

2026 Organization of the Year

Slavic American Cultural Organization

SACO

SACO provides cultural experiences to the many creation people in the Pajaro Valley. Apple orchards started with the Croatians bringing their farming skills to the Pajaro Valley. They have various fundraisers to give scholarships and keep the heritage alive.

MISSION STATEMENT

*to bring the Slavic Community of the former republics of Yugoslavia together in a proud body,

*to instill in the membership, a pride in the cultural heritage and traditions of those Slavic people,

*to inform and educate Slavic-Americans, as well as others, of and in our culture and history,

*to inform the community of the contributions of Slavic-Americans to this community and continue these contributions, and

*to provide social and recreational activities for the membership and the community at large.

Introduction

On February 22, 1979, a small group of Serbo-Croatians gathered together to establish a local club/organization to share their language, culture, traditions, and ancestry within the city of Watsonville and surrounding area. From this meeting, the Yugoslav American Cultural Organization, YACO, was established. The former Republics of Yugoslavia included the present day countries of Bosnia Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Slovenia. After the establishment of these countries in the 1990's YACO became the Slavic American Cultural Organization, SACO.

Presently, their organization has over 400 active members located in the city of Watsonville, as well as throughout California, in New York, Washington, Connecticut, and in other parts of the United States. Today, the organization and its members continue to share the traditions of the Slavic culture by hosting several events throughout the year for SACO members and the city of Watsonville community. Proceeds from fundraising events and the surrounding communities enable the organization to fund our high school scholarship program and to maintain our lease of the P.V. Columbian Hall. In addition, they regularly participate in additional community events, as they connect to other organizations with similar goals, in Campbell, Delano, Fresno, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and San Jose, which enables them to share history, heritage, and contributions with the Watsonville community and Pajaro Valley.

Since 2015, the Student Ambassador and Exchange Program, known as SAEP, under the guise of a group of SACO members, has worked tirelessly to make this program viable. Students are selected to travel to the former Yugoslav republics to immerse themselves in the culture, language, and heritage. The students' trip focuses on their ancestral link to their heritage. It is the hope in alternate years, students from the former Yugoslav republics would travel to Watsonville and would also visit other scenic areas in California. These students would learn about the American culture and the rich history of the Pajaro Valley, specifically the Watsonville community and its connection to the former Yugoslav republics.

Community Outreach

- In the early 1950's to the late 1980's the Yugoslav Radio Program was broadcast on KOMY radio every Sunday. It was started by Andrew and Millie Soldo along with their son Bob. Years later, upon the death of Millie, Ann Soldo joined Andrew on the program.
- In the mid 1980's, YACO/SACO published and sold a record album entitled, *Harmonija of the Pajaro Valley*, which contained selections of Croatian folk songs.

- Also in the 1980's SACO also held a performance by Dubrovacki Trubaduri and Kico who came directly from Croatia and were touring the United States.
- SACO publishes the Kalifornski, our tri-annual newsletter, sent to all members, as part of their yearly membership. The newsletter highlights our activities, shares recipes, and gives information about other Slavic organizations along with their activities.
- In March of 2015, former SACO President Patricia Gospodnetich Solano was recognized as the honoree at the Annual YMCA International Women's Day celebration.
- In July of 2015, Watsonville Mayor Dr. Nancy Bilicich presented a Watsonville City Council Proclamation honoring SACO for its 36 years of service to the community.
- In 2016, SACO set up a Facebook page, which shares the organization's events, membership information, scholarship applications, and communication avenues.
- As a new member in 2016, SACO continues to be a non-profit, member of the Pajaro Valley Chamber of Commerce and Agriculture.
- In September of 2016, at the Kirigin Winery's 100th Anniversary and Harvest Festival located in Gilroy, SACO provided a booth highlighting our Croatian culture and roots.
- In 2016, SACO participated in a Chamber of Commerce monthly mixer at Carmona's. The evening's non-profit drawing proceeds were designated to SAEP.
- In December of both 2016 and 2017, SACO participated in the Holiday Tree Lighting and Multicultural activities located at the Watsonville City Plaza with booths that shared coloring activities for the children, desserts, native costumes and music.
- In April of 2017, SACO participated in the Pajaro Valley Chamber of Commerce and Agriculture's Business Expo, "Making Connections," at the Santa Cruz County Fairgrounds.
- In the summer of 2017, SACO members participated in the creation of a mosaic medallion representing the Croatian migration to Watsonville

and the Pajaro Valley, which is placed at the southwest corner of Main Street and Maple Street in downtown Watsonville.

