

Valencia Hall's history reaches the crossroad

BUILDINGS

By DAN WHITE
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APTOS — People and dogs sat in the redwood shade and watched history move.

A few yards in front of them, four workers slid 117-year-old Valencia Hall across a road, bringing it far from an eroded creek bed that threatened to consume it.

Communities are full of old buildings, many forgotten and shabby. But Valencia Hall has always been important to volunteers looking to protect it.

They realized it was a relic from Valencia, a town that no longer exists. It's also one of only two buildings left over from legendary timber man and builder Frederick Hihn's once expansive empire.

These same volunteers are also convinced that the building would have crumbled into the east branch of Valencia Creek if they hadn't stepped in.

"The only reason this building is being saved is the people around here care about it," said Capitola Historical Museum curator Carolyn Swift, who used to live near the building.

Now that the building with the star decoration and fish-scale tiles has been saved, it can get a new identity and a future.

Volunteer Pat Manning has worked hard to save it but she's not going to stop now. "No, this will go on," she said. "It'll consume me forever."

Valencia Hall was moved slowly onto a foundation. It will turn into a community center. The post office next door will become a museum.

Manning hopes this will be part of Aptos for generations. "When I was in my 30s and 40s, I raised four kids," she said. "The center of my life was Valencia Hall and 4-H Club. Now I'm hoping the next generation of people in their 30s and 40s will use it."

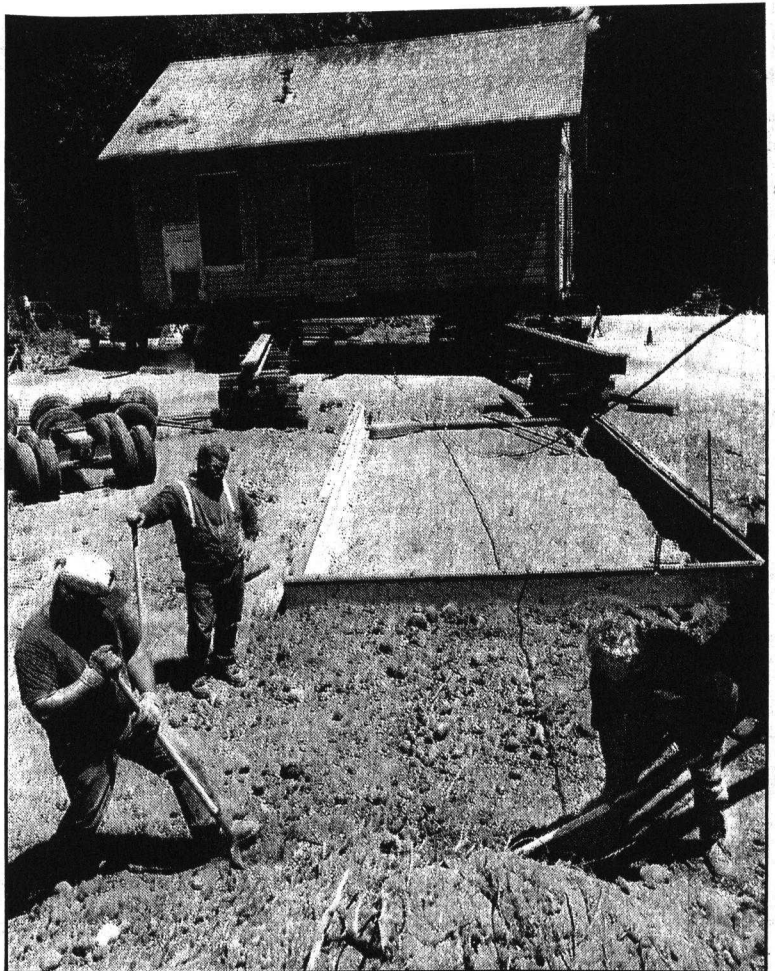
It takes coordination and caution to move a building off the spot where it's been since the 1880s. Four employees of Felton-based Fresno House Movers slipped steel beams under the building and jacked it three feet off the ground. A truck with a winch then rolled the building across the beams.

It was a painstaking process, not one continuous motion. Workers constantly had to stop and make adjustments before the truck started pulling again.

The building's past, and its troubles, go far back in time.

Aptos volunteers treasure it as a remnant of a once-booming timber town that churned out up to 70,000 board feet of lumber a day.

Hihn had the hall built as a general store, the center for his timber town of Valencia. His other achievements were developing the towns of Felton, Aptos and Capitola, putting in wagon roads, water systems and banks. Volunteers found it disturbing that one of the final traces of this



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Workers prepare foundation area for Valencia Hall.

legacy was slowly pitching itself into a creek.

The store provided provisions for lumberjacks, mill workers and their families. Valencia was once called "a neat settlement of houses with a good school, store, public hall, and other comforts of living."

The hall wasn't 100 percent safe. People occasionally got shot or disappeared, noted Bob Knight, former owner of the Valencia post office. "People vanished suddenly but they were probably bear dinner or got caught in a rainstorm," he said.

Knight once heard from an old timer that the hall used to host wild parties. "Dancing girls from Watsonville and Santa Cruz would come in and be the entertainment for the weekend," Knight said.

Hihn's mill closed in 1902. The area became agricultural and apple-producing. The hall became the meeting place of the Valencia Farm Bureau. The farm center deeded the hall to Santa Cruz County in 1976.

The hall was closed up in 1986. Three years later, the Loma Prieta earthquake shook it up, slightly damaging it. A community effort to save it began to

mount.

The project's future was made possible by more than \$100,000 in grants, funneled through the county, from sources including Measure E funds, a state bond act and Historic Preservation Office grants.

Manning said it took \$6,500 to move the building and an additional \$13,000 in concrete and wood to lay the foundation, leaving plenty of money for more Valencia projects.

It will be used to give Aptos residents a sense of grounding, she said. "Lots of new people are moving into the area," Manning said. "They are looking to put down roots. It's amazing how many people in trades are here. A fellow stopped by on a bike and said he was a licensed electrician. He said he wanted to help."

Most likely, the hall will be around for generations to come.

"It's quite solid," said Craig Husman of Architectural Resources Group, a San Francisco-based company specializing in historic preservation. "There's some mild termite damage. The creek erosion caused some shifting of one wall. The floor popped up in one place. But it's amazingly well-preserved for its age."