, the park takes its name from

the Christmas berry (toyon) bushes native to the hillsides forming the grounds' southern boundary. In return for the use of this beautiful site, the festival committee makes permanent additions to the park's recreation facilities. These additions, over \$100,000 worth, have included the gazebo stage, Miller Avenue improvements, a barbecue area, walkways, and a stage cover and seating area for the amphitheater. The festival has added an earth bridge over Uvas Creek as an additional entrance to the park, and in drought years it added security fencing alongside the dry creekbed.

Christmas Hill Park lies southwest of the city on Miller Avenue. It includes 36 acres including natural wilderness with trails, two softball diamonds (one lighted) two large children's play areas, barbecue and picnic facilities and 2,500 seat amphitheater. It is the site not only of the Garlic Festival, but also Cinco de Mayo, Bonanza Days, 4th of July, a summer concert series and the Wine & Pasta Festival.

In 1971, Christmas Hill Park received a statewide Environmental Planning Award from the California Parks and Recreation Society for excellence in park design and environmental considerations. Gilroy is the only city in the state of California to have received four of these awards. Coupled with its Recreation Division, the City of Gilroy Parks and Recreation Department offers the community an array of programs, facilities and services which are compare to or exceed those of much larger cities.

In 1982, an additional land was added to the Festival grounds expanding it by 50%. The "Ranch Site," owned by the Filice family, is across Miller Avenue from the park itself. This added elbow room for exhibit space and booths, and adds a country/western flavor (straw and haystack decor, as opposed to the green lawn in the park itself). In 1990, the City purchased the Ranch site

from the Filice family, and master plans were laid for a permanent festival site, exhibit area and cooking facility on the property.

WELL-"OILED" ORGANIZATION

Part of the festival's success is derived from its extraordinary organizational structure. The Festival Board is composed of about 35 people, each of whom is the chair of a separate committee. The chairs rotate through two-year shifts, to allow "new blood" to circulate freely through the organization. In many cases, the children of the original organizers are now committee chairs in their own right.

The committees handle physical areas of the festival grounds such as Arts and Crafts, Wine Tent, Children's Area, Garlic Grove, Garlic Braiding, Garlic Topping, Beer Booth, Gourmet Alley, Display Booths, the Recipe Contest Cook-Off, and the Hospitality area, where workers and V.I.P.s are treated to special meals.

Other committees handle the pre-festival special events: the "Garlic Squeeze" barn dance, the "Tour de Garlique" bicycle tour, the Miss Garlic Queen pageant, the 5/10K Run (:The Garlic Gallop"), the tennis tournament, and the golf tournament.

Still others oversee festival-wide administration for special concerns such as Communications, Cookbooks, Emergency Services, Entertainment, Finance, Information, Parking, Printed Program, Promotion, Refuse, Security, Signs and Decorations, Souvenirs, Tickets, Traffic, Transportation, Utilities, and the Garlic Express Train.

GARLIC "FIGUREHEADS"

YEAR	GARLIC FESTIVAL PRESIDENT	GARLIC QUEEN
1979	Rudy Melone	K.T. Bendel
1980	Rudy Melone	Jeannette Arde
1981	Bill Ayer	Julie Dunlap
1982	Tim Filice	Liz Archer
1983	Norie Goforth	Lauretta Barsi
1984	John Blaetter	Janet McAllister
1985	Leonard Hale	Monica Ann Baca
1986	John Locey	Franca Barsi
1987	Glenn Suyeyasu	Jennifer Stoughton
1988	Greg Guisiana	Kimberly Beckley
1989	John Parrinello	Conni Teeple
1990	Sam Bozzo	Kim Yafai
1991	Gene Sakahara	Kenda Wilkerson

The Chamber of Commerce became involved at the creation of the festival, and eventually the Garlic Festival became incorporated as its own separate association. In December, 1981, after much deliberation, it achieved tax-exempt status. Dave Bouchard, the Association's first director, went on to become the Chamber director in 1986. He was succeeded by Dick Nicholls, with Joann Kessler and Loyce Lombard serving as assistant director and administrative assistant for many years.

The festival office was located in the historic Old Gilroy Hotel" (next door to the notorious radio station, "KFAT") from April 1982 until May 1985. A move to new quarters in Gilroy's El Dorado Plaza allowed expansion until April 1991, when the decision was made to return the festival office to downtown Gilroy.

CELEBRITIES AND QUEENS

Over the years, a number of celebrities have been attracted to the festival. Media personalities and politicians are always in attendance, as well

as culinary stars such as Narsai David, Martin Yan ("Yan Can Cook"), Jeff Smith ("The Frugal Gourmet"), and many others. Before his death, actor Danny Kaye used to love to attend the festival and take a turn cooking in Gourmet Alley.

