

1980-1984

After 64 years of service here, the American Red Cross soon will have a permanent home in the Pajaro Valley.

With financial help from the Helen Volck Tucker and Irma Jefsen estates, the Red Cross is preparing to buy a former residence at 351 E. Lake Ave. Community donations will be sought to help pay off the mortgage. Present owners of the property are Noel and Joy West.

Full financial details will be made public when the sale has taken place, probably early next month, and then a public appeal for funds will begin, says Marguerite Blaisdell, a board member for over 25 years. For her, as for other long-term members, having adequate headquarters will be a fulfillment of years of service. And the purchase comes just in time for the worldwide organization's 100th birthday, to be observed not only in this country by the Red Cross, but also abroad by its Red Crescent and Red Lion affiliates.

"The home is on a large lot with space for adequate parking facilities. And inside, two rooms connect with

plenty of space for classes and meetings and loads of storage for emergency supplies," says Mrs. Blaisdell.

Through the years, the Red Cross has never had adequate headquarters, observes Joe Crosetti, chairman of the board for over 40 years. He came to the leader's spot close on the heels of the valley's first Red Cross chairman, attorney J.E. Gardner. For many years, the Red Cross was housed in the civic auditorium, later torn down, on Second Street. Then it was moved to rooms above the Wells Fargo Bank on Main Street, where a staircase inhibited use by the less agile. Two years ago, the office was moved to space at the junction of Palm and Hill avenues, where the parking is limited.

With a dedicated board, the Red Cross has remained an active and vital service agency in the Pajaro Valley, notes Mrs. Blaisdell. And when the United Fund was organized and the Red Cross was included, it was "one of the few organizations was which making it (financially)," she recalls.

Crosetti looks back to early years. "Our chapter began in 1917 during World War I when there was an epidemic of Spanish influenza," he remembers. "Everybody in town had to wear mouth masks; it was

compulsory in school.

"They converted the old civic auditorium into a hospital for emergencies because the hospital was filled up, and the Red Cross helped in nursing."

With the early 30s came the Great Depression, which longtime Red Cross board members remember well. Their organization, headed officially by the president of the United States, is the nation's official disaster emergency agency.

"There was no way in those days to deal with the influx of new people, people forced off their farms in the Midwest by the great dust storms," Mrs. Blaisdell recalls. "It was pathetic in Watsonville — there was nothing except individual charities that gave help to people in very precarious states."

Alice Liles, the county's visiting nurse, who then worked through the Red Cross, made health checks from door to door, shack to shack, in impoverished areas.

"They talk about poverty now, but in those days people just didn't have a thing. We had to help them out, to keep them going," says Crosetti, who "got hooked on this thing" through Malcolm MacQuiddy's request for apple boxes one Christ-

REFERENCE

Watsonville Red Cross volunteers are looking forward to the day when they can call 351 E. Lake Ave. home. Excited at the prospects of their first permanent office are volunteers, left to right, Jo M. Lake, director; Katy Johnson; Tom Sprague; and Joe Crosetti, board president.

Photo by Sam Vestal



mas, for use as food baskets for the poor.

Also in the '30s, the local board established its mobile canteen, showing up at floods and fires to serve coffee, sandwiches and donuts. "Helen Volck Tucker bought the car in memory of her husband William," recalls Crosetti. "And Jimmy O'Brien, the city clerk, was chairman of the group that got the wagon built."

Several times, before substantial levees were built, the Pajaro River flooded lower parts of town, and the Red Cross came to the rescue. "We evacuated the people to shelters, fed and cared for them until the water receded," reports the longtime chairman, remembering especially the winter of 1955, when a high tide combined with inordinate amounts of rain to produce an unforgettable flood. People were carted to church halls, to the fairgrounds and to any other available shelter, with the Red Cross making door-to-door appeals for help. That year, he recalls, the national Red Cross granted some \$650,000 for disaster repairs, with the local chapter responsible for tagging washed out bridges and homes.

