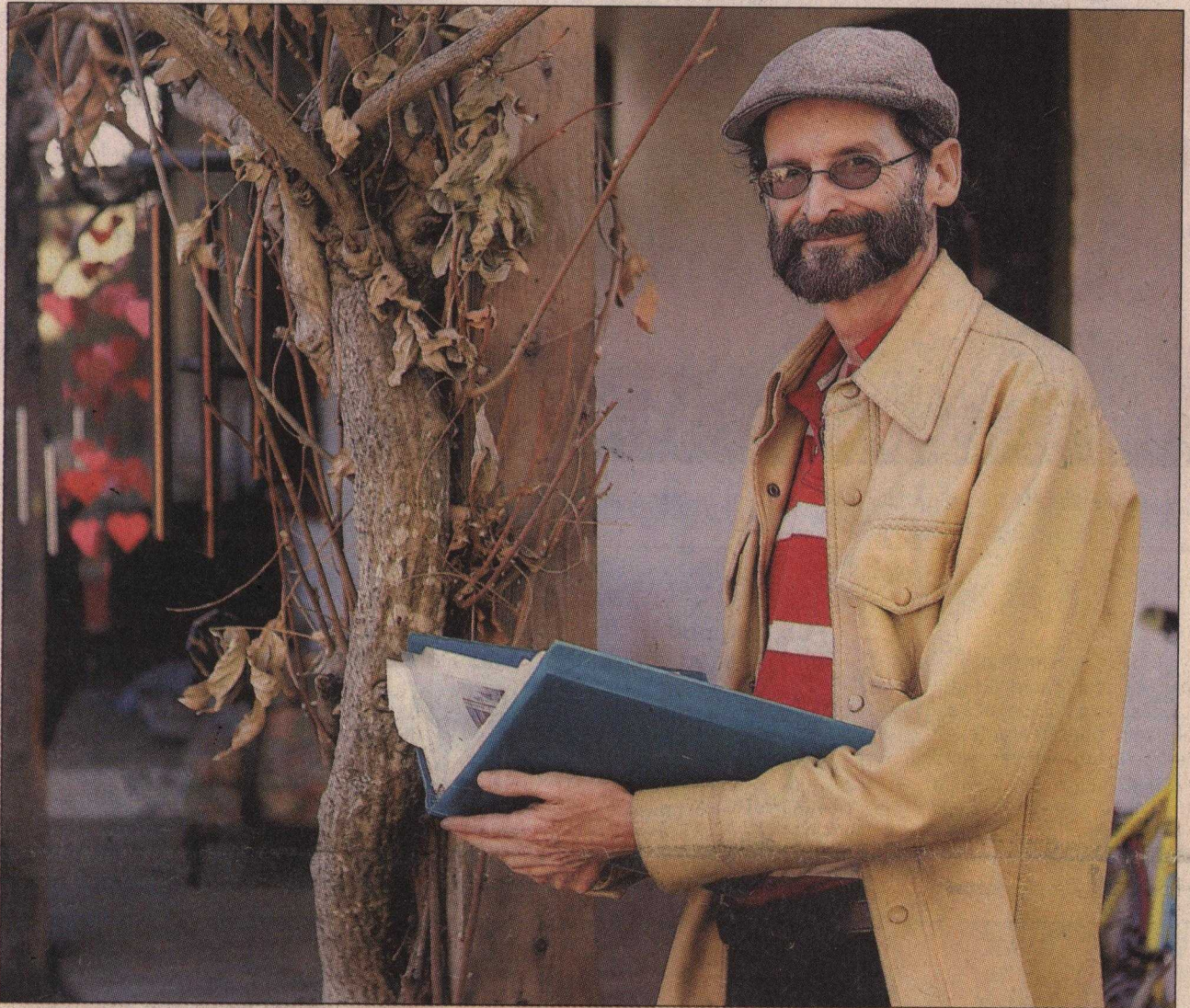


SANTA CRUZ

Hidden History

NORTH BRANCIFORTE NEIGHBORHOOD HOLDS SPECIAL PLACE IN PAST



KEVIN JOHNSON/SENTINEL

Local historian Ross Eric Gibson stands outside of the adobe house on the corner of North Branciforte and Goss Street in Santa Cruz on Thursday. The home is the only remaining building of the historic Villa de Branciforte.

