

Early feminist would question all the celebrating

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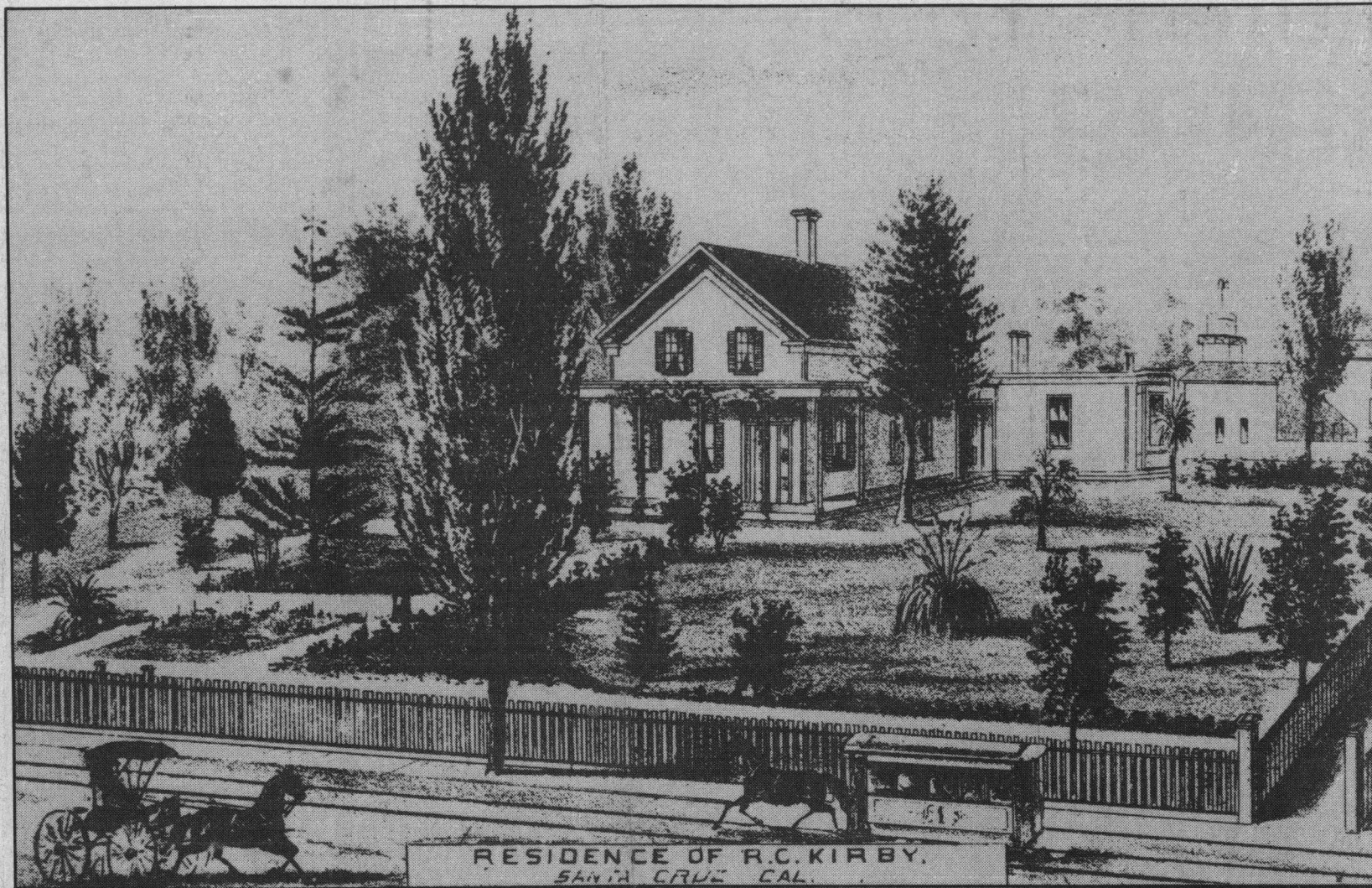
WHEN I FIRST encountered Georgiana Bruce Kirby a dozen or so years ago, she was a local legend buried, misunderstood and discounted throughout decades of Santa Cruz County history.

Georgiana and her compatriot in feminism, Eliza Burhans Farnham, were remembered most as amusing, bloomer-clad "eccentrics" who came to town in the early days of Santa Cruz society. In sorting through their lives, I found the story of Georgiana and Eliza to be so rich in detail and importance that it took years to piece together a realistic portrayal of both women. They were, in the briefest of summaries, the first *bona fide* women's rights activists in the West. Not only were they tied to the movement on the East Coast, both women were keen observers and recorders of life in Santa Cruz County. In fact, the ink on county boundaries was barely dry when Eliza landed in 1849.

