

They keep the historical fires burning

Santa Cruz Historical Society is celebrating its 30th anniversary with a 6:30 p.m. dinner and program at DeLaveaga clubhouse. Today, local historian Margaret Koch takes a glance back at the history of the society itself.

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By MARGARET KOCH
Sentinel Correspondent

ON A SPRING evening in 1953, at a meeting of Santa Cruz Parlor, Native Daughters of the Golden West, I found myself cornered by a friendly but intense brown-eyed woman whom I had known all my life — Marie Pratchner.

With hardly a hello, she began: "We need a historical group in Santa Cruz. You know, if somebody doesn't do something about it, the old adobe on School Street will go like most of the others have."

I had grown up in Santa Cruz but I wasn't exactly sure what Marie was getting at.

"Think about it," she went on relentlessly. "You could head it and we'll all help — I'll get a committee together ..."

That was Marie. No matter that I had three very young children and knew next to nothing about the adobe. She persisted until I found myself involved in the re-creation of the long-defunct local historical group and serving as president for two terms. Marie pushed and prodded. She was a tireless worker herself, and aiding and abetting her were Santa Cruz High School science teacher Robert Burton, banker Moreland Johnson, Sentinel publisher Fred McPherson and a bevy of Native Daughters.

We formed the Santa Cruz Historical Society. We had no money and met regularly in the basement of the old public library. We had few members at first but we had enthusiasm and eventually — big ideas about saving the adobe.

Everybody went to work on it. Burton persuaded the owners to sell, although he had no idea when or how it could be purchased; McPherson persuaded Assemblyman Glenn Coolidge to get the state to purchase it, and Johnson did the title work and much else, all gratis. Acquisition was completed during McPherson's term of office as president. The whole thing took several years of leg work and a lot of talking and that's how it all started. We didn't realize it was just the beginning!

Since then, many of the oldtimers have died and new members — newcomers to Santa Cruz in many cases — have taken over to complete the adobe project, and others.

One of the Historical Society's projects which lasted for a number of years was the publication of the "News and Notes," a leaflet often referred to by researchers today. Oldtimers wrote most of the articles.

In recent years, the struggle to restore and preserve the adobe has been spearheaded by Edna Kimbro. John Chase's book on local architecture has been published as a project, and the Landmark Plaque program was instituted in 1973 by Cynthia Mathews and others. The Society also has been instrumental in getting the city to adopt historical preservation measures and in presenting special public exhibitions, including the very successful Early Craftsman Arts and Crafts.

"We serve as an advocate for historical preservation," notes Mathews, who is president. And that is as it should be. History needs constant tending.

History is a mixed bag and you either hate it or love it. Or you grow up with it and are indifferent to it until someone opens your eyes — that happened to me with Marie. And Santa Cruz County is lucky in being home to a large number of



Thirties interview: Ernest Otto with Terry McArdle, center, and Bob Secondo.

history buffs today. In fact some of the most enthusiastic have come from out of state and upon arrival here they adopt local history as their own private discovery.

But long before the present local Historical Society, we had historians. The first were the Franciscan padres who came to establish Mission Santa Cruz. Busy men, planting, building, teaching, they still endeavored to keep records. Those written accounts were sent to various places, including Mexico and Spain. Some were lost, many were incomplete as to information we would like to have today. But the fact remains, the padres were recording the first local history.

With the coming of the American settlers, there were a few early pioneer journals written and printed, but for the most part the pioneers were too busy scratching out a living to do much writing.

When Alta California became part of the United States, weekly newspapers moved in to take over the job of recording history in the form of news. In 1856, the first newspaper, the Pacific Sentinel, came to Santa Cruz from Monterey.

Along with a change of name, The Sentinel provided us with several memorable historians, amateurs all.

— Ernest Otto was born in a modest frame home on Church Street, just a few steps from the present Sentinel plant where he was to find his life's work. Otto became known statewide for his homey, down-to-earth but highly perceptive pieces; he was "Mr. Santa Cruz" to everyone and a familiar figure on the Municipal Wharf where he covered a regular beat. Otto died in 1955.

— Leon Rowland, a native of Iowa, came to The Sentinel as editor in 1929 and became so enamored of local and California history that he self-published booklets on the Mission, Villa de Branciforte, Santa Cruz, Soquel and the early Spanish families. He also wrote a regular column, The Circuit Rider, mainly devoted to county history.

— Preston Sawyer, a soft-spoken pack-rat of a man with a high forehead, also worked at The Sentinel as a proof reader and he collected everything. Pictures, pamphlets, books, — his fabulous collection of old photos formed the basis for his series of "Santa Cruz Yesterdays" which ran for years in The Sentinel.

A glance at history



Leon Rowland, author of "Santa Cruz The Early Years," and Phyllis Bertorelli Patten, at right in High Jinks costume at the old Glenwood Hotel, were among early history buffs.



At intervals, newspaper articles would appear under the bylines of W.E. "Skip" Littlefield or Robert Burton, both history buffs. And for more than 20 years I wrote articles on topics which included historic homes and buildings, businesses, recreation, characters, families, and what I enjoyed the most — personal interviews with the oldtimers.

There are books too, beginning with the "Elliot" of 1879 and the "Harrison" of 1892. Torchiana's book on the Mission appeared in 1933. Not until 1973 did another extensive history book appear and that was my own "Santa Cruz County, Parade of the Past." I followed it with "They Called it Home," now out of print, and "Going to School in Santa Cruz County."

In these later years, Phyllis Patten wrote an account of her childhood in a Santa Cruz Mountain lumber mill camp, "Oh, That Reminds Me!" Sandy Lydon

and Carolyn Swift collaborated on "From Soquel Landing to Capitola-By-The-Sea." Frank Perry researched and wrote a history of Lighthouse Point, and there are now books on the Ohlone Indians and Big Basin State Park. Betty Lewis has written extensively on the history of Watsonville.

Mildred Brooke Hoover's book on California devotes many pages to Santa Cruz County and is a widely recognized reference.

In addition to the books, civic and historic-minded citizens have opened their wallets to finance the re-printing of valuable historical materials: the Ley family, Viola Washburn and Dorothy Miller come to mind and there probably are others.

No doubt there will be more books and publications in the future because history is a growing, changing thing, as colorful as a kaleidoscope and just about as stable.