

Santa Cruz Yesterdays

APRIL 19, 1953

Sawyer, Preston

Just around the corner from Cooper street, back of the 1882 Hall of Records was the brick county jail. For nearly 50 years it stood facing east on Front street on part of the site of today's Court House annex.

When the new jail building was turned over to the board of supervisors on October 23, 1890, it was considered one of the best of its class in the state. Its cost, with furnishings, was about \$30,000. Of brick and iron construction it was called completely fireproof.

The main entrance was of Santa Cruz granite rock face, and the steps were also of granite. Above the entrance was an imposing tower "made of fire-proof materials and in classic design."

Had 12 Cells

From the entrance a main corridor led past offices to the jail part itself. There were 12 cells of jail plate 7x7x8 feet in size with heavy steel doors. Six of the cells were on the ground floor and six on the upper floor.

The jail doors and stairs were of wrought and cast iron; the floors of iron beams, iron arching and bituminous rock pavement.

Originally the sheriff's office was to the left of the entrance corridor. Across from it was the Supervisors' room, which communicated with the Hall of Records. In later years there were living quarters on the upper floor.

Limestone, lumber and the principal portion of the labor were of local origin. A. J. Meany was the contractor; architect, J. M. Curtis.

Earlier Jails

Earlier jails had been on High street in the vicinity of the Catholic church. One dating from 1854 had been of plank lined with quarter inch sheet iron. Its successor, also of limited proportions, was of stone: native granite slabs from the H. F. Parsons ranch in Scotts Valley. Some were 15 feet long. This jail, 25x18 feet, had four cells with walls 16 inches thick.

The succeeding edifice, downtown, among the county buildings, was a big step forward for the budding community. After the turn of the century reporters and some others occasionally, in humorous vein, referred to the jail as "Hotel de Trafton."

And this was not without good reason. A he-man sheriff, Howard V. Trafton served his county well in the post for almost a quarter of a century. Sheriff Trafton, who had come from Watsonville, after four years here picked a native Santa Cruzan as Undersheriff — R. H. "Dick" Rountree.

Tragic Shooting

Both were killed in line of duty, in a blazing gun battle with a crazed recluse at Seacliff Septem-



OLD COUNTY JAIL OF 1890 — 1937

(From the Preston Sawyer Collection)

ber 5, 1925. The fellow had a miniature arsenal of dangerous dynamite bombs, a sawed-off shotgun and 300 shells. Trafton was succeeded by J. B. Holohan.

The picture was taken in mid-January, 1937, when work was getting under way on the demolition job by Barrett & Hilp, contractors, who also built the present Court House annex on the site. Already partly down is the 1877 City Hall, to the south. Jail inmates were

later transferred from the "falling bastille" to temporary quarters in the Sisson building down Front street, near Laurel. Today's county jail is the top floor of the annex.

First Fire Bell

The 60-year-old City Hall had once housed two early fire companies. The fire bell first pealed from its roof. When the bell's weight became a cause for concern a tower was built for it close by,

permitting removal from the groaning roof. The city's first library had quarters in the old hall after the firemen moved.

By 1937 many had come to think the jail tower was of masonry. During the demolition proceedings there was some surprise when it was found to be of redwood with tin covering. The tower had little practical use, its functioning little more than just mental.