

# Yule greens tie Ferndale's past with the present

Historic Bldg

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One in a series

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**C**HRISTMAS AT THE old Ferndale School is being celebrated today by the family who has lived there for the past 14 years. The fragrant odor of their Christmas tree fills the living room, where once the scent of redwood boughs wafted through a school room.

Rigoberto Madrigal, his wife Ophelia, and daughters Edith and Liz, rent the former schoolhouse from ranchers Virginia and Alfred Conde. Rigoberto is one of the foremen on the Conde ranch. Ophelia works in the berry fields in season, and takes care of Virginia's mother Angelina Mello.

The schoolhouse, located on Green Valley Road in the Pajaro Valley, has been part of Virginia's family for generations. It was so



named because of the abundance of ferns on the property.

Angelina Mello's parents, Joseph and Mary Travers, deeded a portion of their property for the school in 1908. John Hart, another local rancher, was the moving force behind the school's construction.

Angelina, 88, lives in the original

Travers home on the Conde ranch property.

She went through eight grades at Ferndale School. So did her son, Gil Mello, who recently retired as manager of the Santa Cruz County Fair. Virginia attended through fifth grade, then was transferred to other schools when Ferndale was closed in 1945.

**L**AST week, Gil and Virginia sat at the kitchen table in the Conde home, high on a hill behind the venerable schoolhouse, and shared memories of their school days.

Gil recalled Christmas at the school:

"We always had a Christmas program. We collected redwood boughs to decorate the school and we had a Christmas tree with real candles. All the people in the area came to the program — Christmas

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## School/ Name came from ferns

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and graduation were the two big events.

"Santa Claus would come ... It was probably John Hart." (Asked how long he "believed," Gil said, "I still do!")

Virginia remembered singing Christmas songs on the "stage," which actually was the teacher's platform.

Eighth grade graduation was a milestone for the students. Gil had asked Angelina to share memories of her own.

"She said she and her best friend, Eva Dickey, wore white voile dresses with yellow ribbon sashes," Gil reported. "They had put their hair up in rags and had long curls for graduation."

Gil recalls playing "The Carnival of Venice" on his accordion during his eighth grade graduation program. He also recalls "not playing it very well."

Actually, Gil performed at the school before he was a student there. When he was a preschooler, attending one of the programs with his family, his mother pushed him forward to recite.

"I recited something that began, 'My chickie's name was Waddles ...' I forget the rest. My mother was so proud of me."

**F**ERNDALE was the first of the country schools to be closed

after formation of the new Salspuedes School District. After completing fifth grade there, Virginia was transferred to Green Valley, then Casserly and Carlton Schools, which were closing in turn. She spent the last few weeks of eighth grade in the new Salspuedes School on Casserly Road.

"I wasn't there for graduation," she said. "I was at Annapolis for Gil's graduation."

Virginia and Gil remember some of their teachers at Ferndale School. Mrs. Dorothy Jones, who now lives in Sacramento, was a favorite — "attractive, strict and she used to read Bible stories — I thought they were interesting," is Gil's recollection.

"I learned well from her, even though she was strict," Virginia added. "Some teachers could teach all eight grades and the kids could learn better than they do now."

Gil and his friends experienced some of the teacher's strictness in this episode:

"The teacher took exception to the fact that the Leonardich boys and I killed a gopher snake at the noon hour. The teacher was really irate. She made us write, 'I will never kill a gopher snake again' on the blackboard 100 times. We thought we'd done something really good, killing that terrible snake."

State Sen. Henry Mello, D-

Watsonville, Gil and Virginia's cousin, also attended the school.

"When I was in the first grade, the teacher skipped me to the second grade," Gil said. "Henry was in the second grade, but he got skipped to the third, so I never did catch up with him."

The Travers family had stipulated that when the school was no longer in use, it would go back to the family. Virginia and her husband have kept it as a rental property since.

Once white, the building is now olive green. The kitchen was once the anteroom. The schoolroom was made into a living room, where the original, high wooden ceilings remain, two bedrooms and a bathroom.

The front porch is the same; so are the old, wooden steps, scuffed by the shoes of hundreds of country children as they eagerly, or perhaps reluctantly, started another school day.



So

