

BATTLE FOR THE VETERANS' MEMORIAL

By

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The History Forum Awards Nights on November 8 was an inspiring affair honoring people and projects, in partnership with the Museum of Art and History. These joyful successes for local history tended to conceal the long, hard road it took to arrive at this point. President Traci Bliss hosted this event. A Special Recognition Award was given to Kate Clark for Exceptional Stewardship of Evergreen Cemetery. Long overgrown with broken monuments, more than 650 grave stones have not only been repaired, but cleaned—an initiative spearheaded by Clark. Several other Evergreen Volunteers attended the celebration. Some monuments are structures, like the Veterans Memorial Building. And the History Forum's annual Dolkas Mertz Grant was given to Sarah Miguel Madsen, representing a partnership between Santa Cruz Rotary and the Vets Memorial board. By 2022, Rotary had turned an overgrown, hard to maintain area into the Veterans Memorial Courtyard. This beautiful space has more than 250 bricks purchased by community members, commemorating veterans in all branches of service, an effort led by Stoney Brook, a 30-year member of Rotary, and chair of the County Veterans Council. To complete the effort, the partnership has received \$3,000 from the History Forum and \$3500 from the Santa Cruz Rotary Club. This will ensure the completion of Veterans Memorial signage, plaques to tell its history, and courtyard benches. Veteran and local historian Joe Michalak reminded us that we almost lost the Veterans Memorial Building, yet refrained from reliving that emotional story on such a festive occasion. But he shared his research with me, and this is that history.

VET'S KICKED OUT

In 2010, Tim Bratton noticed some falling plaster, and inspectors concluded the county-owned building was seismically unsafe. So they abruptly padlocked the Veterans Memorial on January 21, 2010, and kicked the veterans out. Repairs were estimated at \$1.4 million, and since the County was in a \$17 million deficit, they didn't have the money, and might not get it for a long time.

This was a major disruption to veterans' lives. No replacement facilities were offered, and veterans were skeptical of the county's findings. Maurice "Rick" Ricketts, one of the few surviving WWII veterans, has seen the building withstand the 1989 Earthquake, and the 1955 Flood, which had filled the basement. (*Sentinel*, May 29, 2011). And unlike other nearby historic buildings, the Veterans Hall was steel-reinforced poured-in-place concrete, the type of modern construction recommended for earthquake prone areas. In addition, it is a memorial, built to honor the work and sacrifice of veterans, and had been placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1992.

And why was there no money available? Ralph Boroff, representing the United Veterans Council, said only a few years prior to this closure, the county secured more than \$500,000 in tax monies for improvements to the Veterans Memorial Building, including \$55,230 just to repaint the floral pattern in the auditorium ceiling. (*Sentinel*, Nov. 21, 2010). Bob Patton (United Veterans Council) feared this might be an attempted land grab, to raise money by selling prime real estate in the heart of downtown. (*Sentinel*, May 29, 2011). What seemed improbable, was similar to the Garfield Park working-class neighborhood's struggle to stop the rezoning of the Circle's Church as "housing" in the City General Plan in 2012. The church was the center of community life, and the Historic Preservation Commission said the site should be zoned Church/Community/Park to recognize its century-old uses. The city said losing the church was unlikely. (The site was put up for sale in 2017 in an ad noting: church on site, but zoned residential.)

From the Board of Supervisor's point of view, they were not depriving the veteran's of their community center, but were protecting them from an unsafe building. Reports showed the

Veterans Memorial had crumbling concrete foundations from the flood specifically, and perhaps the high water table of this riparian corridor. Over the centuries the San Lorenzo River watershed had distributed silt and sand deposits in the downtown river basin, with a tendency for soil liquifaction in an earthquake. The 1989 earthquake weakened the foundation, and additional soil testing would be conducted in 2011 to determine future quake risk.

In April, 2010, the United Veterans Council took the County to court, asking to be let back in their building. Engineer Steve Duquette had done a study concluding the building had problems, but could be fixed while the structure remained occupied. There were other examples of older buildings in downtown and around the county, that had similar problems but remain occupied. While the Judge refused to reopen the building, the County at last offered facilities for veterans in September, only it was 700 square feet of basement, which hardly compensated for the loss of 8,000 square feet at the Veterans Memorial (Sentinel, Nov. 21, 2010).

