

# A dying piece of history

Historic houses - South County



Victoria Manley

The Redman house, built in 1897, is an attraction to passersby on Highway 1, and a closer view of the house reveals intricate detail and sophisticated architectural design.

## Group of locals strive to preserve century-old house for posterity

By VICTORIA MANLEY

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IT CAN BE SEEN from the highway as commuters push down the road or drive to the dunes. That home — the Redman house — that tired, lonely construction of history sits alone amidst rows of strawberries off Beach Road.

Overgrown bushes and shrubbery veil the time-worn front porch of this two-story home. Cracked outside walls are stripped of paint, and broken windows are shielded by cobwebs.

A green couch is placed on its side along with some boxes against the locked front door to keep away any midnight intruders who may come around to deface the property.

The emptiness of this house is so thick the rays from an average flashlight can barely cut the darkness, and the stillness of the de-

stroyed interior leaves an eerie feeling.

It wasn't always this way for the Redman house, however. Though the house may be the source of several urban legends, it was once a home for a large local family, and may be the next coming attraction in our area.

It was home to James Redman, a local farmer who married twice and had one adopted daughter, May Nelson, who died at age 22 in a car wreck on Beach Road in 1903. Redman was born in Missouri in 1856 and came with his parents, Kenrick and Mathilda, to the Pajaro Valley when he was nine years old.

Redman was a successful farmer, carrying on his father's business of raising potatoes and sugar beets — in 1883, census records indicate he had 70 acres of land valued at \$5,170.

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# REDMAN

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The house, built in 1897, was designed by William H. Weeks, a prolific Watsonville architect. Local contractor Will Porter gained the contract for construction for offering the lowest bid, \$3,368. After Porter hastily left town, however, the contract was given to Lamborn & Uren, a local firm, which completed construction.

The interior of the house was finished in eastern oak, bird's eye maple and natural hardwood. Throughout the years it had not only been home to the Redman family, but was an internment camp for Japanese Americans during World War II.

The last known family to own the house was the Hirahara family of Watsonville. For the past 10 years, however, the house has been unused and unprotected — it is a dying piece of history, dilapidated and decayed.

John Skinner of Watsonville wants to see the house survive. He is president of the Agricultural History Project, a non-profit organization that strives to preserve the history of agriculture in the Central Coast area, but says his Redman house project arises solely out of his own interest.

He says he's always been attracted to the house, and wants to be another of many who have tried to secure a future for it.

"It's a neat old house that I see deteriorating. There's no financial interest," he said. He's looking to find locals who are interested in sparing the dilapidated home from its own ruin, and to generate enough spirit to resurrect the house from its weathered foundation.

"That house is a tremendous draw," Skinner said, and suggested he may put a sign visible from Highway 1 asking for support. "I think that if I did that, people would just come out of the woodwork," he said.

Skinner is aiming to collaborate with community members interested in preserving historical homes and buildings like the Redman house in the area, and organize some sort of committee to protect historic homes.

One of Skinner's primary reasons for arranging such a committee is to have some sort of organized group to create a dialogue with county officials resistant to making zoning exceptions for deteriorating buildings.

"What I see is a committee or a



The Redman house

group to get the county on the dime," he said. "My sense is that this is not an active resistance... It's just that there's nothing to encourage anyone to take a proactive stand on these issues.

"There doesn't seem to be any willingness to stretch the definitions," Skinner added. "I'm not looking forward to confrontation with the county... I'm just looking for some kind of exemption for the house."

Actually, owners of the property have been trying to obtain an exemption for the house for some time now. In 1987, Ryland Kelly of GreenFarm in Santa Cruz hoped to transform the house into a restaurant and the surrounding land into a farming museum and culture showplace.

Eleven years later, Kelly is no longer working on the project, but Owen Lawlor of the same company is. He has been active in attempts to annex the property into Watsonville's city limits, but no avail.

Lawlor has battled with the Santa Cruz County Local Agency Formation Commission — the governing agency responsible for making annexation decisions — for years. However, because he and his associates have not had any luck with county officials or LAFCO, Lawlor said he is ready to ask the community for help.

"We've gone through the process... and we haven't gotten anywhere," Lawlor said. "It's time to put our political differences aside... and try to come up with a use."

LAFCO commissioners have repeatedly denied GreenFarm's request for adding the property into the city of Watsonville's sphere of influence, maintaining that agricultural land should not be sacrificed for any use other than farming.

Darryl Clark of Clark Farms, located at 4 Lee Road, is the farmer of the land the Redman house sits on. Though a woman from the farm said that Clark gets asked about the house approximately "200 times