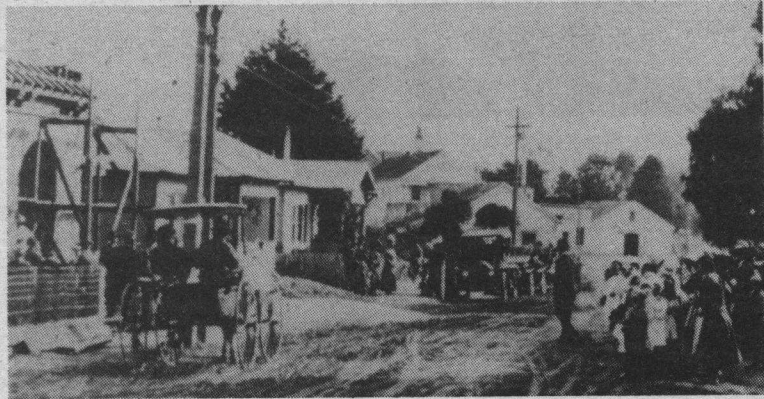


BEHIND the HEADLINES: Losing a Piece of History

By Carolyn Swift

Another landmark bit the dust in Downtown Santa Cruz a few weeks ago, and like most things and people grown very old, it failed to receive the respect it deserved.

The Hugo Hihn Flatiron, at the northern corner of the block, was among the first permanent buildings constructed downtown. When new, it sat at the juncture of Main and Willow streets (later to become Front Street and Pacific Avenue). Here the flatiron was a backdrop for history both ordinary and sensational. For instance, it's the place where Santa Cruz County's



historically most successful businessman and first millionaire, Frederick Augustus Hihn, is said to have spent the first days of his marriage in the late 1850s.

Recently, I also learned the Flatiron building's upper floor was for several years the Santa Cruz County Courthouse and jail. One night in 1865, 18-year-old Pedro Lorenzana was taken from his cell by vigilantes, dragged to the wharf and thrown off with weights on his feet and legs. Young Lorenzana had been an accomplice in the killing of Andrew Jackson "Jack" Sloan; he was guarded that night by

Sloan's brother, who was "overpowered" by the mob.

The lower part of the building was first occupied by I. Blaum's General Merchandise, and later the Tanner Drug Store. In the basement was a saloon, closed in 1878, "because underground bars had gone out of style," noted John Chase in *The Sidewalk Companion* to Santa Cruz Architecture.

This is a very short commentary on the building unceremoniously scraped away early this month. Perhaps it was time to go, but it should still be given a salute, I think, for standing up all those years through fires, floods, earthquakes, the

coming and going of wars, the celebrations, protests and parades. Like many old things, it was attractive once, but no one was around who remembered.

Chase's book, written in 1975, is a real heartbreaker to glance through in these post-earthquake days. Being one who wishes to hear nothing more about quakes, I've still got one little story:

A boss of mine once told me the town of San Juan Bautista sits so close to the fault line that it never really stops shaking. Now as everyone has so recently been reminded, San Juan has its

own unique and practical approach to doing things. On the main street of the business district is a bench, called the Liars' Bench, where folks gather to pass the day with embellished tales. The smooth seat is neatly fitted with a seatbelt long enough to hold two or three oldtimers firmly in place through wild tall tales and the shakes of everyday life.

One old local building thankfully still in place (due to no small amount of community effort) is the Soquel Porter Memorial Library. Cornerstone for this historic structure was set 80 years ago, Oct. 19, 1912.

The library and its history are worth mentioning now in tribute to the woman who helped keep it alive after the passage of Proposition 13 in 1978. Mona Blankholm, leader of the drive to unite the community and save its library, died last month in Oregon.

When it was first announced in July, 1978, that Soquel Library would be among the low-circulation branches aced from the Santa Cruz City-County Public Library System, Mona quickly appeared with a 1912 agreement made with William T. and Mary Porter Sesnon to provide a free public library on that site. It was the Sesnons who provided land, their own architects—Ward and Blome of San Francisco—and fundraising opportunities to help the Soquel Ladies Improvement Club build the Porter Street library in memory of Mary's parents, Benjamin Franklin and Kate Hubbard Porter. The stones of its fireplace were carried from Soquel Creek by Soquel school children and the library completed and dedicated in January, 1913; it had been open continuously (except for a brief



period following the 1955 flood) until 1978.

Soquel's library was reopened in November that year. Blankholm, convinced the townspeople would continue to support the branch, fought for better hours, appealed for volunteers to paint and repair the interior, and organized a re-enactment of the cornerstone dedication on Oct. 19, 1979. The next month, the Save Soquel Library Committee became the Porter Memorial Library Board of Directors, led by Blankholm.

In 1980, budget problems connected to Proposition 13 again forced the closing of Soquel Library. Blankholm mobilized the community to sustain the library on a volunteer basis. Descendants of the Sesnons, Lee and Nell Cliff, came forward with a donation to get that effort get started (and have since made contributions to help keep it alive in the hard times after the 1982 flood and 1989 earthquake).

The result is that Soquel Library is still independent, alive and well, after 80 years—through exactly the kind of community spirit that built it in the first place. Last year, the Santa Cruz County Historical Trust awarded the building landmark status. However, longtime volunteer coordinator Lynn Coker says the tiny library is open

through private donations and can use all the help it can get. Volunteers, book and material donations, services, labor and other supports are welcome.

Since this column seems to be filled with tributes and farewells, one more is due, to a man who active many years in building Capitola as a city. John Macdonald, 66, died Oct. 3 in Santa Cruz. He'd retired last year from Macdonald Realty in the village and moved with his wife, Alice Crump Macdonald, to Kelseyville.

Macdonald and his brother, Bradley M. Macdonald, were raised in this area (as were their parents), and played important roles in the establishment of this municipality. John had worked with Brad in the early days of the Shadowbrook Restaurant and later the Saba Nightclub on the Esplanade. Over the years, he helped float the early begonia festivals; was active with the Capitola Chamber of Commerce and provided guidance for continued existence of the Capitola Historical Museum (serving several years as its curator).

As a participant in historic moments and as a contributor to the archives of Santa Cruz County, John Macdonald deserves a heartfelt thanks. □