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Casual inquiries led

By BETTE BROWN

Betty Lewis, mother of four grown children, wife of an investment broker, didn't really appreciate antiques of Victorians until four years ago when her curiosity was piqued by the family's East Beach Street home.

What that curiosity led to is partly reflected in a book about Watsonville, due for publication in December.

She'll be able to supply research data for several books in the future judging from those first four years of concentrated effort in ferreting out historical data in south Santa Cruz County.

Like most hobbies this came about casually.

She and her husband, Monte, moved to Watsonville 10 years ago, living first in Corralitos, before buying the 1894 Victorian house at 128 East Beach St.

"I have always wanted an old house," she explains today.

But Mrs. Lewis didn't really fathom the influence that house would have on her lifestyle at the time. She simply liked the unique styling and the comfortable feel of the two story home, within walking distance of downtown Watsonville.

There are four children, Christine Lewis who lives in Aromas; Marcie, wife of ser-

viceman Robert Plank, in Germany; Michael Lewis who is studying law at UC Santa Barbara, and Kelly who is working in Germany.

The first grandchild, Heidi, 10-months-old, was born in Germany, becoming Marcie and Robert Plank's first-born.

Turning the family pages back to Betty Lewis' youth, she was born June 21, 1925, in Fresno, the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Roy Bagby. There were two brothers. Her father was manager of a savings and loan in Santa Cruz.

Her husband-to-be, Monte Lewis, made his home in Corralitos where his future wife spotted him one day on a bus.

"I was on the bus going to school at Hartnell Junior College and Monte got on in Freedom. The bus stopped right in front of his house," she recalls.

In time the two got acquainted and their marriage took place Jan. 11, 1946, in a Presbyterian church in Reno.

For years her husband worked for American Can Co. until an East Coast assignment was offered, at which time he decided to strike out on his own in the investment field, as a counselor.

"Monte thought it would be great to be self employed and go back to his hometown. We are both glad we did. We love Watsonville,"

Mrs. Lewis said.

As a homemaker and busy mother, Mrs. Lewis occupied herself with the usual duties, taking part in church and school activities. As the children grew older, she took part-time jobs, working in the office at Watsonville Canning, for Manpower, and the United Presbyterian Church. She was a "Pink Lady" for three years, doing volunteer work at Watsonville Hospital.

Some 15 foreign exchange students periodically were housed in the old Victorian over the years as the Lewises served as hosts for them on short stays.

Then in 1972 a wave of pride swept through Watsonville owners of Victorian houses and a renewed interest was manifested by the townspeople including Betty Lewis in their unique homes.

She was invited to attend a meeting of the Pajaro Valley Historical Association by Clara Dickson the same year.

"I must admit that the membership at the time was mostly the old timers who were older people. This was no problem for me since I have always enjoyed older persons," she recalls. Today there are 200 members.

At the same period, Mrs. Lewis idly drew a map one day of the location of her Victorian, placing it in relationship with neighboring old houses. It signalled the birth of a natural researcher.

From that moment on, her interest has been unassuaged.

The most pressing question of the first phase was to learn about the house the Lewises lived in. This led to trips to Salinas to the former owners, to cemeteries, to libraries, and wherever the trail led. Not content with the knowledge about their own home, she broadened the research to include her neighbors'. She cast her eyes across the street, then up and down the thoroughfare.

Meeting with the historical society members led to further research with Mrs. Lewis cooperating with the others in broadening their store of knowledge about the history of Pajaro Valley. She served as curator at the William H. Volck Memorial Museum, getting acquainted with the artifacts and historical data stored there.

On and on the research developed, taking Mrs. Lewis into one neighborhood after another, usually taping interviews, but more often recording in her now bulging notebooks. She is a precise recorder of detail, listening closely for variations in accounts coming to her from persons whose memories are often vague on details.

To double-check historical details, she spent hours in newspaper offices, both here and in nearby communities, scanning the news pages of 100 years ago, and taking copious notes.

A strong identity kept turning up almost everywhere Mrs. Lewis went. It was the early architect William H. Weeks whose prodigious works are to be found throughout the city and the state. She began keeping records on the architect's buildings and his family's background, gradually uncovering records that revealed more of the man's



A few weeks after the publisher forwarded the first draft of Betty Lewis' book, she's finding it hard to remain calm. It's her first hard back volume but she's written for other publications.

to exhaustive research



Betty Lewis, author of a new book on Watsonville being published in December, in front of the Victorian home that inspired her new career.

architectural achievements than it did his personal life. Then she located Weeks' daughter, Alice Weeks Halsall, in San Francisco who is now cooperating with Mrs. Lewis on a future manuscript about her father.

