

AND THE MALL CAME TUMBLING DOWN

10-17-99

It was a day
that changed
the landscape
of our community
— in many ways



By KATHY KREIGER
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PEOPLE, HOUSES, buildings and livelihoods. All were among the losses in the brief moments of geologic shifting 10 years ago that locals know as the Loma Prieta earthquake. But there was another loss, too. Overshadowed at the time by graver matters, it lingers still for some. That loss is the trees along the old Pacific Garden Mall. The trees that put the "Garden" in the name.

They were a remarkable collection. A 24-hour arboretum where you could walk under rare trees from the far corners of the earth in between dropping off your shoes to be re-soled, picking up a loaf of bread and listening to jazz outside the old Cooper House by a band appropriately named Warmth. A place to take out-of-towners and know that no one else *anywhere* had something this unique.

Trees that flowered at different times throughout the year. Trees with odd shapes, or peeling bark. Trees with gloriously golden- or flame-colored fall foliage or with blue needles smelling of the northern forests. Trees with scent, with texture, with character.

A weird and wonderful mix of trees you would never find growing together in nature — and certainly never growing together on most small town streets.

Just like us. Just like Santa Cruz.

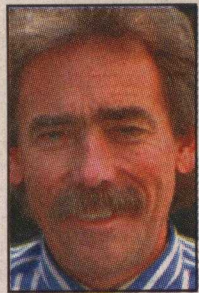
TUPELO, FLOWERING crabapple, corkscrew willow and flaxleaf paperbark. Peppermint tree, camphor tree and coral tree. Norway spruce, Japanese maple, New Zealand tea tree, Chinese pistache and Southern magnolia. And unbelievably, many more in the few short blocks on both sides of Pacific Avenue, from the bottom of the Mall at Laurel Street north to Water Street at the top.

The beauty of the mall was that

you didn't have to be a botanist to enjoy it, but local plant folks had their favorites.

Melinda Johnson of the UC Santa Cruz Arboretum remembers the sweetshade trees near the old Heavenly Goose/Swan restaurant at the top of the mall, graceful trees whose flowers blew a scent of orange-blossom honey into the late spring breeze. Or the trumpet trees, pink-flowering ones and golden. When they bloomed, people flocked into the old Santa Cruz Lumber garden center where she worked, looking to buy them. Trouble was, once planted, people couldn't get them to bloom in their own yards.

The sweetshades were big favorites of landscape architect Roy Rydell, too. Rydell also recalled the rare magnolias on the mall. They came from city gardener Todd Gresham, who dying of cancer at the time when Rydell and the late Arthur Hyde were designing the mall landscaping along with architect Kermit Darrow.



Lang

and flowering plums. So there were things going on all the time. There was tremendous variety and yet there was a unity, not a hodge podge."

"It was the mixture," agreed City Councilwoman Cynthia Mathews, who still has a stack of the walking guide map to the trees she helped put together in the early '80s.

Asked his favorite, though, city parks and recreation director Jim Lang remembers right away: a copper beech. "We went to all kinds of lengths to save it," Lang said. Undamaged by the quake, the tree

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Pacific Avenue, above, looks a lot different today than it did on Oct. 17, 1989, above left. But even those who remember the quake aren't sure how the Community Tree, left, got where it is now.

Trees

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was moved and later planted at the Locust Street parking garage.

City arborist Ray Sherrod knows his favorite, too: the Atlas cedar at Locust and Pacific. It, too, survived the quake.

NOT THAT THERE WAS universal love for the trees. They took their share of lumps through the years: for luring-street people, for casting too much shade, for their litter and for staining the pavement with their fruit.

Then came the quake in 1989. Many trees were left splintered, broken by falling buildings. An unusually cold winter the following year killed a few more.

Then came the massive re-building downtown. Pacific Avenue was gutted, dug up to remove the maze of old redwood water lines, gas pipes and more. The street itself resembled a town from the Old West.

Efforts to move the remaining trees turned out to be far more expensive and difficult than anyone imagined, and were abandoned after a few tries. In the 20 years of the Pacific Garden Mall's existence, tree roots had simply entwined themselves too thoroughly into the utilities to make removal a simple scoop-it-up process. But besides Lang's beloved copper beech, a trumpet tree was moved to the west side of the Santa Cruz Main Library and another tree went to the Loudon Nelson Center on Center Street.

