

New life nears for old hall

By **ROBIN MUSITELLI**

Sentinel staff writer

APTOS — Valencia Hall, a relic of the town of Valencia that no longer exists, is working its way back to its beginnings.

Volunteers are building a porch on the one-time community center and general store. Watsonville Construction will build a 460-square-foot addition with bathrooms and a kitchen in the next few months after the county Board of Supervisors accepted its low bid of \$135,200 on Tuesday.

The goal is to return the venerable old hall to a community center, complete with Girl Scout and Cub Scout meetings, according to Barry Samuel, Santa Cruz County Parks Department director. The post office next door will become a museum.

Valencia Hall is one of only two buildings left from legendary timber man and builder Frederick Hihn. It was built in 1882 as a general store for the center of Hihn's thriving timber town.

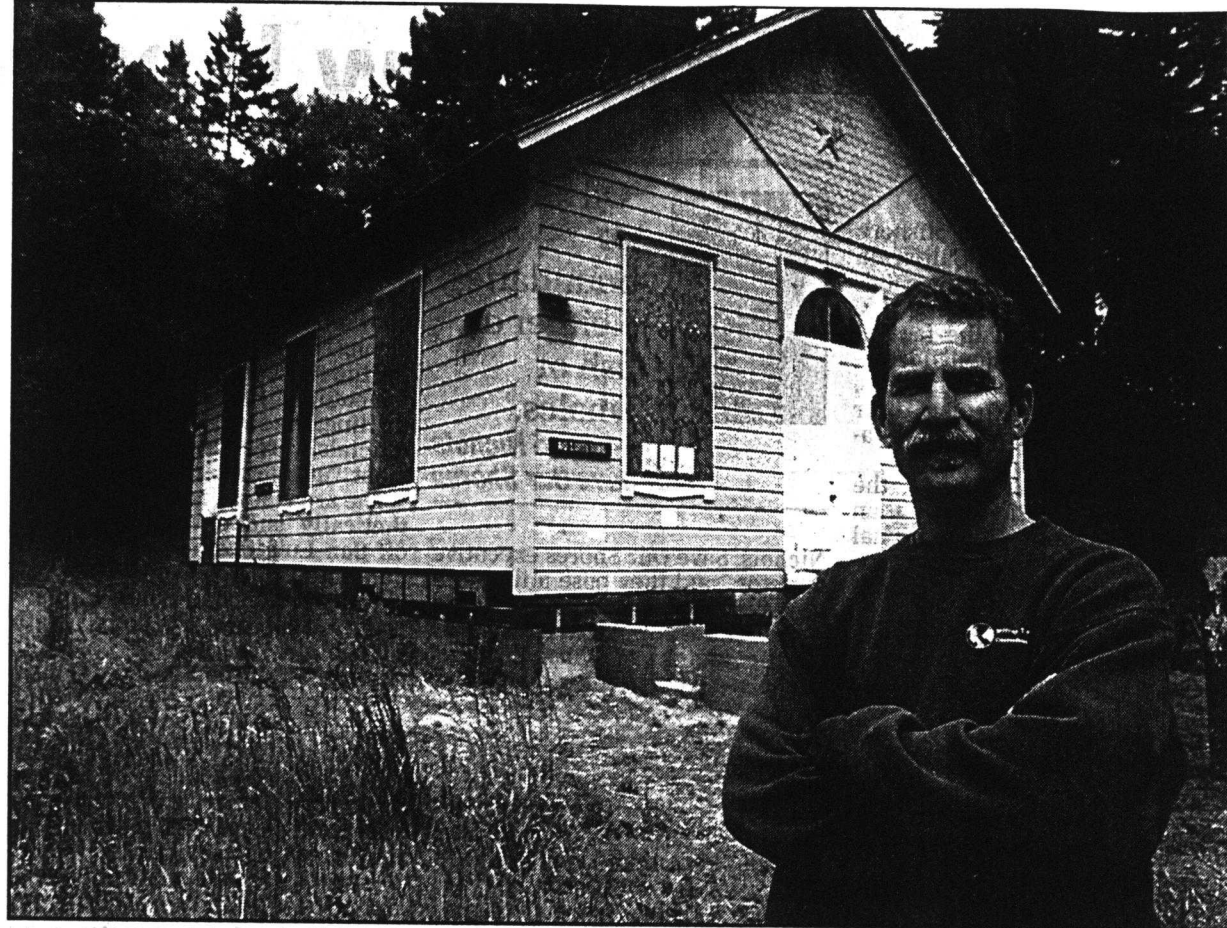
The store had provisions for lumberjacks, mill workers and their families, all of whom worked to feed redwoods to the Valencia Sawmill. Hihn owned that, too.

A high roller, Hihn also built and sold the original Capitola, and developed Felton and Aptos, putting in wagon roads, water systems and banks.

In those days, Hihn had an eight-mile-long railroad built from the area to the present day Aptos Village to haul lumber out of the hills.

The hall was a community center back then, with dancing girls from Watsonville and Santa Cruz entertaining on weekends.

It was used as a church, a school, for dances and social events, according to old news clippings.



Jeff Talmadge is one of many volunteers who are putting life back into historic Valencia Hall. Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

The lumber mill, and consequently the hall, was at its heyday in the 1880s and 1890s. When the community logged itself out of existence, the dancing in the hall stopped, too.

The mill closed in 1902, and apples were planted where redwoods once grew. The hall was used briefly as a residence, but then was transformed to reflect the new lifeblood of the area. It became the meeting place for the Valencia Farm Bureau and base for 4-H groups.

The hall changed hands again when the farm bureau deeded the hall to Santa Cruz County in 1976. It was closed in disrepair in 1986.

Three years later, the Loma Prieta earthquake slightly damaged it. A bigger threat came from

Valencia Creek, when the eroded creek bed started to consume the hall.

Last year, volunteers, led by Pat Manning of Aptos, stepped in to move the building across the road onto a foundation at the corner of Valencia and Bear Valley Roads and on to a foundation. It was a \$122,500 project done for about \$6,000 plus materials.

The work is continuing this summer. Last weekend, contractor Jeff Talmadge, who lives across the street, and a handful of carpenters

started putting porches on the hall and on the post office.

The kitchen, bathrooms, heating and electrical work come next.

Bids have also gone out for drainage work. Next year, work will be done on the hall's septic tank. The hall will also be painted, said Samuel.

The restoration was made possible by a combination of Measure E earthquake repair money and Historic Preservation Office grants, said Samuel.