When first built, the Oddfellows Building had a mansard roof and gold-lettered black clock. It served as the post office for the new civic center.

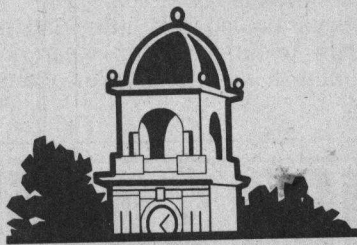# Town clock's near-demise was born from 1899 fire

BY ROSS ERIC GIBSON
Special to the Mercury News

SANTA CRUZ
Historic Perspective

THE SANTA Cruz Town Clock was almost lost two Sundays ago, when its tower caught fire, causing $10,000 damage. It was born a century ago out of another fire. Yet the latest tower only hints at the grandeur of its original structure, when it stood atop the three-story 1873 Oddfellows Building at the head of Church Street on Pacific Avenue.

The Oddfellows established a Santa Cruz lodge in 1862. While the country was divided by civil war, the lodge aimed to unite people from different walks of life into a fellowship dedicated to the common good. Local founder Charles Ames stated the group's principles, here paraphrased:

We have no secret knowledge, and would keep no knowledge secret. We claim no merit for the order beyond its usefulness to the community. Our membership is open to all who support universal brotherhood, regardless of politics or religion. If a man says he loves God, but hates his brother, he is a liar. We hope to unite Protestants, Catholics and Jews in a charitable fraternity, to combat prejudice and bigotry, and replace the quarrelsome opinions

of the head with the deep sympathies of the heart.

Immediate aims were to aid the sick, aged, burial costs, widows, orphans and public education. In 1865, they established an Oddfellows Cemetery below Graham Hill (today's Santa Cruz Memorial Park). They met in rented halls, the last in the 1868 Alexander Block, still standing on the south corner of Pacific Avenue and Locust Street. A new civic center began at Cooper Street with the building of the 1866 Court House.

They purchased a neighboring lot on Pacific in 1868, planning a three-story post office and Oddfellows Hall, with a clock tower marking the heart of town.

But the 1869 earthquake delayed those plans until 1873, when the $11,000 mansard struc-

The 1899 remodeling of the Oddfellows Building at Church Street on Pacific Avenue was Greek Revival, and provided the present clock tower.

Fiery link to past for old town clock

■ HISTORY
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ture was built. John Brazet was postmaster, living in a back room. South of the post office room was Brazet's Book Store, with stationary and news stand. It also once included the town library.

Brazet was assisted by William Cooper, later postmaster in 1884-1887. Cooper started a store in 1850, laid out Cooper Street and donated part of his land for the courthouse. He was the town's first mayor after the 1876 reorganization, and a relative of Western author James Fenimore Cooper.

Upstairs were offices for doctors, dentists and a printer. One of the doctors was the famous author, C.W. Doyle, who wrote Rudyard Kipling-style fiction and was a protege of author Ambrose Bierce. There were also lodge facilities for a dozen benevolent societies, including the Rebekahs, Knights of Pythias, Rathbone Sisters, Druids, Portuguese Druids, Portuguese Union and the Italian Benevolent Society.

In 1886, the Oddfellows added a two-story Italianate south wing, then a matching brick north wing in 1890. The Great Fire of 1894 destroyed two-thirds of the business district, gutting the neighboring courthouse, but sparing the Oddfellows Building. As the new Romanesque courthouse was constructed next door, a brick rear annex was added to the Oddfellows Building, with an auditorium and a long porch across the facade.
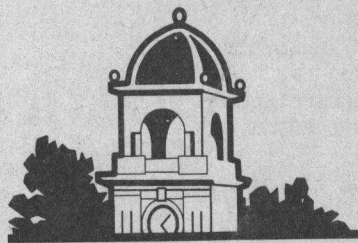
Near midnight, May 7, 1899, several men noticed smoke coming from the Oddfellows Building, and hit the fire alarm. The Pogonip firefighters also came, and both crews kept the fire contained. The crowd cheered as the clock struck one, but in less than an hour, its bell dropped with a horrible racket, and some bystanders wept.

"EVERYBODY MOURNS THE TOWN CLOCK" read the headlines the next day. But only the tower and third floor were destroyed. It was replaced, with all exterior walls made of brick. The remodeled building was Greek Revival, with pressed tin panels simulating Romanesque brickwork, to tie in with the Renaissance civic center. Greek incense urns decorated the parapet.

The old bell was placed in a new clock tower, but the Palomar Hotel had it silenced in 1930. The clock was electrified in 1951, but when it was announced the tower would be demolished for a 1964 modernization, high school students successfully rallied to save the tower, which was put in storage. The modernization gave the building a boxy sheet-metal facade with "cheese grater" panels, destroying its landmark status. But the town clock was built into a free-standing tower in 1976 as the city's American bicentennial project.

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Local historian, architectural consultant and author Ross Eric Gibson writes a weekly history column for the Santa Cruz/Monterey edition.