

# Founder remembers mall's birth

*Santa Cruz' most crucial period lies in the months ahead. This is the time for civic action — not apathy: A time for civic generosity...*

— Chuck and Esther Abbott, 1966

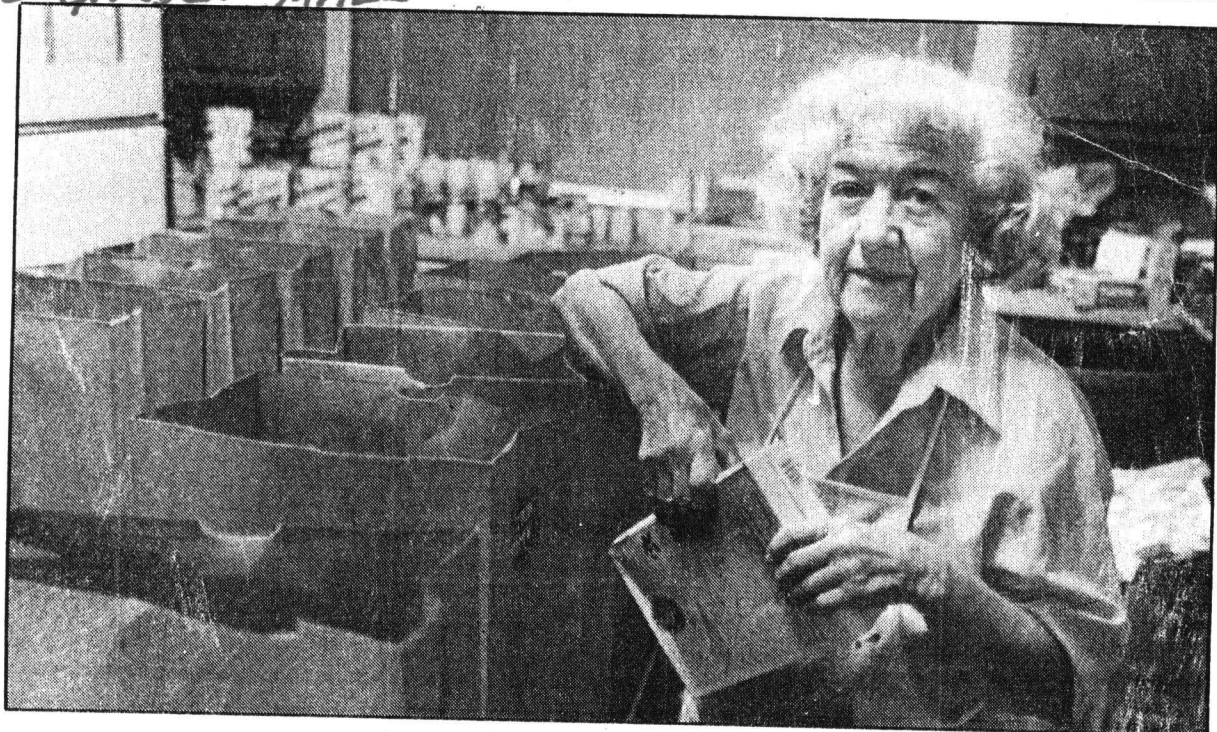
By RICHARD EMANUEL  
Sentinel correspondent 10-30-89

SANTA CRUZ — These days, Esther Abbott spends most of her time working for the Salvation Army.

"I'm here all day, every day," the vital 78-year old said Thursday, during a break from filling bags with groceries for earthquake victims.

Twenty-three years ago, she and her husband Chuck were almost as busy. They were launching "Project Foresight," a personal crusade that took root and blossomed a few years later into the tree-lined Pacific Garden Mall in downtown Santa Cruz.

Today, much of that mall lies in ruins behind chain link fences patrolled by uniformed guards. The Oct. 17 quake that rocked the Santa Cruz area hit the town center hard,



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

In aftermath of killer quake, mall visionary Esther Abbott fills grocery bags for victims.

bringing down six buildings and killing three people. Perhaps 20 percent of the mall's buildings will end up demolished within the next few weeks.

Chuck Abbott, the "father of the mall," did not live to see the devastation. He died in 1973.

"Chuck would be sick if he could see it," Abbott said. "I don't feel so bad about the mall. I grieve for the merchants because I know what it must be like to lose your building and your inventory, everything."

The Abbotts were both professional photographers before

they got involved in downtown renewal and historic preservation. They moved from Arizona to Santa Cruz in the spring of 1962, intending to retire.

"We came to this town because it was so beautiful," Abbott said.

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## Abbott/ Mall should keep Victorian look

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They quickly fell in love with the town's Victorian architecture. For \$15,000, they bought a small Victorian house in need of repair, on Lincoln Street a few blocks west of Pacific Avenue.

Abbott still lives in the house, now 130 years old, which came through the recent earthquake just fine.

In the mid-1960s, few people worried about preserving Victorian architecture, Abbott recalled.

"We were very distressed to see them tear down five Victorians just on Lincoln Street, between Chestnut and Pacific," she said.

Most of the old houses on Lincoln Street were pretty run-down. To save them, the Abbotts bought and fixed up a number of them.

They also turned their talent and attention to the task of sprucing up the rest of Santa Cruz and to converting others to the cause of historic preservation.

"The first campaign was for a sign ordinance," Abbott said, to reduce the "overhead signs and clutter" that marred many Pacific Avenue shops.

"Having photographed for 50 years all over the country, we were aware of these things," she said. They had seen places where commercial signs were restricted and could see, with their photographers' eyes, the potential of downtown Santa Cruz.

"We put together a slide show, with good and bad examples from around the country and around Santa Cruz," Abbott said. "We didn't know anybody in town, so we didn't care whose feet we stepped on. And we went on the luncheon circuit to anyone who would look at this show," addressing service clubs, businessmen and civic groups.

"We made color prints (of Pacific Avenue buildings) and overlays with the signs and clutter blocked out by striped aw-

nings or greenery," she said. "People would go down the table and when they saw *their* business the way it *could* look, they were surprised."

In 1966, the Santa Cruz City Council passed an ordinance restricting the size and design of signs.

That same year, Chuck Abbott made a fateful visit to Grand Junction, Colo., on an assignment as a freelance photographer. Grand Junction had just built the first "semi-mall" west of the Mississippi River, a shopping center with limited traffic flow. The design struck the Abbotts as a great way to revitalize downtown Santa Cruz, and they threw themselves into selling the idea.

"Beauty is good business! That was our slogan," Abbott recalled.

Over the years, Esther Abbott became one of the mall's most loyal patrons.

"I never spent a dime except at the mall," she said. "If I couldn't find it at the mall, I didn't buy it."

In recent years, the number of street musicians and transients on the mall would trouble her.

"Chuck wouldn't have liked it," she said. "Something is wrong when that element can predominate, but I don't know what the answer is."

"I wouldn't have minded a few street musicians, but there were so many. And there were panhandlers. They don't have them in Carmel, do they? Why not? I don't know what the answer is."

Pacific Avenue will rise again, the "mother of the mall" is sure. She just hopes it rebuilds in Victorian style.

"It would be sheerest folly to change it and make it modern or art deco. It doesn't have to be pure Victorian, but they can make it sympathetic with that style," Abbott said.

"There's a force now that says, 'Let's build modern.' Of course, we fought those people in the beginning."