Plaza Fire Memories

By Alex Stillman

I heard fire engines as I was leaving an HSSA meeting at Kaaren Buffington’s home early in the evening of November 12, 1979. I decided to walk to the Plaza to see what was happening. The buildings on the corner of 9th and H Streets were in flames. When I arrived on the Plaza, Harry Bistrin was standing there looking at his two buildings hoping the firewalls would hold. They did hold and the Bistrins continued to operate their clothing store after smoke damage was mitigated. The Hunt building also survived the fire and still serves as office space as it did in Dr. Hunt’s time. I believe it survived the fire because of its stucco construction and its location on the alley.

The Hunts were interested in rebuilding, but at the time, the City of Arcata required more parking spaces than could fit in their lot. Fortunately, after many years of work, the parking requirements in the downtown have changed. (Continued on page 4)
President's Message from Alex Stillman

I love how excited Carolyn Otis gets during our sales. She visits with people she has not seen in many months and, as our treasurer, she collects the money.

There were many wonderful items this year from vintage clothing to items collected around the world by several of our donors. One lucky fellow was able to leave with much needed kitchen items. Jewelry is always popular. Each year, I sort through my jewelry. Months later I notice someone wearing a pin or earrings that were once mine and I think, “wow, they look grand on their new owner.” I want to thank all of you who are so generous to the Phillips House Museum and for your donations to the sale. It makes me happy too.

As I look around Arcata, I see many buildings being painted. What a refreshing feeling it gives our town. The repairs and painting are almost complete on the Presbyterian Church and the Chapman House is being completely restored by Sandi and Scott Hunt. Sandi is an interior designer and has been searching for appropriate furnishings. Peter Daggett and his brother have been busy preparing the foundation for Stotts and Sons to lower the house onto its new foundation. Several downtown storefronts are being painted. As of this writing, the colors are unknown so keep an eye on them. I painted my house downtown on H Street. It looks beautiful with a fresh coat of pink paint.

Our webmaster, Andy Alm said, “Convening property owners, developers, architects, mortgage brokers, sales people and spectators is a really great mix!” I thought his comment most appropriate since Arcata’s architecture is from many eras.

Often, people originally owned two parcels. Stores started to sell milk, eggs and other items the family needed and it was no longer necessary to raise them. When the second parcel was not needed for chickens, a vegetable garden and cow it was sold off.

As time moved forward so did styles of architecture. The new house built on the second lot was often of a different style or era. That is why one sees a Victorian next to a Craftsman or a Settlement era house next to a 1960’s duplex or a historic house in the center of the block now surrounded by many different styles of architecture.
A few items from our successful vintage clothing sale, Revenue from our sales helps to maintain the Phillips House.

This fall we are fortunate to have an HSU intern, Michele Sommer, who is part of the HSU Art Department’s internship program. Michele is training as a docent. She helped with our vintage clothing sale and is now immersed in archiving the Ruth Horel Caskey Collection.

Michelle states, “For the past few weeks I have been working with archivist Edith Butler on archiving letters and documents pertaining to Ruth Horel Caskey. On the first day of archiving we took out ten boxes from storage containing the letters and documents. Most of what I do involves sorting through letters and organizing them by year. I am also checking to see who regularly corresponded with Ruth and their role of importance in Ruth’s life. I am enjoying my time learning about the archiving process; I have only just begun and I am excited to discover more about Ruth’s life.”

The Timber Heritage Association offered rides this summer on the speeder.

HSSA Board Member Karole Ely was able to go for a ride. She had so much fun that she is thinking about planning a fundraiser for HSSA that could involve speeder rides and a meal on the dining car in Samoa.
Fires (continued)
The property sold twice, but it took a long time to build a replacement structure. During that time, Mary Gearheart and I owned the Garden Gate. We watched people noticing the empty lot, looking north and then turning around. This vacant lot was not good for our downtown businesses.

On Thanksgiving weekend, 21 years after the Hunt fire, I was able to buy the former Hunt property. The Stillman Buildings were constructed soon after and have stood on the corner of 9th and H for the past 15 years.

Hensels Hardware caught on fire and was seriously damaged on February 10, 1990. Then on New Year’s Eve 1994, the Feuerwerker building was destroyed by fire. By this time my son, Kelly Carlin, and I had bought the Bistrin buildings. Pete Hess of Hensels moved his business into two stores in the Bistrin Building, which were empty at the time. Hensels re-built on their property and arranged with the owner of the Feuerwerker building Francis Stebbins to expand the store into the lower floor of that building. Currently Hensels uses the former Seeley and Titlow building for this. The Feuerwerker Building is empty and available.

On July 26, 2001, Marinos, Northcoast Environmental Center and the Automotive Paint Store were lost to a fire. The paint store quickly rebuilt. Recently Julian Berg designed a new building for the Marinos site. The NEC site, formerly a dry cleaner, is still waiting for approval to remove toxic chemicals that are present.

Marinos, before and after the fire. At the far right is the newly built replacement building.
Docent Corner

As part of my duties as a Board Member for HSSA, I manage the schedule for our Docents. I thought you might like to know the people who keep our Phillips House Museum going...they are our dedicated volunteers. Some have been doing this for decades while others are new, but equally committed. Our pool of Docents are: Nancy Atkinson, John Barstow, Sarah Conner (former intern), Sherry Eaton (Board member), Dan Hauser, Kel Loughmiller, Ann McClary, Michelle Sommer (our current intern), and Tamara Walski (Board member currently on leave in Europe). While it may seem that we have more than enough in our pool, there are always issues of availability, travel, health, etc., so I am always looking for more docents to ease the burden of these wonderful and committed volunteers. They are invaluable to us! Keep in mind that docents work only on Sundays from 2 to 4. If you have any interest in becoming a docent, please contact me at 707-822-3534.  Jaffa Dugan

A Summer Trip to Benbow

Julia Morgan was a determined young woman when she entered the University of California, Berkeley majoring in civil engineering, which was the closest she could get to a major in architecture. Fortunately, she had Bernard Maybeck as a mentor. He encouraged her to attend Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris where he had graduated. She took his advice and was the first woman to graduate in 1902. In 1904 she opened her own office, one of the few woman-owned firms in the country. Julia came of age in the Progressive era when women wanted to excel in their chosen college field. She had chutzpah and moxie, which gave her the strength to pursue her dream and not be deterred.

Julia Morgan designed over 700 buildings mostly in California. She was inducted into the California Hall of Fame in 2012 along with Jane Fonda and Leland Stanford, founder of Stanford University. She is the first female winner of the coveted Gold Metal from the American Institute of Architects.

The home was built for Ms. Stewart who was of Stewart Hotel fame in San Francisco. She contracted with Julia Morgan to design the home. The Benbow Inn is within walking distance of this home. Last February, at the PBS North Coast auction, Karole Ely, Jaffa Wahlberg and Alex Stillman bought the use of the home for an afternoon. They thought that a tour of this historic structure would be a perfect fundraiser for HSSA. On a very hot day in August, twelve brave souls lunched on the patio overlooking the river, then toured the home with its much-appreciated air conditioning. This home has been lovingly restored by the present owners, Mr. and Mrs. Huegels, who reside in Marin County. We thank them for offering PBS this auction item.
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