

Rebuilding Pajaro Valley's churches

The flames of fire have destroyed three of the Christian churches in the Pajaro Valley but the congregations have re-trenched, rebuilt and carried on their church work through it all. Their histories date back to 1859 when interested parties gathered together in country homes until there were 50 members, and they moved into a small cabin. In 1861, the congregation moved into their own newly built structure on San Juan Road.

It was a one-room building with two doors in front. One side was for the men and the other for the women. By 1873, the members decided to move into Watsonville and the Methodist Church was purchased at the corner of West Lake Avenue and Rodriguez Street, now the site of Long's store. The Methodists built a new church at the corner of West Beach and Rodriguez streets.

The Christian Church held services for 19 years at their new location when it was decided, in 1892, to purchase their own property at the corner of East Lake Avenue and Main Street, now the site of the Jefsen Building, from James Waters for \$2,200. Architect William Weeks was hired to draw up plans for the new church and construction soon began.

"The plans and specifications for the new Christian Church will be here on Saturday and contractors can see them by calling on R. W. Eaton. Bids for the work will be received up to noon of the 25th. The building is to be 56 feet in front on Main Street and run back 90 feet on Fourth (E. Lake) Street. The building is to be substantially constructed and will be ready for occupancy during the coming fall." — The Pajaronian, May 12, 1892

But on Oct. 7, 1892, the new church burned and the congregation, after cleaning up the debris, rebuilt with a few changes. A new pipe organ was installed in the new church built by local man Joe Hetherington at a cost of \$600. Disaster struck again on July 4 of 1902 when the Christian Church went up in flames. Ironically, the fire brigade and their equipment were out of town competing in the hose races.

Again a corner lot was selected, Weeks was hired again and a new church was built at the corner (they loved corners!) of East Lake and Alexander Street. The cost was \$40,000 for this stone structure that rose above the ground in all its grandeur. Its interior was decorated with curly redwood paneling and there were frescoed walls in Nile green and ivory woodwork, plus beautiful stained glass windows throughout.

The congregation moved into this magnificent edifice and was to stay there for 25 years. Then, on the morning of March 27, 1927, a



That Was Watsonville

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fire broke out and burned until there was only a shell left of the building. Undaunted, the members again selected a new lot, still on East Lake, but up the street at the corner (again) of Madison Street. Weeks was the architect for the present building, which was built at a cost of \$95,000 and was dedicated on June 3, 1928. In a national contest for architecture, the Christian Church, Mission style, was awarded a third prize in those under the \$100,000 class.

Mrs. Catherine Rowe, the oldest member, burned the mortgage on Dec. 10, 1944.

"While the smoke of the burning paper ascended our old church bell pealed forth our victory and the people sang 'praise God, from whom all Blessings flow.'" — the late Mabel R. Curtis.

This property was purchased from Nick Burten for \$45,000 and the two-story Burten house was moved further down Madison Street where it stands today. The Burtens owned the Watsonville Brewery and the brewery and saloon were located to the right of the Burten house on East Lake Avenue in the early days of the town's history.

The present minister of the First Christian Church is Ruben Megron and the Sunday school and worship service are at 10:45 on Sunday. The minister is bilingual and his church is having difficulties with attendance as many other churches are having the same problem.

Referring to the fires that had plagued the Christian Church, one of the former ministers commented: "They had experienced so many fires that the congregation just turned the cornerstone around to a clear surface, fished the bell out of the ashes and rebuilt the church!"

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Betty Lewis, a local historian and Watsonville resident, is a regular columnist for the Register-Pajaronian.