Actress K.T. Bendel was the first "Miss Garlic Festival" in 1979. But ironically, the first "Miss Garlic" was chosen by the Chamber of Commerce in 1955. She was Rose Emma Biafore, now Rose Emma Pellicione. Mrs. Pellicione serve the festival as the first chairman of the Garlic Recipe Cook-Off. Liz Archer, daughter of Gilroyan golf pro George Archer, served as Miss Garlic in 1982, and is now a Presbyterian minister. In 1987, the "Miss Garlic" contest merged with the Miss Gilroy contest to create the title "Miss Gilroy Garlic." The 1990 queen was Kim Yafai, who had gained some notoriety when featured scantily-clad on the "Girls of Gilroy" calendar, a semi-scandal that landed on the pages of People magazine.

Other special appearances have graced the festival over the years. The Budweiser Clydesdale Horses put in an appearance in 1988. Hot air balloons have appeared at several festivals, and balloon pilots and even pilots of small aircraft claim they can smell the festival from miles above it.

GARLIC ENVY

In recent years, USA Today and other periodicals have questioned Gilroy's title, quoting garlic yields from Fresno County which exceed Gilroy's.

Gilroy no longer claims to have the lion's share of the garlic production market, having suffered through soil diseases and farmworker labor strife which has reduced its own crop yields. But the City still claims its title

based on its garlic processing plants, and its "centralized" location, which is the focus of the garlic yield once it is picked.

There is much envy by Gilroy's neighbors have for the festival and the title (which is often misspelled "capitol" instead of "capital" on souvenirs and wine bottles). Dozens of small California towns are also trying to use their biggest agricultural products to put themselves on the map, though Gilroy remains the most successful. Garlic Festival organizers were used as consultants for the start-up of the Morgan Hill Mushroom Mardi Gras, and other towns send representatives to the Garlic Festival hoping to emulate its success.

California now hosts a fruitbasket of annual fairs and festivals celebrating its finest fruits, flowers and vegetables from A (artichokes in Castroville) to Z (zucchini in Hayward). The Castroville event has been around for over a quarter of a century, while others are "cropping up" for the first time. Lodi celebrates its grapes, the state's second-biggest crop, while citizens in Selma dry their grapes and claim the raisin capital title. Shafter couldn't decide and settled on a Potato and Cotton Festival. Santa Paula and Cloverdale run the gamut with Citrus Festivals. Stockton has an Asparagus Festival, and like Gilroy, Vacaville plugs its nose and holds out an odoriferous economic symbol, the onion.

The right to claim to be a fruit or vegetable capital of the world is never "cut and dried". Pumpkin Festivals are held in both Half Moon Bay and Manteca. Carlsbad and Fort Bragg challenge Morgan Hill's mushrooms with festivals of their own. Watsonville and Los Gatos both celebrate their strawberries. La Habra and Coachella both trumpet their corn. And each summer, blackberry lovers can sample their favorite fruit at festivals in Westhaven,

Trinidad, or Covelo. And no less than fourteen locales around the world have some sort of garlic festival.

Still, Gilroy, stands out on the list. Its festival, like the vegetable it celebrates, is unique among all the rest. Not even Avila Beach's Plankton Festival can hope to capture the aroma of Gilroy's big weekend. The big garlic producers of Europe and Asia (Monticelli d'Ongina, Italy, St. Clar and Arleux, France, and Takko-Machi, Japan) now accept this American superiority, and line up for the chance to become one of Gilroy's sister cities.

GROWING PAINS

Although the overwhelming reaction of Gilroy's 150,000 annual guests is almost always positive, there have been a few pundits who over the years have complained in letters to editors about negative aspects of the Garlic Festival. Such complaints often bemoaned "monstrous lines," "outrageous prices," "overglorified event," "the parking lot from hell," "herded like cattle," "tagged like livestock," etc.

Yet more people attended each year than the year before for nine years in a row. Complaints about the crowds are reminiscent of Yogi Berra's famous description of a New York restaurant: "Nobody goes there; it's too crowded." The detractors were generally food critics expecting to be catered to, who were not really familiar with the festival and its volunteer organization.

A KINDER, GENTLER GARLIC FESTIVAL

By its second decade, the festival had already proven it had staying

power. There was a formula in place that definitely, almost inexplicably, worked. And there were those who frequently repeated the battered refrain: "If it ain't broke, don't fix it."

