



The spirit of Johnny Modolo blows through an abandoned building of the old Filipino camp in the Swanton area.

Ghost Stories

IF THESE WALLS COULD TALK

In a group of old houses in Swanton, tales of mystery and tragedy blow through open windows and faded curtains

Story by **PEGGY TOWNSEND**
Sentinel staff writer

W isps of old curtain hang from the ceiling like spider webs and it's easy to imagine Johnny Modolo's mother staring through the fabric, thinking about how her son was gone. She would have looked through the curtains to the artichoke and Brussels sprouts fields, where she and her husband Frank had put their sweat and dreams, and thought: What does it matter now?

Now that Johnny, so strong at 20, had been bucked off a cow while fooling around with a couple of his friends and died.

He had looked just fine when he came back to the little wood house with the climbing roses out front. Nobody expected he would die.

But something had ruptured inside of him when he hit the ground, and he wasn't able to recover.

The images come easily inside the old house where Johnny's mom once lived, a house sinking back into the earth like a tired old woman.

The Modolos' farmhouse sits along a rutted dirt road in Swanton, with three more old houses in a row after it.

All of them are falling down.

All of them have their ghosts.

"The Modolos worked really hard through the Depres-



sion and the beginning of the war," said Lud McCrary, who was with Johnny Modolo on the day in 1948 when he was bucked from the cow.

"They had a really tough, hard life."

They scraped out a living from the rich, dark soil and went to the Catholic church in Davenport on Sundays. On summer evenings, the fog would spill over the green hills like river overrunning its banks.

They moved off the ranch a few years after Johnny died, his death doing what the Depression and a war couldn't.

Now all that's left is faded wallpaper, a cascade of overgrown roses and the pain of Johnny's mother.

Down the road are three more ghost houses called the Filipino camp.

It's where the young men who came from the Philippines to work the fields grew old.

Where their dreams faded too.

They came to the U.S. without women because that's what American law required. They lived in little rooms with single beds like reluctant monks.

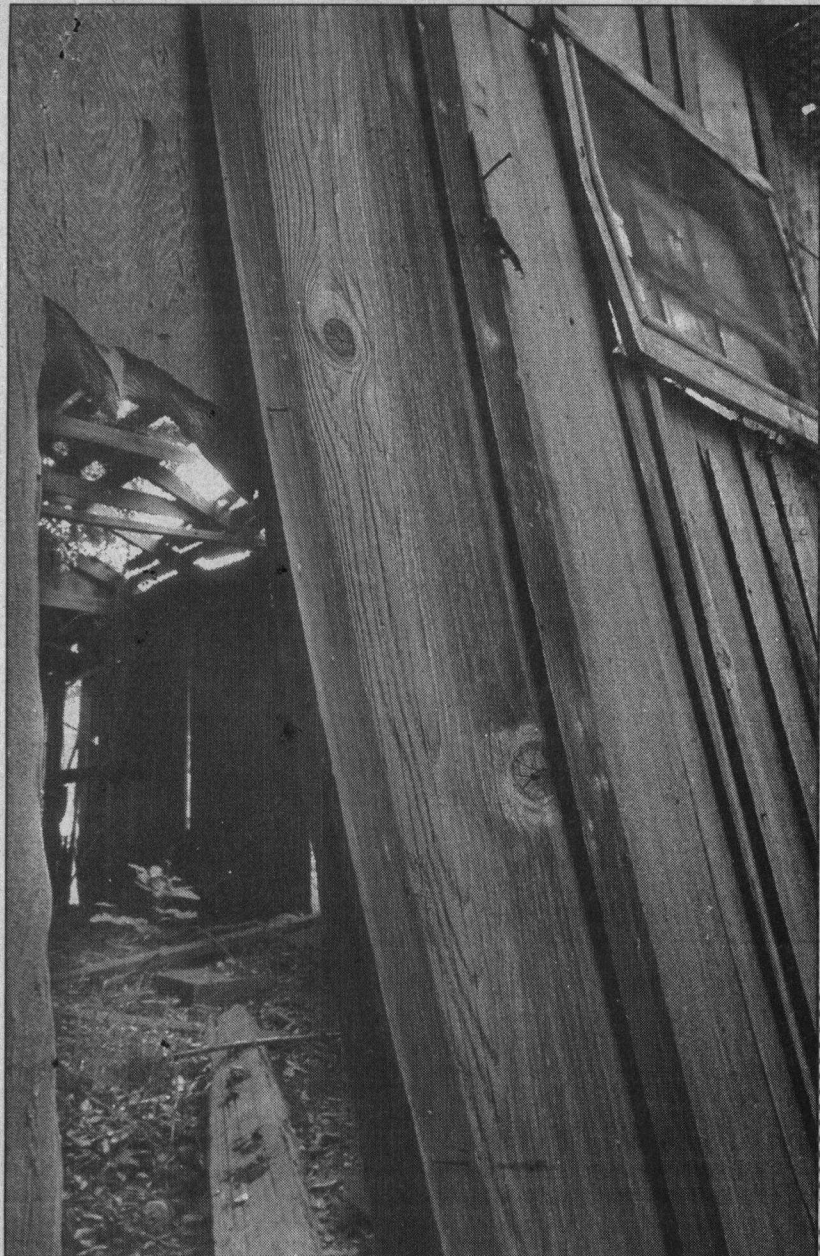
There used to be a cockfighting arena up behind the last house on the road.

The old Filipino men would station a lookout at the road

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Photos by **SHMUEL THALER**
Sentinel staff photographer

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Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

One house still has a 'Philippine Times' tacked to the wall.

Ghost houses

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and hold their fights out of the sight of the local sheriff.

Once deputies came roaring up the road while a fight was going on.

All the workers grabbed their roosters and money, hightailing it into the steep, forested hillside.

The young deputies chased after the workers, but couldn't catch the gray-haired old men, whose bodies were made leather-tough by hard work and fresh ocean air.

Their ghosts are in these houses too.

In a house with a roof that sags like it's carrying an invisible weight, there is an rusting iron bed and a faded page from the Philippine Times tacked to

the wall.

"Hardly anybody knows what is in my heart," reads the news page.

"I alone by my death..."

And then the page is ripped so the rest of the thought is gone.

What did the old man from the Philippines think his death would reveal?

What did he want to say?

An old chair lies on its side. The floors tilt where a nearby creek rose up and flowed through the houses last winter. Bushes push through the floors.

The forest is swallowing the houses whole.

One day, only the ghosts will remain.