Branciforte

By SHANNA MCCORD

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SANTA CRUZ — North Branciforte Avenue, when just a dirt road, was the original Main Street of Santa Cruz beginning in the late 1700s.

Horse races were held on the street, which was the first surveyed road in California — straight as an arrow and said to be an engineering marvel for the time.

Villa de Branciforte, established in 1797, was the heart of Santa Cruz before the city existed.

In fact, the county was called Branciforte County for about six months before the name changed to Santa Cruz County in 1850. Residents were known as Brancifortians.

Local historians consider the story of North Branciforte a hidden gem of Santa Cruz.

"Many people have no idea this existed," historian Ross Eric Gibson said. "It's so unknown. It's often dismissed in the history books with just a little story."

Gibson is working to compile a collection of the histories of the pre-1940 homes along North Branciforte Avenue and the side streets that back up to the bluff overlooking Branciforte Creek. He's trying to talk to as many folks as he can who might have photos of the area's early homes or know descendants of the historic homes.

Some of the homes Gibson has documented include the Stan Laurel house on Rathburn Way. Laurel was the famous comedian who performed with his comedic partner Oliver Hardy from the 1920s through the 1940s.

The Molares house on Sunnyside Way was owned by a movie director who worked with actor Charlie Chaplin, Gibson said.

"I want to make their history more visible," Gibson said. "I like to focus on how everything developed."

Donna Ramos and her husband Doug Brouwer live in the white Queen Anne bungalow at North Branciforte and Berkeley Way. The house, with a large enclosed front



KEVIN JOHNSON/SENTINEL

The adobe home located on the corner of North Branciforte and Goss Street is the only remaining building of the historic Villa de Branciforte.

AT A GLANCE

VILLA DE BRANCIFORTE

WHEN: Starting around 1797, the pueblo Villa de Branciforte was formed.

WHAT: Villa de Branciforte was one of three Spanish settlements in the state. It was the heart of Santa Cruz before the city was established. The villa was annexed to the city in 1905.

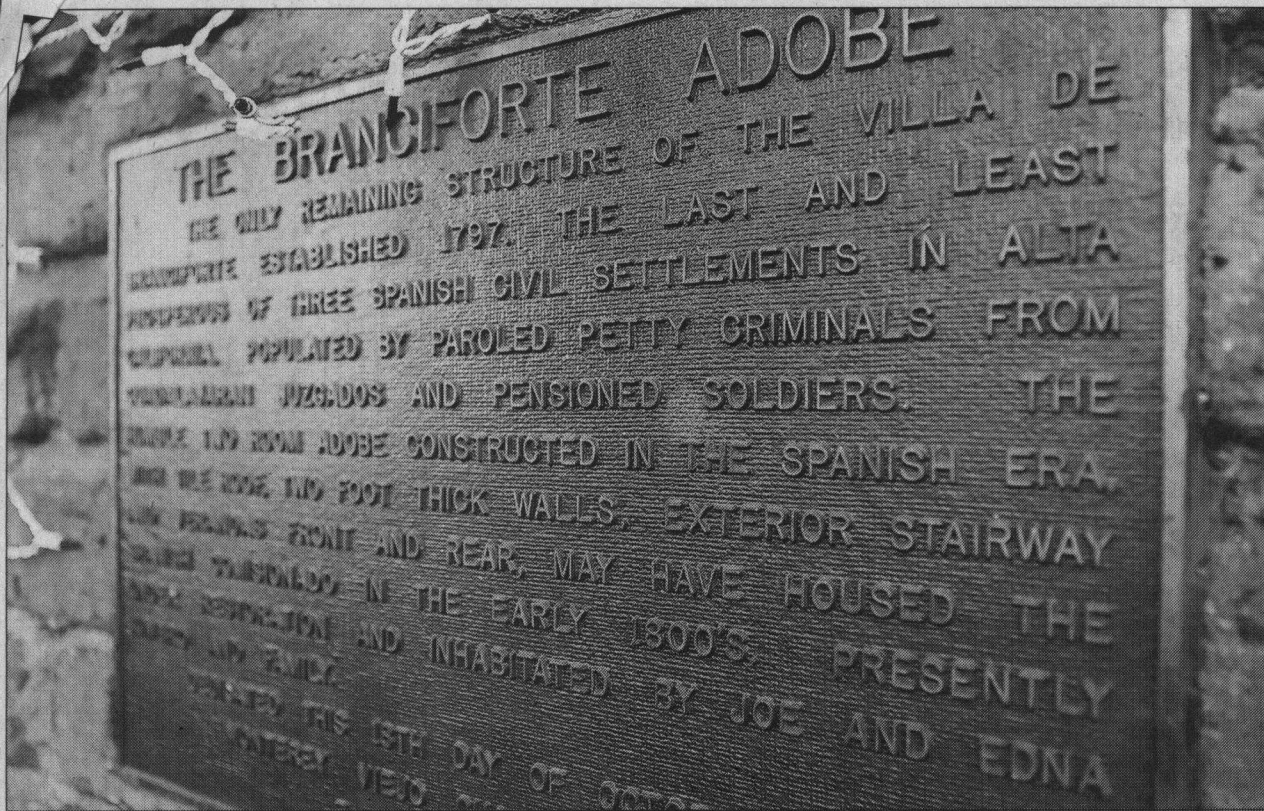
WHERE: The villa's boundaries reached to Seabright Avenue on the south, DeLaveaga Park on the north, Branciforte Creek to the west and Morrissey Boulevard in the east.

