

Happy Burro is calling it quits after 25 years

By FAITH RAIDER
STAFF WRITER

The Happy Burro has been put out to pasture.

The two colorful murals on the front of the building remain, but the 25-year-old market that became a Watsonville institution by offering ethnic Hispanic foods before it was popular has closed its doors.

Its former owner, John Franklin, who also owns the Tropicana supermarket on Freedom Boulevard, says the larger store is filling the void left by "the Burro."

"Many people who shopped at the Burro now shop at the Tropicana," Franklin said, adding that the Tropicana's sales have increased slightly since the Burro closed.

"We've got a bigger place. It's like the little burro moved into the big burro," said Gilbert Munoz, who managed the Happy Burro for 20 years and is the current manager of the Tropicana.

The Happy Burro, a small, old-fashioned supermarket in the Town & Country Shopping Center on Main Street, had a large selection of Mexican pastries and take-out dishes and racks of chili peppers and other condiments used frequently in Mexican cooking.

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lin.

Tropicana's tortilla factory, which turns out fresh tortillas on the premises, and its array of Mexican-style meats and cheeses ensures that the eight-month-old store will continue the tradition.

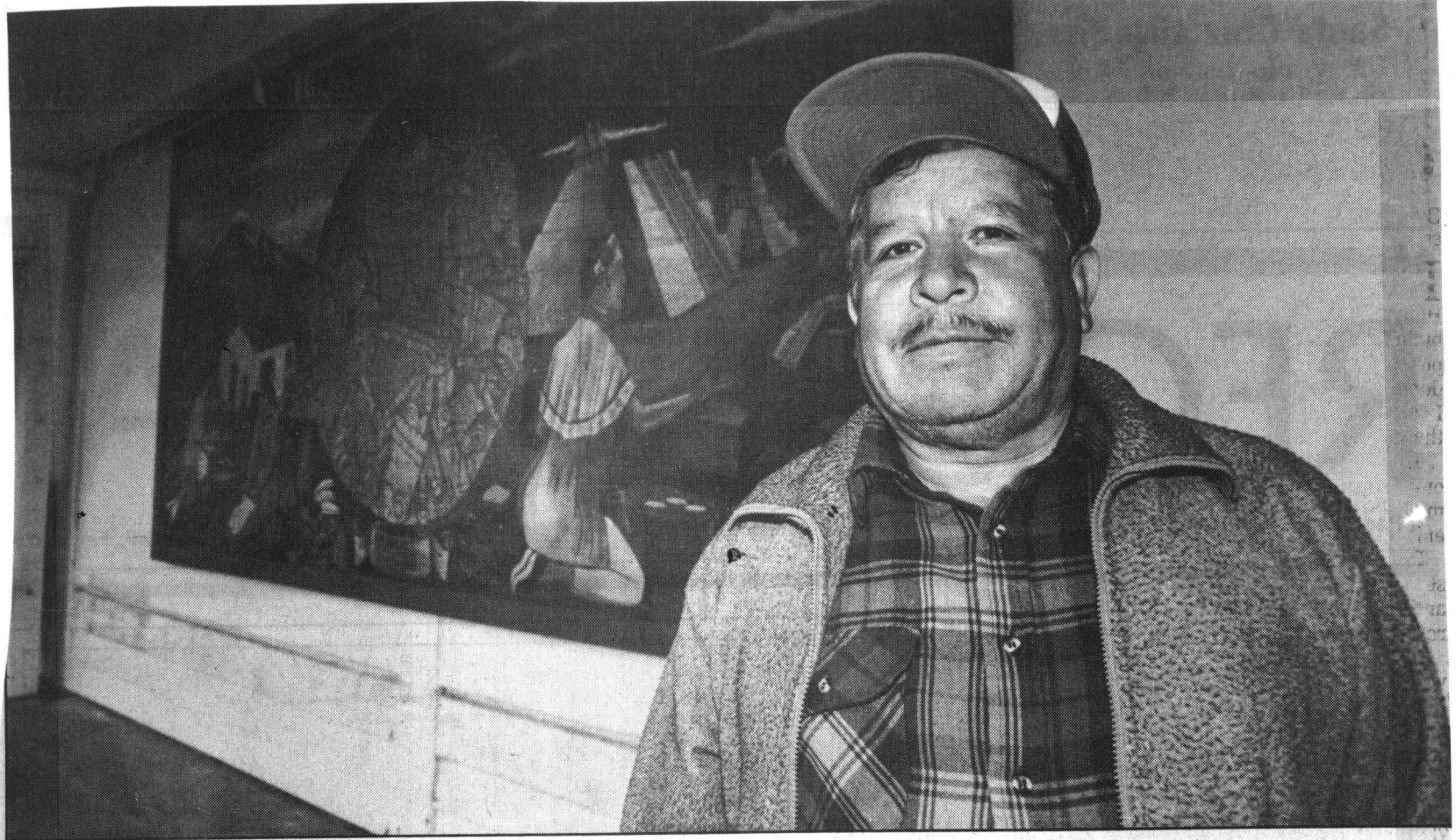
"It's one of the things that enhanced our move," said Franklin, who bought the Tropicana after it closed under previous management in March 1994.

According to its staff, the new Tropicana is bigger and better than the Happy Burro. "We're like the big boys now," said Munoz.

The Tropicana has a larger parking lot, new scanning machines at the check-out counters, and more floor space. The new store is over 22,000 square feet, 4,000 larger than the Happy Burro.

Gil Lopez, who worked at the Happy Burro for two years before moving to the Tropicana five months ago, said he recognizes a

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Shawn Hubbell

Long-time Happy Burro customer Teodoro Redondo of Watsonville stands outside the store, which has been gutted and is undergoing renovation for the new La Esperanza market.

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lot of customers from the old store. "They say it is further away from them but we have better prices," he said.

Workmen are busy improving the Happy Burro's old digs to make way for La Esperanza, a market scheduled to open in March. Javier Vargas is the owner of five stores by the same name in Watsonville, Salinas, and Santa Cruz.

Teodoro Redondo, a Watsonville

resident, stopped in front of the vacant building with its signs announcing the arrival of the new market yesterday. Although he shopped at the Happy Burro regularly, he also shops at Tropicana, and wasn't sad to see the new store move in. "La Esperanza has good meat and low prices," he said.

Franklin said he had been looking around for a better location for the Happy Burro because he couldn't work out acceptable terms for a lease with the owner of Town & Country, Robert Katz.

Katz said he had offered Franklin a new lease that the tenant had rejected. He was enthusiastic about his new tenant, Vargas, who is improving the space by painting the walls and putting in a new floor.

"I think (La Esperanza) is going to give the center some new energy," he said. "I was intent on having a market and it had to be a Mexican market — Mexican-oriented."

Franklin began the Happy Burro market in 1970 with three partners. Over the years, his partners left one by one, but Franklin and

his family remained. "We've seen people born and grow up in this community," Franklin said.

Today, Franklin's corporation, Happy Burro Market Inc., owns the Tropicana. He said he hopes to incorporate the old store's smiling burro logo into the Tropicana's marketing style.

Some of the Happy Burro's neighbors in the shopping center were sorry to see the market move. Gary Blanton, the owner of Tubby's, a pizza shop in the shopping center, said about Franklin, "I'm sad to see him go. They were a big asset to this area."