

The Mystery Adobe: What Now?

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The old adobe on School Street has led a precarious existence during the past 18 years since it was purchased by the State of California.

At that time, the State seemed to be far more interested in Monterey's wealth of historic adobes than in Santa Cruz' one remaining structure of Mission Days.

A lot of local people worked hard to get the purchase deal through...and a few years later the roof gave way and threatened to melt the walls...more recently there have been rumors that the State is reconsidering the fate of the historic building.

Its destiny will be discussed at 5 p.m. Wednesday, September 7, at the City Council Chambers at City Hall.

What will happen to it?

Who knows?

The only thing that is sure, is that a number of Santa Cruzans will be keeping their ears and eyes open and will once again take up the cudgels in its defense if that becomes necessary.

Thoughtful historians are vitally concerned with the fate of the School Street Adobe which is the only remaining building of the Mission Santa Cruz compound which, at one time, boasted a number of adobes.

The reputation "hard luck Mission" which has clung to Santa Cruz Mission down through the years, almost seems to jinx its last vestige — the adobe.

Take the name, for example. For years it has been known as the School Street Adobe, but recently there have been other names applied which are not incorrect in their use, but which are lengthy and may serve to confuse the whole issue.

The story of the adobe, which is a complex one, starts back in the days of

Mission Santa Cruz — the exact date of its construction is not known, neither is the use to which it was put. However, educated guesses place its construction anywhere from the 1790s to 1810, and its use as a barracks for Mission soldiers or a dormitory for the neophyte Indian women and girls.

The late Phyllis Bertorelli Patten, who did much research on the Mission and wrote about it at length, believed that the adobe dated from the 1790s. She maintained that it was a barracks built for the soldiers who guarded the Mission, and that since they accompanied the Franciscan priests who established the Mission, their living quarters would have been built very early in the game.

Phyllis's speculations are not to be taken lightly. She did much diligent research. Unfortunately, church records do not go back to the earliest days of building. The padres were so busy teaching the Indians to build and to grow crops, tan hides, weave cloth, grind grain into flour and do the hundred and one things required of such a settlement, that they did not record the construction of this particular adobe building.

The long-gone adobe Mission church was built in 1793-94 almost on the site of the present-day Holy Cross Church. The adobe sanctuary was flanked with low adobe buildings in which the weaving, leather work and carpentry were carried on as well as the storage of grain and crops and the making of wine.

The Mission struggled from bare subsistence into a period of semi-prosperity with bumper crops of vegetables raised down on the "flat" where the main part of downtown Santa Cruz is today. Sailing ships called here to buy the vegetables, take on fresh water supplies and grain.

The stiff, dried hides of

cattle were counted almost as dollars are today — so many hides, worth so much. As good as gold.

Then, in 1796-97, the Villa de Branciforte was established across the San Lorenzo River with its central point where Branciforte Elementary School sits today.

The Villa was everything that the Mission wasn't.

Dancing, horse races on the Sabbath, gambling, drinking, bear and bull fights — FUN! The Mission padres were hard put to keep the neophyte Indians under their wings. Quarrels and problems arose and multiplied and Mission fortunes went into a decline.

Politics were turbulent (when haven't they been?) in those years, also, with Mexico struggling to free herself from Spain. Spain had dominated about two-thirds of the world's populated lands for many years — but Spain's fortunes were slipping. Administration of the California Missions, precarious at best with long delays between Mexico and Spanish communications, deteriorated.

The Missions in Alta California were secularized and properties were sold or distributed among the Indians. Santa Cruz Mission was secularized in 1833-34, and the adobe was turned over to two Indians who received it as their share, in the distribution of Mission properties. In 1850 the adobe was purchased by Felipe Armas from J. Petra and Isidro (Indios). In 1850, when state and county governments were formed, Felipe Armas became justice of the peace and a member of the Court of Sessions, according to the late Leon Rowland.

The adobe was the scene of the founding of the Masonic Lodge in Santa Cruz in 1853.

Half of the adobe, which is really a duplex, was purchased by Roman Rodriguez in 1838. Then in

1864, Patrick Neary purchased the other half which had belonged to Armas. The two families, Neary and Rodriguez, lived in the adobe for many years, separated by a five-foot thick common wall which cuts through the building.

Mrs. Cornelia Hopcroft, a Rodriguez heir, still maintains her half of the building under a life tenancy agreement with the State.

The late Miss Alice Neary sold her half of the adobe to the State in 1959 for \$23,375.

The story of the State's purchase is an interesting one. The Santa Cruz Historical Society first was alerted to the importance of the adobe when the writer of this article was its president. A campaign was begun amid many negative remarks — "Who wants that old thing?" and "How will the Historical Society ever raise any money — ha ha."

A few people in Santa Cruz never lost their faith that the adobe could be saved. The late Robert Burton was one; he arranged meetings with state officials and had them come here to inspect the adobe. Moreland Johnson was another. He spent time and money working on legal papers. The publisher of The Sentinel was another.

Fred D. McPherson Jr. was instrumental in getting the final purchase through, with the help of the late Assemblyman Glenn Coolidge of the San Lorenzo Valley.

It took several years to accomplish, and Fred McPherson was president of the Historical Society the year the final deal went through.

Others who helped were numerous, but Marie Pratchner of Santa Cruz Native Daughters was one, so was the late Attorney Donald Younger.

Miss Hopcroft received \$13,650 for her portion of the adobe, plus life tenancy.

To all intents and

purposes the historic adobe on School Street was saved. History-minded citizens sat back and waited for state funds and restoration which never appeared. Our adobe appeared to be a "step-child".

Not only was it a step-child, in 1965 when heavy rains fell on Santa Cruz County they fell right through the adobe's shingle roof and threatened to melt the walls. Adobe is like sugar — it "melts" when it gets wet.

A crew of workmen came from the Monterey office of the State Division of Beaches and Parks to replace the roof. They found the adobe's condition then so precarious that they also installed a concrete bond beam around the top of the walls for strength.

In the process of removing the old shingle roof (which was not the original roof, of course), the workers made a startling discovery. The old adobe, which is now one and one-half stories, originally was a one-story building. The second floor where the Masonic Lodge was founded, apparently was added on.

First floor walls are about three feet thick; the second story walls are about 22 inches thick.

If anything, the fact that it was one-story adds to the argument that it was probably constructed in the 1790s.

What lies ahead for the adobe now?

It has waited patiently for 18 years.

Historical Society members had hoped originally that it could be a museum, staffed by them, with perhaps a meeting room in one end.

Garden enthusiasts hoped that outdoor chamber concerts or wine tastings and such social events might take place there. The garden was — and could be again — a beautiful place.

Will Wednesday's meeting tell the final story?