

Memories in the rubble of the Cooper House



The Santa Cruz Historical Society

The '06 quake took a chunk out of the Cooper House, which was finished off by the '89 quake.

EARTHQUAKE '89 - City of Santa Cruz

By DONALD L. WILSON
Sentinel correspondent

I hear they're tearing down the Cooper House because of earthquake damage. I didn't go down there to watch it.

I saved the Cooper House from destruction about 20 years ago, and I don't even want to think about it finally going down.

Well, it probably would be more accurate to say that I *helped* saved the Cooper House. It really was Stan Fullerton who saved it.

Maybe you know Stan. He's a Santa Cruz artist and commercial fisherman. He and I used to hang around in the old Catalyst when it was in the former ballroom of the St. George Hotel (and that's another sad aspect of the earthquake; will it have to be torn down too?)

Anyway, Stan and I were having coffee in the old Catalyst one afternoon. The county had built its new courthouse across the river and had moved in. The old courthouse on Pacific Avenue and Cooper Street was empty. The county didn't need it anymore.

At that time, I was administrative assistant to the county Board of Supervisors. The board had discussed what to do with the old courthouse. The supervisors finally decided to sell it — and they advertised for bids.

The best bid they got was \$75,000 with the property as is, and \$90,000 if the old courthouse was gone and the lot leveled. The bidder wanted to make a parking lot there.

The supervisors asked the public works director what it would cost to tear the building down. He gave them a figure far less than the \$15,000 difference in bids. So the board scheduled a vote at its next meeting to tear down the building and sell the empty lot for \$90,000.

Stan sipped at his cup of coffee and grumbled something about what a shame it would be to lose that fine, old building.

"I was talking to a couple of real estate people the other day," he said, "and they think that would be a

great place for law offices. I'll bet that they'd buy the building and fix it up, if they had time to scout around a little."

I thought that was a great idea.

"Get onto it," I said. "I'll see what I can do."

Stan took off on his mission and I went to see Russ McCallie, who was county supervisor for the Santa Cruz area then. I told him what Stan had said. Russ hadn't liked the idea of tearing down the old courthouse anyway.

He had me write a memo to the board, asking for a delay in the destruction order. At the next board meeting, the board voted to hold up on the order.

A few days later, Phillips Patton (whose son, Gary, later succeeded McCallie as supervisor) asked for a six-month lease on the old courthouse building. He told the board that he and other lawyers were interested in converting it into a set of offices.

Patton got engineers to check the building and they said it could be made safe for occupancy (it had been a bit shaky at times in the past). But the six months went by and Patton wasn't able to put together the right kind of group to buy the building and remodel it.

Meanwhile, some people had seen what Max Walden had done rebuilding an old school in Los Gatos into Old Town. They asked Walden to take a look at the old courthouse in Santa Cruz.

He did. He came up with a plan to remodel it into a whole bunch of shops and specialty stores. He bought the building, remodeled it and named it the Cooper House (because it was on Cooper Street which was named for an old Santa Cruz family).

The Cooper House became an institution, maybe even a legend, in downtown Santa Cruz, a focal point for the new Pacific Garden Mall built at the persistent instigation of Chuck Abbott.

So now an earthquake has done what nothing else was able to do: It has destroyed the old county courthouse.

And it has taken a lot of memories along with it.