Eventually, all the remaining trees were cut down, bulldozed and removed. The mall was re-built, a process still going on today. New trees went in — more uniform, part of a new look for the mall. Instead of the arboretum feel, today you can count the number of species on one hand. Sycamores, flowering cherries, Japanese white birch predominate.

RE-DESIGN WORK was inevitable, even without the quake, Rydell said in a recent interview. Pruning, maintenance, some removal would have solved the complaints.

"But I don't think there would be anything as bleak as what is there today," he said. Sitting in a vibrantly colorful room added to the old Bonny Doon schoolhouse he and his late wife Frances restored in the 1950s, Rydell was philosophic about what's on the mall now.

Gardens are periodically re-done, he said. Change — in fashion, in ownership, in acts of nature — is inevitable.

"I accept it," he said. "These things are so fragile. Landscape architecture is so fragile if it's not maintained — or if it's not maintained as it was intended."

Now in his 80s, Rydell is semi-retired and fighting cancer. Attended by a frisky white standard poodle named Beau, he continues to work at home, drawing and painting — his other loves — and still designing outdoor spaces for people to enjoy. He's done several volunteer design projects locally and has more in the works.

"You have to look toward the future," he said.

Talk to nurseryman and rare plant lover Luen Miller of Santa Cruz, though, and listen as he puts his finger on the pulse of mixed feelings for those days and these.

"I think that overall what they did was good for Santa Cruz. It was too bad if you were into plants. But very few people were," said Miller, one of those who helped get the late mall gardener Ken Hockenbery to



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel file

Workers tried to rescue this copper beech in the fall of '91.

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— Luen Miller, nurseryman

add some unusual flowering trees to the plans. "In the late '80s, it was a grim scene there. It was not a place I would like to take my wife at night, or my kids. And I'm a counter-culture guy. It was kind of a crime scene. Overall, it's better not having it down there."

Then Miller goes on to tell about a friend who is the arborist for the city of Fresno. They compared the results of letting people plant what they want with a city-run street tree program.

"The ones with street trees have a more cohesive look," he said. "But I like living in a community where people are free to paint their house any color they want. ... There's a lot of purple houses in Santa Cruz. I like living in a community with purple houses."

NO MATTER WHAT color our houses are now and which trees we plant — and no matter how much we love the new mall now — the old mall in its glory days is worth remembering as yet another victim of the quake.

Like another place of wonderful trees, disastrously lost forever, the old Mall was an Eden that gains in beauty as time goes on.

Gone from the real world, it now enters the misty realms of memory

and legend.

Take the case of the community tree, for instance: It's the blue Atlas cedar growing in the circular planter at the top of the mall, at the intersection of Water Street and Pacific Avenue. About as public a place as you could get.

Thousands pass it daily. And each December, the tree's lights are turned on to mark the season.

But already, a mere 10 years after the quake, how quickly time blurs the details.

Accounts from people intimately connected to the community — who were here then and interested in trees — vary about where that tree came from. And they all sound pretty good. Fitting endings for the tale of how we lost the old mall but gained a new one.

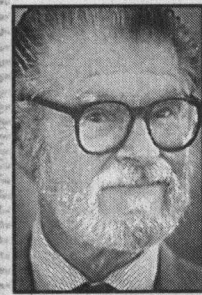
One man is sure it was moved here from the mall, saved during the rebuilding. A local tree expert thinks it was there *before* the quake. Someone who worked nearby says, no, the tree was moved in *after* the quake. But not from the mall; from over on Chestnut Street.

And yet another thinks it came along with all the other new trees now growing on the mall... maybe from Oregon?

By the time Rudy Quintanar, head of parks maintenance for the city, finally weighs in with the decisive voice on the matter, it almost seems a shame to mess with this urban legend-in-the-making. The reason Quintanar knows where the tree came from is because he went to pick it out. And he says it came from Gilroy. Boring old Gilroy.

And what about the trees that were moved from the mall? Not one is alive today.

"It's amazing," said Quintanar's boss, parks director Jim Lang, (who thought it was a new tree, but wasn't entirely sure.) "You know the town so well, walking the town all the time. Now I have a hard time remembering."



Rydell