

1985: A look back at 1857, when an S.C. schoolhouse cost a mere \$2,233

EDITOR'S NOTE: The Sentinel is celebrating its 150th year in 2006 by reaching into the archives to republish some of the noteworthy stories out of the past. The following story is the final installment of the series. Titled "Oh for 1857, when a schoolhouse cost \$2,233," it was printed in the Santa Cruz Sentinel on March 17, 1985.

By MARGARET KOCH
SENTINEL CORRESPONDENT

Today you couldn't build a storage

shed for \$2,233. But back in 1857, things were different. The state of California had been created just seven years earlier on Sept. 9, 1850. Santa Cruz County had actually been born seven months before the state, on Feb. 18, 1850.

Before any kind of schoolhouse was built, classes in Santa Cruz were conducted in the First Methodist Church at the southeast corner of Green and Mission Streets. And according to an early census, there were about 200 children in Santa Cruz County in 1851.

The money for the first schoolhouse

was raised mainly by subscription — local citizens dug into their pockets. The one-room school house, located at the "top" of Mission Hill, opened in August 1857, and ran for seven months. Thomas Gatch and Miss Clara Adams were the teachers.

Gatch had come from Ohio to make his fortune in the California gold fields, but after a bout with typhoid he settled on a teaching career instead of pick and shovel. A college-educated man, he went on to become professor of mathematics at College of the Pacific (then in

San Jose), and later president of Willamette University, the first president of University of Washington, and finally, president of the Oregon Agricultural College.

That first year of Mission Hill School District 1 was just the beginning of a series of financial crises. In 1858, after a year's operation, the school was broke, so parents put on a festival and raised \$360 to keep it going. By 1859, local citizens were not being as generous with their money and the school was able to stay open for only four months. How-

ever, later in the year it reopened for five months with Harriett Field and S.N. Blakley as teachers.

It was a spasmodic operation at best. Trustees were men whose names adorn local streets today in Santa Cruz: Richard Kirby, the tanner; William Anthony, tinsmith; and Richard Vestal, wagonmaker. They did their best but only \$400 of support came from county taxes; about \$1,400 was raised by subscription — parents who wanted educations for their children.

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The trustees had trouble meeting the bills, even in compensating the workmen who built the school and later added a second room to it.

Roads in Santa Cruz County were impassable for many of the winter months; and distances were great when measured either by horseback or on foot. Within four years, five more little one-room schoolhouses were built to fill the need of a growing rural-county population.

Mrs. William Roache established a school in the parlor of their Pajaro Valley home in 1860. L.D. Holbrook taught Watsonville primary pupils in an upstairs room of his East Lake Avenue home. But Santa Cruz District 1, on the brow of Mission Hill, was the largest school with a daily attendance of 58 students in two rooms.

At that time, state law decreed that the minimum school year would be three months. Santa Cruz schools were proud of the fact that they stayed open an average of eight months.

By 1860, Branciforte School was built; about 1863 Grant School came into being, then in 1865, Bay View School. By that year there were 21 schools in Santa Cruz County serving 1,756 children. Ten years later there were 54 schools, including the little one-roomers, and a total of 3,378 pupils. It was estimated, howev-

er, that probably one-fourth of the children living in the county were not attending school. It was a time that when a child was needed at home for a harvest or planting, that came first.

Finances improved about 1876 with the formation of a hard-working Common Council in Santa Cruz city government. Members included Mayor William Cooper (of Cooper House fame); D. Tuthill, Henry Skinner, Charles Martin (livery stable operator and my great-grandfather), and Judge Joseph H. Skirm.

By 1879 Santa Cruz was able to build a \$25,000 school on the Mission Hill site. It had a large basement and three stories — which included nine classrooms for 600 pupils. The top story was used as the city's first high school.

The new schoolhouse had some remarkable modern novelties for that day: sinks with running water for drinking and washing hands, and a huge wood-furnace heating system. But it had no gas lights or electricity. All evening programs had to be held down in the Opera House which was located on a street just below the hill (behind today's Goodwill Store).

The top-floor Santa Cruz High operated without state funds until 1891, financed solely by the county and local citizens.

The stately old Mission Hill school building — with its distinctive mansard-roof styling — commanded its hill site until 1930 when it was demolished. Temporary buildings were set up at the present King Street site in 1931 and the new plant was built there.

Today it serves as a junior high. Santa Cruz City School District offices were built on the original Mission Hill lot — a fire recently damaged them.

It was a long time ago when the black ex-slave, Loudon (London) Nelson looked up at the hill from the tiny plot of land where he raised vegetables, and decided to leave his entire estate to the school for the education of children — white children, as there were no black children there at the time.

The white folks erected a stone at his grave in Evergreen Cemetery which bears the words: "He was a colored man. He left his entire fortune to Santa Cruz School District 1."

Nelson's fortune amounted to his plot of land, a note for \$35, \$7 worth of county script, furniture worth \$15 and a crop of onions worth another \$15.

The \$372 realized from Nelson's estate went to buy an adjoining lot to the mission Hill site, enlarging the school grounds.

Today, school buses ply roads all over the county, winter and summer. Most of the little one-room schoolhouses are gone or serving other purposes. It is hard to believe that once, there were more than 60 of them dotted through the mountains and backroads of Santa Cruz County.