

Schoolhouse as a work of art

BY BARBARA BURKLO
Sentinel staff writer

TWO ARTISTS LIVE in the 90-year-old Green Valley schoolhouse in Watsonville. Walls once hung with the crayoned efforts of generations of children now display the paintings of owners Kay and Bert Spencer and some of their favorite fellow artists.

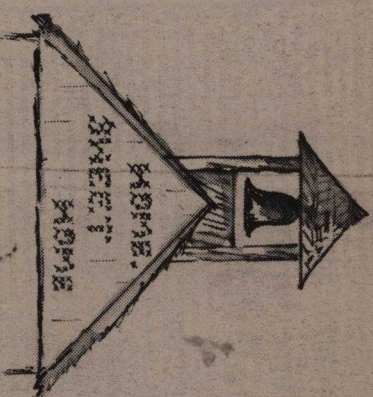
In 1950, the Spencers, their two children and the family dog moved into the school building, which had been taken out of service the year before. Purchase price was \$3,200.

Kay recalled their first Christmas — both sets of parents came for the holiday and when they saw the dwelling, "they thought we were crazy," Kay said. But the Spencers were convinced they had made the right choice. They had spent a lot of time house-hunting after they moved from Riverdale to Watsonville, where Bert began his long career as art teacher at Watsonville High School. When a Realtor showed them the schoolhouse, "everything else looked pale," Kay recalled.

Although the structure was run-down, (and had bees in the walls) it was designed by early California architect William Weeks and had good lines, including a lot of decorative gingerbread. It was made of virgin redwood and a building inspector had pronounced it sound.

THE couple embarked on a years-long program of improvement.

"We had a roof over our head, and when we had a little money we'd get some lumber and do some-



The Spencer home

thing," Kay said. "We had no debts — just an early small loan to establish credit."

They ultimately transformed the two-room schoolhouse into a 1,350 square-foot home with three bedrooms, large living-dining room, kitchen and bathroom.

An outbuilding was turned into a studio for Bert.

The Spencers still maintain their sentimental feelings about the place.

They enjoy having a home that boasts a bellfy, complete with bell. Their kitchen was once the school's cloakroom. Original 13-foot ceiling and original, tall windows of their

living room bespeak of its earlier use as a schoolroom.

As you enter the house, you see cloakrooms on either side of the hall. One is used for storage; the other was enlarged and made into the kitchen.

Certainly, the bell is the star of the show.

It's not the original — that one was given to a Catholic priest before the Spencers moved into the house and, they have been told, hangs in a mission in Africa.

Early on, Kay's father found a 165-pound bell in a northern Washington schoolhouse, and it replaces the original.

"We used to call the children with the bell — you can hear it four or five miles," Kay said. "Even the dog knew when it was time to come home."

NOW, the Spencers ring their bell for departing guests. As one drives down the driveway and out to the road, its peeling sends a cheerful, "come back soon," kind of message.

"Friends like the sound, and we try to be a little discreet about it," Kay said.

The bellfy is accessible from a ladder which Bert built into the kitchen wall. The ladder serves as a towel rack — until an earthquake occurs.

The vibrations dislodge the bell from its mounting, so after each tremor, Bert removes the towels.

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Shirley Friend of Watsonville has happy memories of her days as a pupil at Green Valley School. In 1928, she was a first grader, her teacher was named Florence Bailey. For more about Shirley and Green Valley days, please see page E4.



The bell still peals from Green Valley schoolhouse, home to artists.

Dan Coyro/Sentinel





Original high ceilings and windows remain in the Spencer living room, which was once the main schoolroom.

Spencer/ Home makes the grade

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climbs the ladder into the belfry and puts the bell back in place.

In earlier years, owls inhabited the belfry and the family cat liked to sleep there, Kay said.

The long bell rope dangles down near the kitchen sink — another unusual but homey touch.

The Spencers' artistic expertise shows Bert's woodworking and counter construction and Kay's refinishing work.

The enormous, 120-year-old redwood piano is an example of her restoration technique.

The Spencers' artistic efforts are well known in the Watsonville community.

At their church, All Saints' Episcopal, Bert designed the stained glass windows and Kay designed the kneelers and banners. She also does costuming and enjoys spinning at her wheel.

Next project, the Spencers said, is painting the house, inside and out. But, when they work on the exterior, they'll be very careful not to obliterate the words "Green Valley School," still visible up near the belfry.



Photos by Dan Coyro

Kay Spencer stands by the kitchen sink, ringing the school bell, while her husband, Bert, prepares to climb the ladder into the belfry.