

Old adobe's looks changed many times through the years

By CAROLYN SWIFT

Villa de Branciforte, the last Spanish pueblo established in Alta California, began in 1797 as a colonization attempt that proved both impractical and unsuccessful.

Its residents were mostly unfortunate souls — prisoners, malcontents and retired soldiers — who were mustered for life in a settlement never given enough financial or moral support and never welcomed, certainly, by the Mission of Santa Cruz.

Records show only one adobe structure of Spanish design was ever built at the pueblo. Constructed before 1803, it was surrounded by about 17 wooden buildings at the base of the hill just north of what is now the intersection of Branciforte Avenue and Water Street in Santa Cruz.

The adobe became one of the last reminders of the Spanish era — yet during its lifetime the home has been consecutively altered, disguised, ignored and threatened with spiteful demolition.

It is by an impressive blend of good fortune and skill that Branciforte Adobe not only stands today — it looks much the way it did 180 years ago. And now it has also been rewarded for endurance with a designation in the National Register of Historic Places.

There are two people who can claim credit and best tell the story of the adobe's restoration. They are Mike Taylor, who operates a firm called "Old Mission Adobes," and Edna Kimbro, an avid researcher, owner of the adobe, president of Santa Cruz Historical Society and a member of the Santa Cruz City Historical Preservation Commission.

Located at the corner of Branciforte and Goss avenues, the adobe was originally constructed as a two-room home, a common design for Spanish-style houses of the period, Mrs. Kimbro said. It also had a small attic called a "tanbanco," with a small doorway and outdoor stairway. In the beginning there was a tile roof, but this disappeared when the first alterations were made in the mid-1800's. The walls were two-feet thick and the ceilings were low. There was a corral nearby.

Sometime before 1900, two wooden rooms were added at the back, and the stairway disappeared. A doorway was cut at the side of the house that faces Goss Avenue.

In 1921, the house was remodeled completely. The rear portion — then nearly 50 years old — was renovated; a porch was added and a dormer was built. The adobe assumed a "California

bungalow," identity. It was at this point, Mrs. Kimbro adds, that part of the north wall was removed and a common roof was built for both the adobe and wood sections.

The bungalow facade camouflaged the oldest home in Santa Cruz County for more than 50 years. Then in 1974, its owners obtained a lot split on the property, and the home lost its backyard. The house itself was sold and a new home constructed at the rear.

Realtors who bought the adobe decided to begin restoration, and they hired Taylor to strip away the remnants of the 1920s.

Taylor is a licensed general contractor with lifelong interest and expertise in adobe construction and restoration. He is known for his successful restoration of the Mission San Juan Bautista under direction of Harry Downie, curator of missions for the Diocese of Monterey. And although San Juan Bautista is his biggest project to date, Taylor and his sons have also worked on the Los Coches adobe in Soledad, the Bronda adobe, and the Alvarado adobe at San Pablo.

The restorer's expertise has brought the home close to its original appearance even though there were at first no photographs and little information to serve as a guideline. Taylor removed the dormer and other bungalow features, including the porch and stucco exterior, and made indoor repairs to the walls. He then re-roofed the adobe with hand-split shakes and added the traditional veranda.

"It turns out, luckily," Mrs. Kimbro said, "The veranda is what the house had originally."

Mrs. Kimbro also had a longtime enthusiasm for adobes. She was raised in downtown Monterey, near the "island of adobes," and resided for a time with a relative in San Juan Bautista. This relative once owned an adobe home next to the Carmel Mission, and was a collector of religious and American art. She was also a friend of the internationally-known sculptor and artist, Joe Mora, whose works depict the history of Monterey County and include the sarcophagus of Junipero Serra.

Living in an adobe was something Mrs. Kimbro had always wanted to do, and in 1974 the opportunity arrived. She and her husband, Joe, moved in once Taylor's work was completed.

But there was still no kitchen, no heating and nothing on the floor but a concrete slab. The work was gradual — the Kimbros did much of it themselves — and now there is a kitchen, new

electrical siding, mud coats added to front and side walls, and an interior tile floor.

The porch represents another bit of lucky guesswork. Mrs. Kimbro researched the kinds of walks typical for adobes in the vicinity, and decided on a wooden walkway. When it was finished, she discovered in an old photograph that her house did indeed have a wood walk identical to the one she built — even the same-sized boards.

The photographs that provided vital detail were given to Mrs. Kimbro by Harold Van Gorder, a friend of Herbert Winchester Still, who once lived in the house. She has since met with Still, and now corresponds with him about the adobe's past.

Other clues have been provided by archeologists. Santa Cruz Archeological Society has sifted through the earth from the backyard lot before construction on the new house began. Workers have found the property was once an Indian site — which was expected, Mrs. Kimbro said, because adobes were often located in the same areas once occupied by native Californians. There is also an abundance of ceramics and late 18th century Mexican majolica.