But by 1989, the festival's long-range planning committee, which included past presidents of the festival, was starting to fine tune the formula to eliminate complaints about rowdiness, drinking, long lines, parking, and other negative feedback. Complaints often focussed on the attitudes of the crowds, particularly after rock bands ended their sets in the early evening. The festival staff contended that the Garlic Festival was a food fair, not a music festival. The music is "something to do while you're digesting," according to entertainment chair Mark Baliton, even though traditional harvest festivals are filled with music.

Some of the organizers began planning alternative transportation, shuttle buses and bicycle storage areas to help solve some of the parking problems. Bed and breakfast arrangements were suggested to house visitors and vendors.

A "town hall meeting" set up on December 15, 1987 to address comments from the public, and a public relations firm was hired for \$10,000 to make recommendations. After months of committee meetings, the festival implemented a number of changes:

1. Family atmosphere. Plans were made to include a carousel and a children's area ("Garlic in Festival Land") complete with Disney characters. All aspects of the festival were re-evaluated with the family in mind.
2. Liquor limitations. Two-fisted drinkers were still allowed, but not three; a limit of two beers per purchase became law, and was enforced.

3. Health food. For the first time, Gourmet Alley offered a low-cholesterol dish: vegetarian chili. Created by veteran Gourmet Alley chef Val Filice, the inspiration came from Filice's own heart problems and bypass surgery.
4. Alternative transportation. Shuttle buses and bicycle storage areas alleviated some of the parking problems.
5. Security. Many of the security problems had been caused not by out-of-town visitors but by rowdy Gilroy youths. Security measures designed to disperse crowds at closing time and protect adjacent neighborhoods were instituted.
6. Music. Rock music was restricted in volume level and duration. Significantly fewer musical groups of all styles were invited. The stage space once devoted exclusively to musical groups was split between children's activities, stand-up comics, cooking demonstrations and contests, and combination acts.
7. Efficiency. More ticket-takers were added, and entertainers were contracted to entertain those waiting in long lines.
8. Comfort. Sun screens were added over the arts and crafts areas, and shaded bleachers made it easier to watch the garlic cook-off event.

THE GARLIC EXPRESS

The Garlic Festival Association took bold steps to combat traffic snarls and drunk driving accusations by sponsoring the Garlic Express train from San Francisco to Gilroy, during festivals in 1987, 1988, and 1989. First year service was for one day only, but in 1988, two-day service along the Southern

Pacific railroad tracks began. Up to 4400 people utilized this service each year, which included shuttle buses from the historic Gilroy train depot to the festival site. Tickets were \$35 from San Francisco and \$30 from San Jose, including festival admission. Part of the money went into a fund to promote future rail service in the area.

In 1990, liability insurance problems reared their ugly heads. Southern Pacific wanted more than \$10 million liability the festival provided. Negotiations stalemated, and the train service was at least temporarily derailed.

WHO NEEDS PUBLICITY?

Because of the human limits of the park facilities, the Garlic Festival has never really needed to do a lot of publicity. The media has spared no adjectives in ballyhooing (or sometimes boo-hooing) the festival, without any prompting. Even the international media has historically picked up the story and run with it.

And the people have come, regardless. From the festival association's perspective, only pertinent information about special events, traffic and parking needs to be disseminated.

What is somewhat unique about the Festival is the way negative publicity fails to decrease attendance. Festival organizers make almost no effort to combat negative stories, rumors or exaggerations.

First the media told everybody it was too crowded. And what happened? All of the professional crowd-watchers started showing up. When organizers added the "secret" Garlic Festival on Fridays just for locals, everyone in San

Jose started taking the day off and coming to that, too.

One year there were pickets from the UFW outside the gates. That tactic really backfired. When the strikers yelled "Huelga! Huelga!" ("strike" in Spanish) it sounded to those in line for tickets like they were chanting "Welcome! Welcome!"

Then came media reports about the great plagues, reminiscent of the people of Israel in Egypt. Instead of boils and locusts, the media picked up stories over the years about garlic rot, skunks, ticks and Lyme disease. Reports in 1989 about ticks proved unfounded, as did the exaggerated 1990 publicity about a skunk invasion. Even commentator Paul Harvey carried the story.

But all of the efforts of the negative minority of the media and envious neighbors have been in vain. Armies of garlic fans still appear year after year, cranking the turnstiles to gather en masse wearing T-shirts that say "Garlic Capital of the World" smeared with remnants of an agricultural orgy of hundreds of thousands of garlic-laced servings of pasta, calamari, scampi, bread and mushrooms.

In the words of Sir John Harrington from "The Englishman's Doctor," written in 1609:

"Garlic then have power to save from death
Bear with it though it make unsavory breath
And scorn not garlic like some that think
It only maketh men wink and drink and stink."

