

Santa Cruz Yesterdays



THE OLD GRAND CENTRAL BLOCK

(From the Preston Sawyer Collection)

The site of the J. C. Penney store at Pacific and Cathcart looked like this from 1889 to a dozen years ago.

Earliest occupancy of the site was in 1856 when a young carpenter named Tom Beck built a cottage there for his wife. He lived there ten years until he removed to Watsonville, where he operated as builder and contractor until he turned to politics. He was state senator and California secretary of state.

Beck sold his little home, which was then far down Pacific avenue, to a spinster, Mary Logan, who occupied it until 1880, when Peter V. Wilkins and his wife bought it.

Wilkins, a New York state man, had arrived in Santa Cruz in 1856 and married Katy Short a year later. He worked in the San Lorenzo hotel until it burned in 1865 to be replaced by the two-story brick Pacific Ocean House. After that Peter had a restaurant on Front street and for a time leased a little wooden building near Front and Cooper then known as the Santa Cruz Hotel.

Start of Wilkins House

In 1880 he and Katy were ready to carry out their ambition to own their own hostelry. They bought Miss Bergin's cottage, and an expanse of land across Pacific avenue, which, already planted to orchard trees, afforded pasture for the cows which provided the Wilkins House' table with milk and cream.

Peter moved the little house Beck had built 24 years earlier to the back of the lot and built a two story wooden hotel, with gable ends toward the street. A wing at the north end which extended to the street was entrance and office, but the main building was fronted by a porch which overlooked a grass and flower plot.

Peter and his wife operated their

hotel only nine years, selling then to H. D. C. Barnhardt, who built the store fronts, for rental, with additional rooms upstairs for the hotel, which he named the "Grant Hotel."

A later owner, William Russell, from Felton, in 1902, amplified the name to "Grand Central" which it bore until the building was razed.

Railroad Depot Planned

The failure of the Ocean Shore railroad to develop into a major rail artery defeated its plan to erect a depot building on the site. The railroad, which built links out of Santa Cruz and San Francisco but was never able to join them, had grandiose plans to extend its line eastward. The line was originally planned to be electrically operated.

For Santa Cruz it planned a combined station and office building, to be five stories high. Shortly before the 1906 earthquake, which proved the beginning of the end for the main project, negotiations had been started to purchase local elec-

tric lines to aid Ocean Shore's extension toward Watsonville.

In the old hotel's heyday it, too, had a porch balcony over Pacific avenue. The picture shows three doors along with all the second floor windows, door never erased after the porch was removed.

Early Movie House

The first store space at right was long occupied by King's Carriage Shop. Next to it, and adjoining the hotel stairway, was for some years the little Star theater, one of Santa Cruz' early nickelodeons. Three to five reels of movie thrillers could be seen daily for a nickel. Next was for years a bakery, a real estate office and at the end a grocery.

South of the Grand Central, the high two-story structure, remodeled from its previous appearance, had years ago housed the store and home of Pon Fang, prominent Santa Cruz Chinese, and his family. The building was razed when Cathcart street was cut through to Cedar.