But veterans were dissatisfied. Hoping to head-off another lawsuit, the County offered 8,000 square feet at the County Medical complex on Emeline Street, a mile-and-a-quarter from the Veterans Building. To sweeten the deal, they suggested Veterans groups could also sign-up for meeting space at the County Government Center, the Civic Auditorium, and the Loudon Nelson Center (now "London Nelson Center"). But this left them too scattered, and the veterans felt ill-equipped to do their annual Thanksgiving and Christmas feasts which had been traditions since 1987. Another group hosted a Civic Auditorium banquet instead. (Sentinel, Nov. 16, 2010).

Back in court November 17, veterans explained that the Emeline Street complex had provided no place for socializing, no kitchen for meals, no radio communications room, and the remoteness and topography were challenging for some veterans. Even appointments for Veteran services, once made in person on a walk-in basis, had been replaced with an impersonal leave-a-message phone on the wall, in lieu of a receptionist. The attorney for the county thought the building was in dangerous condition, felt the county had made a good-faith effort, so he asked the jury not to be swayed by flag waving or emotions, but stick to the facts. In 10-minutes the jury came back with a verdict, finding the county was not upholding its legal obligation to provide adequate meeting space for veterans, or respond to their concerns in a timely manner.

Eleven months into the Veterans Building closure, the news was becoming a public relations nightmare, which the county couldn't finesse. The closure remained a bone of contention for two years. Then on January 12, 2012, the flag on the Veterans Building was ceremonially lowered. Facing a group of city officials, several dozen veterans and community members, Supervisor Greg Caput announced the building would be fully renovated, "thanks to the persistence of all the vets who have put so much work into making this happen. Veterans are a tough group. When they want something done, they get it done!" County General Services head Nancy Gordon said the job would cost about \$3.5 million, which will be funded through a floating bond. This ceremony marked the beginning of the renovation, which would last a year. A 21-gun salute was followed by "Taps," then the Tin Can Band sang songs as the gathering was invited to tour the Veterans Memorial Building. (Register-Pajaronian, Jan. 14, 2012).

The renovation work came in at \$2.6 million, replacing the 4-inch concrete slab foundation with a 16-inch slab. The roof was reinforced, rusted rebar was replaced in exterior pilasters, and the building braced against lateral shifting. The renovation added bathrooms, a new boiler and a fire alarm system, and removed ancient wiring, lead paint, and asbestos. (Sentinel, Dec. 5, 2013). While most improvements were not apparent to the eye, it gave the landmark a new lease on life.

When the Veterans Hall reopened, veterans returned to a place many regarded as their second home. The lesson was that this is an important building, ideally situated, and deeply loved. It fits into the heart of downtown as an old friend, making our veterans a

centerpiece of downtown life. The chaos of losing the building, even temporarily, showed how ineffectual the same square footage could be elsewhere, when it was remote, challenging and insufficient.

MUSEUMS

Back at the Awards Night, The Distinguished Historian Award was bestowed upon Lisa Robinson, recognized as author, archivist, meticulous researcher, and President of the San Lorenzo Valley Museum for 19 years, with a love of San Lorenzo Valley's history and nature. She runs museums out of two rescued churches, the former Presbyterian Church in Felton, which used to be the Faye Belardi Library (now Belardi Gallery), and the former Grace Episcopal Church in Boulder Creek. Robinson gave a talk about the traveling exhibits visiting the Belardi Gallery in Felton. "Chinese Pioneers: Power & Politics in Exclusion Era Photographs" (ending Nov. 12), and "Gold Fever: Untold Stories of the California Gold Rush" (for 2024). This demonstrates the might of a little museum hosting big city exhibits, and Robinson's creative vision.

Then Robb Woulfe, the executive director of the MAH (Museum of Art & History) received the History Forum's annual gift, which will go to upgrade the MAH history gallery. Former History Forum president Burt Rees, a long-time advocate of the upgrade, made his own generous contribution to help the "modernizing effort." Woulfe shared with the group delightful previews of MAH's various exhibitions forthcoming in 2024.