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History of the Hen House

By Cathy Tyson



Photo courtesy Lafayette Historical Society

Now leaning precariously to the left, the Hen House building has a colorful past. "They sold ice cream, hot dogs, soda pop, peanuts, candy, cigarettes, coffee and beer," recalled Edith Hunt Sterling in an oral history recorded in 1983 of Miller's Quality Ice Cream, the original shop. It was also known as Mother's Place, Ma's Kitchen or Ma Hunt's Kitchen.

Tunnel Road was eventually widened in the 1920s. "My aunt and uncle (Alice and Joe Hunt) had to give up their little road stand. They then bought a piece of property at the corner of Mt. Diablo Boulevard and Hough Avenue. ... It contained an inside counter, and tables for serving food," recalled Sterling.

Longtime resident Euphemia Speyer remembers that one of the first five Lafayette telephones was in this building, and Mary Solon noted in an article, "If these walls could talk."

According to Solon, in the 1940s the Lafayette Sun occupied the building, then it housed a used furniture shop. During the '60s it was divided in two, with a wall down the middle, housing Happy Acre Realty Company and the Trading Post. In 1983 when Edith Sterling's oral history was recorded, the building was called Nifty Thrift Shop and run by Futures Explored for participants in their vocational programs. Nifty Thrift is still in business at a different location on Golden Gate Way.

Active 91-year-old and vice president of the Lafayette Historical Society Marechal Duncan visited and shopped at both Nifty Thrift and the Trading Post. "Don't remember what I purchased, but once I bought a gift for my wife, Doris," he said.

The building has been many things to many people in its almost 93-year history, from an ice cream shop, to a newspaper office and beyond, this hidden gem now needs a little love and lot of construction support. It's currently vacant after Kirkpatrick left earlier this year. Owner Mel Hunt said, "At the moment the building is in transition," so look for some changes in 2014, although no specific details were immediately available.

"The location is perfect for the right business," said Duncan, "whatever that may be."

Many thanks to the Lafayette Historical Society for their help with this story and for sharing their wonderful photos.

Sandwiched between the Round Up parking lot and the soon to be opened Cooperage restaurant sits the rustic historical Hen House building. The most recent proprietress of the Hen House, Elizabeth Kirkpatrick, has fond memories of the shop where she sold a wide variety of one-of-a-kind collectibles for a dozen years; an old sign on the side of the building described the merchandise as "Haute Bohemian, Vintage Atelier, Bits with a Flair."

"The building moved a lot especially during the seasons," said Kirkpatrick, who described the floors bending "every which way - it was like you were walking on a ship. The clients at the Round Up had a habit of hitting the side of the building!"

Unfortunately time has not been kind to the structure originally built in 1920 on Tunnel Road, which is now Mt. Diablo Boulevard near Plaza Park, before being moved in 1939 to its current location at 20 Lafayette Circle, according to the Contra Costa County Assessor; there has been a fair amount of settling over the years, deferred maintenance, no insulation and critters that made for a challenging work environment.



Photo courtesy Lafayette Historical Society

Reach the reporter at: cathy@lamorindaweekly.com

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