

Walden; or, Life in the Cooper House

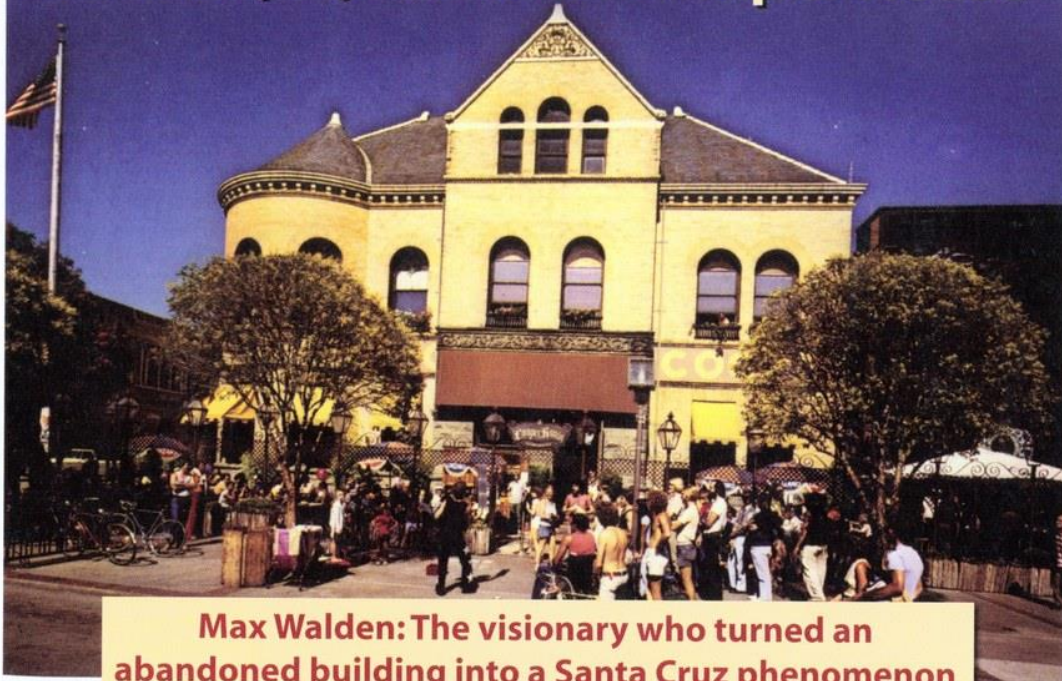


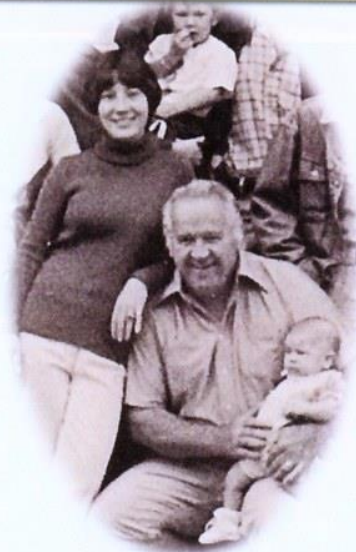
Photo: Kyle W. Smith/Smith Western, Inc., From the Frank Perry Collection.

Max Walden: The visionary who turned an abandoned building into a Santa Cruz phenomenon

By Kent Pollock

To most old-time Santa Cruzans, a mention of the Cooper House produces nostalgic smiles and fond memories of a community gathering place that exuded positive energy and good times. For nearly two decades, the historic brick-and-mortar building—built in 1894 and restored in 1972 to its former grandeur—was a lively, popular attraction for locals and tourists, the centerpiece for the renewal of an otherwise sadly declining downtown.

Only the finest woods and stones were used to transform Cooper House. There were fountains and archways, flowers and stone sculptures. The restored building featured a gorgeous stained glass dome and a magnificent stairway to a galleria where retailers and artists offered their wares in shops designed to fit the building's heritage. A band played outside the entry every afternoon and into the night, lending an upbeat spirit to the am-



(Above) Valerie and Max Walden with their daughter, Eloise, in 1976

biance. Restaurants and bars in artistic spaces served overflow crowds.

The Cooper House was a dream come true for many, a remarkable backdrop for creative entrepreneurs that provided patrons with quality products and a good time at a fun place. But the dream died in 1989 after the Loma Prieta Earthquake when the building was demolished.

Virtually everyone associated with the Cooper House's astounding success salutes visionary Max Walden, an entrepreneur who was 83 when he died in 2007, for imagining and creating the Cooper House after buying the dilapidated former county courthouse at a bargain price. Walden was recently de-

(Above) A crowd pauses outside the Cooper House to enjoy the music of, Warmth, the local jazz band, and a street performer.

Photo : © Valerie Walden Collection



Photo: Valerie Walden Collection

(Above) The recently completed Santa Cruz County Courthouse, (right) built in 1894, featuring the tower which was dismantled following the 1906 San Francisco earthquake.

