

This old house

Historic Houses - So. County

Fair organizers hope to rebuild, showcase historic Victorian

By **TRINA KLEIST**

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WATSONVILLE — Supporters turned out in droves last year to save a Victorian farmhouse from a demolition crew. Now, Dimitra Smith, County Fair director, is hoping they will help put the Rodgers house back on its foundation.

Once the home of author John Steinbeck's sister, the home now sits in pieces at the entrance to the Santa Cruz County Fairgrounds. The second story rests on pilings behind the first. The four-story tower has been hewn in two. Plywood covers the windows.

"The longer it sits there, the harder it is to get it back together," Smith said. "Now we need those people who stood in line and testified (at public hearings on the house's fate) to come and support it financially."

Some already have.

George Rider, of H.A. Rider & Sons, has agreed to excavate for the foundation. Granite Construction Co. will bring fill dirt to even out a slope at the end of the horse-shoe-shaped drive where the house will be reunited. Other companies and individuals have volunteered materials, services and time.

But Smith also needs to raise about \$85,000 to put the house back on its foundation and \$250,000 more to assemble the pieces in time for the County Fair, which opens Sept. 14 and is expected to draw more than 70,000 visitors.

The six-bedroom home was built in the Southern style in 1870 at 832 East Lake Ave. Local architect James Waters designed it for Tennessee native James Rodgers, whose father and grandfather served in the War of 1812.

Rodgers and his wife, Malvina Gilbreath, came to Central Cali-

fornia in 1853, returned to Tennessee in 1855, then crossed the Great Plains back to California. They settled in the Pajaro Valley in 1867, according to historian Betty Lewis.

Rodgers' grandson, Carroll Rodgers, married Esther Steinbeck, and the couple raised their children in the family home.

And there begins a sentimental connection for Melanie Kett, whose late father, Stewart, bought the house after Esther Rodgers died in 1986.

"My mother was a childhood friend of Mrs. Rodgers' daughter," Melanie Kett said. "She would go to the house to play as a child."

Last year, the Ketts sold the property beneath the house to the Rite Aid Corp. When the building's fate was thrown into doubt, would-be purchasers called from around the country hoping to acquire it.

"It's a small town, but we're proud of our history. I didn't want to see the house leave Watsonville," Kett said. So, after months of discussions with local officials, she donated the house to the fairgrounds and paid for its November move, estimated to have cost about \$70,000.

The fair's budget has no money for either the reconstruction or maintenance of the house, Smith said, so she has returned to the community for support.

On the building's aged white siding, marks remain where a vine once climbed and pulled off the paint. Dusty blue plastic covers once-elegant lines.

But Smith imagines the house becoming the backdrop to showcase gardens and a visitor center that could draw tourists to the Pajaro Valley.

"There are photographs of other homes published in books and magazines," Smith said. "We want to get people in California to appreciate this area as well."



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

County Fair Director Dimitra Smith inspects the condition of the Rodgers House, on jacks in the fairgrounds parking lot, waiting for restoration efforts to begin.