



'Picket Fences'
popularity beginning
to fade
Page 5

SUNDAY BAY LIVING

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Section

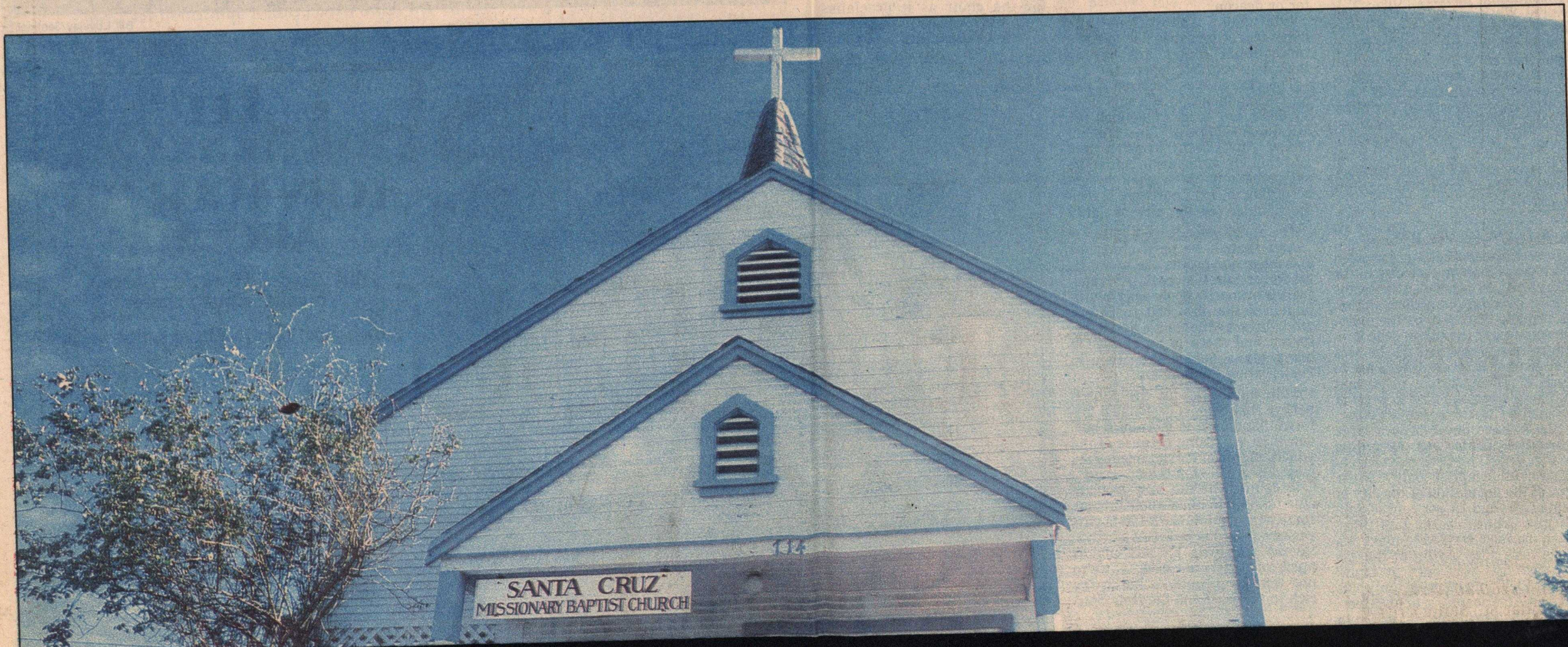
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- Ann Landers, Page 4
- Crossword, Page 4
- Travel, Page 7

LET IT SHINE



Church prophetess Peggy Rogers weeps as she holds Taisa Hunter, whom Rogers prayed would enter the church.





Sunday at church: The choir members assemble and some of their children run around before services at the Santa Cruz Missionary Baptist Church.

Churches 1990

The members are few, but the faith is strong at Missionary Baptist

“**W**HEREVER TWO or three gather in his name, (God) will be in the midst,” says the pastor, smiling as his gaze touches a congregation small enough to be outnumbered by the church choir. “There’s at least three here today.”

There may have been only a handful of people present to hear the sermon of J.W. Jones, interim pastor of the Santa Cruz Missionary Baptist Church, but the tiny church was still half full.

