

Historic
Houses
Buildings

Restoring Victorians In Santa Cruz

By
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"The Sea, the Sand, the Surf, and the Salubrious Mountains", this is how the publicists sang the praises of Santa Cruz at the turn of the century. But hundreds of years before, this place on the northern shores of Monterey Bay was a well-kept secret, protected as it was by the very sea and mountains; a few peaceful Indians, industrious padres and easy-going rancheros enjoyed the bounty of Nature in their own fashion. Then, in the 1850's, with California statehood, Americans began to find their way to this land of promise. They were quick to exploit all that was so available: lumber from the forests, lime from the mountains and leather from the cattle that roamed the vast ranchlands. With advances in transportation and communication, the wonders of Santa Cruz County were bally-hoed to all the world, and by the end of the nineteenth century thousands of people were spending their vacations "where the mountains meet the sea".

In the 1860's and '70's, vacationers came by stage coach over the rough mountain roads from the hot Santa Clara Valley, or by steamer from cool, fogbound San Francisco. With the completion

of railroad lines to Santa Cruz in the '80's, "excursion specials" brought them in ever increasing numbers. Many families spent the summer at new and elegant hotels near the shore, and later they built permanent vacation homes on the heights overlooking the Bay.

Since California architects of that period had received their training in the East, and most of the newcomers also had Eastern origins, it was natural that the Victorian influence popular in the East was repeated in the West. Many of these homes built before the turn of the century have since been demolished to make way for "progress", and a walk around Santa Cruz presents one with a mind-boggling array of architectural overlays: there are imposing Victorians in various stages of restoration cheek-by-jowl with Early hodgepodge and Late tacky tacky.

During the '30's Depression, some of these houses were divided into apartments and suffered visible deterioration. More recently, before the rapid rise in real estate values, young married couples bought old Victorians in the downtown area and in their pride of ownership began to restore their homes authentically. The resurgence of interest in these older homes has also added to the "local color" of the neighborhoods. More recently several of the old houses have been converted respectfully into offices or businesses. (One successful designer of "one-of-a-kind" Victorian clothes is appropriately

housed in a restored Victorian.)

Several years ago a battle raged over an 1886 Italianate structure situated on a busy corner in downtown Santa Cruz. For three years the war of words continued between advocates for historical preservation and the forces for commercial progress. Acrimonious salvos were fired off in letters to the Editor and petitions signed and filed. Despite all their efforts, the preservationists lost, the old building was torn down, and in its place now stands a very contemporary bank. Although they lost the battle, the preservationist group won the hearts and minds of many residents in the county, and in 1974 they were instrumental in the passage of the Historic Preservation Ordinance, thus making Santa Cruz one of the first in the state to enact a law protecting sites of historic importance.

It is always a happy privilege to be invited into a house that you have long admired from the outside. So I would like to take you along with me on my visits to four Victorian homes, each one with its own unique history and style. People who live in restorations have a very special quality, they have a deeply personal involvement in the whole process, and they enjoy sharing their pride. As one person said to me, "the experience of restoring a house is very much like falling in love."

Opening the garden gate to the home of Mr. and Mrs.