A Century Atop Arcata’s Western Skyline, Part 3

By Sean Kearns

Marvel – the story’s hero

By 1969, Cal Barrel, the Arcata train station and the United Creamery had vanished from the landscape; and the Creamery was in serious decline. At some point, local realtor Jim Marvel and his son, Lee, bought the building.

In 1970, Son Hae, a Buddhist Zen master from Los Angeles in his early 30s, established The Internal School at the Creamery, converting about 7,000 square feet of space, including the roller rink, into the “Blue Dragon Zen Temple,” a Buddhist retreat and training center, where kung fu was taught. In its heyday, The Internal School enrolled about 100 students and hosted teachers of various religions. It included 19 residential rooms and a commercial kitchen. The school moved out in 1977.

At the time, the Creamery’s current owners, husband and wife Brian and Lisa Finigan, were also tenants, making a go of their furniture-making business and getting discounts on rent for doing repairs. Then the elder Marvel approached them about buying the Creamery.

Jim Marvel, in his 80s at the time, was the unsung hero of the story, the linchpin to Creamery Building’s survival, according to the Finigans. The building, in its 50s at the time, was, according to Brian, in a “dangerous get-ready-for-whatever’s-next phase; and buildings don’t last too long in that phase. They get forgotten, neglected, used for storage. It was waiting for a dozer.”

“Jim saved it,” said Brian. “He was a sweet guy, really honest, spiritual...a little burned out on it, but smart, generous and caring...our fairy godfather. He told us to buy it.” The Finigans lacked credit, so Marvel accepted equity in a Blue Lake house they owned. As Brian tells it, “He laid out the (purchase) papers and said, ‘Sign. Sign. Sign. It’s yours. Bye.’”
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Historical Sites Society of Arcata promotes recognition of the cultural heritage of Arcata and its environs, identifies historical and architecturally significant structures and sites within Arcata planning area and encourages their preservation.

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President’s Message
By Alex Stillman

It’s been a busy time for the Arcata City Council and citizens of Arcata as they look to the future of the statue of William McKinley. City logos on stationary and vehicles and Arcata Main Street’s logo are just a few of the items that would need to be changed if the statue is removed.

Redwood National Park is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year. As part of the RNP's celebration of “the redwoods”, the Phillips House Museum will showcase a display that emphasizes the role that women played in the timber industry. More on this in the next issue of this newsletter

The display room at the Phillips House will feature poster size photographs of the Lady Bird Johnson Grove dedication. One has to stand back to get the full affect since they have been massively enlarged.

On the way to the Arcata Main Street office on the Plaza, stop in the hallway and check out the large format photographs of Arcata and visit the HSSA website arcatahistory.org

May is Preservation Month. The National Trust for Historic Preservation's theme is This Place Matters. This theme has been used for a number of years because it means a lot to communities throughout the United States who are interested in preserving their heritage. It applies to the built environment, manmade and natural landscapes, engineering feats, trees, statues, parks and people.

A 1979 fire destroyed the corner of 9th and H Streets, which lay barren for nearly 20 years. (Photo of building with a fire engine in front) The property belonged to the Hunt family and one of the original buildings still stands at 839 9th Street. When the fire occurred, City parking codes required so much on-site parking that no downtown properties would be able to rebuild. The lot could not handle the amount of parking required per square foot, in addition to a building. It was very frustrating for the Hunt family. I lobbied the City for years to change the parking code for the downtown area, but to no avail. The Hunt’s sold the property. I am the fourth owner of the property since the fire in 1979.

Alex Stillman
Historic Preservation

By Dan Hauser

The most recent movement to eliminate the McKinley Statue from the center of the Arcata Plaza has caused us to review the historic preservation program we put in place back in the 1970s. Early in that decade historic buildings and structures were still being demolished or “modernized.” Some of us thought that there was value in preserving our past in architecture and even ran for City Council on that platform. The program we put in place has served us well and has prevented the replacement of many fine structures and architectural harmony with new buildings.

The City Code still refers to the Design Review Committee although those duties have been merged into the Planning Commission. The procedure remains requiring application to and approval of the demolition of or modification of a structure. A rejection can be appealed to the City Council. This process may be a moot point given the Council’s decision. However, modification of the Plaza and its centerpiece does require a General Plan Amendment. That process does require an environmental review as well.

If the full process were to be followed there is a 180-day “cooling off” period from the time of the Planning Commission decision to consider alternatives. City staff contends that the City Council can waive the 180-day delay although I think that could be challenged. Further, staff contends that the granite base can be cut off at the current planter level. I believe an argument can easily be made that the entire base is part of the structure and must be retained intact.

This round of the “get rid of McKinley” campaign is far from over.
“That’s the real story,” said Lisa. “There’ve been a lot of myths. Some folks thought my grandfather gave it to me — and he didn’t even live around here."

As children, Lisa and Brian skated at the Creamery roller rink. They met each other at College Elementary School (now Gist Hall at Humboldt State) and hung out together at Arcata High School, where, according to Brian, “Lisa was a star in woodshop.”

The Finigans saw the facility’s potential as an incubator for artists, including some of their “broke and talented” friends. They included Stock Schlueuter, Jim McVicker, John Wesa, Suk Choo Kim and George Van Hook. Sundance Leather moved in, as did Holly Yashi jewelry. Meanwhile, every roof leaked and thousands of window panes needed repair.

The Finigans almost felt like they were in over their heads at times, Lisa said. “I remember the two of us with these little prybars removing three layers of old roofing tar, breaking off piece by piece of a 110-by-120-foot completely waterlogged roof. Roofing nails everywhere. We got it totally stripped, all prepped up — and then it rained.” “But,” Brian said, “it’s great now.”

