

# FOTO FINISH

## OPERA HOUSE

**S**anta Cruzans sat on kitchen chairs for the opening performance at the Opera House in Santa Cruz on November 23, 1877. The production was "The Bohemian Girl" with the Hitchings-Bernard Opera Company.

The first night's take was \$600, and the total after four performances was still an impressive \$1,100. Jock Merrill (bartender) managed "a rushing business" in a little bar at the front corner. People were so pleased to have an opera house that a bunko artist named A.B. "Budd" Smith was able to persuade Santa Cruzans to back a stock company. A leading man and leading lady were hired, and for the first week all was well.

The first week was really all there was, however. Even an extension of credit for a Shakespearean performance could not inspire an audience. The kitchen chairs were soon empty.

In 1887, the opera house was bought by Benjamin Knight, Jr. He was an esteemed resident of



The Opera House in Santa Cruz eventually became the Capitola Garage.

Santa Cruz since the early 1870s. Knight was named Santa Cruz County Physician in 1880, and was elected state senator a few years later. While a busy man, Dr. Knight evidently considered culture an important part of community life.

He replaced the kitchen chairs of the Opera House with cast iron theater seats that had upholstered

cushions. The building became known as Knight's Opera House, and regarded as a significant asset to the community.

Entertainment ran from boxing matches to shows of "The Red Stocking Blondes," for men only. Plays, minstrel companies and musical soloists varied the fare. According to the late historian Leon Rowland, among the list of

greats were Jack London, Josh Billings, political cartoonist Thomas Nast and heavyweight boxing champion John L. Sullivan.

One of the last stars to appear here did so at the very start of her career. Zasu Pitts was still a Santa Cruz High School student when she first walked up on the Opera House stage.

The early days of silent film ended the career of Knight's Opera House, but the building itself was saved. Its timbers — redwood from local mills — were dismantled in 1921 and moved by Henry Peterson and Harvey West to Capitola. Reconstructed at the corner of Capitola and Stockton avenues, the garage was known by 1924 as the Capitola Garage, owned by Peterson and Gross. It was remodeled that year to handle repairs for 125 automobiles.

Over the next 40 years, the garage had a number of uses, including a pottery factory and discount clothing store. It was by the 1960s one of the larger and older buildings in town. Unfortunately, it was also one of the first to be torn down when Capitola pondered ways to revitalize its economy when the beach disappeared in 1964. The site, oddly enough, was next used for a musical show held during that year's Capitola Begonia Festival. Unknowingly, the folk singers offered one last song for the old Opera House. □