A block or two inland from the expensive homes that line West Cliff Drive, the church sits on

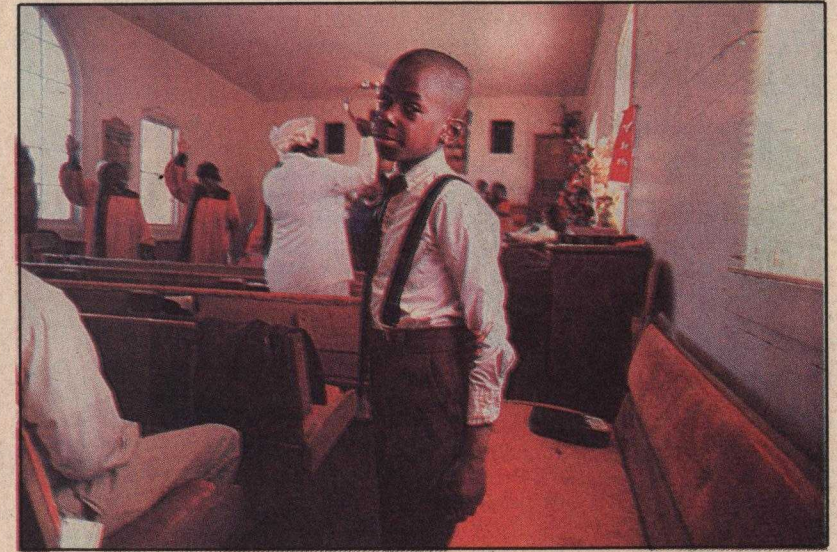
Woodrow Avenue near the heart of the Circles, a predominately black neighborhood on the Westside. The building is a clapboard rectangle circa 1910 with one curiously skewed wall, a simple steeple and paint that’s peeling and cracked from constant exposure to salt winds that blow across its neatly clipped lawn.

Inside, light streams through plain, glass windows onto nine velveteen-covered pews, worn thin by years of devout worshipers. And on any given Sunday, the voices of the 10- to 15-member choir float through the neighborhood as they

Please see BAPTIST — C2



Sister Florida Whitley sings the praises of Jesus.



J.T. Hunter represents the church’s next generation.

Story by PEGGY FERNANDEZ / Photos by BILL LOVEJOY

Baptist Missionary Church

Continued from Page

sing praises to Jesus for their blessings in the traditional black Southern Baptist tradition.

One of the gospel favorites they sing is "This little light of mine ... I'm going to let it shine," and for the 25 to 50 members of the church, those aren't just words set to music.

They define a spirit of tenacity and faith so large that the small church has been one of the centers of Santa Cruz's black community for more than 50 years.

It's a spirit that carries through their dress and demeanor. In many churches today, jeans and T-shirts have become accepted attire, but at the Missionary Baptist Church, it's a scene reminiscent of a more formal era. Women don conservative dresses, the men sport coats and ties and the red choir robes are delicately embroidered with the church's initials.

Services at the church are just as spirited as the choir's music. Emotion runs high, sometimes leading to tears of elation. And the booming sermons of the pastors and deacons with their rhythmic patter cause parishioners to leap up, shouting "Amen!" and "Thank You Jesus!"

Associate pastor, the Rev. George Washington, explains that the black Baptist tradition relies heavily on the oratory storytelling style that early African-American slaves used to keep their culture alive and to teach their children.

"It's how we presented our history, and we continue the tradition today," he says. "God is a real entity ... a force in our lives. It's the one force that's kept us together through lots of crises through the years."

A witness to the past

Deacon Isaac Jackson has seen more years than anyone else in the church. At 88 years old, he is the holder of several unofficial titles. He proudly claims to be the oldest black man and the oldest deacon in Santa Cruz. He also says he was the second African-American to work at Shadowbrook restaurant in Capitola and the first to work at Shopper's Corner in Santa Cruz.

Blacks have never been a large minority in Santa Cruz. According to the 1990 U.S. Census, African-Americans comprise only 2.3 per cent of the population of the city of Santa Cruz and 1.1 per cent of Santa Cruz County. In the late 1940s, when Jackson decided to make his home here after a stint at the Army post that was once at Light-house Field, there were only 121 African-Americans — or 0.55 per cent of the population — in Santa Cruz.

Through the years, Jackson says he made numerous friends — customers from the grocery business and truck drivers he knew when he worked in the tanning industry. Still, incidents of bigotry have

left their marks on the congregation and the local black population. In 1951, Santa Cruz's black community lived exclusively in the Circles. Former Pastor William Brent broke the unspoken rule, though, and purchased a home near the present site of Skyview Drive-in. The day after he made his down payment of \$300, his house was severely damaged by fire and angry white residents were in his yard, threatening further violence if he didn't leave.

Faith and elbow grease

While dramatic crises like arson are relegated to the past, the congregation still faces everyday practical problems that require a concentrated volunteer effort.

They're looking for a permanent pastor and an organist. At the moment, associate pastors divide sermon duty and a pastor's son accompanies the choir on a set of drums.