- In February of 2019, SACO began our organization's year-long 40th anniversary celebration. We commemorated with aprons, wine glasses, and emblem pins for purchase.
- In 2019, SACO's Apple Logos were affixed to the entrance of Watsonville's Business District Monuments on Main Street and Highway 129, acknowledging our longstanding presence in the community.
- After several functions, food is donated to the Watsonville Fire Department and Holy Eucharist Church, who will feed the needy every Monday.
- The Ag History Project located at the Santa Cruz County Fairgrounds benefits from recycled plastic, glass, and aluminum drink containers after our events.
- Notable Croatian Family contributions:
 - Buildings—Derpich (Miramar Restaurant), Jack's Cigar Store, Lettunich Building, Resetar Hotel, and Charles Sambrailo Paper Company.
 - Cold Storages and Apple Sheds
 - Bakich
 - Balich
 - Braycovich
 - Buak
 - N. Butier
 - Butier and Bulich Brothers
 - Proctor Lettunich
 - Madesko
 - Marinovich
 - Matiasovich
 - B. Pista
 - Resetar Brothers
 - P. N. Scurich
 - Stephen Scurich

- Apple Label Murals located on buildings throughout the city
 - Bachan Fruit
 - Lettis
 - P. N. Lettunich
 - B. Pista
 - Resetar Brothers
 - P. N. Scurich
 - P.P. Stolich

Literary –

Non Fiction History--“The Slav Community of Watsonville, California”.
Two books that chronicalize the settlement of the Slavic migration from Europe to the Central Valley from the 1800’s--Tom Ninkovich

Blossoms into Gold-- Donna F. Mekis and Kathryn Mekis Miller

This book chronicles the history of the immigrants from the Konavle Valley in Croatia to the Pajaro Valley.

Fiction –

The Apple King

The California Immigrant

Where Flowers Grow—all authored by Barbara Anne King

- Many of their members have served as elected officials for the City of Watsonville, the County of Santa Cruz, and the County of Monterey.
 - City of Watsonville elected officials: Dr. Nancy Bilicich, Betty Kosovia Bobeda, Louis Gluhan
 - County officials: Greg Caput, Nick Drobac, Judge Charles “Chick” Franich, June Borina Schnacke.
 - Monterey County elected official: Mark Del Piero
- In 2022 SACO signed a lease with the P.V. Columbians to secure the hall for monthly meetings and functions.

- In May of 2022, SACO held our first Chamber of Commerce and Ag Mixer at the new hall.
- In November of 2022, SACO held a “Watch Party” at our hall to view the World Cup with Croatia playing against Canada. Croatia eventually took third place.

International Connections

- In years past, the organization has hosted musical/cultural groups open to members and the residents of the City of Watsonville and surrounding counties.
- SACO members regularly attend Slavic events in Campbell, Delano, Fresno, Los Angeles, Sacramento, San Francisco, San Jose and Seattle, Washington.
- In July of 2015, at the annual summer picnic, SACO hosted a guest of honor, Tomislav Vlahutin, Consul General from Croatia, assigned to Los Angeles.
- In February of 2016, SACO hosted a reception and meeting in Watsonville at Driscoll’s Inc. on Westridge Drive, with the City Manager of Dubrovnik, Dr. Igor Deranja, and the Mayor of Dubrovnik, Mr. Andro Vlahusic, to discuss the future of the SAEP Program.
- In June of 2018, SACO/SAEP sent their first group of seven high school students from surrounding communities and counties to Croatia and Montenegro for a two week cultural exchange.
- On September 11, 2018, The City of Watsonville’s City Council approved SACO’s request to establish a Sister City relationship with Cavtat, Konavle, Croatia.
- For ten days in February of 2019, SACO and its members hosted Ivo Radonic, Deputy Municipal Prefect, and Mario Curic, Head of the Department of General Affairs, from Cavtat, Konavle, Croatia. They toured the City’s Police Department, Fire Department, and the Water Treatment Plant. SACO members set up visits to the Martinelli Apple Cider processing plant, Driscoll’s Research and Development Laboratory Center and strawberry fields, local apple orchards,

vegetable row crop fields, and local Catholic Cemeteries. They attended an evening game of the Santa Cruz Warriors. They enjoyed a full day of sight-seeing in San Francisco from S.F. Giants' Oracle Park to Fishermens' Wharf to the Golden Gate Bridge, to Coit Tower, with lunch overlooking the Pacific Ocean.

