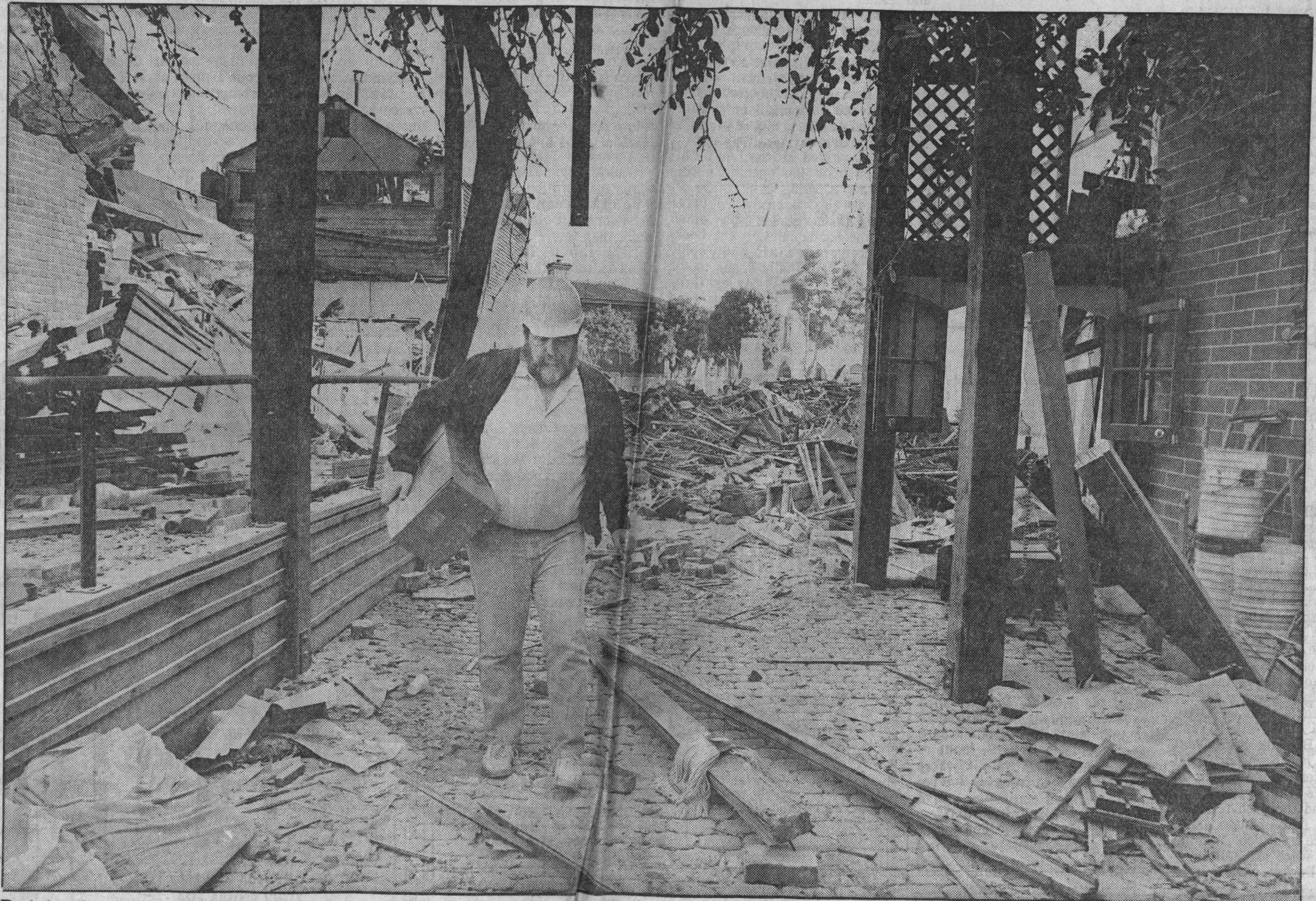


## THE QUAKE OF '89

Some would say the lengths to which folks have gone just to save a bookstore say volumes about the people of Santa Cruz



Bookshop Santa Cruz owner Neal Coonerty, holding a box of books he salvaged, walks through the rubble of his store.



