

A historian pays tribute to guardians of the past

When Florence Wyckoff died Sept. 20, historical preservationists bid farewell to an unshakable champion of their cause. In particular, Corralitos — where Wyckoff lived for more than 50 years — lost a distinguished guardian of the past.

Along with her many other endeavors, 94-year-old Wyckoff was a contributor to the Corralitos Valley Community Plan, a draft document released earlier this year by a citizens committee and the County Planning Department. Her work to identify and preserve historic structures continued a concern and enthusiasm for Pajaro Valley history that she had shared with her husband, Hubert C. Wyckoff, who died in 1979.

A Watsonville native born in 1901 with extensive family ties to this region, Hubert was a prominent attorney, who for many years served as president and supporter of the Pajaro Valley Historical Association.



CAROLYN SWIFT
Flashbacks

When its museum acquired a bulky reel-to-reel tape recorder in 1966, Wyckoff eagerly seized the opportunity to begin a series of oral history interviews with valley old-timers. These documents have

since provided local historians with priceless recollections and folklore.

The Wyckoffs deserve a tribute from the historical community, and this brief sketch of their hometown is dedicated to them.

Named for the Rancho los Corralitos, "the ranch of the little corrals," the village where the Wyckoffs lived is one of the oldest settlements within the former territory of the Santa Cruz Mission.

Opinions differ on how the rancho got its name. Writers often cite 1769 Portola Expedition diarists, who in mid-October that year recorded that a corral was built between a low hill and a lagoon. Almost a dozen men in the party were suffering and ill, and the corral meant that only one guard would be needed at night. References to either man-made or natural corrals are so numerous, however, that Don Clark, author of Santa Cruz County Place Names, determined that any one of the corrals could have inspired the name of the rancho.

Writers of the Corralitos Valley plan traced the common use of the name back as far as 1810. Shortly before the Santa Cruz Mission was secularized,

four square leagues — patented later as 15,440 acres — were granted to Jose Amesti. By 1844, a number of buildings, including a sawmill, existed near the Amesti adobe. The settlement was called Corralitos, though it was several miles from the town of today.

In 1929, the daughter of pioneer Ben Hames claimed that he established the present Corralitos in 1855. Ben was the brother of John Hames, who had constructed a sawmill and then a flourmill along the banks of Soquel Creek in 1843. Ben arrived in 1854 and moved southward to build the first Yankee gristmill at Corralitos.

Author and Corralitos historian Judy Pybrum Malmin writes that by 1861 the village also had two stores, a wagon and blacksmith shop, a schoolhouse, numerous homes and other markers of a lasting settlement.

The Sentinel observed, "The village wears a cheerful and busy aspect, and if we are not much mistaken it will soon be a rival of Soquel for the honor of the county seat."

Before the Santa Cruz-Watsonville Railroad was completed in 1876, both Soquel and Corralitos thrived on their proximity to the timber harvests, sawmills and shingle mills in the hills above them. Muddy roads marred local scenery with deep ruts cut by teams hauling logs.

Corralitos was optimistic about the future. "One half of the Corralitos Creek is heavily timbered with redwoods and oaks, enough so to last for generations to come," observed the Sentinel in September 1865.

The prediction proved to be true, but when the railroad route failed to make a direct connection to either town, the speculation about its promise of becoming the county seat squealed to a stop. Soquel and Corralitos continued to boom with mills, factories and farming, but neither could compete any longer for importance with Santa Cruz or Watsonville.

A letter found in the Porter family archive at the Santa Cruz County Museum of Art and History describes tough times by 1880. Writing to his cousin, flour mill office worker Philander Pettitjohn was alarmed by rapid changes in the community's moral fiber. Corralitos was becoming a "hard town." Saloons had sprung up like magic in what had been a quiet country village. New industries hired a class of men that were "anything but the best."

"We now have what is called in California a fast town," he said, "several saloons, bad men and bad women, no church on Sunday, only gambling, fighting and quarreling and whiskey by the wholesale and retail."

A news item published six years later in the Santa Cruz Surf ribbed that "Corralitos still keeps up its reputation

as a fighting town. One of its citizens has been arrested for mayhem. He is charged with biting off an ear of a man who insulted him."

As the timberline receded, however, agriculture replaced the trees and life became orderly. Orchards, apple dryers and packing warehouses surrounded the natural "corrals" of clustered redwoods, which have always been revered as local landmarks.

Like other rural districts in Santa Cruz County, Corralitos today struggles to balance growth with a community desire to protect its agricultural and scenic landscape, as well as to preserve the structures and places that have given it character and definition. Thankfully, the valley has active citizens like the Wyckoffs who are willing to pay attention to the past as they prepare for the future.

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TOP: Joseph Totten and crew pose with an early homemade spray rig in a Corralitos orchard.

Photo courtesy of Alvin Totten

Teamsters bringing logs from a sawmill in Eureka Canyon stopped at the Five-Mile House near the village of Corralitos.

Photo courtesy of the Pajaro Valley Historical Association collection