- On February 23, 2019, The City of Watsonville and representatives, Ivo Radonic and Mario Curic from Cavtat, Konavle, Croatia, signed the official documentation establishing the Sister City Relationship.
- On September 25, 2019, SACO hosted a dinner at the California Grill for Ivan Sentic and Romana Malojodzic, officials from the City of Dubrovnik.
- On February 25, 2022, and February 26, 2023, Renee Pea, Consul General of Croatia, located in Los Angeles, attended the SAEP dinners at the Seascape Golf Club. Ms. Pea has remarked that SACO/SAEP is the only Slavic organization in the United States that has a Student Ambassador Exchange Program.

Events

- Since the establishment of YACO/SACO and before COVID, SACO annually hosts a Christmas Dinner, April Lamb Dinner, and July Picnic that have been enjoyed by members and the community.
- In the years of 2016 through 2020 and 2022, SAEP has held cocktail/dinner events to raise funds for the Student Ambassador and Exchange Program. A variety of venues were enjoyed by the attendees: The Knights of Columbus Hall in Watsonville, the Marriott Hotel in Monterey, the City of Watsonville Civic and Administration Building, and the Seascape Golf Club in Rio del Mar.
- In October of 2017, 2018, 2019, 2021, and 2022, SAEP hosted it's annual BBQ fundraiser at the Pajaro Valley Historical Association. The event allows attendees to view the exhibit honoring Slavic Americans and their history in the Pajaro Valley. This display is located in the Borina Archive Building.
- In 2020, due to COVID 19, annual events took on a new look. SACO/SAEP hosted "Drive through dinners," which included a Pasta

dinner, Christmas dinner and a Lamb BBQ. The organization was able to provide the community with the menus of past events, keeping members at a safe distance and wearing masks, according to the Santa Cruz County COVID-19 protocol. They were fortunate to resume the Annual picnic in July of 2022.

- In 2021 due to COVID 19 concerns, SAEP put together a Drawing with five prizes. This helped to continue to build the SAEP funds, in order to send future Student Ambassadors to Croatia and Montenegro for a two week cultural exchange in the summer of 2022.
- They have been exceptionally grateful to the many locally, elected government officials or representatives who have and continue to attend our events. Jimmy Panetta, U.S. House of Representatives, Mayors, past and present of Watsonville and Monterey, City Council members, past and present from Watsonville and Monterey, Santa Cruz County Supervisors, past and present, are just a few.

Scholarships

- Beginning in 1981 to the present, SACO has awarded scholarships to local high school seniors planning to attend advanced higher education or trade schools. The total amount awarded to students receiving scholarships is over \$240,000.00.
- The total to date, SACO has presented over 210 student scholarships.
- In June of 2018, SACO/SAEP sent their first group of seven high school students from Kern, Monterey, San Benito, and Santa Cruz, counties to Croatia and Montenegro for a two week cultural exchange. SAEP awarded scholarships to each student to cover one half of the trip's cost.
- In July of 2021, SACO established the Peter John Kovacich Memorial Scholarship. He was a longtime resident of Watsonville, past owner of the Del Monte Restaurant and Hotel, and a beloved member of SACO, since its inception.
- In July of 2022, SACO/SAEP sent their second group of eight high school students from the counties of Kern, Monterey, San Benito and Santa Cruz, to Croatia and Montenegro for a two week cultural exchange.

Once again, SACO/SAEP covered one half of the cost for the trip per each student.

Goals

- Through our SACO sponsored events, the organization hopes to increase our scholarship, fund awards to local high school students.
- Due to the success of their May 2022 Chamber Mixer, SACO hopes to host a future event.
- SACO/SAEP continues to work with our friends and the dignitaries in Croatia and Montenegro to bring high school students to Watsonville to share in the history and economy of Santa Cruz County and California.
- SACO is collaborating with Inspira to complete a permanent exhibit in the Ag History Building at the Santa Cruz County Fairgrounds, tracing and honoring the influence and contributions of our Slavic heritage, specifically in the City of Watsonville and Santa Cruz County. By viewing this exhibit, it is SACO's hope that it will encourage other local ethnic groups to establish their display.
- To be a strong and contributing local organization, SACO will continue to engage in community events. Through our events, website and other similar organizations SACO strives to increase our membership.
- To readily connect with members, SACO hopes to advance the use of technology to keep members informed.