

The Old And The New

One of the Beach Hill Mansions

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Hotel McCray dominates the lower Front Street approach to the beach like a dowager queen surrounded for the most part by untidy servant girls.

The hotel is just one of a remaining handful of imposing old mansions that once clustered on Beach Hill like currants on a bun.

Most of the old-time millionaires made their money the hard way — by working for it. And when they approached that high financial plateau, they didn't mind advertising the fact by building a home that often looked more like a hotel than a house.

Those homes were no problem in that era. Hired girls moved in, practically became part of the family in many cases, took over the washing, scrubbing, baby sitting and a million other chores. Chinese cooks were easily come by, and often proved to be devoted, life-long friends as well as producers of delicious culinary products.

Gardeners worked almost for the love of it in those almost unbelievable days, tending velvet lawns and intricate flower beds, trimming box hedges to geometric perfection, and tending gold fish pools, lily ponds and sometimes a fountain or two.

The McCray was twice a private home and three times a hotel. It looked like a hotel long before it was, and it had the gardens too, two acres of them, complete with iron deer and pools.

It was built a hundred or more years ago — dates don't agree — by Dr. Francis M. Kittredge, who came to Santa Cruz in 1851. He was a distinguished physician who had graduated from Dartmouth Medical School and practiced for 20 years in the Eastern U.S. before coming here. When the older doctor married the young daughter of Judge William Blackburn, he built the big home for her, probably in the early 1860s. In any event, the doctor didn't enjoy his fine home for long; he died in 1879.

For a few years the home was operated as Kittredge House (hotel) by J. B. Peeks who also ran the famed Sea Beach Hotel just over the hill.

Then in 1890, J. Philip Smith came to Santa Cruz with pockets full of money made in his international food distribution company. Mrs. Smith was the former Susan Crooks of Santa Cruz. Smith looked about for a suitable mansion for his wife and her daughter, Miss Anita Gonzales, saw Kittredge House and bought it. He spent money like water and turned it into an elegant

summer home, complete with a herd of iron deer and other statuary adorning its two acres of lawns and gardens.

The Smiths re-named it Sunshine Villa and entertained there with a continuing series of lawn parties, teas, balls, musicales and formal dinners that set the town on its social ear. The Villa as a showplace, rivaled the natural bridges and the redwood trees ... every visiting dignitary was wined and dined there by the Smiths.

Highlight of the Villa's and the Smiths' social career was the first of two Venetian Water Carnivals in 1895, held on the San Lorenzo River which was dammed where it curves near the foot of Third Street. The spectacular water show was planned at a series of conferences in the Smith

home, as Director-General Papa Smith plunked down the cash, Mama Smith was named Dowager Queen and daughter Anita was crowned Queen of the Water Carnival.

Queen Anita barged down the San Lorenzo in great style, thanks to father's pocketbook.

Smith was described by friends of the day as a person of "fierce energy and ready purse." He needed both. The carnival went on for three nights and three days with fireworks, newfangled electric lights strung along the river, band programs, tableaux, boats and elaborate floats and the works. The Smiths occupied the house until about 1920 when a group of local investors bought the place, held it about five years, then sold to Mr. and Mrs. John McCray. The McCrays were hotel people before coming to Santa

Cruz. They did some remodeling, built a series of apartments outside the main building, and operated it as a hotel-apartment house for 17 years.

In 1943 they sold to C. W. Bender, a local jeweler; Bender shortly sold to someone named Schmidt; Schmidt sold to Jacob Lieberman in 1945, and he sold to Mr. and Mrs. Porter Kilpatrick in 1955. The Kilpatricks, who came here from Alaska, still have the old hotel and have retained the McCray name.

Today, the Hotel McCray sits on Beach Hill like a grande dame, slightly out of gear with the times, an elegant remnant of yesteryear, surrounded by some sad architectural examples of more recent vintage.



Landmark on Beach Hill is the Hotel McCray, located at the point where Front Street goes over the hill to the beach and Municipal Wharf.