When maintenance or routine jobs need to be done, volunteers heed the call. They paint, sand and perform whatever tasks need to be done. Cheryl Washington, for example, helps by baking communion bread — a task that can only be performed by the wife of a pastor or deacon.

But major renovations and hopes for future expansion to add a recreational center are beyond their do-it-yourself approach.

The church was declared a historical landmark in the mid-1980s so there are strict guidelines the Missionary Baptist Church must follow. Any exterior construction, addition or renovation must be sympathetic to the original design, according to Don Lauritson, associate planner for the city of Santa Cruz.

And though he says churches and other non-profits are not eligible for certain tax-break programs (which primarily cover only multi-million dollar projects) there are guidelines available to assist research and there is no charge to bring plans before the Historic Preservation Commission.

Still, authorities in the church believe that being a designated historical landmark is more of a burden than a blessing because of the added material costs needed to meet historical standards.

Undaunted by the lack of available funding to make their dreams come true, church clerk Linda Givens says, "God is how you survive. He takes a little bit and makes much of it. It's not easy — we're not wealthy people — but we're rich in the Lord and the Holy Spirit."

Looking to the future

It doesn't help that the number of church members has declined in recent years.

"One time there was five black churches, but it ain't that way no

more. That didn't last," Jackson said, recalling the deaths of older residents and migrations of others away from Santa Cruz County.

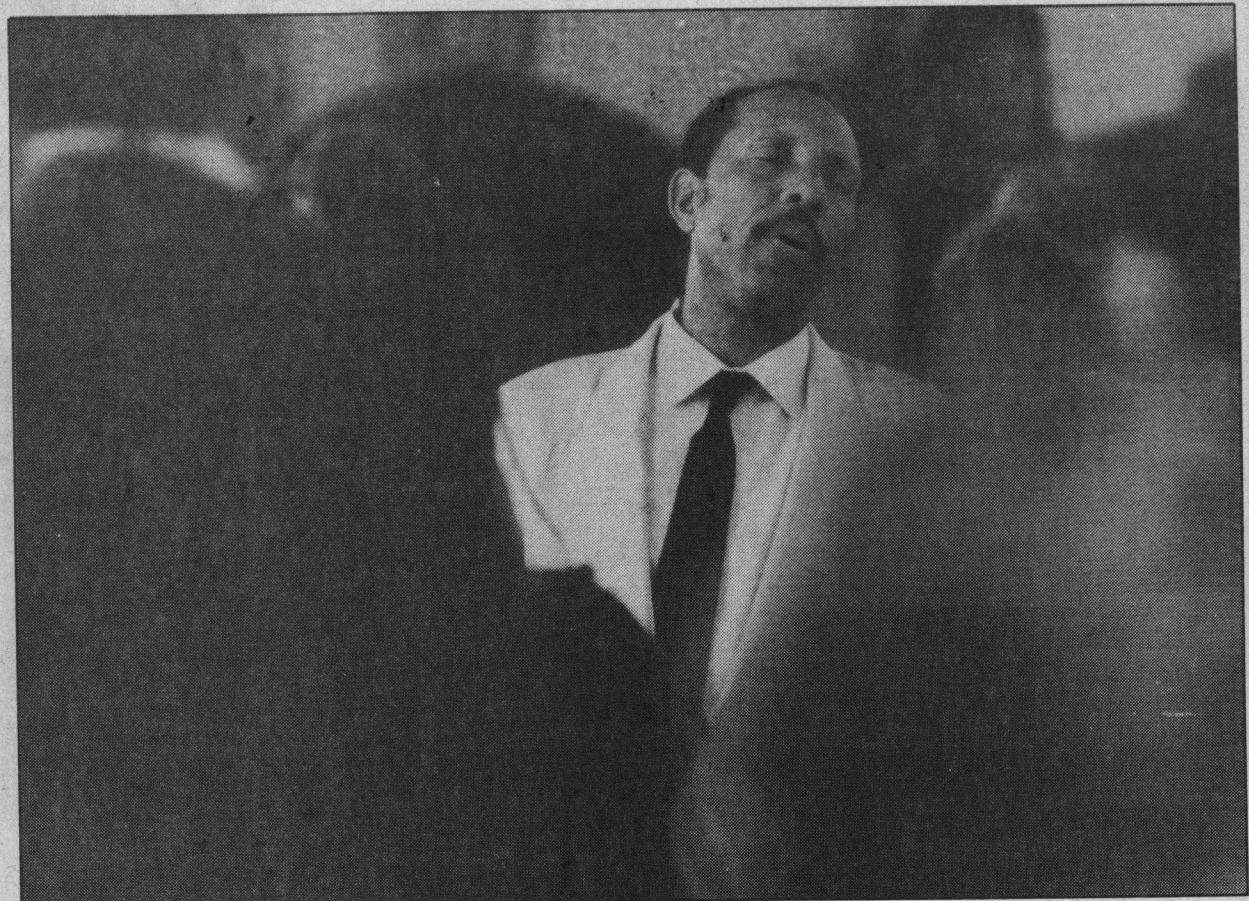
He also feels that the problems that plague today's youth run against the grain of a spiritual life and have had a detrimental effect on church membership.