Mrs. Kimbro hopes to find a definite date for construction of the adobe through study of some of the artifacts. A shipment has been made to an archeologist in Washington, D.C., who specializes in the study of ceramics. It may also be possible, she added, to locate the date through study of the plant age in the adobe bricks.

Harry Downie, who once had an interest himself in the Branciforte Adobe, helped the Kimbros understand how their house was structured. It is his theory that a niche in the bedroom wall was used for kitchen storage, and archeological evidence under the flooring helps confirm his guess that an open kitchen may have once existed there.

As the owner of one of two adobe structures in the Santa Cruz area (the other is the Neary-Hopcroft Adobe, once a barracks at the Santa Cruz Mission), Mrs. Kimbro has become a member of the Monterey Historical and Art Association and frequently looks to other counties for information about adobe buildings. She has eagerly researched the past of her own house and the pueblo of Branciforte.

She now knows about everyone who has owned the adobe since 1848. At that time, she says, it was the home of Jose Lorenzana, his wife and ten children.

"You can't appreciate a dozen people living in this house until you see how small it is," she said.

She believes that as a Catholic family with strict rules, the Lorenzana males may have slept outdoors, perhaps on the veranda and covered areas.

Lorenzana lived in Branciforte at the time Thomas Larkin owned a store here run by Jose Belden. Mrs. Kimbro discovered that Lorenzana at one time carted lumber for Larkin from the Branciforte area to Monterey.

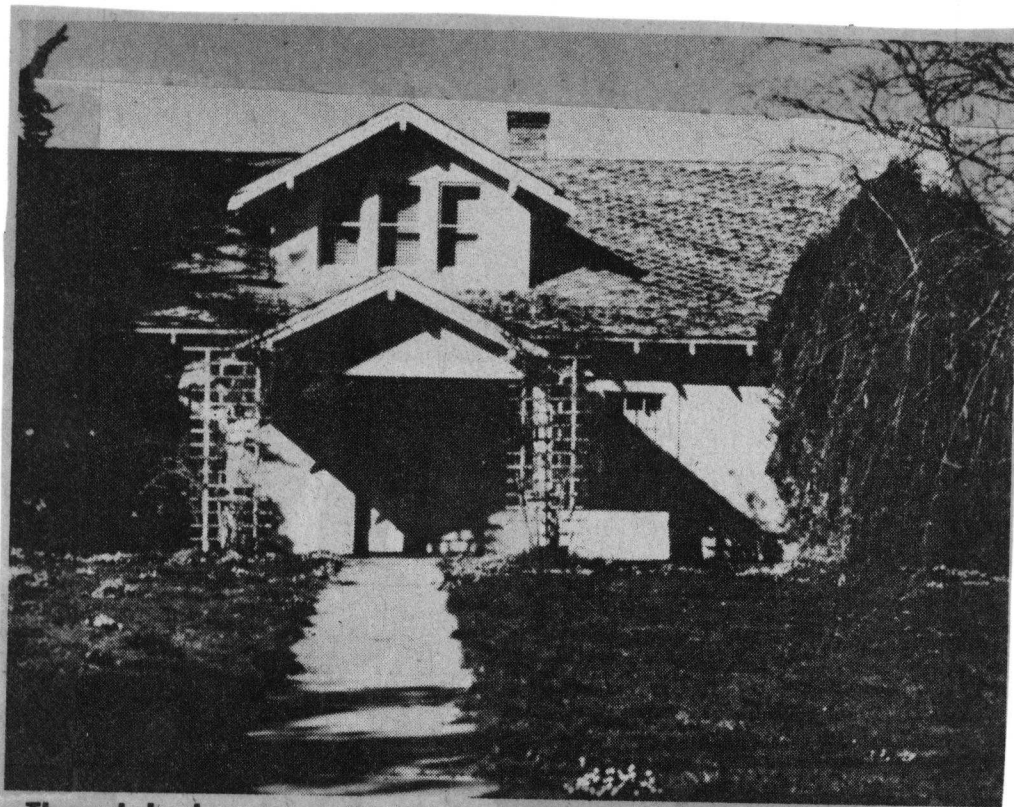
She learned about the Lorenzana family through a lawsuit after Jose's death in 1863. His wife and four children were still living in the house, but were evicted because Jose owed \$257 to an American. The American claimed ownership and won.

Initially, Lorenzana had owned about 100 acres — but this was eventually reduced to 6½ acres, including the house. Since the California culture was based upon hides rather than the dollar, Jose was among many forced to sell their lands for cash during the period of Yankee settlement through the 1860s.