Georgiana and Eliza were sophisticated eastern intellectuals — friends of such notables as Horace Greeley, Margaret Fuller and Henry Ward Beecher — who found themselves in one of the most isolated regions of the entire West. Santa Cruz of 1850 was culturally embryonic and intellectually spiritless. The feminists thought it was their responsibility, by virtue of refinement and superiority, to lead this pioneer community toward civilized improvement and simple good taste.

Now, 140 years after their first appearance, it would seem both women are *still* struggling for the recognition they so wanted and could never get from their peers. Santa Cruz County appreciates and honors the feminists — but somehow the accolades are tainted with that same curious irreverence that has shadowed them over and over both in life and death.

Imagine the spirits of Georgiana and Eliza standing on the porch of Georgiana's old home, moved years ago to 117 Jordan St., and now owned by John Cujé. On Saturday morning shortly after 11 a.m., the Monterey Viejo and Mountain Charlie Chapters of E. Clampus



Residence, in 1879, of Georgiana Bruce Kirby, who was a feminist in Santa Cruz before the term 'feminist' was even invented.

Vitus will march to the tunes of the N.G.D.G. Clamp Band, right to the door.

Steven D. Corbin, noble grand humbug, will make comments fitting the dedication of a plaque commemorating Georgiana's accomplishments.

E. CLAMPUS Vitus is an all-male organization. Its creed is to appreciate a little of the ridiculous and "always be a two-fisted Clamper when the bottle passes our way." Marching in parades and acting silly is one of the ways they appreciate western lore. The Clamper motto is "credo quia absurdum" (We believe because it is absurd.)

The Monterey Viejo and Mountain Charlie Clamper chapters are honoring two women who have made major contributions to the history of feminism. They invited myself (who cannot appear) and Judith Steen (who will), because we co-authored the introduction to "Georgiana: Feminist Reformer of the West" published in 1987 by the Santa Cruz Historical Trust. But we know — Judy and I — that underneath the very real interest and earnest intention to pay homage, the Clampers simply couldn't resist an opportunity to tease Georgiana and Eliza, one more time.

Georgiana was, after all, not only someone who fought for women's equality, but also a leader of the

local temperance movement. What would she think of the motley bunch to land on her doorstep?

I'm quite certain Georgiana would *not* approve. Judy and I agreed, after years of studying Georgiana closely, that our dear friend was not possessed with much humor. No where, in all accounts by those who knew her, is there any reference to a funny bone. She would stand up to others, turn any man or woman who crossed her into mincemeat with a single glance, but had never been known for jocularity.

Eliza, however, was a little different personality. One can easily see how she would endear herself to E. Clampus Vitus. Ms. Farnham

has, actually, long been a mascot of a San Francisco chapter, which has engraved her likeness on a pin and has annual "doin's" in her honor.

If Eliza could be present Saturday, she might assume the group to be more evidence of the natural superiority of women (a topic Eliza had discussed at the 1859 National Women's Rights Convention.) She might also incite a fiery discussion of proper decorum and good taste in dress. And, equally possible, Eliza might treat them all as children and join in, laughing too loudly and drinking too much, should any refreshment be offered.

After a decade of studying the character of these two, the opinion that Judy and I share has turned

E. Clampus Vitus will have a dedication ceremony at 11 a.m. Saturday at 117 Jordan St., once the home of early Santa Cruz feminist Georgiana Bruce Kirby and now the home of John Cujé. The public is invited.

from awe to a sense of relief — they weren't stern perfectionists. Both had human fallibilities and were sometimes very hard to like. Yes, they were eccentric.

The feminists had been part of the Transcendentalist community at Brook Farm, Mass., and served together as matrons of the Female State Prison at Sing Sing, New York. Coming West, Eliza advertised a brideship plan to civilize men at the mines. Georgiana taught in the mid-West and became an avowed abolitionist, a cause she brought with her to Santa Cruz County. Here, she eventually led California's first attempt to gain for women the right to vote.

Their accomplishments are significant — a find beyond the expectations of any local historian. But the wonderful part of them, really, is the risks they took and the mistakes they made. Eliza was going to show her East Coast friends how she could be a farmer, for instance, but all her crops died. She was very proud of the house she built with her own hands, but it was so ugly and misshapen that local papers called it a "wild looking edifice." Both women wanted to be teachers, but their ideas were too radical.

The important thing is not so much that they succeeded as pioneering super-achievers, but they saw the West as a place where women could test their full potential, and they called upon their own skills to begin.

In the end, I guess, I know exactly what Georgiana would do if she could greet the Clampers Saturday morning. She would serve them tea, engage them in a sparkling debate, and set about converting them to her own cause.