



Two views of the 'Seven Mile House' which historians believe was built in 1868.

Landmark status looms for Seven Mile House

By JAMIE MARKS

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SANTA CRUZ — The legendary stagecoach driver Charley Parkhurst might not recognize the old Seven Mile House these days.

The two-story road house was built in 1868, seven miles from Watsonville on Freedom Boulevard. Since then, subsequent owners have added their touches — a second-story wing here, a rickety-looking fence there, and various coats of paint.

But if architect Jeff Oberdorfer and owners Eugene and Dolores Ferrari have their way, the house will become a national landmark.

"We think it's one of the oldest rural buildings in the county," said Oberdorfer. Already, according to Oberdorfer, the Seven Mile House has passed one hurdle in its way to status as a county landmark: It's been approved by the county Historical Resources Commission and is headed to the Board of Supervisors for final acceptance.

Last week, the board took another action which should help historians like the Ferraris resurrect these architectural treasures throughout the county.

The board adopted the State Historic Building Code, which gives renovators more flexibility in bringing old structures back to life, said county associate planner Ron Lauritson.

According to Lauritson, the state has had the law on the books since January 1976. The city of Santa Cruz adopted it years ago, and the county has been informally using it for a while, he said.

If the Seven Mile House obtains "historic" designation, then it will be added to the 120-odd sites in the Historic Resource Inventory of the county's General Plan, he said.

Lauritson said the Seven Mile House is a "good example" of how the historic building process works. It's also indicative of how the State Historic Building Code will help preservationists.

The first step in designating a site "historic" begins with poring over the old deeds and title holdings "to prove it's historic," he said.

Oberdorfer and local historian Carolyn Swift were hired by the Ferraris to research the history of the Seven Mile House.

In the process, they compiled the most complete record of Parkhurst's life, says the architect.

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Parkhurst gained national notoriety when, upon death on Dec. 29, 1879, it was discovered "he" was actually a "she."

Her tombstone reads, "Death in cabin near 7 Mile House, revealed one eyed Charlie (sic) a woman, the first woman to voted in the U.S. Nov. 3, 1868."

To friends of the tobacco-chewing, whip-lashing Parkhurst, the revelation came as a shock.

An account of her death in the Carson Appeal, Jan. 1880, reads, "When Hank heard the report that Charley had turned out to be a woman, he was so overcome for several minutes that he gasped for breath, and drawled out: 'Jehosaphat! I camped out with Parkie once for over a week, and we slept on the same buffalo robe right along; wonder if Curly Bill's been plain' me the same way.'"

Oberdorfer said he plans to restore the Seven Mile House to its original size, ripping off the wings that have been added over the years. Doing so will enhance the solar access, he said.

The new building code is "very specific" about what kinds of alterations are allowed, said Oberdorfer.

Sometimes, the state laws are so specific Oberdorfer has found himself at odds with them.

For instance, when Oberdorfer was working on the Felton Covered Bridge (circa 1892), he proposed putting in 20 windows. They would have allowed natural light on the bridge, but the state nixed the idea.

After more research, Oberdorfer was able to prove that four windows were part of the original scheme, and the state allowed them.

The new regulations will give the architect some flexibility in keeping the walls and floors authentic. Instead of having to pull apart the walls to bring the house up to code on electrical and plumbing standards, the renovator will be able to use the existing structure and add to it.

Oftentimes, the standards of today's codes mandate such small alterations as changing the height of a railing a few inches.

If the house had to be brought up to the uniform building code, then the cost of restoring it would have been prohibitive, said Oberdorfer.

He added the savings from the more flexible rules will be put back into the home in the form of authentic materials.

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Oberdorfer thinks the floor plan indicates the house was a tavern, and historian Margaret Koch has written that Parkhurst "kept a stage stop where horses were changed while travellers stretched their legs and got a cup of coffee or a nip of something stronger."

The relationship between Parkhurst and the Seven Mile House enhances the building's historic significance.

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In exchange for their efforts, they will get a tax write-off, he added.

"This kind of thing is happening more and more," offered Oberdorfer. "As housing becomes more scarce, and people become more attuned to preserving the character of old houses, the idea of historic preservation catches on."

Now, as a result of the county's adoption of the state's building code, Oberdorfer and Lauriston hope to see more homeowners seeking historic designations for their architectural treasures.