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Chuck Myer is an urban planner and free-lance journalist in Gilroy, CA.
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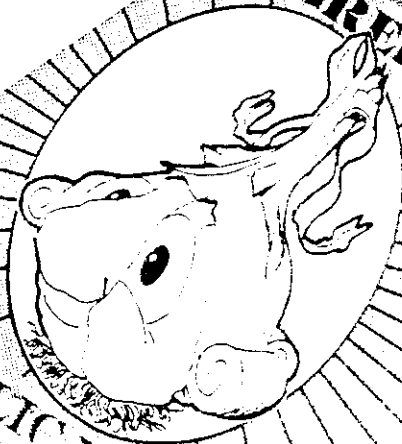
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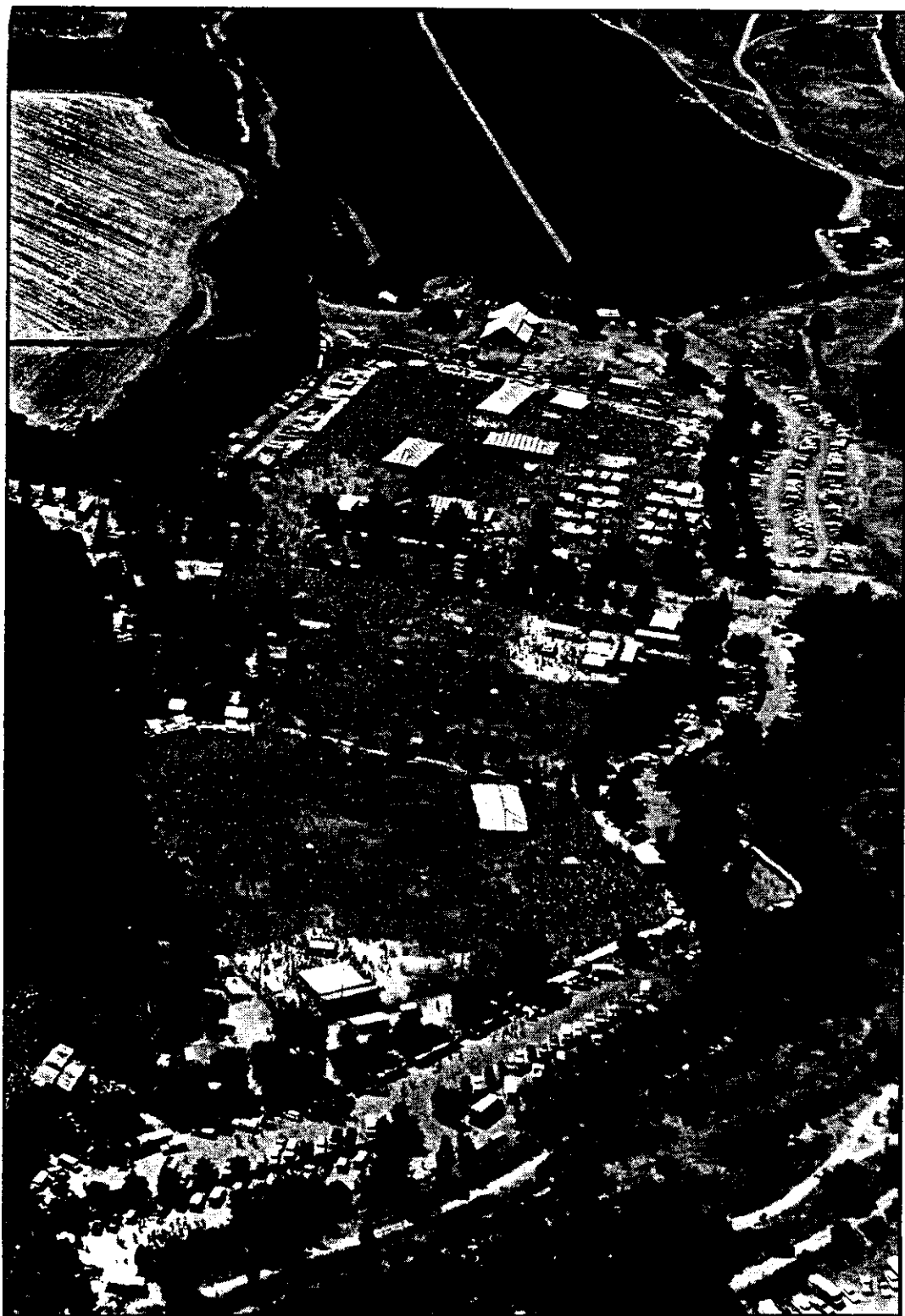


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1985 Gilroy Garlic Festival
Christmas Hill Park, Gilroy, California

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