The Branciforte Adobe once sat along an avenue of the pueblo that was frequently used as a one-mile track for horseracing. Now it sits facing a busy intersection, and until two weeks ago, was exposed to the street without an enclosed yard.

But the front of the house is now neatly surrounded by an adobe wall completed through the teamwork of the Kimbro family and Taylor. The adobe bricks for the wall were created by Taylor and his crew at the Rodeo grounds in San Juan Bautista, and are exactly the same as the adobes inside the house — except that the wall is reinforced.

Assistance with the adobe wall was also provided by Boy Scout Troop 933, led by Cabrillo College archeology instructor Rob Edwards. The troop completed work at the adobe toward a heritage badge, and will also help the Santa Cruz Archeological Society sift through dirt on the property March 23 and 24.



The adobe became a "California bungalow" before restoration began in 1974.

GREEN SHEET

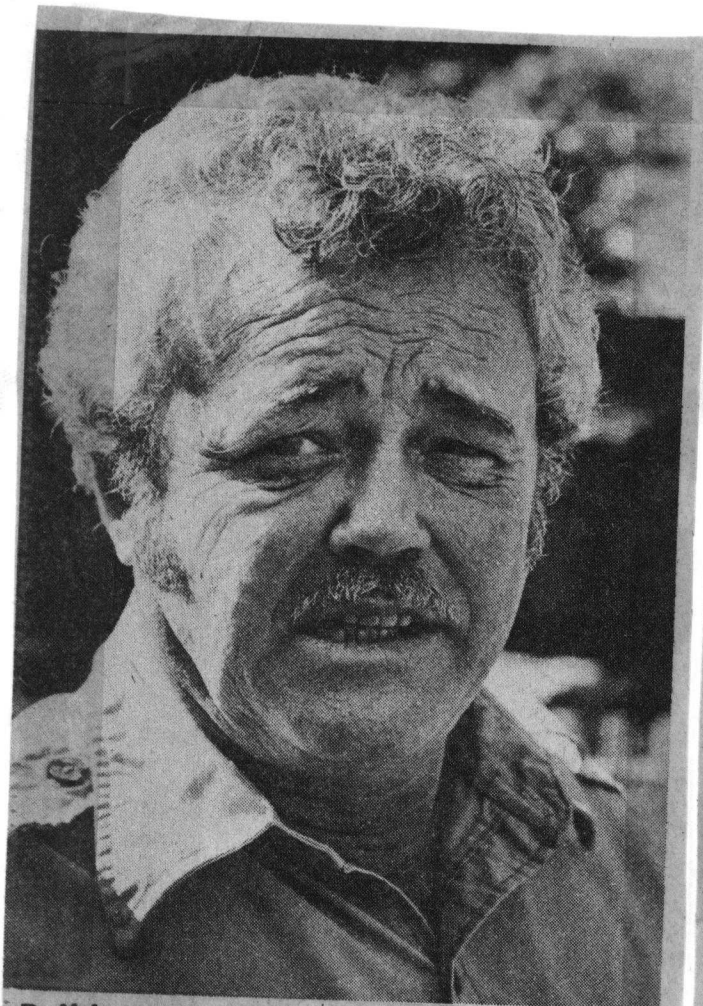
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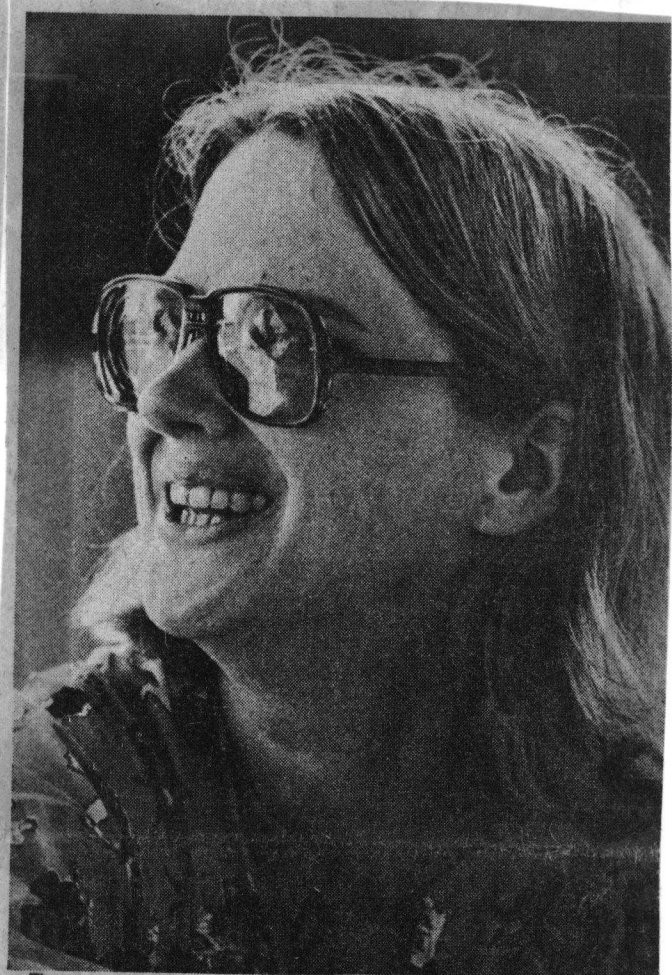


The 180-year-old Branciforte Adobe now looks much as it did when built.

