

A bit of history for sale

By DAN FITCH
STAFF WRITER

George Mortan bought the 117-year-old Thurwachter ranch house on Beach Road in Watsonville for one dollar.

The house. Not the land. The 3,000 square feet of prime agricultural land on which the house sits is worth many, many dollars.

But the house is a different story. It is old and in the way.

Constructed in 1872, the ranch house was the centerpiece of the 133-acre farm run by the Thurwachter family (see accompanying story). The house still sits where it was built, but these days it sits empty, surrounded by farm equipment and a house trailer, and is overseen by a foreman who tends to the equipment and keeps trespassers away.

It sits, an historic relic, occasionally downwind of the sewage plant.

But Mortan has plans for the house. He wants to save it. He offered the owner, Tom Mine of Mine Bros., a dollar for the house and Mine accepted the offer. The subsequent contract they signed gives Mortan until May 22 to move the house off the parcel.

Mortan says he would like to give the house to someone who has enough land to place it on. And if no one wants it, he will take the house home to Aromas.

"I offered to get this problem off their hands," Mortan said. "The house is an attractive nuisance to them, they're retired, and they need the land.

"I want this house to stay up, and I'll move it here (to Aromas) if I have to. If I do, I'll have a lifetime of weekend work ahead of me. Think of it as recycling at its highest order."

Mine, 71, was born and raised in the Pajaro Valley and has owned the Thurwachter ranch land for about 15 years. He is retired and lives in town, and hopes Mortan can find a suitable spot and caring owner for the house.

Mine said he has considered other offers for the house, but decided to take up Mortan on his offer.

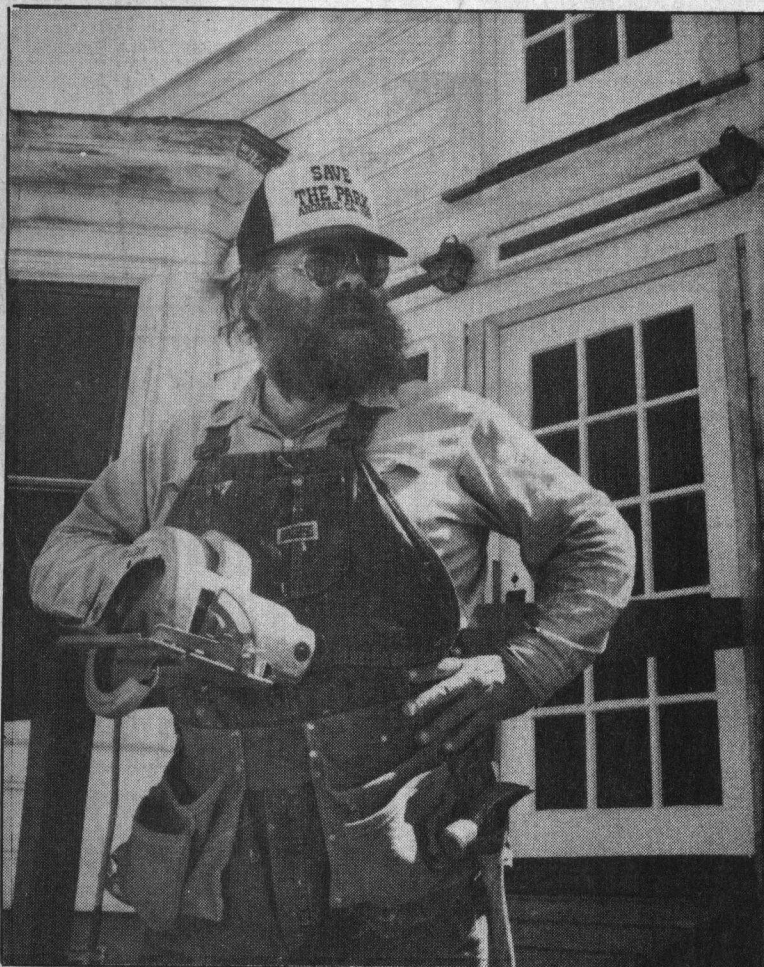
"We were not just going to put a bulldozer to the house and knock it down, but it is difficult to upkeep and would cost so much to restore," Mine said. "We told George, 'if you want to take it, we'll let you take it.' The house has a historic past, so whatever he can do would be good."

Mortan has done this sort of thing before. Currently, he is



Diane Varni

The Thurwachter house on Beach Road stands empty now.



Kurt Ellison

George Mortan at work on another house.

rehabilitating an old house he bought and had moved from Watsonville. The house sits on a lot adjacent to Mortan's home in Aromas, and between the two lots is ample room for the Thurwachter ranch house.

