

Dec 12, 1974

# 'I'm afraid Sis has left us . . .'

By VINCENT T. LEONARD

One stormy night in 1912, I had had great difficulty in sleeping. The wind howled like a banshee as it swept through the railroad bridge out behind our ranch house. The air seemed to come in great waves, each one hitting the house with solid force and seeming to move it on its foundations.

The timbers creaked and groaned, and then far off I'd hear the sharp crack of a big redwood branch snapping. The Valencia Creek, usually a quiet neighbor, was roaring threateningly and punctuating its roars with the occasional crash of a floating tree into the steel underpinning of the bridge. I don't know how often I dozed off, only to be startled from sleep by some new, alarming noise. Finally, a gray dawn came and the storm abated. I fell asleep.

But not for long. The loud barking of two dogs and a familiar voice trying to quiet them sent me racing to the window of my brother's room that commanded a view of the front yard. There stood my Uncle Pat Walsh in his night shirt, covered with a heavy overcoat. He was leaning heavily on his cane and a kerosene lantern dangled from his hands against it. "Sonny, is your Daddy awake?" he rasped. "I'm here, Uncle," Dad called from behind me. "What's the matter?"

"I'm afraid Sis has left us. Could Clara come with me to help?"

Mother's "Of course!" came from the yard, where she was already embracing the old man.

Dad raced toward the village to get one of the Verhoeff brothers to open the store and call Dr. Davis from Soquel.

The storm had passed and the sun was shining when Mother returned to rescue Dad from our relentless barrage of macabre and unanswerable questions. She cried quietly on Dad's shoulder for several minutes before she said, "Auntie had a heart attack. I found her collapsed on the floor near the dresser. There were burned matches all around. I guess she'd been trying to light the lamp. I bathed her and laid her out. Uncle called Mr. Wessendorf, and he'll get the body about nine o'clock. I think we'd better go stay with Uncle for a few days, the poor old man is so

confused and helpless."

Thus passed the quiet, dignified lady who had been the hostess of the Live Oak House for forty busy years. And thus we came to spend the next few weeks in the family quarters off the rear of the big stairwell and to be witnesses to the placing of the big mahogany casket in the bright and cheerful ladies' parlor and to the clasping of her hands around her white Missal and her favorite rosary.

That parlor was her favorite room. To it she retired from the pressures of the daily round of caring for chickens and cows, making butter and canning fruit in the long "buttery" behind the kitchen, and keeping peace between her trigger-tempered, loud-voiced husband and their succession of proud and independent Chinese chefs. The separate little wing in which it was located jutted out into the hotel garden, and the long, narrow room, with its big windows, had the feel of a hothouse.

Auntie kept two sewing machines there, and I often saw her at one, a lady friend at the other, as they busily treadled and sewed while they chattered above the rhythmic beat of the machine.

She richly deserved any leisure she could manage, if one can call her sewing sessions leisure, for she had a lifetime of hard work to building the reputation of the Live Oak House and its dining room. She had hemmed all the linen in the dining room, preserved all the fruits and jams, and pickles that delighted her guests, made all the butter served—even gathered the eggs.

Uncle Pat always saw to it that she received a portion of the hotel income and this she supplemented by selling excess butter and eggs to the local grocery. She accumulated enough to make a few real estate investments.

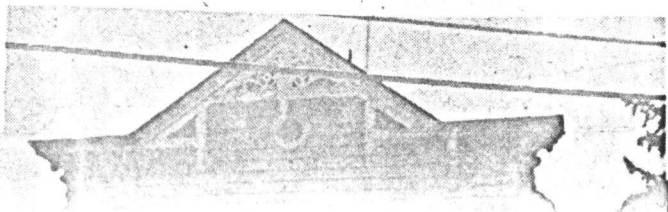
The closest of her purchases to Aptos was a nine-acre plot across from Trout Gulch Road from the present Aptos Knolls. In her will she deeded this property to her favorite niece, Anne (Dorsey) Spencer. The J.C. Spencer family gave up working their farm at the head of Baker Road and built a home on the crest of the eastern spur of the property. In later years, Glenn Spencer and Mr. and Mrs. Auburn Jellison also developed homesites on the hillsides.

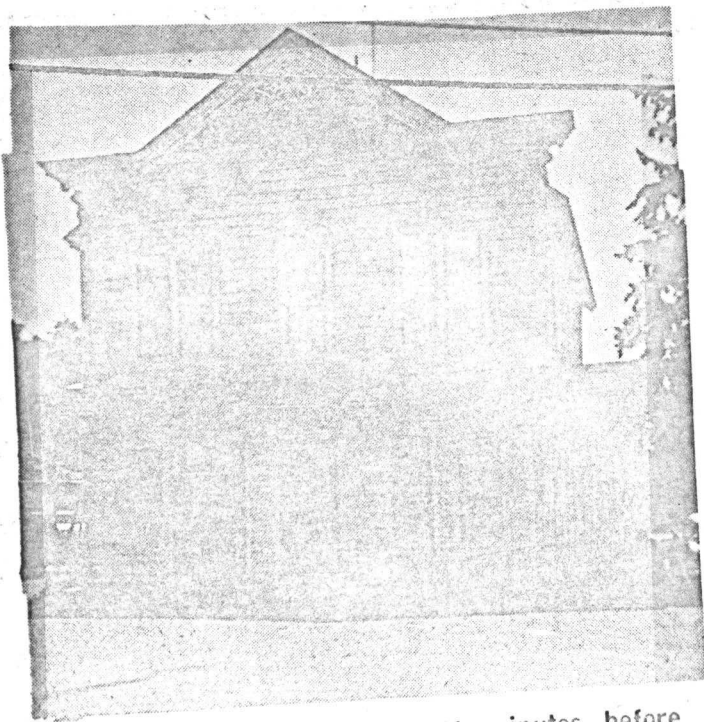


PATRICK KEIRAN WALSH—1882



CATHERINE LEONARD WALSH—1882





Old Live Oak House in 1966 minutes before wreckers pulled building over.