

THAT WAS WATSONVILLE

The life and times of Watsonville native Ralph Wyckoff



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Betty Lewis

"Ralph Wyckoff, formerly with W.H. Weeks and for the past year practicing for himself in Berkeley, has succeeded to the business of H.B. Douglas at Watsonville, and Mr. Wyckoff will make his future home there. He has plans under way for a school house, garage and other buildings." — Architect & Engineer, Dec. 1915

Born, reared and educated in Watsonville, Ralph Wyckoff was a descendant of a pioneer local family. His grandfather, Jesse, came to the Pajaro Valley from Illinois in 1867. Ralph's father, Cyrus Newton Wyckoff, was born and reared here, as were his three sons.

Ralph Wyckoff stood 5 feet, 8 inches tall and, according to the late San Jose architect Peter Wuss, who used to work with him, he had a good sense of humor and went around with a pipe in his mouth most of the time. Ralph married his childhood sweetheart, Nellie Myrtle Cornell, on Aug. 30, 1905, in the bride's home on West Fifth Street.

"The bride was prettily and daintily gowned in cream-colored crepe de Paris trimmed with all-over chiffon lace and carried a bouquet of pink carnations. She looked charming and presented a splendid picture of robust health and womanly beauty. The bride was attended by Miss Rhoda Rowe, who was neatly gowned in lavender voile." — *Evening Pajaronian*, Aug. 30, 1905

The young couple went on a short honeymoon in Southern California, after which they returned to Watsonville, where Ralph con-

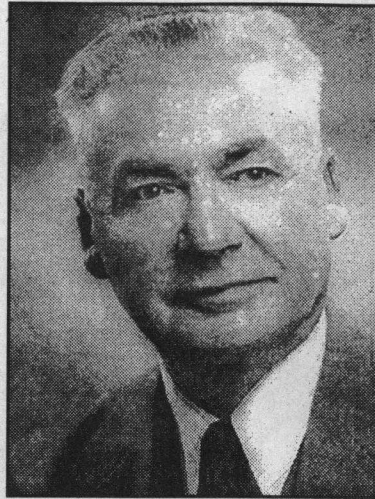
tinued his work in the office of architect Weeks as a draftsman. In 1909, he was transferred to the San Francisco office, where he remained until 1914, when he was granted his certificate to practice architecture and opened his own office in Berkeley.

In 1915 he moved back to Watsonville, taking over the business of architect H.B. Douglas. Some of the buildings Wyckoff designed locally were Radcliff School, 1917; Marinovich Building, 1916; Pajaro School, 1922; and the Watsonville Woman's Club in 1917.

The construction of Watsonville's third high school building raised a flurry of controversy with members of the school board. In 1916, Wyckoff was the local architect, while William Weeks, who had designed the first two high schools, was living in Oakland. The board was divided on which man should be hired to design the new school and discussion ran hot and heavy. It was finally decided in September of 1916 when the plans of Weeks were accepted. They were actually prepared by his chief designer, a man by the name of DeMart, with Weeks' final approval.

Right after this, Wyckoff was hired to prepare plans for the Radcliff School on Rodriguez Street, but there were many in the community who felt he should have received the high school commission. A daughter, Frances Elmira, was born to the Wyckoffs in May of 1918. In 1919, the family moved to Salinas where Wyckoff had opened an office in partnership with Hugh White because of the increase of business in the Salinas Valley.

