



# LOCAL NEWS

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## HISTORY

# The Sunshine Villa's long legacy

### Building inspired Hitchcock movie, survived development

By Calvin Men

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**SANTA CRUZ** » Nestled at the top of a hill near the Santa Cruz Boardwalk, the Sunshine Villa Assisted Living and Memory Care sees little action compared to the rest of the Santa Cruz.

In the middle of the Beach Hill neighborhood, the building has 124 residents roaming its hall-

ways. But unbeknownst to them and most county residents, the four-story structure holds more than people, with a legacy that encompasses Hollywood, California politics and Santa Cruz's early days.

The villa's leaders plan to host an event for residents, their families and friends to celebrate the assisted living facility's 25th anniversary. Slated for 4:30 to 7:30 p.m. on Oct. 28, the event includes a rehashing of the buildings his-

tory by Santa Cruz Historian Russ Gibson.

The building has gone through several iterations, with its origin starting in 1867 after it was built by Dr. Francis Kittredge as a small, two-story cottage residence, Gibson said. The house passed to Kittredge's sister-in-law, who expanded the property to include adjacent orchards, built an extension and made it into a hotel.

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Afternoon light spills through the windows of the Sunshine Villa library in Santa Cruz on Thursday.

KEVIN JOHNSON  
— SANTA CRUZ  
SENTINEL

# Sunshine

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It later changed hands, giving ownership to James Phillip Smith, a trolley line owner who bought the property to rent out rooms to his employees. While Smith was known as a silent man, he earned the nickname "Sunshine Jim" and the building was renamed the Sunshine Villa as a result.

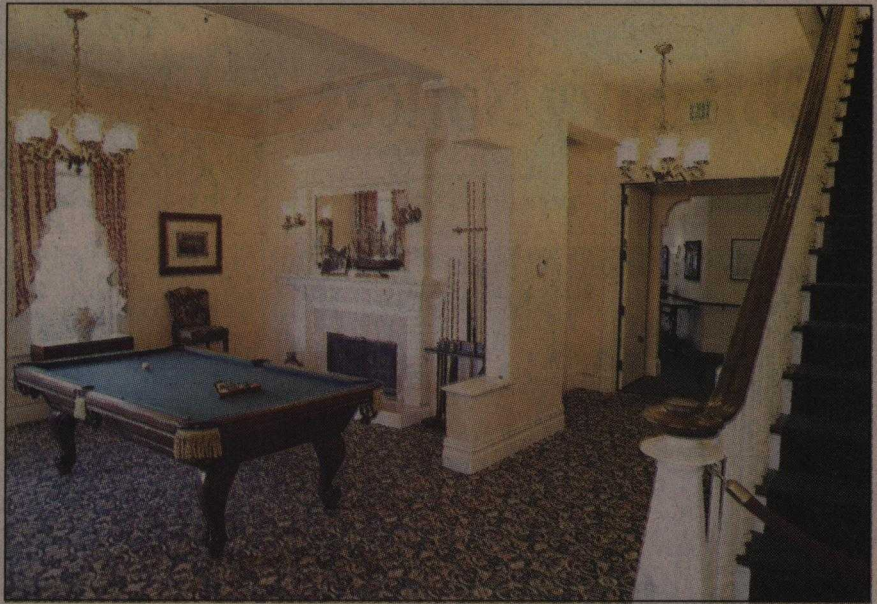
That era is one of Gibson's favorite since the building was repainted in its yellow and white facade. From 1890 to 1927, the building was under Smith's care, who also helped start a Venetian water carnival to jump start tourism after a fire in 1894.

"It was back in its day where the building sat in a parklike setting and people could appreciate the beauty of the era," Gibson said.

One of the more infamous tidbits about the building was its inspiration for the master of suspense, Alfred Hitchcock. Hitchcock lived in Scotts Valley during the 1960s and, while looking for inspiration for a film, came upon the then dilapidated building. At the time, cars were becoming more common and created a large availability of hotel rooms. Because of that, the business saw a decline in tenants and, as a result, a decline in care. Known then as the McCray Hotel, it had a stucco exterior and took on a spooky ambience, which Hitchcock drew upon for inspiration for the fictional Bates Motel in "Psycho."

"Looking up, you can kind of see what he was envisioning and get an idea of what he ended up reproducing pieces of in the backlot of Hollywood," Gibson said.

In the decades after, it fell into further disrepair as it became a sight for



KEVIN JOHNSON — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

The parlor at Sunshine Villa in Santa Cruz is one of the historical rooms in the now assisted living home.

seedy drug deals and was even across the street from a brothel, according to Gibson.

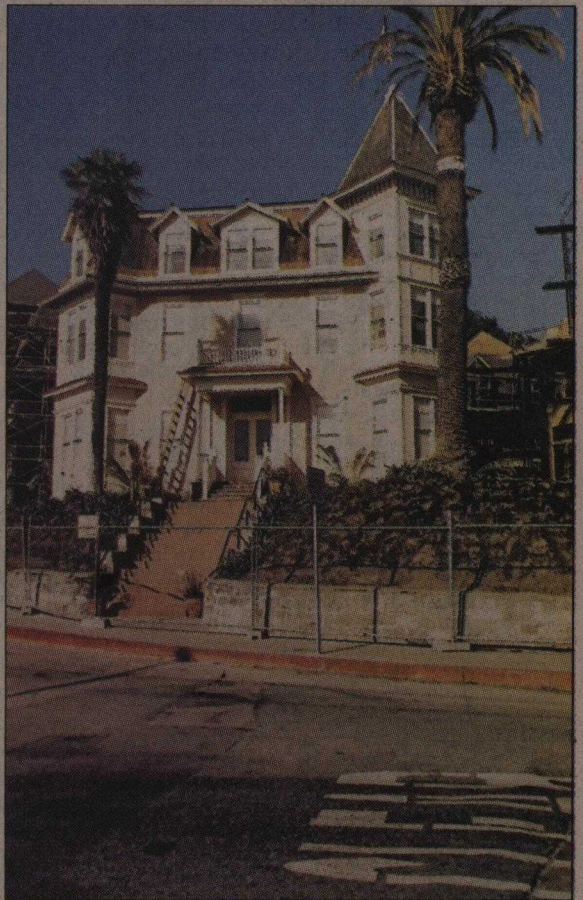
But in 1987, Santa Cruz architect Michael John O'Hearn took interest in the building, buying it with the goal of restoring it. Gibson, who worked with and knew O'Hearn before he died in 2011, said the architect couldn't bear with the thought of someone else buying the famed building and tearing it down.

During the restoration project, the building was placed onto rollers in 1989 to excavate the basement. That move likely saved the building since the 6.9 magnitude Loma Prieta earthquake came days later, wreaking havoc across the Bay Area.

O'Hearn found funds for the project by making it into senior housing and brought back the name Sunshine to honor the time when the building flourished.

Executive Director Teri Cilley knows the importance of history for building and the staff.

"History is the foundation of what Sunshine Villa has evolved from," she said.



ALLAN ALLEN — CONTRIBUTED

The building was known as the McCray Hotel for decades before it was bought, restored and renamed.

"History brings a foundation of stability and purpose. I think that's what's happened for us here."