



EMMET C. RITTENHOUSE

ILLUSTRATION BY GAELAN KELLY

Digging Deeper

One of the last reminders of the Loma Prieta Earthquake fades in downtown Santa Cruz as the EC Rittenhouse Building finally gets its day. But why was getting there so dramatic?

by Peter Koht

Earthquake - City of Santa Cruz Rebuilding

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On Aug. 28, despite the fact that work had been progressing for several weeks, a public groundbreaking for the EC Rittenhouse building was held at the corner of Church Street and Pacific Avenue in downtown Santa Cruz. Civic dignitaries, flanked by contractors and owner Louis Rittenhouse, chuckled as they ceremonially dipped gold spray painted shovels into a mound of fresh earth—to the delight of assembled photographers.

It was a cause for celebration. After nearly 17 years of squabbling, plans for a public plaza, economic downturns, threats of eminent domain and mediations, the empty lot that stood for so long as a reminder of the devastating Loma Prieta Earthquake of 1989 would now finally feature a new multi-story mixed-use development.

Bringing this project to fruition is estimated to cost around \$12 million. This hefty price tag has played a part in the long history of vacancy on the 20,000 square foot lot. First securing the necessary building permits

before 9/11, Rittenhouse was granted more time by city officials to find tenants in advance of construction after the economic downturn that followed the terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington D.C. In 2004, Rittenhouse was given another three-year extension.

Rittenhouse repeatedly told the council that he didn't want to move forward with the project until he secured tenants for the 65,000 square feet of office and retail space that the finished building will eventually feature. "It's like a newspaper, you can't print it without advertisers and you can't build a building without tenants," he told *GT* on the sidewalk outside of the project last week. "It's exciting that enough economic growth has finally been generated so that a project of this size can get off the ground." Despite his optimism, no tenants have been confirmed.

Designed by the firm of Baldauf, Catton Von Eckartsberg, which took the lead on revitalizing San Francisco's Ferry Building in the wake of the demolition

of the Embarcadero Freeway, the new building's classic lines will surely become a welcome addition to downtown's architectural palate.

Yet for all its intricacies, the historiography of this long delayed construction project is not nearly as complicated as the man that it's named after—Emmet C. Rittenhouse.

Explaining his choice of monikers for the new project, Louis Rittenhouse says that his grandfather "is the only reason why any of us [in the Rittenhouse family] are here. He acquired the building, held on to it and he named it. I felt it was appropriate to maintain his name [on the project]."

Born in Ohio in September 1878, Emmet (or EC as he's commonly referred to) Rittenhouse grew up on a farm, fought in the Spanish American War and survived a nasty bout with malaria—all before traveling west to attend Stanford University.

During his studies he worked as a barber to offset the costs of attending college, "placing his textbooks before him while he worked and studying all the while" according to an article printed in the *Santa Cruz Evening News* on May 8, 1941 called "How I Earned My First Dollar." After postgraduate work in law, he journeyed south to the Central Coast.

After his arrival in Santa Cruz County, one of the first tasks to face this newly minted lawyer was to draw up articles of incorporation for the city of Boulder Creek and act as the town's attorney until its dis-incorporation in 1905.

Moving to the county seat, Rittenhouse became active in fraternal organizations such as the International Order of Oddfellows and the Masonic Lodge, as well as serving as a trustee of the First Congregational Church and the Library's Board. More importantly, he founded a successful downtown law practice along with Bert Snyder and set up its offices at the corner of Pacific Avenue and Church Street.

Yet for all his civic mindedness and success in business, Emmet was a product of his times. In the wake of the 1929 stock market crash, as the first contractions of the Depression began, Rittenhouse was imbued with a deep distrust of ethnic diversity. He made these views public in his 1930 candidacy for the Republican nomination for the eighth congressional district of California.

"If I adopt a campaign slogan," he told the *Santa Cruz Evening News* on May 6, 1930, "it will be 'Keep California White.'"

In the same article, Rittenhouse went on to state, "There are more Mexican peons working in California than there are white men out of work ... Every civilized nation other than ours protects itself from an influx of foreign labor. It has not only proved detrimental to good morals in the United States, but it has not been economical in an industrial way."