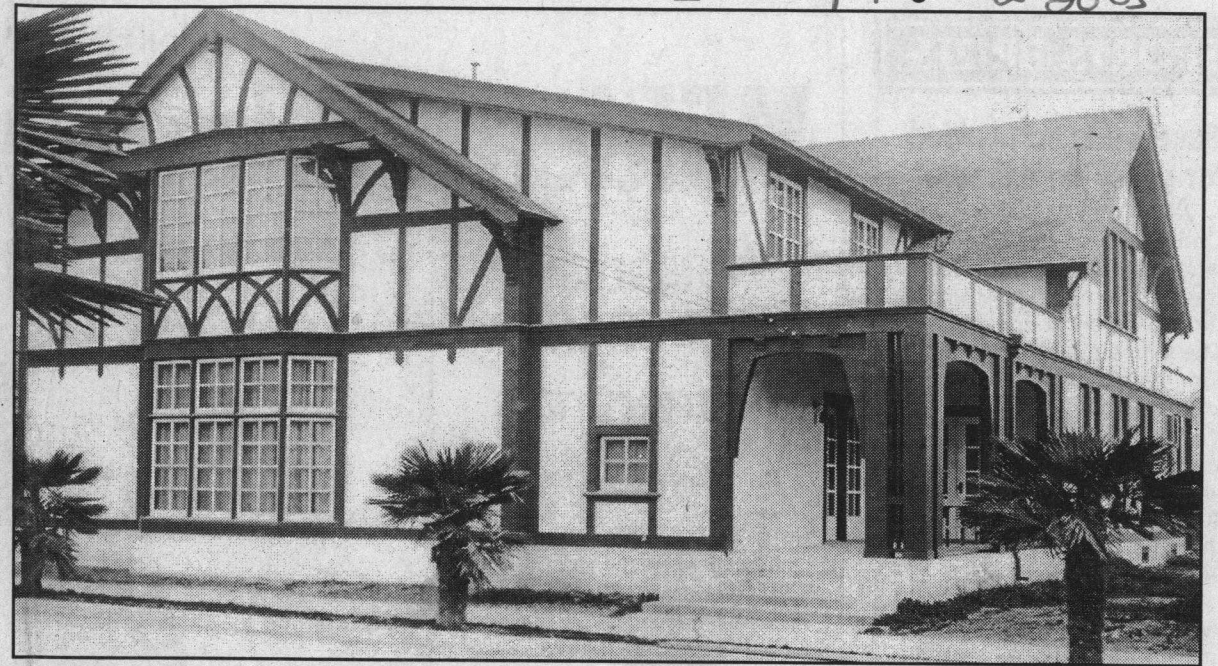
"Ralph Wyckoff, a well-known architect, was in Salinas Friday looking for a house to live in and an office to do business in. He is at present located in Watsonville where he has established a successful business in the central coast counties, but is satisfied that Salinas, a more central location, is a better place for him." — *Salinas*



Ralph Wyckoff

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Among his designs in that town was Salinas High School, buildings for Hartnell College, remodeling of the Elks building and a number of private residences. But his stay in Salinas was of short duration. In 1921 the firm moved to San Jose and the Watsonville and Salinas offices were closed. The partnership was to be dissolved in 1925 when White moved on to Oakland and Wyckoff remained in San Jose. Wyckoff was to return to Watsonville for various assignments, such as the high school shop building in 1924, Charles Ford store that same year and the fire station on Second Street in 1925; remodeled into a



Courtesy of Betty Lewis

The Woman's Club (1917), located at 12 Brennan St., was designed by Ralph Wyckoff.

museum in 2001.

In 1933 he designed the St. James Post Office. Other San Jose buildings he designed were the San Jose National Bank, McKinnon School, Speech and Drama building at San Jose State and the Moderne Drug Store building. On Aug. 30, 1955, Ralph and his wife returned to Watsonville to celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary at the Loma Linda Restaurant with 30 friends and rel-

atives. Just under a year later, Ralph died at the age of 72 at his home in San Jose. He was working on the remodeling of Ford's department store at the time.

Mr. Wyckoff was a member of the American Institute of Architects, president of the state organization. His hobby was photography and he was a co-author of a book entitled *Hoe To Build and Equip a Modern Darkroom* along

with Nester Barret, Mercury News photography columnist.

Ralph Wyckoff is one of those little-known group of architects whose buildings stand as reminders of their contribution to our architectural heritage.

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Betty Lewis, a local historian and Watsonville resident, is a regular columnist for the Register-Pajaronian.