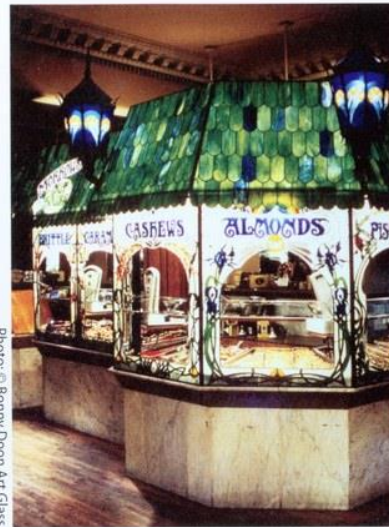


Photo: © Bonny Doon Art Glass

(Above) Walden brought together the talents of builder Michael Bates and glass artist John Forbes to create the Cooper House's legendary candy shop.

scribed by friends and associates as creative, hard working, enthusiastic, genuine, fatherly, self confident, socially at ease, generous to a fault, and a risk taker whose word was as good or better than any written document.

It was Walden who imagined how an antique building in need of massive repair could become a place where attention to detail and creative design formed a congenial setting for shopping, eating, drinking, admiring locally produced art and music, or just hanging out with friends.

"The place had a vibrance and a heart," said Michael Bates, a builder whose quality, hand-crafted work created much of the Cooper House's ambiance. "We were all young and energetic. We weren't in it for the money; we were into creating something beautiful. He wanted something special and you were there to do something special. You were doing it as a lifestyle."

Photo: © Bonny Doon Art Glass

To journalist Bruce Bratton, a weekly Santa Cruz columnist and radio host over four decades, "Cooper House was the very center of all things happening downtown. It was the heat of the buzz about downtown revitalization. It became the gathering place for citizens to meet, have a drink or eat, or



(Above) One of the two stained glass domes, originally installed in the First Presbyterian Church, were restored by John Forbes of Boony Doon Art Glass and installed in the Cooper House.

whatever."

Walden was a big man who thrived in social settings, mixing with local politicians, glad-handing acquaintances, and constantly exploring and discussing entrepreneurial ideas. He was a pioneer patron of the Santa Cruz arts and artists, many of whom were allowed to trade their work for rent instead of cash when

times were tough. He loved to sing, and he had what was described as a strong, passionate operatic voice.

"He was bigger than life," said longtime admirer and associate John Thomson. "A really nice guy. He had this kind of burly, loud presence. He was kind of like a Donald Trump, but not as obnoxious. He was loud and outgoing and everyone was his buddy. With Max it wasn't phony, it was just him."

Other friends described Walden as a happy bear of a man who loved life, lived and built his dreams, thrived on art, and revered all things old—especially old buildings, which he believed encapsulated the energy of those who worked there over the years. Asked how they thought Walden would have wanted to be remembered, several friends cited his loyalty and integrity.

"The biggest, most important thing in his life was honesty," said his widow, Valerie Walden. "The big 'I' word that we kept sticking down the kids' throats when they were growing up was integrity. If that's all you have, he told them, you have enough."

When people didn't live up to their end of bargains, or were dishonest, Walden was devastated, Valerie said. And it happened more than once. Merchants colluded twice

during Walden's career to defraud him by faking their cash register receipts to trigger lower rents, and one of his lawyers embezzled \$25,000 from him, Valerie said.

"Max was everyone's friend," she said. "Sometimes it felt like people just looked at my husband and saw 'sucker' written across his forehead."

But most people who did business with Walden described him as anything but a sucker. Like most developers, he had enormous successes and equally difficult times. The Waldens had two sons and a daughter, and family finances got so difficult one year that his wife, driven by concern for the family's economic welfare, went back to school to obtain an advanced degree. Ultimately, Walden's successes by far outweighed his struggles. Along the way, there were numerous highlights.

Walden created Old Town Los Gatos out of an ancient elementary school that town fathers were planning to tear down. "Walden buys white elephant," a local newspaper headline declared. But Old Town Los Gatos instantly became, and continues to be, a colossal success. He restored Cooper House and in the process revitalized downtown Santa Cruz. He started a pineapple brandy plant in the Cook Islands to solve a serious local problem of pineapples rotting before getting to market due to limited shipping facilities. And he saved the original Kings County Courthouse and Sheriff's Department in Hanover by transforming it into a thriving shopping and office complex. The 1896 buildings were scheduled to face the wrecking ball when Walden leased and then refurbished the facilities. There's now a sports bar in a former courtroom.

Not all of his projects thrived, but enough of them did to allow Walden to live what most would consider a lavish lifestyle. He took 18 months off after the Los Gatos project, touring the U.S. and Canada in a beautifully appointed railcar he had purchased. He cruised to Tahiti and then the Cook Islands on a 68-foot wooden ship that he had spent lots of time and money refurbishing.

