From A Primitive Beginning To Costly Sophistication

The old Eagle Hotel, first Santa Cruz County courthouse, was a two-story adobe with porches running around it. It can be seen in the right center of this photo from the Roy Boekenoogen collection. Behind the big adobe stands the first Holy Cross school.

A History Of County's Courthouses

By Margaret Koch
Sentinel Staff Writer

Courthouses — no matter where — seem to prove the old saying: "You can't please everyone, anywhere, even part of the time.

Citizens like to pick them apart, board by board, stone by stone, nail by nail, complaining they are either "too square," "too ugly," "too expensive," "too frivolous" or too something. It's almost never good.

A whole new vigorous crop of courthouse critics has blossomed in Santa Cruz this past year as "San Quentin South" took form on the bank of the San Lorenzo River.
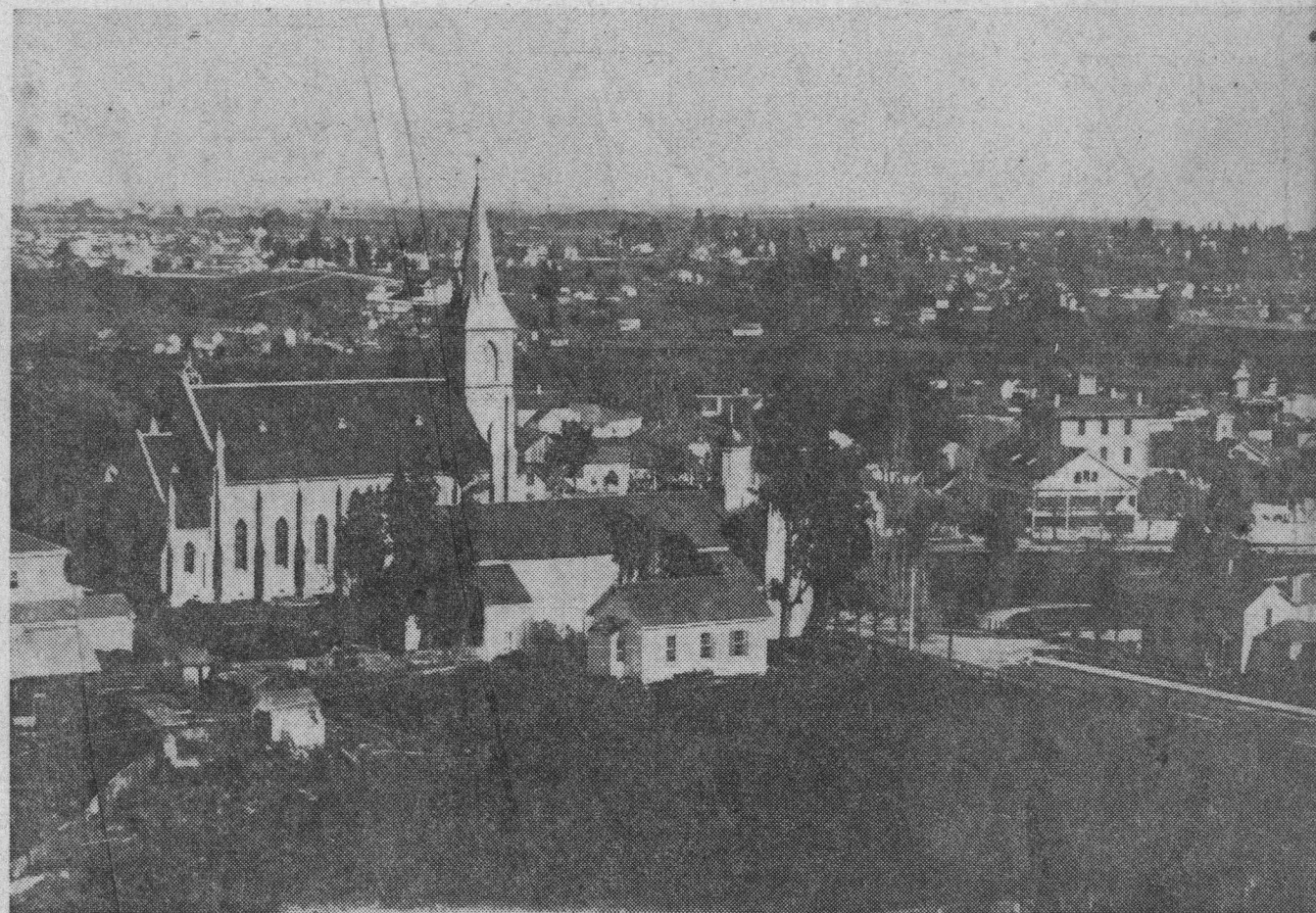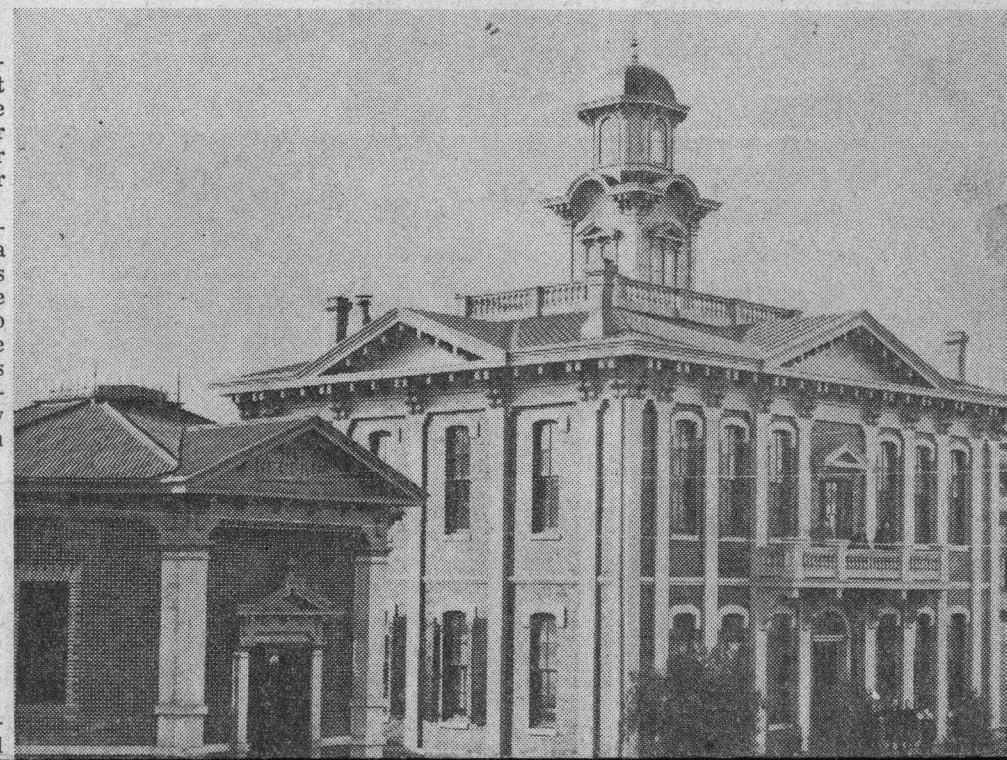
Looking back, through dusty and humble years to a simpler day, one wonders how the "old timers" would react if they could see us now: five stories and $6.7 millions poorer (or richer?) —cash on the barrel head.

Back in 1850 the county fathers weren't so fussy about their headquarters. They were lucky to have a leaky roof over their heads, a tattered ledger to write in and a hen's quill for the writing.

And the county's first courthouse was an adobe hotel, a hotel on the decline as far as business was concerned, because business was moving down to the "Lower Plaza." The Eagle Hotel stood where Holy Cross Elementary School stands today. It was a large two-story adobe that dated from Mexican days.

It served as Santa Cruz' first hotel and it passed through the hands of Job F. Dye to Joseph Majors in 1848 and then to William Blackburn who leased it out for courthouse purposes. In 1862 the Daughters of Charity acquired it and started Holy Cross School there.