Admitting he had been a pretty strict father, he complained, "Today, kids do what they want. What with drinking, using drugs and stuff. You don't know where they are at half the time."

That kind of a lifestyle is something members of the Santa Cruz Missionary Baptist Church hope to curtail — possibly by providing a recreation center to give youngsters something in their lives besides the street.

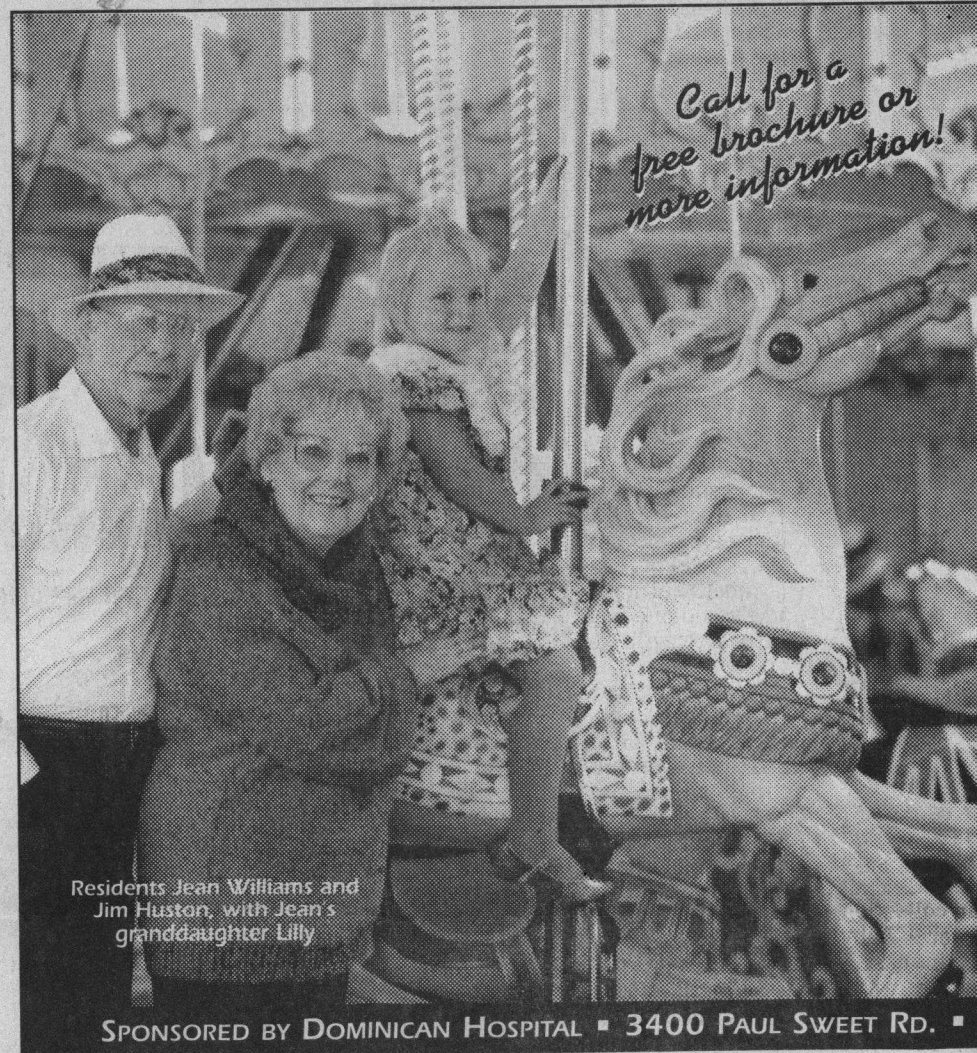
"There's no place for children to safely play and there's peer pressure everywhere you look," Washington said. "Our main obligation should be to kids. They're our tomorrow, they're our today."

In the meantime, the children are as much a part of Sunday services as gospel hymns and shouts of praise. Little girls dance, toddlers rest on their mothers' shoulders while they sing, and the well-groomed pastor's son plays drums for the choir as it proclaims a truth felt by many of those present — "We've come this far by faith."



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Raising his voice: Deacon Richard Butler joins the Missionary Baptist congregation in song.



Residents Jean Williams and Jim Huston, with Jean's granddaughter Lilly

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