Bookshop Santa Cruz owner Neal Coonerty, holding a box of books he salvaged, walks through the rubble of his store

Karen T. Borchers — Mercury News

By Richard Scheinin  
Mercury News Staff Writer

**T**HE week after the big earthquake, a public radio station in Santa Cruz held a call-in "town meeting" on the air to discuss the future of the city's downtown. What were listeners concerned about? Books. There were about 300,000 of them trapped inside three bookstores on the Pacific Garden Mall; three beloved bookstores, all headed for the wrecker's ball. One listener phoned to say he would risk his life to bring out the books.

Then Neal Coonerty, owner of Bookshop Santa Cruz, possibly the most beloved institution and hang-out in a town that has many, phoned in with a report on his store. Coonerty obviously was on the verge of tears. That afternoon, the city had given him 15 minutes to rescue a few essentials from the store; everything else would be reduced to rubble. He had strapped flashlights to his forearms and raced around in the dim light, grabbing sweaters and coats that belonged to employees. He had scooped up financial records and carried out the rocking horse from the children's book section — was there a child in Santa Cruz who hadn't rocked on that horse while his or her

parents wandered through the shop where Ferlinghetti and Rexroth had read their poetry, where Carlos Castaneda used to drop by to lecture on consciousness?

For years, the bookshop had celebrated its birthday each November with a party for its customers. This year, Coonerty told everyone listening to the radio, the party was going to take place on his front lawn.

Coonerty was asking everyone to bring "five good books" as presents for the bookshop on its 23rd birthday. The demolition crews might trash the shop and all the volumes he had inside; Coonerty estimates that between 100,000 and 150,000 books were in there. But with those gifts he would have the makings of a new inventory, and the bookshop could rise again.

# Town treasure begins new chapter

That's the background.  
Here's the twist.

Coonerty was able to save some of his inventory, but the party is still on. It's happening Saturday afternoon.

Last weekend, about 2,500 cartons of books were brought out of the store before the wreckers moved in. The other two bookstores — Logos and Plaza Books, which share legions of fans with Coonerty's place — managed to do the same. Coonerty did it by quietly leaning on the city bureaucracy until it bent, and with the help of so many volunteers — there were about 250 who donned hard hats and came out to pack, dust and store books — that they had to be organized in shifts so that everyone would have a chance to do a good deed.

It must be true that Santa Cruz is lost in a time warp, because the folks there still read. Over the years, Bookshop Santa Cruz has become an intellectual hub of the town: "It seemed to be very close to a great many people's mental image of what a bookshop should be. It *felt* right," says Sam Leask, a businessman and friend of Coonerty's. "Saving the inventory of the Bookshop Santa Cruz," says Tom Killion, a poet and illustrator, "was probably the most important, positive thing to come out of the earthquake."

Novelist James D. Houston, who has lived in Santa Cruz since 1962, punctuating his career with numerous readings and book signings at the bookshop, throws some perspective on the rescue operation: "Santa Cruz, for all the years I've been here, has always been a fulfilling place to be because of the bookstores and the writers who live here."

"And to have all of those bookstores come down at once seemed unfair and devastating. The thought of losing all that stock, of Neal losing \$650,000 worth of stock — of course, I don't think of it in terms of thousands of dollars. I think of the writers whose work would just be buried by the wrecking ball. That's a terrible, terrible thought. And now that they've been able to salvage their

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## Cover Story

# Santa Cruz bookstore turns the page on disaster

BOOK, from Page 1C

inventory, well, that's really a great ray of hope."

