

Another building coming down

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The Oct. 17 earthquake isn't over yet for Watsonville. As if to underscore that point, Ford's Department Store recently announced that it will be tearing down its salmon-colored warehouse building on West Beach Street.

The warehouse, visible from Main Street now that the Ford's store is gone, has only been a warehouse for about 30 years — before that, it was Watsonville's first movie house.

In the 1920s, it was also a vaudeville theater. It was the first place to show "talkies," or movies in which dialogue could be heard by the audience, and then, in 1949, the first theater in town to show Spanish-language movies once a week.

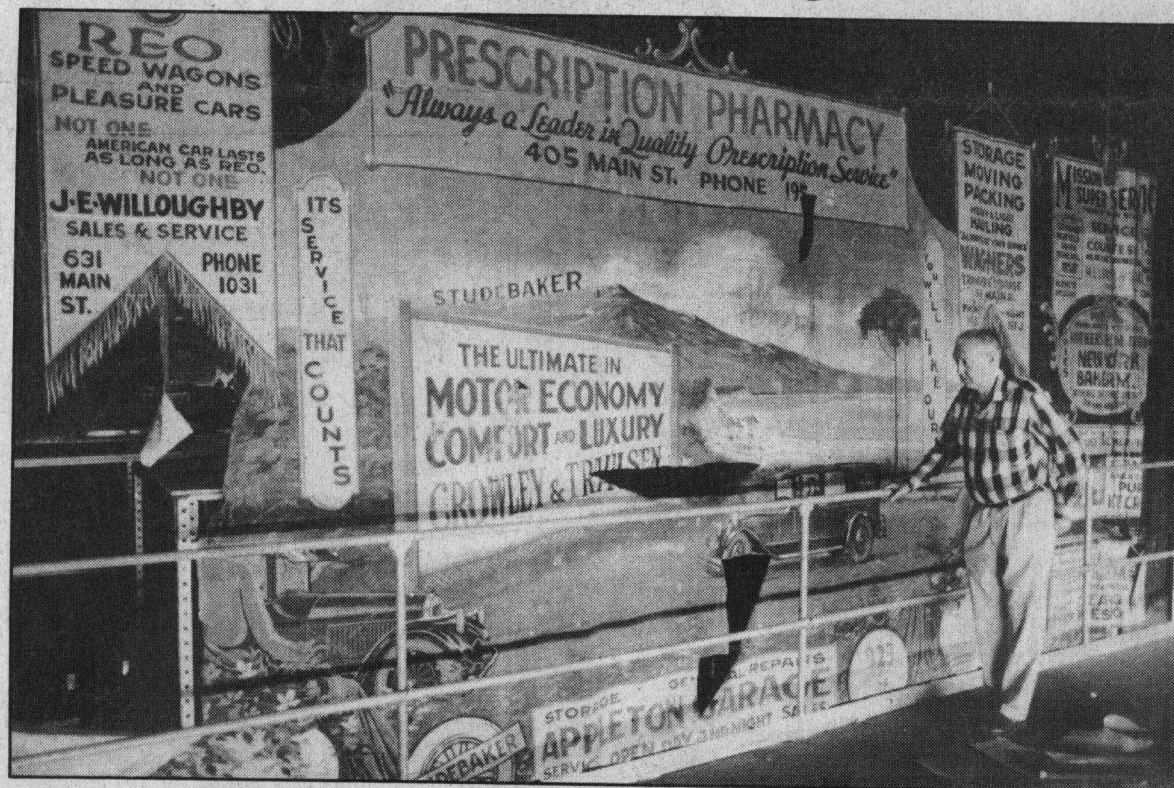
According to Hal Hyde, the senior vice president for Ford's, the store's own structural engineer has decided that the building — while not teetering on the brink of collapse — can't be saved. This week the office staff that has been working in the front part of the building since the quake will be moving to the old Nestle building in Pajaro.

Meanwhile, Ford's is waiting to find out whether FEMA will pay for the demolition, Hyde said.

According to Neil England, Watsonville's building inspector, FEMA decides whether it will pay based on an analysis of what percent of the building's damage was caused by the earthquake, and what percent if just old age.

The building, designed by William Weeks in 1915, was an effort by the Appleton Investment Group to bring a theater to town. As part of the same project, the Wall Street Hotel was built next door.

The theater has not enjoyed a



Kurt Ellison

Ford's executive Hal Hyde looks at the interior of the old theater.

very calm life since then. It changed hands several times, and suffered losses when the Fox Theatre was built and gave it some competition.

A fire gutted the theater in 1924, causing \$50,000 in damage, but it was rebuilt.

In 1966, Ford's Department Store bought the building, as well as the Wall Street Hotel. Ford's also bought much of the square block, including houses, to make room for a parking lot.

A few years later, Ford's sold the hotel. And after the Oct. 17 earthquake, the 110,000-square-foot Ford's store facing Main Street was demolished almost immediately.

Now, eight months later, the decision to tear the old theater building down has been a difficult one, Hyde said.

"We're hoping to get a fast-

track replacement (for the warehouse building,) even before the (new) store building goes up," Hyde said.

The theater was grand, drawing crowds in "the latest modes in gowns and millinery," Watsonville historian Betty Lewis writes in her book, "Watsonville: Memories Thatlinger."

It originally had a pipe organ, and leather seats arranged in two levels. Later it had maroon velour drapes tied with gold tassels.

The seats have long since been removed from the ground floor to make room for inventory.

Today, a person can climb a portable steel staircase to get a view of the old theater from the stage and balcony level. It's surprising; from metal clothes

racks and cement floors, one steps up and suddenly sees that the balcony looms over the dark warehouse. Across from it is the dark stage, with its scrolled wooden paneling along the top of the walls.

The stage still looks like a vaudeville stage, with faux red curtains tied back with faux gold tassels, and a screen with advertisements for local merchants.

Hyde said he hopes to save the screen, perhaps with the help of the Pajaro Valley Historical Society.

The building also houses some of Ford's offices in front, in what was for a time the Eagles Hall, and more inventory was stored in what was once the Ford's Garden Shop in back.

There is no date set for the demolition, Hyde said.