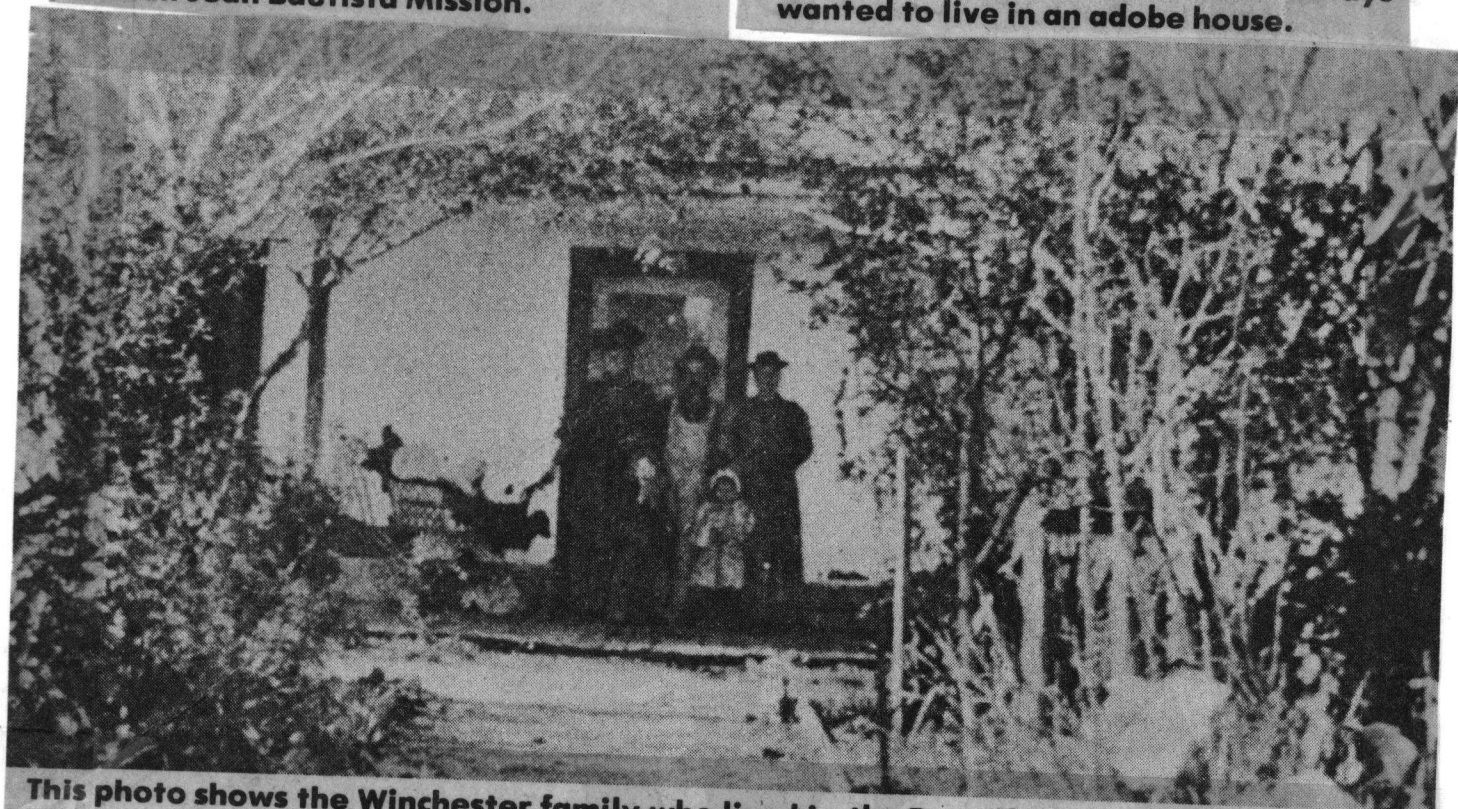
Photo by Bob Smith



Builder Mike Taylor also restored the old San Juan Bautista Mission.



Present owner Edna Kimbro always wanted to live in an adobe house.



This photo shows the Winchester family who lived in the Branciforte Adobe for 30 years.