

# The history behind the Judge Julius Lee house



That Was  
Watsonville

## Betty Lewis

*Editor's note: This column is being reprinted in memory of Betty Lewis. Her interest in the house (pictured) was the beginning of her research of the Pajaro Valley.*

"Judge Lee's cottage is reaching up into the air and is up-to-date in every way and is entirely new to this section in its architectural design. W.H. Weeks is the architect and J.S. Jennings is the builder. The foundation of granite is a solid structure and far superior to wood or birch."  
— The Pajaronian, 1894.

One hundred years old in 1994, the Judge Lee house is the first known house to be designed by architect Weeks in Watsonville. Weeks came to town several years earlier to design a Christian church and the town's first high school building. The Lee house was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1980. The structure is painted in six colors and has been featured in several national books on Victorian homes.

Featured in the two-story, with basement, structure is a second-story balcony, projecting circular tower with conical roof, a slanted bull's eye window, relief work on tower frieze and a recessed entryway with an oak and beveled glass doorway, which is graced on either side by two ladies in flowing gowns in plaster relief. The stained-glass windows original to the house were removed prior to its sale and the present windows were designed and made by the present owner. There are two tiled fireplaces, ornate inlaid floors and lincrusta wainscoting in the hallway and up the stairs. The stairway boasts two window seats located under stained glass windows.

After coming to Watsonville in 1862, the judge lived in a house on Carr Street (now the site of Dr. John King's office). Then Lee purchased two narrow lots on East Third (Beach) Street across from the first Wat-

sonville hospital. One parcel of land had belonged to Dr. Will Rodgers who lived next door; the cost was \$10 in gold coin. The adjoining lot was purchased from the neighbors on the other side, June Fletcher and Josephine Brunson, who were sisters. The price of this lot was \$560, giving Lee a narrow plot of land measuring 50 by 300 feet upon which the Queen Anne Victorian house was built.

Judge Lee was married in 1869 to Marcella Elmore, a Watsonville school teacher. They had one son, Elmore, who married Sadie Hawthorne in 1897. This marriage ended in divorce and he then married Minnie Hansen of Salinas (he had jilted her when he married Sadie) in 1911, the year after Judge Lee died. Elmore had no children by either wife. His mother died in 1915, and Elmore died in 1938. Minnie continued living in the house until 1962, when she was moved to a rest home in Salinas, where she died in 1972.

Minnie Lee was a very frightened woman when she lived in the Judge's house after her husband, Elmore, died and she had locks put on the entire interior connecting doors in the house. She slept on a cot in the back utility room to be closer to the men's boarding house extension next door. She also had a magnificent garden in back of the house where she raised prize-winning dahlias, many of

which she sent to relatives in Salinas.

Judge Julius Lee was born in Connecticut in 1829 and attended Allegheny College and was Salutatorian of his class and Valedictorian of his college society. He went on to teach Greek and Latin at Washington College, Tennessee. At age 27, Lee entered a law office in Vicksburg, Miss., and was admitted to the bar during this time.

His house in Watsonville at 128 E. Beach St. stood empty until 1966, when this writer and her husband, Monte, purchased the property. The front portion of the house was converted into offices for Lewis Associates and the Watsonville Mortgage Company in 1990. On the back of the house was an extension built in the 1920s. This was torn down in 1991 and two bedrooms and two baths were built replacing an old utility room, and half bath. A three-car garage and a two-bedroom apartment were built on the back of the property with a parking area behind that off of Trafton Street.

In 1982, the Santa Cruz Organization for Progress and Euthenics awarded the Judge Lee house an award for excellence calling it a "Victorian Masterpiece" after it was painted the six colors. The house is also on the city's historical list and has been awarded historical plaques by the Pajaro Valley Historical Association and the

Santa Cruz Historical Trust. The house stands as a monument not only to its original owner, Judge Julius Lee, but also the architect, William Henry Weeks, and is a reminder of our earlier heritage and Victorian architecture.

"In the passing of this old resident (Judge Lee) of Watsonville the people of this community lost not alone the sight of a familiar figure, but association with one whose presence was an honor, whose acquaintance was a pleasure, and whose friendship was of inestimable value." — The Pajaronian, March 28, 1910.

The late Louise Worthington once told this writer of a couple's arrival at the front door of the very staid judge who remarked: "If we had only known; if I had even perceived it was going to be such a storm as this, we never would have ventured forth."

Lee, a tall, thin man, always walked with a slight stoop, and when questioned about this, he replied, "Did you ever notice that in a field of grain all of the full, ripe heads are drooped, while those with nothing in them stand up proudly above the others?"

The Judge Lee house came through the 1906 earthquake with flying colors. Fortunately, when the 1989 earthquake hit, a new foundation had been installed under the house several weeks before!



This house, located at 128 E. Beach St., was owned by Judge Julius Lee.

Courtesy of  
Betty Lewis