

# Store's closing was 'end of an era'

By VINCENT T. LEONARD

To apply that old cliché, "the end of an era," to the closing of the Aptos Village Hardware Store is misleading for the attitudes and merchandizing practices it had preserved for yearly a half-century belonged to an era that really ended with World War I.

Village Hardware started in 1928 as Fred Toney's Plumbing Shop, a little building facing on Trout Gulch Road at its intersection with Valencia Street (then called the back street).

The new development at Seacliff and Rio Del Mar gave Fred all the work he could handle. His elder brother, Lester A. Toney, had contracted to put up many of the new structures and Fred took the plumbing contracts on them.

So many people visited the little shop asking for tools, pipe and other hardware items that Fred realized the potential for a hardware store. In the short intervals when he was not busy with plumbing, he exercised his talents as a carpenter in the erection of an addition to his little shop. By the time he married Elma "Babe" Archer in 1930, the hardware shop was in full operation, or, at least open every minute that its young proprietor could spare from his contracting business. The new bride, who proved apt both as saleslady and manager, helped give the store a full business day. The business thrived, despite the depression.

Fred had long felt that his store had a poor location, that it would do better on Soquel Drive. So

when Ed Arano put the Bay View Hotel property on the market at a ridiculously low price, Fred used his rapidly growing credit rating to raise the money for its purchase. He also had in mind salvaging the fine lumber in the old hotel for future building projects and the use of its site for a business building.

World War II was upon us before he could carry out his plan, and Fred's patriotic impulses forced him to postpone private plans and offer his skilled hands to the war effort. He spent 1942 as a pipefitter in the Bethlehem Steel Co. shipyard in San Francisco.

Several times he tried to hire a house mover to move the hotel from its corner location, but no one would touch that delicate job,

most said it was impossible. Characteristically, Fred did not give up. He examined the building carefully and knew it could be moved. So he assembled a crew of local men, brought a used set of moving equipment, reconditioned it and moved the old building into what had been its formal garden, some 50 yards to the west. He even set up emergency water and sewage connections so that a P.G.&E. work crew could be housed in the hotel as it moved. (The dining room he opened for them became by popular demand the Bay View Hotel dining room, Aptos' chief attraction for the past quarter century.)

On the former site of the Bay View, he put up a shop with a 25-foot frontage on Soquel Drive,



Fred Toney brought all these shops under one roof about 1960.

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and when Bob Menefee died the next year, Fred bought the Menefee grocery stock and, with his own hands, built a second shop of similar size to hold it. Now he had a grocery store, a hardware store, a big restaurant, and a plumbing business in successful operation.

In it he preserved the generous courtesy and painstaking personal service he had admired in the local merchants of his father's generation. He understood and delighted in catering to self-reliant people imbued with the "do-it-yourself" philosophy. For such customers, he was always ready to cut, shape or punch wooden and metal parts, to thread pipe, or to weld small parts together. And if a customer needed a single screw or small bolt or washer, Fred was always willing to spend the time finding it in the boxes that lined the shelves. It did not occur to him to offer the customer an assortment of the desired item, packed in bright cellophane and priced at 39 or 49 cents, but he contented himself with the tiny profit on a one to five-cent item and the good will he earned.

By the mid-1940's, Fred had realized one of his fondest dreams: he was able to offer a number of well-paying regular jobs to his fellow villagers. In fact, until the opening of the Rancho del Mar shopping center, he was the biggest employer in the Aptos area.

The only shadow on his joy was the amount of paper work this



**With only an occasional helper, Toney erected this building to post office standards in 1949. It was a post office for 20 years, then a printing plant for The County News.**

involved, for he loathed confinement to desk work. Still, he soon became expert with the complicated forms for tax withholding, Social Security and Workman's Compensation so he prepared them on the big desk he built for himself against the wall

of his hardware store.

We old time villagers will sorely miss the Village Hardware, especially Fred's cheery greeting as we entered and that sense of being back again in the slower-moving, happier time we knew as children. But Fred

remains with us as manager of the Village Fair, where characteristically, he also cooks for the snack bar that serves his concessionaries. Patrons have found as expert a cook as he is a plumber, a carpenter and a merchandiser.