□

The modern history of Santa Cruz — its transformation in 25 years from a sleepy resort town to a flaked-out but increasingly upscale university town and tourist spot — revolves in some important ways around the history of Bookshop Santa Cruz. For the bookshop began as the outpost for the counterculture in town. As the counterculture became the establishment in Santa Cruz, the bookshop became an institution, hip but respectable.

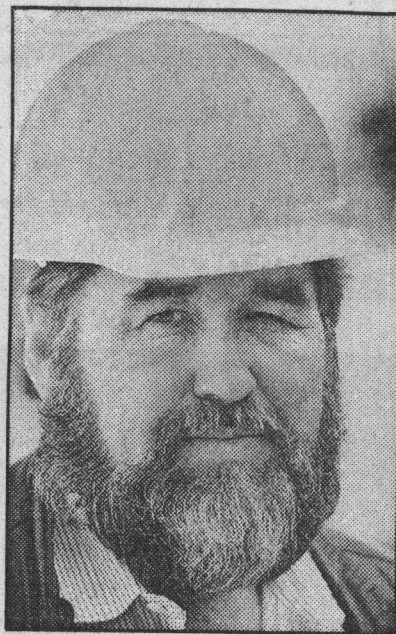
Ron Lau has been part of the transformation.

Tuesday morning, with a crane's massive yellow wrecking claw poised over the roof of the bookshop, Lau sat down for coffee in a greasy spoon down the block to talk about how he became the bookshop's founder.

That was in 1966. Lau, who is now 53, was 30 then, "a straight little kid who used to play golf when I was in Episcopal school in Hawaii." He'd been in the Army and eventually landed a job as a publisher's representative with MacMillan, traveling up and down the coast between San Rafael and Big Sur, knocking on bookshop doors to sell books. He was living on Nob Hill in San Francisco, always went to work in a suit, and every month or so would come through Santa Cruz and walk through the doors of a strange little shop on Pacific Avenue called the Hip Pocket.

The Hip Pocket bookshop, which had opened in 1964, was the first hip business in town, a full-strength bohemian bookstore that missed its market by about a year. Described in some detail in Tom Wolfe's "The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test," the shop was run by a couple of Ken Kesey's Merry Pranksters who began engineering the first downtown literary events, bringing in people such as Kesey and theologian Alan Watts to read and lecture. Beatnik hero Neal Cassady, who had been portrayed as the character Dean Moriarty in Jack Kerouac's "On the Road," often was behind the cash register. There were a pair of nude sculptures above the front door, and the town matrons were scandalized.

When Hip Pocket went out of



**"The whole situation is overwhelming."**

— Neal Coonerty

business in 1966, a friend urged Lau to move in with his own shop. Lau made his pitch to the Santa Cruz consumers union that was trying to fill the Hip Pocket's space and borrowed \$20,000 from a civic-minded administrator at the new University of California campus in the hills above town. He hired a staff "right off the sidewalks — they were just long-haired freaks," nailed some bookshelves together, and carried the spirit of Hip Pocket into the new Bookshop Santa Cruz, the only hang-out in town for artists and academics, open seven days a week, even at night, on an avenue pockmarked with empty storefronts.

In the fall of 1969, Lau moved the bookshop to its present site across the street — a larger, airier, more amply-lighted Italianate building that had survived the 1906 earthquake despite being made of unreinforced brick. This is where Carlos Castaneda would arrive unannounced after completing one of his Don Juan manuscripts and lecture for hours, the bookshop's aisles filling quickly as word spread through town.

Lau, who sold the business to Coonerty in 1973 but stayed on as the shop's landlord, decided to build a tree-shaded cobblestone courtyard behind the bookstore. It became the place to see and be seen in town, to relax with a new book and a cappuccino. That's how it always was. The community was always part of the bookshop, Lau says, and so "it has a kind of aura that just sits there" to this day.

