



Bob Stiegel

Pat Manning, whose community coalition has been working since 1980 to preserve and restore Valencia Hall, stands on concrete steps that will be replaced by a wooden front porch matching the original.

# Preserving the past



# Valencia Hall brings community together

STAFF REPORT

APTOS — As it did a hundred years ago, Valencia Hall brought members of the community together this past weekend.

This time, though, they came with hammers, saws, crowbars and a commitment to preserve an important piece of their history.

Thirty-eight volunteer workers turned out Saturday and about a dozen showed up Sunday for "community workdays," the latest part of the largely volunteer effort to stabilize, move and restore the 114-year-old hall.

For Pat Manning and Carol Trengove, members of a community coalition that has worked since 1980 to preserve the landmark building, the weekend of activity was the most significant to date.

"This is the beginning of the final push," said Manning, whose group's goal is incorporating a museum in a small park with a refurbished hall that once again will be used for community meetings and events.

On Saturday, volunteers removed a backside addition that



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About a dozen volunteers worked Sunday on the hall; most of the work was done Saturday when 38 community members turned out.

included a stage and kitchen. On Sunday, using original redwood planks, they restored the building's rear wall to how it appeared in the 1880s.

Trengove noted that two of the volunteers were men who have lived in the community for more than six years. But even though they live only two houses from each other, until the weekend they had never met, she said.

"It's already doing what it's was

supposed to do — bring members of the community together," she said about the single-room, all redwood building built in 1882.

Situated on the corner of Valencia and Bear Valley roads, the hall had sat largely unused since 1986, when county leaders, concerned about liability, locked its doors. The county took possession

sion in 1976, but for the most part ignored the hall while community members used it for 4-H club meetings and other events.

Valencia Hall, according to local historians, was the centerpiece of a community envisioned by lumber baron Frederick A. Hihn. Wood for the hall, a nearby school and other buildings in the community might have come from five redwoods whose stumps serve as the foundation for Valencia Hall.

Heated by a wood-burning stove, the 30-by-40 foot hall was supposed to have been the center of a community of mill workers and their families, although local legend has it that dancing girls were brought to Valencia Hall on weekends to keep the lumberjacks and mill workers entertained.

Whatever its uses, Hihn closed the mill in 1902 and the area became largely agricultural. A local farm bureau held ownership of the hall from 1932 until 1976, when the hall was deeded to the county.

Todd Allen, who now lives in Capitola, was one of the 4-H youngsters who attended meetings in the hall in the early '80s, before the county closed it down. Now 26, he was among this past weekend's volunteer workers.

"It's something I was a part of as a kid," Allen said. "I'm all for this (preservation). I think we ought to make sure things are left in the state we found them in. Unfortunately, there's not a lot of these kinds of things left."

Valencia Hall was named in 1984 to the National Register of Historic

Places. That was a year after the restoration coalition obtained a \$30,000 grant to replace the roof on the building.

"If we hadn't have done that, there'd be nothing to save now," Manning said. "It'd all be dry-rotted by now."

The local coalition once thought it had a lock on \$400,000 in funds through the Santa Cruz County Department of Parks, Open Spaces and Cultural Services. But revised spending plans left only about a quarter of that amount still dedicated to Valencia Hall, and coalition members are resolved to completing the project primarily with volunteer labor.

Plans are to relocate the hall across Bear Valley Road, under the shadow of a towering redwood and behind a building, nearly as old as Valencia Hall and once used as a general store, that will serve as a museum. The hall itself, after complete restoration and a rebuilt front porch that will mirror the 1880s original, will again be used as a meeting spot for the community of about 500 people.

Coalition members acknowledge many frustrations and more obstacles await them as they continue what amounts to be an eight-phase project. But they don't believe any difficulties will be as frustrating as those they've already overcome during the past 16 years.

"We talked at one point, 'Let's just put a plaque on it and say this is where Valencia Hall used to be,'" Trengove said.

"But we couldn't let it go," Manning said. "Valencia Hall is about us, about the history of our area. This gives us a sense of community — our community."