

Felton's 'do-it-yourself' community hall is a half-century old

This Friday is the 50th anniversary of the completion of the Felton Community Hall. The hall was built by a group of Felton residents with donated money and time for Felton servicemen returning from World War I in the 1920's.

From the beginning, the project was called officially the Felton Community Hall.

Unofficially, however, the building has always been called THE HALL by folks who know of the ideals, effort and self-sacrifice it symbolizes.

And THE HALL it will be, these folks predict, until the venerable and now shabby building is permitted by an indifferent generation of Felton residents to collapse into ruins...

Interestingly, THE HALL had its origin in a totally unrelated decision made by some Felton residents in 1919 to provide counsel and other aid to service men returning home from World War I.

Living and practicing in the Felton area then was a Dr. Jessie Farmer who has been described by an oldtimer as "one of them real tough women who aren't as tough as they make out to be."

"That Doc Farmer," the oldtimer remembers, "was such a damn good surgeon they used to call her to Frisco to fix insides and things."

Tough or not, however, and despite local and distant demands on her time, Dr. Jessie Farmer grew so concerned about the readjustment problems of the returning Valley service men that she became a leader in forming a community group to help them find jobs and settle down into the tempo of civilian life in their communities.

The group was called the Felton Community Council of Readjustment. Dr. Farmer was its charter president, Herbert E. Manners its vice president, and Irene Prouty its secretary.

All Felton residents were considered to be members.

According to the records, the first meeting place of the group was the Alcazar Hall that used to stand on the site now occupied by Security Savings.

The hall was used for local dances, meetings and traveling medicine shows and when the owner raised the rent to the Council of Defense, they began meeting across the street at the Felton Hotel which is now the home of Heavenly Hamburger and a Villa of Beauty.

The Council of Defense was a group of local citizens who met during the World War I years, counseled the families of men overseas, received the soldiers on their return to the area, and did other worthwhile projects to benefit soldiers and veterans.

By 1924, however, the scope of the group's work had broadened to include a broad range of community projects, and it seemed imperative that a community hall be built forthwith.

In addition to Dr. Farmer who was the general chairman, the principle members of the group which spearheaded the drive for donations to build the hall were George Ley, Manley Beaver, George Clement, Nicolas Sinnott and O. E. Powers.

Then, as now, of course, buying a lot and building any kind of place without money was a tricky business.

"But gosh," says an oldtimer who worked on the project, "the community wanted THE HALL, so everybody got to work."

And so, without trepidations, the greatest "do-it-yourself" project in Felton's long history was begun in February of 1925.

The group purchased the site from the school which at that time owned the property bordered by Highway 9 (Baldwin street as it was then known), Gushee, Kirby and Hihn streets—the area where the old Safeway store, Community Hall and firehouse is now located.

They held benefit dances and dinners in the old Alcazar Hall to raise the money for the land and to begin work on the building in addition to the private donations from residents.

The total cost of the building was about \$5500. It is not eligible for any tax relief since it is a community owned structure and it was assessed for taxes this year at \$35,000, according to Toft.

An oldtimer remembers, for example, seeing a much younger Ted Toft than you see today working with his horses and grader to "grade out" the area for the kitchen and dining room.

Others worked as diligently to collect money or pledges so that materials not donated could be bought as needed.

Under the general supervision of O. E. Powers, the building went up in a hurry. Working without any of the labor-saving devices used today and contributing their

labor after a day's work and on Sundays, the men of the community actually completed the great "do-it-yourself" undertaking by early March.

Similarly, under the chairmanship of G. N. Ley and with the wholehearted assistance of Dr. Farmer and a host of Felton women, donations or pledges for the building fund were obtained from anyone anywhere and then, if possible, again.

That the money-raisers acquitted themselves as impressively as the building-raisers is indicated by the fact they needed only \$1,200 more to pay for the building completely when the historic opening day arrived.

As it turned out, they had the \$1,200 before the great opening-day celebration of March 14, 1925 ended.

In a sense, then, the opening day celebration was historic, too, for it was

the first of the many hundreds of successful parties destined to be held in THE HALL down through the Valley years.

At that party, the band from Santa Cruz beach played until a late hour, and the dancers contributed \$790 to the building fund. A supper of ham, potato salad, coffee and homemade cakes was offered for \$1, and 243 persons bought.

After the band had been paid \$66 for its efforts and other expenses had been met, the Felton community was the proud possessor of a completely paid-for meeting hall unequalled in size or elegance in the Valley.

In 1925 the group instrumental in building THE HALL changed the club's name, appropriately, to the Felton Community Club, and so it is called to this day.

But now, as long ago, the objective of the club is the same: "to work for any

and all things to be in the interest of the community, the district, the county, the State and the Nation."

That the club objective has been achieved in many ways is indicated by the success it has had with the Americanization programs, street-lighting programs, fire-hydrant programs, road programs, etc.

But to many in the Valley the club's finest triumph was the great "do-it-yourself" project of 1925.

For as an oldtimer has said: "That Doc Farmer club had just an idea to start with. Eversince, the community's had a place to meet."

Over the years, the hall has been used for a variety of functions but the most popular event in the beginning were the town dances which were held on an average of once a month.

"We never had any name bands, with the exception of the boardwalk band at the dedication, we just had local county bands, but people used to come from miles around for the festivities. We'd start at 9 p.m. and dance until 2 a.m. and only stop at midnight for a supper down in the basement of the hall," Toft said.

For several years before the formation of the unified school district, the hall was used for classes for the overcrowded school next door.

Benefits were held in THE HALL for the local baseball team, the Woodpeckers, which were known as one of the best in Central California and they had no trouble getting games up with the San Francisco and Oakland teams.

Political rallies rallies and elections were held there as well as home town talent shows. Movies were tried a few times but were never successful.

In more recent years, rummage sales sponsored by local civic groups have been a popular event.

To this day, the building is still owned by the people of Felton and anyone who is a resident may belong to the Felton Community Club.

The rent which is received from its rental for various club and social affairs and the proceeds from the Community Club's monthly card parties is used for the maintenance of the building and grounds and to pay the yearly taxes.

More recently it gained a lot of local attention when it was used for the filming of a Walt Disney movie entitled "Escape from Witch Mountain" which is soon to be released.

All in all, the building in the center of Felton has lived up to the original concept in the minds of the hand full of local citizens headed by Dr. Farmer that spearheaded its construction, but it was the local citizenry who donated their time and money to realize its completion.

And there THE HALL stands now still symbolic as ever of the ideals, effort and self-sacrifice that went into its building back when Calvin Coolidge was president and cars were rarer sights than horses on Valley streets.

Today the trustees of THE HALL are Clyde Poulsen, Art Provost, Ted Toft, Lillian Neill and Mae Ley. The officers of the Felton Community Club are Mae Toft president; Lillian Neill, vice-president and Clara Ballauf, secretary-treasurer.



Hall in 1954

The Felton Community Hall at the corner of Highway 9 and Kirby Street in Felton has been the center of many activities in the Felton area since it was built 50 years ago this month. This picture was taken in 1954 when the public library was located in the hall. The hall is still being used for all types of community activities. The building at the rear on the right is the Felton firehouse.