

LE
1970 5-1580'S

A look inside the walls of 200-block businesses

By ELIZABETH SCHILLING
STAFF WRITER

The black-and-white photo makes a stark statement about Main Street merchant Juana Ortiz.

The well-dressed young woman stands beside a round rack of garments in her tiny clothing store, Casa Ortiz, the walls crammed with neatly hung clothes. Her stance shows the pride of a defender who has at last staked out a territory; but her cautious smile hints of worry.

All this is in the heart of Juana Ortiz. And one moment of it has been captured by Fred Chamberlain in his photographic essay, "The 200 Block."

The display premiered Tuesday at the Volck Museum, revealing the people inside the dilapidated buildings on the 200 block of Main Street that will soon be demolished by the city.

The city is buying out or moving the merchants from the first two blocks of Main Street in order to pave the way for construction of a post office as part of a redevelopment plan.

City leaders say the blocks are a blight, but Chamberlain's photographs reveal an active business community with a loyal clientele.

Comments from the people viewing the photos ranged from "This breaks my heart" to "I had no idea people worked in those buildings."

Chamberlain is a Pajaro Valley native who as a child was told that the 200 block was off-limits. There is delight in his voice as he tells of his discovery that such fears were — and are — unfounded.

Chamberlain has returned to the area to begin a portrait studio, after having achieved commercial success on the East Coast. He was commissioned by the Pajaro Valley Historical Association to record the block's internal workings before the area is obliterated into mere memory.

The caption below Ortiz' picture tells of her concern for her future:

"Business has been slow ... I expect that I will have to sell these clothes at the flea market when we get shut down. Before I was a sales person I worked in the fields. The previous owner offered me this opportunity so that I would not have to return to the fields."

Chamberlain, assisted by his bilingual wife Martha, said they encountered no resistance during the month they made visits to 22 businesses on the condemned block.

"They opened up easily to us," said Martha. "They saw it



Fred Chamberlain

Juana Ortiz won't have her store much longer.

as a chance to share their feelings of abandonment and helplessness. Many of them do not understand the decision from City Hall."

Mixed with the discouragement, she said, is also a feeling of pride among the merchants.

"They have an important business for their cultural group. They know they are providing a necessary service, not luxury items. They wonder, if they aren't there, who will feed the workers and cater to the migrant and Mexican population?"

That wonderment, mixed with some anger, can be seen on the face of Gabino Lopez, the owner of the 265 Club, in a photograph where he leans against the daytime-empty bar. The statement below his picture explains the service he offers his customers:

"When the men come in from the fields they need a place to relax, to talk, to forget the

day's work. Where will they go to meet friends now? La Manzana? The Mansion House? The Elks Club?"

Most of the photo captions speak of personal concerns of the store owners. But in his statement, Dick Wong, an owner of Daylite Market, places the redevelopment of lower Main Street into a broader community perspective.

"He (City Manager John Radin) just wants to clean up this side of town. The post office was originally supposed to go on Green Valley Extension, but he changed the zoning laws and put it here. Radin does what he wants to do. It's nothing which is printed, but it is something which is just known in the area."

Chamberlain said the feeling of being left out of Watsonville's mainstream was held by most 200-block merchants.



Carlos Jambora gives a rancher a shave in his Model Barber Shop, a business he has operated on the 200 block since 1937.

— from page 1

"They believe there is a hidden agenda in what the city is doing, with the goal of getting rid of Mexicans. They sense a racial prejudice in what is going on," said Chamberlain.

More than 60 people turned out at the wine-and-cheese reception held at the museum. The Chamberlains said they chose the Tuesday-night date because many of the merchants photographed said it would be a convenient time to attend.

However, none of the people photographed came to the show.

Among the photos are some which reveal the decor and staff of several restaurants.

A photo of Mr. and Mrs. Kim Wong, who have operated the

Star Cafe for 35 years, also reveals the restaurant's immaculate interior and its soft, cozy booths.

Other pictures of long-established 200-block businesses include one of R&M Bookkeeping and Tax Service, which has served Spanish-speaking taxpayers for 15 years.

The rich contrast in the photo converts the routine office setting — complete with copying machine, flowers, file boxes and a no-smoking sign — into a striking scene.

In another picture, an almost sullen look is depicted on the faces of workers inside the shop of P.J. Freiermuth Sheet Metal and Well Casing Manufacturers. Roy Large now runs the business, which his family has

operated at the same location since 1882. His statement reflects a strong resentment:

"We're damn lucky to come out of this and survive."

Not all 200-block merchants are heavy-hearted about being pushed from the scene. Joe Esparza, owner of Freedom Brake and Alignment, is caught smiling in the midst of his work.

Having owned the 42-year-old business for the last three years, Esparza appears to be a man who can roll with the punches:

"I don't see this as a bad thing. Sometimes when there is progress people get hurt. For me this is an opportunity to stop and decide what I want to do. When I first knew of this plan I immediately relocated my family to San Antonio, Texas."

In reviewing the show, Chamberlain returns again to the picture of Juana Ortiz.

"This one is my favorite, because of the story she tells," Chamberlain said. "We know what she has gone through and where she will go. Hers is a classic story: She struggles and struggles and struggles, and just as she is about to take off, someone pulls the rug out from under her."