

## Church in the Sky...

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Sentinel Staff Writer

High in the Santa Cruz Mountains, with a bird's-eye view of the entire southern portion of Santa Cruz County, is Skyland Community Church.

The church stands in the center of the early mountain Highland-Skyland fruit-raising area. Prune orchards have given way to subdivisions and new homes. Remaining apple trees are mossy with age and a few bright persimmons hang like golden globules in the mountainside orchards.

Skyland Church is probably the closest church to heaven in Santa Cruz County. Located at an elevation of slightly more than 2000 feet, it is about a mile uphill from Old San Jose Road, and nearly four miles from the junction of Highway 17 with Summit Road, at the flashing light.

According to information from Walter B. Young, an oldtime resident, the Highland-Skyland area's first worship services were held in 1880 at Highland Hall.

In 1887-88, families of the area got together and decided they needed a real church.

There was no money, but each family donated what it could — cash, labor or materials. The land for the church was donated by Judge George Miller — Miller Road was named for his family. Carpenters who built the church included the designer, D.M. Clough; Jerome Bassett and John Berkenshaw.

Area residents put down their ploughs and took up hammers and saws to assist in the construction.

Lumber for the building was donated by Jerd Comstock for whom Comstock Mill Road was named. The Glenwood Lumber Company also donated building materials.

The church was finally completed and served as a much needed meeting place

for the mountain community. A Rev. Mitchell, who promoted its construction, served as the first pastor, followed by the Revs. Sears, Wright and Norton.

Early deacons were Carl Allen, D.M. Clough and J.E. Bassett. By 1902 the village of Skyland consisted of the church, a post office, general store, winery, Highland School, the H.F. Lawrence Box Mill, Hotel de Redwood, Hotel Milton-Mount and many homes.

All money for early-day church improvements came from socials of all kinds put on by the hard-working ladies of the church. Dinners and box-suppers were the mainstays, also serving as social get-togethers.

After World War II a series of Harvest Festivals was started as the main fund-raising activity. A Sunday School addition was constructed in 1960 by men of the church when there were fewer than 50 members.

Whitaker Hall, a recreation and social center, was built in 1964-65 and church membership has grown to more than 60 today.

Early church records were lost, but visiting Presbyterian ministers conducted services until 1920. At present the church is Congregational. The American Sunday School Union sponsored the Sunday school until 1950.

In 1945 a mountain resident, Henry Von Der Mehden, who held the church and community in great esteem, paid off the mortgage and presented the church property to the community. An independent non-profit corporation was formed with a board of trustees holding title to the landmark church property.

In a way this story of the church mortgage is typical of the little mountain community.

While some areas of Santa Cruz county were known as "feudin' country," and there were quite a few of those, the Highland-Skyland area was known as a place where neighbor helped neighbor — for the good of all.

### Landmark: What Now?



Skyland Community Church, high in the mountains, has a history of families working together. It is particularly proud of its single beautiful stained glass window and its bell. The bell was a gift from a visitor from the East Coast who shipped it — collect — to his Skyland host, J.B. King, who was not exactly a confirmed church-goer, according to old stories. King finally paid the freight which was considerable, and the bell was installed.

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