

McCray Hotel overlooks a varied history of use

by MARGARET KOCH
Sentinel correspondent

ALMOST ONE hundred years ago, it was called Sunshine Villa and the name is back in style today. Maybe.

The most recent owners of the McCray Hotel, high on Beach Hill, Michael O'Hearn and Clancy Becker, are proposing a 163-bed senior residential care facility for the historic structure.

The Villa, known for years as the McCray, from its vantage point looks north over downtown Santa Cruz to the mountains and south over Monterey Bay. And the hotel's history has had almost as many ups and downs as the tempestuous waters of the bay.

The hotel is just one of a remaining handful of imposing structures that grace Beach Hill. It was twice a private home and three times a hotel. Originally there were two acres of velvety lawn where life-size iron deer browsed amid other statues and flower beds. In those days gardeners worked for the love of it — almost. So did domestic help that ranged from a Chinese cook to the live-in maids and housekeeper.

THE HOME that became Sunshine Villa was built by a distinguished physician, Dr. Francis M. Kittredge, who came to Santa Cruz in 1851. He had graduated from Dartmouth Medical School and practiced for 20 years on the East coast before coming west. In Santa Cruz, he met and married the young daughter of Judge William Blackburn, and he had the house built for her, probably in the early 1860s although the actual date is lost. Dr. Kittredge didn't enjoy his marriage or his fine home for long; he died in 1879.

A glance at history

Then for a few years, the place was operated as The Kittredge House by J.B. Peeks, who also operated the Sea Beach Hotel and the well-known Pacific Ocean House.

The Villa's fortunes changed again in 1890 when J. Philip Smith came to Santa Cruz with his fortune made in distributing foods internationally. He brought with him his socially ambitious wife and her daughter, Anita Gonzales. Mrs. Smith was the former Susan Crooks of Santa Cruz. They looked around for a suitable mansion befitting their station in life, purchased the Kittredge home and named it Sunshine Villa.

There, the Smiths entertained lavishly with lawn parties, teas, balls, musicals and elaborate dinners. The 30-room home became known as one of Santa Cruz's showplaces, where visiting dignitaries were wined and dined. Smith's pocketbook seemed to have no bottom. Anita, his stepdaughter, was the focal point of much of the entertaining; she had reached the age when well-heeled young women made their social debut.

Mrs. Smith was busy too. She made the acquaintance of Mrs. Lucy McCann who suggested, delicately no doubt, that a Venetian Water Carnival on the San Lorenzo River would be a smashing way to introduce Anita to society. The river was dammed and a spectacular three-day and night water show was planned at a series of conferences at Sunshine Villa.

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Queen and Anita was named Queen of the Water Carnival. At the time, it was said by friends that Mr. Smith was "a person of fierce energy and ready purse." He needed both, having offered to foot the bill for everything the citizens would not or could not pay for. The Carnival included elaborate floats, tableaux, band concerts, balls and parties galore, and strings of those new-fangled electric lights along the river banks. It was dammed at the curve just below Beach Hill to form a lagoon.

THE SMITHS lived at Sunshine Villa until about 1920 when a group of locals, headed by postmaster Fred R. Howe, bought it. They sold it in 1926 to Mr. and Mrs. John McCray, who had operated a hotel in Paso Robles before coming to Santa Cruz to run the Gral 1943 when he sold it to C.B. Bender, a local jeweler, for \$28,000.

Bender kept it briefly, then sold to a person named Schmidt for \$30,000. In 1945, Schmidt sold it to a Mr. Lieberman for \$55,000. In 1955, Lieberman sold it to Porter Kilpatrick for about \$50,000.

The Kilpatricks operated a hotel-apartment house there and retained the McCray name, but in 1985 offered it for sale at \$1.5 million. Things stood still for about three years before it sold.

The new owners, O'Hearn and Becker, propose smaller new structures on the remaining 1.3-acre property in addition to remodeling the main house. Plans await final approval.



Latest owners have proposed a senior residential care facility for the now-abandoned hotel.