Mortan, 43, and a nine-year

resident of Aromas, said he has completed the restoration of a dozen houses.

This one, however, will be costlier than most. The move itself, which will require that the

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If only the old house could talk

By DAN FITCH
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There is something lonely about the Thurwachter ranch. It has a stubborn look about it, as though it should have quit and gone away years ago.

There it sits, on Beach Road, refusing to leave, easy to ignore. Just an old house to drive by, drawing a glance but not a thought.

Obviously, no one lives in it.

But there was a time when the Thurwachter ranch, or 'T-wester house' to locals, flourished and possessed a celebrity all its own. And it was unusual right from the beginning, when built in 1872.

Frederick Thurwachter was a German immigrant who arrived in New York in 1850 and made his way to San Francisco, Soquel and then to the Pajaro Valley. In 1866, he purchased 135 acres off of what is now Beach Road and began a profitable farming operation that eventually produced every kind of locally-grown crop.

By 1871 Thurwachter was ready to have a house built on the land. The resulting two-story house, with veranda running across the upper floor, two

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house be separated into three sections and loaded onto a truck, will cost between \$20,000 and \$25,000.

Restoration could run into six figures, depending on the taste of the future owners and the quality of materials they want installed in the house. Mortan said the Thurwachter house is still "structurally sound" and relatively free of termites and other debilitating pests.

"At its current spot, it requires people who have a lot of money," he said. "But who wants to live by a sewage plant? If you are going to spend \$100,000 to restore a house, you don't want to smell sewage when it's done."

Mortan still needs a battery of permits before he can move the house — such as getting permission to use local roads and building permits — but Mortan said he has done it before and should have no trouble this time.

The Historical Resources Commission of the Santa Cruz County Planning Department is already aware of Mortan's intentions, and is prepared to give him the go-ahead.

"We basically gave him permission to move the house out of the county," said Judy Haines, Historical Resources Commission Division Secretary. "You have to go through us to demolish a historical structure, or even take away even a piece or part of one."

Mortan, who lives in San Be-

nito County, said a best-case scenario would be for him to give the house to someone who has a nice plot of land and a yearning for a historical piece of architecture.

"This house needs a rich person with a lot of vision or a person willing to undertake a tremendous amount of work," he said.

Mortan said he is willing to undertake that work if no one else will.

But wherever the house ends up, if it does, in fact, move, this much is certain: Someone will have a one-of-a-kind home.

"You cannot buy a house like this," Mortan said. "It is the difference between purchasing a fully restored Mercedes or Rolls Royce and purchasing a Chevy or Datsun."

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chimneys and an additional rear wing, was constructed on a wood foundation and still rests where it was built.

The chimneys are in themselves a historical footnote. The builder of the house needed a chimney specialist, and the man he hired was none other than Kingsley King.

It was King who named his child Pajaro King because he was the first Anglo child born in the Pajaro Valley.

The house then became famous for its shrubbery.

Or what started out as shrubbery. They began as young cypress trees and grew into detailed sculptures administered to by the family gardeners and admired by local residents, tourists and intrigued passers by.

It was an ambitious gardener

who began the tradition in 1929. Ella Thurwachter, the last survivor of eight Thurwachter children (she died at age 95 in 1963), told a Register-Pajaronian reporter in 1957 that one day she was watching the gardener trim a young cypress tree and noticed he was going beyond the call of duty.

It seems the gardener had sculpted the figure of an airplane on one side of the tree and a star on the other. The gardener told Thurwachter the plane and star were in honor of Charles A. Lindbergh, who had recently crossed the Atlantic in his plane, the Spirit of St. Louis.

Subsequent gardeners also sculpted shapes and the names 'Ella' and 'Eileen,' for Ella's step-niece. The cypress trees grew, and the sculptures were maintained through the years, becoming the objects of many a tourist snapshot.

The house was bought and sold with the farmland following

Ella Thurwachter's death. In 1963, the home's owner was forced to have two of the sculpted cypress trees cut down because they were leaning over a drainage ditch and she couldn't find anyone who would trim them.

The house has since undergone a steady decline, although the house still stands, basically in its original form.

Over the past 25 years, local historian Betty Lewis has written articles and supplied information on the house to the county Historical Resources Commission and anyone else who asked. When questioned about the Thurwachter ranch the other day, she managed to put the situation into, perhaps, the right perspective.

"I haven't seen the house in a very long time, probably 15 years," Lewis said. "But it is a beautiful house, it would be wonderful if someone could save it."