"Max loved to spend money like crazy," said Thomson, the artist, who accompanied Walden on his pineapple venture. Walden always sought the best of whatever he did, friends said. For example, he went to Cognac, France, to study how to launch his pineapple brandy venture. He sent his wife to France to learn to cook. When he needed a foundry to produce bench ends his way, he flew to Mexico and found a fit.

Valerie's favorite memory of how



Photo: Valerie Walden Collection

(Above) 1920s automobiles line Cooper Street as the Santa Cruz County Courthouse enters into the 20th Century.

her husband always sought out the best was his pursuit of the perfect French fry for their restaurants. He went to the library and studied, then experimented with types of oils, cooking temperatures and various pre-frying methods. Nothing worked to his satisfaction. He ordered French fries everywhere they dined, seeking the ideal specimen dozens of times. One afternoon, at Ventana in Big Sur, Walden tasted his fries, smiled, then literally ran to the kitchen to see how they were prepared and cooked. When he returned, however, his excitement was deflated.

"His face was just fallen," Valerie said. "He looked at me, astonished, and said, 'They're frozen!' He was crushed. He was all about fresh foods but, lo and behold, we started serving frozen French fries because they came out crisper."

Walden was a strong-willed character who loved taking on projects that rewarded his imagination and creativity. He owned land with a vineyard in partnership with two UC Santa Cruz professors; built a highly successful bench factory in Santa Cruz when he needed benches produced from his designs; and transformed an ugly alleyway where shackled county prisoners once marched between courthouse and jail into a thriving stained glass palace where both accomplished and struggling local artists exhibited their wares.

Walden's big heart, along with many of his commercial successes, had roots in his childhood. He grew up living in his parents' market

where he saw them help friends and give away food to penniless hungry people during the depression. His father had built a market, pool hall, and restaurant side-by-side in Flint, Michigan, making him among the first to bundle shopping, eating, and entertainment in one place. Many of Walden's modern-day projects embraced his father's concept. And like his father, his friends said he had a heart of gold.

"He helped me when I needed a job after losing a building in Los Gatos," said Walter Mole, one of Walden's friends and an advisor on the Los Gatos project. "He was fun to be around. He was ahead of everyone else with his shopping projects. He mixed art and commerce together and always did all he could to help the artists."

By any measure, Walden was a self-made success. Shortly after graduation from high school in Burbank, where his father and he had moved following a divorce, he joined the Navy. He was stationed in the South Pacific during and right after World War II as a Chief Electronic Technician's Mate. He came home to Berkeley, then went into the Navy Reserve in 1946. He started doing small building projects for homeowners and commercial building owners until he was called back to active duty as a radio technician in Alaska during the Korean War.

When he came home, he continued doing construction work in shopping centers in Berkeley and Walnut Creek when his work

caught the attention of Lucky Stores, leading to a lucrative job offer to do construction for the grocery chain. Next came Old Town Los Gatos, followed by Cooper House and his other accomplishments. He remained an active developer even during the final years of his 20-year battle with cancer. His son, Cooper, ferried and carried his dad to and from work sites even after Walden could no longer walk.

"I think what was important to Max was the energy that his places gave to a community," said his wife, noting that his endeavors created the antithesis of today's point-and-click shopping habits. "It was important to him that his projects became a focus place for families to come and enjoy being with each other and being part of a community with continuity to the past."

A concert cellist and instructor whose mother was active with the Santa Cruz Symphony, Valerie met her future husband when he came to dinner at her home as president of the symphony board. There was a 30-year age difference (she was 21), but one evening Max asked Valerie out on a date. She was both flattered and surprised, she said.



(Above) A deserted Cooper House stands behind one of the many cyclone fences that restricted access to Pacific Avenue after the Loma Prieta Earthquake.

In typical grandiose style, Max arranged a dream date with the already accomplished cellist and music lover: dinner on the Santa Cruz wharf; champagne on the San Francisco Opera House steps; then seats at center stage, tenth row, to see famous Russian cellist Mstislav Rostropovich perform his first West Coast concert after defecting from the Soviet Union as a human rights legend.

"I can still hear that concert in my head," Valerie said recently. "That night, when I got home, I thought to myself, yes, I can do this." That was in January, 1975. They got married that September.

Walden sold the Cooper House in 1987, although it was his favorite accomplishment, because his relationship with some of the merchants had soured, Valerie said. When asked how her husband took the news that his favorite project had been demolished a few weeks after the devastating 1989 earthquake, Valerie became uncharacteristically sullen.

"Oh, he was furious," she said, falling silent with a faraway look and tone to her voice. "He believed the building held within its aura the energies of all the people who had ever worked there. To him, more than a building was destroyed." To him, she said, it was a tragedy. ❁

Photos: Bill Lovejoy



(Above) Although building contractor Michael Bates had recently completed an earthquake retrofit and the building sustained very little damage, hundreds watched as the beloved Cooper House fell victim to the wrecking ball. Spectators gasped as the ball struck three times before doing any damage.

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