□

Neal Coonerty is finishing an interview with a reporter from Der Spiegel, a West German magazine. It's Tuesday afternoon. Coonerty's dining and living rooms are filled with bookshop paraphernalia: boxes of credit slips, gift certificates and books, plus a statue of Kwan Yin, the Chinese goddess of mercy, that was given to Ron Lau by his mother upon the opening of the bookshop in 1966.

After the German reporter leaves, Coonerty, 43, talks about how the earthquake hit the bookshop in its prime. After 16 wobbly years, he had finally begun to see some good profits in the last three years. He keeps rubbing his hand over his forehead as he talks: "The whole situation is overwhelming. The first week, it was just mental-

ly exhausting. Every situation was a new situation. You couldn't do anything by rote anymore, and I felt the store was so fragile at that moment that any decision was going to doom it."

There were scores of phone calls and letters from customers offering condolences and encouragement.

A best-selling author wrote to offer Coonerty a \$25,000, interest-free loan for five years, which Coonerty accepted. Coonerty has been active in regional and national book-sellers associations as an advocate for small, independent bookstores, and the response to the quake from the book industry was gratifying. Bantam/Doubleday/Dell offered to forgive the bookshop's debts — and those of Plaza Books — for three years, a gesture that novelist Houston regards as extraordinary: "There you have a major corporation coming to the aid of a seemingly small-town bookstore, but obviously it's much more than that."

"The fall of Bookshop Santa Cruz is more than local news," Houston goes on. "It's a national story. It's a deeply felt loss through the publishing business."

Ironically, the earthquake hit just as Lau was drawing up plans

to reinforce the bookshop against quakes. He had been consulting with a structural engineer who could now talk to city bureaucrats, slowly bringing them around to his view that the building's walls and roof could be shored up safely, allowing Coonerty to pull out his stock before demolition.

Once the city gave its approval, Coonerty and Leask put together their rescue plan. They had been stashing thousands of empty boxes from Watsonville frozen-food processing plants in Leask's garage. Now they solicited local businesses for help. They got conveyor belts from an electronics firm and a tannery, a forklift from a marble importer, hard hats from a cement operation.

The bookshop's staff set up phone trees, and last weekend the multitudes descended on Bookshop Santa Cruz to get the books out.

And now comes Saturday's block party at Coonerty's house. Houston will play bass in the Hot Damn String Band, a country bluegrass band composed primarily of local authors. Tom Noddy, a Santa Cruz fixture who has spent years blowing luminescent bubbles out of his bubble machine on downtown streets, will blow bubbles. The staff will sell all the books — used

paperbacks are preferred — that customers give to the bookshop as birthday presents. Coonerty no longer needs them for inventory, but he needs start-up cash. Plus, he's feeling "the desperate need to go back to being a book-seller."

The bookshop should be back in business late this month or in early December, operating out of a high-tech tent in its parking lot. Coonerty predicts a 50-percent drop in sales in the months ahead. The business will have to go through a re-evaluation in January or February, he says, "and I really don't see us taking a breath until the spring."

That's when Lau hopes to begin construction, in the same spot, on a new bookshop.

"I've already got the design in my head for the facade," Lau says. "You wait and see."

Bookshop Santa Cruz's 23rd birthday party begins at 2 p.m. Saturday at 510 King St., at the corner of Hollywood, in Santa Cruz. Donations for the unemployed staff members of the three demolished Santa Cruz bookstores may be sent to the Northern California Booksellers Association Earthquake Relief Fund, c/o Wells Fargo Bank, 145 West Portal Ave., San Francisco 94127.

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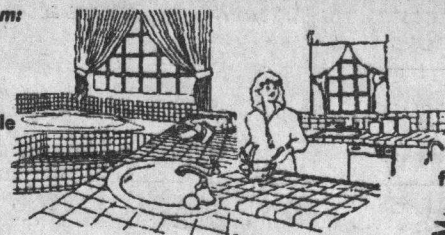
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