The next column over, before calling California "an empire in itself" Rittenhouse stated, "we cannot dump great hordes of other races into the melting pot and expect to pour out a pure product."

His statements are not that surprising given the congressional and popular support for the various immigration measures of the '20s including the Immigration Act of 1924, which specifically excluded non-white immigrants from the Pacific Rim on the assumption that multi-ethnic immigration would change the national character. That act of legislative racism capped total immigration at 150,000—with half of that balance arriving from Northern Europe.

His message was met with approval by voters in Santa Cruz on election day, where according to the Associated Press' late returns, Rittenhouse received 4,651 votes to incumbent Arthur M. Free's 3,262. But while Rittenhouse took the county, Free took the district and thus advanced to the general election where he was elected to his fifth term in Washington. It is worth noting that Free, a Stanford alumnus and former Santa Clara County Prosecutor, lost his next electoral bid in 1932.

Asked about his grandfather's now controversial stands on immigration and ethnicity, Louis Rittenhouse says, "I have no more responsibility for the beliefs that he held when he ran for congress than he does for the beliefs I had when I ran for city council [in 1990]."

After his electoral defeat, EC Rittenhouse didn't make many headlines for more than a decade as he steadily built up his legal practice and real estate portfolio. He flourished financially, but suffered through a divorce in 1936 when his wife of 30 years, Josephine, left him over accusations of cruelty. On July 17, she was awarded a \$125,000 interlocutory settlement, which included the couple's house at Laurel and Myrtle streets. Emmet remarried in 1941, to his second wife, Opal.

Unfortunately, on Jan. 13, 1948, EC was shot and killed in his Pacific Avenue offices by a mentally disturbed 73-year-old retired salesman named Charles Wildey. Rittenhouse was shot once in the back with a .38 caliber handgun and fell to the floor. Wildey then stood over him to inflict three more gunshot wounds.

Hearing the screams of legal secretaries Jean Cloud and Pat Martin, a passing retired sheriff's deputy named Fred E. Bellmer took Wildey into custody as he walked down the stairs of the building that bore Rittenhouse's name.

In the days after the shooting, Wildey told the coroner's inquest that since his 1898 arrival in Santa Cruz that he'd felt "isolated" and that he'd set up an appointment with Rittenhouse to discuss whether the departure of Professor George Bond from his position as high school principal came after a campaign of rumors started by Rittenhouse.

Wildey also claimed that Rittenhouse had spread rumors that he was a communist and that during his meeting with Rittenhouse, the latter had insulted him (with a word he'd rather not repeat). As far as an explanation for the murder Wildey offered up what would become the next day's *Evening News* headline. "I lost my head and killed him."

Asked about Wildey, Louis Rittenhouse says that his grandfather was "on a list of people to kill that Wildey had in his pocket. He thought that doctors and lawyers had ruined the county. My grandfather's partner [Bert Snyder] was actually first on the list, but he wasn't in the office so unfortunately he shot EC."

On Feb. 4, 1948, superior court Judge James L. Atteridge declared that Wildey was insane and committed the murderer to Mendocino State Hospital in Ukiah. Wildey died while still in the custody of the state shortly after his committal in May 1948.

According to the *Sentinel's* Jan. 20, 1948 edition, Rittenhouse's estate, valued at more than \$250,000, was mainly distributed to his widow and three children. Donations to Stanford University the Salvation Army and the Congregational Church were also stipulated in the will. His son, E. Louis Rittenhouse, Louis' father, was bequeathed the law firm.

Emmet's second wife and widow, Opal, received a lifetime stipend of \$200 per month on the condition that she did not sell the family house on Ocean View Avenue—or ever remarry.

The Rittenhouse family built upon EC's burgeoning empire. In addition to the property on Church and Pacific, which had been an office building before it met its demise after the quake, the family now also holds the title of the Flatiron building at the end of Pacific and the Henry Willey Building in the 1400 block of Pacific where the Regional Transportation Commission and Chefworks are located. Their holdings also include a healthy number of residential and commercial properties scattered throughout the city.