During World War II heart-rending pleas flooded in to the Red Cross from families of soldiers. Then, as now, the organization helps in time of emergency to bring soldiers home. The Red Cross director (now Jo M. Lake) is on 24-hour call, and many times board members help out in the roughly 100 cases per year. Mrs. Blaisdell and Crosetti both have memories — some humorous — of late-night phone calls and nighttime expeditions to find ailing families. Their job was to verify the emergency and recommend that the national organization contact the soldier's commanding officer to authorize leave.

Donations for disaster relief in foreign countries go directly to that country when made through the Red Cross, explains Mrs. Blaisdell, who mentions the generosity shown locally for disaster areas in Yugoslavia.

The World War II years also brought concentration on baby care and programs for nurses. First aid was available at the civic auditorium headquarters, and food, clothing and knitted garments were sent to the needy. Post-war years saw an emphasis on disaster training and planning.

A program that continues today is providing quick cash for servicemen in the form of loans or grants.

"Very often a serviceman gets stuck — maybe gambled away his money and couldn't get back to base — and the only place he can get help was the Red Cross," explains Mrs. Blaisdell, noting that this service is still available.

Just recently, a veteran's widow appealed to the Red Cross for financial aid. She was granted bus fare to Colorado, where she was needed to care for her grandchildren because her daughter was seriously ill.

More visible programs in Watsonville, however, are the blood service under jurisdiction of Mrs. Blaisdell and Norine Osmer, and first aid, lifesaving and cardiopulmonary resuscitation classes directed by Don French and Ron Gallirio.

During the Korean War, blood was collected at Fort Ord, and the transfer was made directly from the donor. Since the Blood Bank's inception here in 1966, the process has become more sophisticated, with Red Cross nurses now coming through the San Jose office. "The Red Cross program is the finest testing of blood and research on blood compatibility and uses that exists," notes Mrs. Blaisdell. Last year, the mobile unit came to this area 19 times, and 1,290 people gave 2,096 pints of blood, 474 for the first time.

The safety classes reached 932 people last year through 16 instructors, and swimming was taught to 764 people by 11 instructors.

Also last year, seven volunteers provided transportation for 84 people who had to keep medical appointments outside the county or attend stroke therapy sessions.

For 27 years, Celeste Coehlo headed the Grey Ladies, who helped at Fort Ord.

Many of the 33 board members are long-timers. Recent newcomers are Joanne Kimes, Ron Staley and Ernest Vasquez. Charles Franich, Shig Hirano and Bill Marinovich are the vice presidents; Catherine Casamayou is the treasurer; Loretta Killen, the secretary. Purchase of the new headquarters has been overseen by board members Crosetti, Tom Sprague, Mrs. Kimes and Katy Johnson.

The Red Cross volunteers, including the board, number nearly 200, according to Mrs. Lake.

Criticism of the international organization has touched the local chapter, says Crosetti. "We hardly needed publicity before, but we seem to need it more now. A lot of people are picking on the Red Cross."

Locally, it has been a solvent organization because of its members' hard work, Crosetti notes. And buying the office is possible only because of the two substantial estate contributions. About \$29,000 is expected to come from the Jefsen estate and about \$41,000 from the Tucker estate. And the Red Cross is hoping that generous donors in the community will give \$100 contributions to help pay the mortgage.

"It has been a fascinating thing, being on the inside to see all the good that's being done through the Red Cross," the chairman concluded.

A major fund-raising event for the program, the annual steak barbecue, will be held from 1 to 5 p.m. on Oct. 4 at the Crosetti Ranch with the board supplying hors d'oeuvres and dessert. Tickets cost \$8 per person.



Meeting emergencies at home comes first for the Red Cross. In the Pajaro Valley, that meant sending visiting nurse Alice Liles, left, on children's health checks to Palm Beach in 1933, and sending a rescue wagon, below, to disaster areas.