Santa Cruz County was incorporated February 18, 1850, and

Santa Cruz' third courthouse was the upper floor of the Flatiron building, still standing at the junction of Pacific avenue, Front and Mission streets. No known picture exists of the second courthouse which was Thomas Fallon's combined home and business building on Holy Cross Plaza.

(Roy Boekenoogen Photo)

The county's first honest-to-goodness courthouse was this solidly handsome brick building which burned in the fire of 1894. It was the fourth courthouse in Santa Cruz.

(Roy Boekenoogen Photo)

The fifth and present "old" courthouse, right, looked like this when it was built. The tower was removed shortly after the big 'quake of 1906. To the left of the hall of records may be seen another county building which housed the jail. Far left is the first farm advisers' office in the county where Henry Washburn held forth.

(Roy Boekenoogen Photo)

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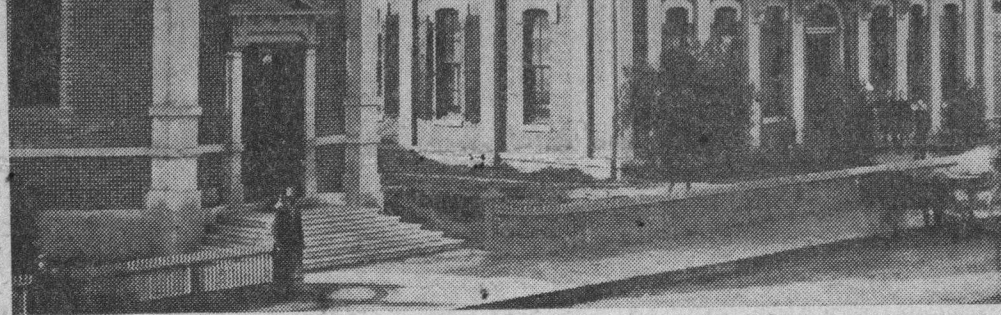
Santa Cruz County was incorporated February 18, 1850, and admitted to the Union on September 9, 1850.

For nearly two years county government was conducted in the old adobe hotel. Then in February, 1852, courthouse business moved across School street to a former saddle-making shop.

The saddlemaker was Thomas Fallon, a brash young Irishman with an eye for the ladies and a talent for making a dollar or two.

He built his combined home and business in 1849 where Holy Cross Mission replica stands today. It also served as a hotel or rooming house.

Fallon came to Santa Cruz and Zayante in 1845, worked at making saddles, commanded a troop in Fremont's California Battalion and married Carmelita Lodge in 1848. He sold his building to the county for $3500, no doubt turning a tidy profit. It was used as a courthouse for about eight years. Later, from 1860-1884, Fallon's building served as the first county hospital.

By 1860, the center of business had moved from Holy Cross Plaza down to the "Lower Plaza." All the important streets and travel routes converged there: Willow street (Pacific avenue today), Main street (Front), the road to the Mission (Mission street), and the main river ford (Water street).

Santa Cruz had attracted several ambitious young businessmen, among them Frederick Hihn and his brother Hugo. Frederick stayed here to gain fame as a far-sighted tycoon who had a finger in every pie and became the county's first millionaire. But Hugo is almost forgotten because he left Santa Cruz to return to Germany. But before he went, he built one of the town's first brick buildings — the Flatiron building. It became the county's third courthouse. Official business was conducted on the second floor for six years.

However, the town was growing and the county was developing as a lumber and lime center. By 1866 the county fathers decided they needed a building of their own — a real courthouse.

Probably no one ever considered architecture and appearances in the earlier days. But sophistication entered the scene. The new brick courthouse, built on the Cooper brothers' property, boasted a front porch, a "widow's walk," a double tower and fancy wood trim. It cost $20,000 and stood where the present "old" courthouse stands, until April 1894 when it burned in the big fire that took most of the St. George hotel block.

The present "old" courthouse was built on the same site the following year. But prices had gone up. It cost $53,475.

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