



Sue Colley/For the Register-Pajaronian

Methodist District Superintendent N.R. Edwards cuts a ceremonial ribbon Saturday at the 150th anniversary celebration of the First United Methodist Church at 229 Stanford St. in Watsonville.

First United Methodist Church marks 150 years

Food, music, fun at celebration

By SUE COLLEY

FOR THE REGISTER-PAJARONIAN

The First United Methodist Church of Watsonville commemorated its 150th anniversary Saturday with a midday ribbon cutting, a barbecue and a special service of music and song.

At the ribbon cutting, Pastor Robin Mathews-Johnson, accompanied by the Methodist District Superintendent N. R. Edwards, gave a litany in which she dedicated the church to the future through recognition of its traditions and core values.

The large gathering of members and friends of the church then

moved to the Commons Room, a hall that from 1954 to 1960 served as the main worship sanctuary. Saturday it was turned into a banquet room with the Watsonville Firefighters' Association catering the meal.

Among the many guests who filled the tables were three former pastors and a group of octogenarians who helped build the original structure in 1954. On tables and walls were photographs, memorabilia and written accounts of the rich history of the church, which reflects the history of Watsonville, even sharing its 150th anniversary.

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After the tri tip steak, beans, salads and cakes, the hand bell choir, dressed in Black Hand sewn costumes trimmed in red and green, entered the hall in a call to the song service in the sanctuary.

Church historians who have contributed their research, their collections of memorabilia and their memories to the event include Hal and Marilyn Hyde, Esther Fisher, Jane Borg and the Richardson family. Marilyn Hyde, dressed in a period gown of red, white and blue, served with her father, Hal, as a greeter.

The Hyde family shares a special connection to the church. Marilyn's great grandfather C.V. Anthony was the church's first full-time pastor. The year was 1859 and the church had by that time grown sufficiently to declare itself a separate charge, independent of the Monterey circuit. Six years before (1853), C.V.'s brother, Mister Elihu Anthony, was appointed the church's first preacher. Elihu, a circuit rider, visited the Pajaro congregation on alternate Sundays.

Saturday's event commemorated the first church service that was held in the fall of 1852 on the banks of the Pajaro River. Near where the bridge now crosses the river, in a grove of cottonwood, a group of parishioners gathered to celebrate a wedding and to hear the first protestant service conducted in the community. Reverend D.A. Dryden, the circuit preacher from Santa Cruz, presided. Two years



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Hal Hyde and his daughter Marilyn Hyde.

later, the first church was built, a small, primitive building on the 400 block of Main Street.

For timber, church members cut and split the Palo Colorado from the mountainside and dragged the wood down by oxen; the walls and floors were lined with cloth.

This church, which served the congregation for eight years, thrived. According to church historian, Esther Fisher, by 1860 the population of Watsonville had grown to 460 and the church had 50 communicants, two Sunday Schools and 40 scholars. However, the noise and dust from the horse races held regularly on Main Street finally offered too much competition and in 1862 the church moved into a structure on East Lake and Alexander that had been vacated by the Methodist Church South.

This move dissolved, on a local level, a division over the slavery issue that had created North and South churches throughout the Western states.

The church remained on East Lake for 12 years until a new church was built on Rodriguez and

West Beach. This church, dedicated on Jan. 12, 1874, with its simple lines and tall steeple, is still remembered by many members of the current congregation. It served for 70 years and its steeple can still be seen moldering in the grasses of Pajaro Dunes as it waits for renovators and a possible new life in the historical village at the county fairgrounds.

A groundbreaking ceremony for the existing church at 229 Stanford St. was held in 1952 and the Commons Room, which served as the first sanctuary, was completed with the labor of parishioners in 1954. Along one wall of the room are pews from the 1874-1954 Rodriguez Street church.

In 1961, the present sanctuary was built. Its uniquely faceted stain glass windows fill three walls of the building. Each window is a commemorative gift from church members. The east side windows illustrate symbols from the Gospels and the west side symbols from the Epistles.

Many of the names that appear on the plaques, under photographs and in the written histories are familiar today: Cummins, Gilman, Gardner, Hushbeck, Hyde, Pearce, Patterson, Richardson, Tuttle, White, Wycoff, Uren, Redman, Kilburn.

Octogenarian Esther Fisher remained after Saturday's musical celebration as a guide. She shares an 83-year history with the church. Born in 1915, Esther was three years old, accompanied by her parents when she first attended a service on Rodriguez Street. She matured in its Sunday School, married

in its chapel and has long chronicled its history. Her father helped to raise the steeple on Rodriguez Street, a huge structure that had a device that allowed it to rotate. Harriet Proctor described the steeple as big enough to have windows a tall man a tall man could stand upright in. The steeple was lit at night and could be seen for miles.

In the narthex (foyer) of the sanctuary is a display leant to the church by the Pajaro Valley Historical Association. Next to a striking photo of the young Grace Richardson are her 1929 wedding dress, shoes, her purse, glasses, gloves and Bible.

Grace, a church matriarch, was a Watsonville High School graduate who married Al Richardson, her high school sweetheart, in the Rodriguez Street church. Her Uncle Harry Richardson, a former circuit rider, officiated. Esther Fisher remembers gleaning bushberries at Al and Grace's farm at the end of every harvest season with other young, married couples. The berries would then be sent to the Fred Finch orphanage in Oakland.

A symbol of the old and new working together also hangs on the wall in the narthex. It is a prize-winning quilt by Kate Totten that commemorates the 150th anniversary of the FUMC. The quilt combines old and new techniques, with photos of the church's history imprinted on cloth and crafted seamlessly into a traditional quilt.

At the ribbon cutting, Pastor Mathews-Johnson emphasized the importance of moving forward into the community through defining bedrock beliefs and core values.