

# Tragedy, Despotism Ruled The Cowells

(Editor's Note: This is another in a Sunday Sentinel series on historical buildings in the Santa Cruz area.)

By Margaret Koch  
Sentinel Staff Writer

Tragedy and a despotic patriarch ruled the lives of the five Cowell children.

They were not to marry. Only one did, and that didn't last long. A tragic death kept most of them away from their Santa Cruz home; one sister never set foot there between 1903 and 1950 when she died.

One wonders if the old Cowell home ever rang to the sound of laughter and youthful fun.

From the front porch of his Santa Cruz home, Henry Cowell could look straight down Bay street. Bay led to his big warehouse and wharf at the corner of Bay and West Cliff drive. Teams of oxen labored down Bay with wagons piled high with barrels of lime from Cowell's kilns.

The Cowells counted their wealth in the millions; they owned ranches and homes in many parts of California and the Pacific Northwest.

Henry Cowell was the first man to ship cement to California from Belgium and fire brick from England. He had the Midas touch: Everything turned to gold for him.

He also had his idea of how

life should be lived. And it didn't include marriage for his five children.

Ernest was the only one of the Cowell children to rebel and marry. He wed without family consent, of course, was ostracized, then re-instated in the family fold. Not much is known about him—the Cowells were "close-mouthed," as old timers put it. He attended University of California at Berkeley. He died young in 1911 at the family home in San Francisco.

Ernest Cowell did leave \$250,000 to UC for construction of Cowell infirmary on the Berkeley campus.

Henry Cowell, founder and patriarch of the Cowell clan in California, came to Santa Cruz in 1865. He and his wife Alice had five children: Isabella, Ernest (who married), Samuel H., Helen and Agnes. Samuel H., who was known as Harry, was born in San Rafael. He was four years old when the family came to Santa Cruz. Patriarch Henry had brought his family West from the family homestead near Boston. After looking around for a likely business, the canny Cowell settled on the lime industry.

For \$100,000 Cowell first bought out the interests of Albion P. Jordan. He also acquired the Jordan home which was then considerably smaller, and built on to the rear por-

tion of it making more room for his family. That is the home that still stands above the junction of Bay and High streets.

Jordan was Santa Cruz' pioneer lime industrialist; he came to California from Brunswick, Maine, in 1849. By 1853 he was in Santa Cruz with his partner, Isaac E. Davis, burning lime. Jordan built the house (exact date unknown) and with Davis established the first lime kilns. The kilns still exist near the cook house campus entrance of UCSC.

When Cowell bought out Jordan he not only acquired the home and kilns, but the old wharf down which barrels of lime were rolled to waiting ships, and Rincon Rancho. Rincon took in Paradise Park, the Felton Big Tree grove and several thousand acres of choice Santa Cruz County real estate.

In 1888 Davis died and Cowell bought the balance of the business for \$400,000. The lime burning operation was extended

to Rincon, just above Paradise Park.

The Cowell family moved out of Santa Cruz, bag and baggage, in 1897, according to the late George Cardiff. They moved into a San Francisco mansion at 2610 Jackson street, making frequent visits to the Santa Cruz ranch home.

The year of 1903 was a tragic one for the Cowells. Henry Cowell, iron-fisted father of the clan, died. And death struck again, taking young Agnes. In May of that year Agnes came down to the ranch to pick wild flowers; she was going to take a bouquet to her mother who was ill in San Francisco. With the housekeeper, Agnes started out in a buggy driving a high spirited horse she had been warned against.

In the hills above the ranch, a buggy wheel struck a rock. Agnes was thrown from the buggy and died of a broken neck. The Cowells sent a special train to Santa Cruz to carry

Agnes' body back to San Francisco for burial.

As a result of this accident, Isabella never set foot in Santa Cruz again. She and the other sister, Helen, lived as recluses on one of the family estates at Atherton during the last part of their lives. In 1932 Helen died. Isabella had their Atherton mansion smashed flat by a bulldozer. She padlocked the gate to the collapsed ruins and went to live in San Francisco with brother Harry. She died there in 1950.

Harry Cowell was the rancher and horseman of the family. As a boy he attended Bay View School, ran with a local hose cart team, and had a pet raccoon that ate hotcakes.

Harry did become engaged once, but never married. In preparation for his marriage he bought the Appleby mansion which stood on a hill above High street. Shortly after building it, Appleby died in a horse and buggy accident. After acquiring it from Mrs. Appleby, Harry Cowell's romance died on the

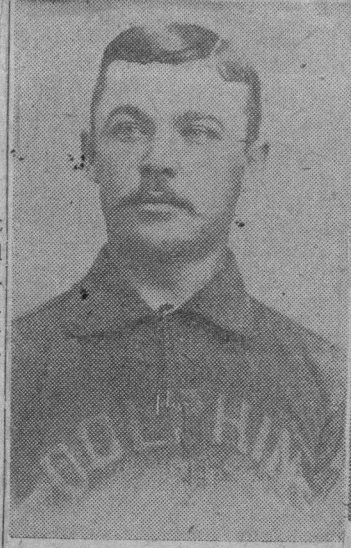
vine. The house stood vacant for years—all 12 rooms—labeled the "unlucky mansion" by localites. In the early 1950s, Cowell finally sold the house and surrounding property to H. A. Sundean.

Harry died in San Francisco on February 1, 1955, just six months after giving 1623 acres of Santa Cruz County redwoods to the State of California. His gift made possible the Henry Cowell Redwoods State Park, in memory of his father.

However, this was not to be the Cowell family's last gift to California. Six years after Harry's death, the Cowell Foundation made the generous offer of the Cowell ranch to the University of California for a Santa Cruz campus.

In the intervening years, the old home on the ranch was lived in by ranch manager Frank George and Mrs. George, then by the local business manager George Cardiff and Mrs. Cardiff.

In 1964, before he died, Car-



Harry Cowell



Ernest Cowell

diff estimated the house to be 110 or 112 years old.

The home is vacant today, high on the campus hill behind the twin rows of cypress trees which line its drive.

## SV PROPERTY OWNERS TO MEET

The Scotts Valley Property Owners Association will meet tomorrow at 7:30 p.m. at Scotts Valley School. It will be the first meeting under the direction of the new officers.



The Cowell house was originally the Jordan house, built by Albion P. Jordan, pioneer

Santa Cruz lime industrialist. Henry Cowell, patriarch of the

prominent California lime and cement family, bought it

along with Jordan's business. Artist Will Shepherd made the pen and ink sketch.