PAC takes the stage
Among the Finigans’ first tenants was the Pacific Art Center Theater (PAC). Guided by Gordon Townsend, it earned a reputation for producing Shakespeare and edgier fare. Its run lasted from 1977 to 1994. Local actor Bob Wells (who portrayed architect Franklin Georgeson in a commercial for the 2017 Creamery Arts Festival) performed in several PAC productions — including “Twelfth Night,” “Hamlet” and “Waiting for Godot.” “In ‘Prelude to a Kiss’ I was this old man who kissed this woman at a wedding, and we exchanged souls,” Wells said. In PAC’s last production — “Saturday, Sunday, Monday” — he played the next-door neighbor to a fun dysfunctional Italian family arguing all the time. “Really weird.”

Dance. Dance. Dance.
Since the non-profit cooperative Dancenter first moved in during the 1980s, various enterprises have drawn dancers of many styles onto the former roller rink. The Dancenter moved out in 2007. Then came Shoshanna, who opened her Redwood Raks dance studio there in 2008, offering lessons ranging from tango to break-dancing to swing to Zumba. “I’ve been in love with this building since 1994,” she said. “We have the best dance floor in the universe. When you’re barefoot, when you’re social dancing, it’s a dream. But it’s too slippery for ballerinas, and we won’t let tappers on our floor.” The surface, she said, makes sound travel through the building more boldly and “samba’s the loudest.” Recently an African dance workshop reverberated through the walls.

Lights go up on the Playhouse
In 2007, the non-profit Playhouse Arts — more commonly known by its venue, the Arcata Playhouse — moved in with its mission to build community through the arts. That means casting a net for local talent in place-based theatrical productions, such as its “Women of the Northwest” historical plays and its annual holiday show — which, in the spirit of the Creamery, might have a cheesy number or two. In 2016, it began an annual partnership-staging of a Ferndale Repertory Theatre production on the Playhouse stage. (“Who’s Afraid of Virginia Wolff” arrives in February 2018.) The Playhouse also provides workshops for children (you try making and then walking in stilts), connects artists with local schools, and presents touring world-class performers, including for its annual “Family Fun Series.”

Defining, refining a ‘district’
David Ferney and Jackie Dandeneau, the Playhouse’s founders and leaders, have also guided recent efforts to create the Creamery District, a distinct arts-infused neighborhood of diverse endeavors. The first Creamery Arts Festival,
a three-day eclectic public party in 2013, served as an open house with sideshows, showcasing the district’s potential. In 2015, the City of Arcata officially greased the tracks, changing the zoning to allow a broader mix of uses. Now, across 9th Street are spots to buy hard cider and hot coffee, and at least two new restaurants are well past the drawing board.

Ferney calls it a renaissance, one made possible by community support—such as a $60,000 from the Rotary Club and donated material and labor for major renovations to the Playhouse’s kitchen and stage lighting—and the Finigans’ quiet commitment over four decades to foster a community of artists. “Brian and Lisa have made it possible for a diverse community of visual artists, dance, theater, woodworking, pottery, puppeteers. “The key thing, the base, is its affordability. It’s kind of a gift from the gods.”Maybe it’s the continuing legacy of Jim Marvel’s generosity. The Finigans made it a haven imbued with history, tall ceilings, some funkiness. "Both towers are renovated," he said. "There’s the yoga studio. A lot’s getting done to elevate the building as a whole, and the neighborhood’s getting fixed up.”

Dandeneau calls it a “confluence” where creative artists come together, “sponsored” by the Finigans’ offer of low rent. “There’s a lot of bleed-through,” she said. “Sometimes you hear what’s happening on the other side of the wall. We all work together to make things work…. It’s not a sterile building.”

History still hangs out
Indeed, non-spoiled vestiges of milk-product manufacturing remain. For example, Dandeneau and Ferney’s office a century ago was the heart of the factory building, so the floor slopes downward toward a drain. Thus, so rolled Dandeneau’s office chair—until a repurposed floor from the set of a Dell’Arte production (of Moliere’s "Tartuffe") was put down.

The current roster of more than 20 tenants runs heavy in the arts, and it includes a vacation rental with a rooftop terrace, a vintage clothing boutique, a martial-arts school and the office of a non-profit that promotes affordable housing.

One very-long-time tenant—Larry Schlussler’s Sun Frost company, known primarily for manufacturing highly energy-efficient refrigerators—recently moved out. Schlussler set up shop there during the Marvel era and has been distributing his innovative technology to clients around the world since. Sun Frost expanded its product line to include energy- and water-saving showers and composters for the home, including a toilet called the "Human Humus Machine." Moving in to its place is an art studio. Next door, plans are in the works for the State of Jefferson Public House, a family-friendly restaurant where beer mugs and milk glasses can clink to toast a landmark.

“The Creamery’s going to come back to being an economic hub in Arcata,” said Dandeneau. “That’s exciting…. People feel the history.”

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Sean Kearns serves on the board of Playhouse Arts (the Arcata Playhouse). From 1984 to 1987, he was on the staff of the Arcata Union. In between are decades of details.

A note on sources: Aside from the interviewees, information for this article came from a 1979 Historic Resources Inventory by Susie Van Kirk, the City of Arcata’s 1990 ordinance to amend the Creamery area’s zoning and an accompanying cultural report by Katie Stanton, the Humboldt Times, the Times-Standard, the Arcata Union, the North Coast Journal, the United Buddhist Church, the Arcata Zen Group, and the obituaries of Archie Bernardi and William Norris.

Do you have something to add? A story? A photo? A good idea for a source? A clarification for the timeline? If so, please send an email to CreameryInfo@gmail.com, call the Arcata Playhouse at 707-822-1575, or write to the Arcata Playhouse, 1251 9th St., Arcata, CA, 95521.

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