WORK: Local historian Ross Eric Gibson is looking for photos, descendants and stories of the early homes along North Branciforte Avenue.

INFORMATION: www.villadebranciforte.org

CONTACT: Ross Eric Gibson 831-423-1932

SEE HISTORY ON A4



KEVIN JOHNSON/SENTINEL

A bronze plaque is cemented into the stone wall surrounding the last remaining building of Villa de Branciforte.

HISTORY

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porch, columns and brick walkway, was believed to be one of the first homes built in the area, probably around 1895, Ramos says.

Brouwer purchased the farmhouse in the late 1970s and has since remodeled and expanded the house, though he's kept much of the historic architecture.

Ramos has become intrigued with the home's history, as well as the rest of the neighborhood's past. She's spent time studying old maps she's discovered through research at UC Berkeley's Bancroft Library and the U.S. Geological Survey in Menlo Park.

"What started out as just a question, what year was this house built, has turned into this fun detective thing," Ramos said.

A significant reminder of the villa's past is the adobe house, surrounded by an adobe wall, at North Branciforte and Goss avenues.

The home, with 2-foot-thick walls, has been owned by Dr. Bruce Block and his wife Maria Caradonna since 1998, and is the only remaining structure from Villa de Branciforte.

The family says it appreciates the home has a special connection to Santa Cruz's early history.

They've stumbled across old pottery pieces in the yard that could date to the 19th century.

"You go through the gates

and step back in time. It's peaceful," Caradonna said. "You feel connected to the earth in that house. There's a history you inherit and we do our best to honor it."

Villa de Branciforte was one of three settlements established in California by the Spanish; the others were Los Angeles and San Jose.

Villa de Branciforte got its name from the viceroy of New Spain, Gibson said.

The settlement was independent from the Catholic Church and the settlers at Villa de Branciforte were often at odds with Mission Santa Cruz. The colonists were a collection of merchants, explorers and retired soldiers from Guadalajara, Mexico, according to Gibson who has studied the area's deep past.

Historians say democracy started on North Branciforte when an election was held around 1805 to name a group of "town fathers" to represent the pueblo with the Catholic Church and government officials in the state capital of Monterey.

The villa was centered where Branciforte Small Schools campus is located on North Branciforte Avenue at Water Street. A state historical plaque sits on the corner.

"These school grounds were center of Villa de Branciforte founded in 1797 by Gov. Diego De Borica on orders from Spain," according to the plaque.

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