She found that a former Watsonville resident, Charles Marinovich, now of Berkeley was also intrigued by the Victorian era architect and had conducted extensive research on the man. Marinovich turned over his findings to the William H. Volck Memorial Museum and Mrs. Lewis said the noted were "a great source of new information."

"My next project will be on all local architects who figures in the early development of Pajaro Valley, including Weeks," she said.

But..... that's the next assignment.

The one that's coming off the presses back East is a 232 page hard-back book called "Watsonville, Memories that Linger." There will be 3,000 editions on the first printing, selling for \$10 each. Some 184 photographs are included. The publisher is Valley Publishers of Fresno.

The book came about because "People kept asking me why I didn't publish my articles. Many have appeared in the Register-Pajaronian. Someone told me to find an agent, but I decided to send my material to the publisher in Fresno. He was interested and asked for my manuscript," Mrs. Lewis explained.

She really didn't have a manuscript, just an assortment of articles, reams of notes, and photographs.

"I went at having a book published backwards," she laughed, her blue eyes sparkling. "I'm naive. Actually, I never dreamed there would be such immediate response."

But she had the challenge.

"Once the man said 'send your manuscript,' I had to start working like crazy," she said.

To complete the book, Mrs. Lewis withdrew from her usual haunts, and went around with a remote air, that she now knows "got me in trouble, because people thought I was being stand-offish. But I couldn't take time to do anything until the writing was done."

She said the first book is only a beginning.

"I must keep going. I love research and there is so much to be done around here."

Her four year record includes the following:

- Active participation in the county and in the city of Watsonville on historical research with local government and the historical groups.

- Serving as tour guide for the walking-driving Victorian tours in 1975.

- Two grants from Sourisseau Academy, History Department, San Jose State University for historical research.

- Taping 45 radio spots for KOMY Radio on local history with the last one scheduled Nov. 9.

- Authoring "Highlights in the History of Watsonville" for the Watsonville Federal Savings and Loan which was distributed to its customers in 1975.

- Working with others in defining the Victorian houses for the Watsonville Chamber of Commerce and the Pajaro Valley Historical Association and publishing a booklet with brief accounts of the houses.

- Assisting with a postcard project in 1973 in which Watsonville Victorians were depicted. They are now in short supply and have become local collector's items.

- Authoring an article for Monterey Savings and Loan used in their periodical promotion magazine mailed to customers.

As if all of this were not enough to keep Mrs. Lewis hopping, she joined the following:

- Californians for Preservation Action
- National Trust for Historic Preservation
- American Victorian Museum-Nevada City Society for Architectural Historians
- Region Elven, California Conference of Historical Societies (Santa Cruz, Monterey and San Benito)

- Deltiologists of America (post card collectors)

- Santa Cruz Historical Society

She is on the board of the Octagon Museum, Friends of the Library, YWCA and the YMCA.

She is a new member of the National Pen Women of America.

It is her fervent hope that one day the stately house in which they live will be designated as a landmark in the state and the federal historical registries.

"I think the first owner's background is important enough to merit this," she maintains.

The two story Victorian was built for Judge Julius Lee in 1894. He was Watsonville's first district attorney and died in 1910. His son, Elmore Lee, inherited the property. Following his second marriage to Minnie Hansen of Salinas, a woman who almost became his first wife, the two lived in the house until his death.

"I learned recently that Minnie had to wait 10 years to wear her wedding gown because Elmore married another woman; Sadie Hawthorne, first," Mrs. Lewis said.

Mrs. Minnie Lee's nephew, Albert Hansen of Salinas, a rancher, inherited the East Beach Street property and the Lewises purchased it from the Hansens.

"They believed the house would be torn down so they removed many of the stained glass windows and the chandeliers. But later Mrs. Hansen was kind enough to allow me go through some of the boxes of stored items for things to put back in the house," Mrs. Lewis said.

She said the Victorian "has tripled in value since we bought it."

Monte Lewis found time to design three stained glass leaded windows for the front and side of the house.

"He had never done this type work before. It took nine months," she said.

During the interview, the door bell and the phone rang almost incessantly in the busy household.

The floor plan of the 82-year-old house has high ceilinged rooms, wainscoting, solid wooden balustrades, flowing space, and interesting alcoves. The exterior was designed with balconies, turrets, and unique carpentry.

In the weeks to come the Lewises will add to the rear of the house so that the budding historian has an office off the garden for her future projects.

"I'm so thrilled. I can hardly wait until it is done," she said.

In the meantime, Mrs. Lewis will be kept busy. The Friends of the Library and the Watsonville Public Library will stage an autograph party for her at the library the second week of December to allow the public to meet Watsonville's historian-author.