

By Kathy Dillon

I got my first view of Eureka's historical architecture in 1981. I was in town to interview for a feature-writing job at the Times-Standard. The area appealed to me because it was near the ocean, surrounded by redwoods, and it never got too warm.

Before heading to the North Coast, a friend had mentioned in passing: "You know, Eureka has lots of neat old houses, too." It was news to me.

I was offered the T-S job immediately after the interview, accepted it just as quickly, and then spent the next hour or so happily driving around my new hometown. I was impressed. Eureka had authentic, albeit somewhat faded, charm. It had a soul.

In time, its old buildings would reveal a multitude of fascinating stories.

Back then, the city's preservation movement was relatively new. Volun-

teers from the Eureka Heritage Society, formed in 1973, were compiling results of a widespread survey of the city's architecture that dates back to the mid-1800s. Their findings were published in what has informally become known as "The Green Book," which is faster to say than its official title: "Eureka: An Architectural View."

It is a captivating view. Over the ensuing three decades, I have had the good fortune to get to know some of the people, past and present, who made it possible. I discovered those who lived in past centuries via research. Others are 21st century citizens striving to preserve this distinctive 158-year-old small city of the American West.

Only a few of their stories can be included within this small publication. There are many others. I salute them all. They have made Eureka a "somewhere" instead of an "anywhere." They have made it a place worth finding.



Eureka!



Fans of the city's famed historical architecture reflect on the reasons why this place is worth finding

Neighbors Pam and Bob Service, Richard Evans, and Bonnie Burgess admire a house on Hillsdale Street.

In 2002, I began producing the Times-Standard magazine, Restore & Preserve. Thanks to College of the Redwoods' Historic Preservation and Restoration Technology classes, specifically instructors Bill Hole and Jill Macdonald, I also started learning about preservation in earnest.

In my post-newspaper life, the Heritage Society offered me the opportunity to produce Architectural Legacy in 2008. Yes, I said, there are still many stories to tell.

Some center around the old houses that survived decades of neglect or abuse. Property owners have told me about coping with heaps of trash, discarded hypodermic needles, and irreverent raccoon and skunk freeloaders. Once, in a rural Colonial Revival near Table Bluff, a full-grown cow was discovered making herself quite at home in the dilapidated kitchen.

Yet even with years of work ahead of them, these people knew they had diamonds-in-the-rough, or more precisely: finely crafted buildings made of now nearly priceless old-growth redwood.

Chuck and Wendy Petty are a great example. When they bought their 1910 Colonial Revival home on H Street more than two decades ago, it was a disaster zone. The walls were deeply cracked, and plaster was coming off in chunks. Windows were broken, and the dining room ceiling was missing. Every removable original element — built-in drawers, doors, light fixtures — was gone. But its “good bones” were still there, and the Pettys slowly turned it into a shining showplace.

I asked the Pettys and other local preservation advocates to tell me why all the work is worth it.

“The architecture itself is what appeals to me,” said Chuck, who is the current president of the Eureka Heritage Society.



Chuck and Wendy Petty relax by the main fireplace in their grand 1910 home.



“They made such whimsical things, just to delight your heart.”

— Chuck Petty

“It comes from an age of craftsmanship,” he added. “Modern houses are just thrown up. It’s just acres and acres of sheetrock. But in a good deal of older architecture, they made such whimsical things, just to delight your heart.”

The Pettys did about 70 percent of the work themselves. A few blocks away on M Street, Greg Debacker topped that by doing all of the work required to turn a neglected, notorious drug house back into a stellar Queen Anne.

Greg’s house was on the 2011 historical home tour, and one visitor in particular, Steve Lazar, asked many questions. He is among the latest generation to get involved in preservation.

In recent years, Steve bought his first house, a 1906 Classical Revival on Garland Street. He chose it because it was never modernize and because it needs work, which he is doing himself.

While old houses have challenges, Steve said, “they’re built out of this gold — this old-growth redwood unique to our area.” Combine that with an older home’s “green” advantages, he added, and the choice was a “no-brainer.”

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Eureka Heritage Society "Preservationist of the year"
Petaluma Heritage House "Professional Craftsman" award



Humboldt County Historical Society photos

The Buhne Mansion (left) and the Huntoon House were demolished in the 1950s.



Moving to the area in the 1990s to attend Humboldt State, Steve is now a planner for the county’s Planning and Building Department. Through work, he began taking CR’s preservation courses.

“Little by little, my eyes started to open,” he said.

Steve uses an analogy that one of his former HSU professors gives his plant taxonomy students: “the green blur.” That’s how nature appears to the uneducated. It’s the same with architecture.

“When you have even a vague understanding of architectural differences,” he said, “it’s a very enriching experience.”

While there are many do-it-yourselfers in the area, the region has also attracted an impressive array of preservation professionals.

Peter Santino, a Humboldt County native who specializes in historic restoration of interior surfaces, saw the preservation light while working in New York.

“That’s when it really hit me: how much more value in actual money the old stuff has compared to the new,” he said. “Today they do the best they can with what they can afford. Then there’s this stuff that has been sitting for 100 years, and it’s hundreds of times better in quality and in value. Yet that was the stuff going to the landfill. It started driving me crazy.”

Indeed, much has been lost in Eureka, including the Buhne Mansion and the Huntoon House, both demolished in the 1950s — a grim era for Victorians. A picture of the Huntoon House from that time shows it was in what I call the “sad old thing” stage. Quite a few still exist.

During the 1970s, Joseph Rowe wrote to the Heritage Society about the large Queen Anne his father, Frank, had built in Eureka in 1900. Joseph was born there in 1902. Seven decades later, it was hard for him even to look at it.

“It hurts us when we drive by this fine old home and see the neglect,” he wrote. “We hope that some day it will fall into the hands of someone who will appreciate its fine workmanship.”

That day has yet to come.

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Steve Lazar was glad to discover original wallpaper in his foyer.

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Among the North Coast's plethora of artists are those whose Muses dwell within the area's old buildings.

Just ask artists like Karen Merry.

"I've always had an interest in antiques," she said, "and I'm always disappointed when something old gets torn down."

Karen was 50 when she took her first art class 18 years ago in San Diego. A job brought her to Eureka in 2004. When it was over she found herself photographing the area's old houses, which she turned into a series of cards. Homeowners soon began asking her to do house portraits. Eventually she contacted Realtors, who commissioned paintings for clients. →

Inspiring artists

Karen Merry has created a series of portraits of Victorian homes, including the Cottrell House (below) in Eureka. For more information visit www.karenmerryartist.com.



"Planet Humboldt" is a 21st-century ode to local Victorian architecture. It is the Photoshop creation of Becque Olson. To order prints or get more information e-mail becque@earthlink.net.

Beverly Harper creates nostalgic, whimsical scenes set amid the North Coast's historical architecture. For more information about her art, go online to beverlyharperartwork.com.



Karen does homes from all eras, but Victorians remain a favorite. "The more complex, the better," she says.

Beverly Harper is a fourth-generation Humboldt County native who has done a series of whimsical watercolors in historical settings. She describes them as nostalgic with an emotional connection.

A member of the Trinidad Art Gallery Cooperative, she was encouraged to find her own path by Ned Simmons, who later bequeathed a 1902 Trinidad house to the cooperative.

Beverly's work caught the eye of the Arcata Mainstreet program, which commissioned her to do a poster for the monthly Arts!Arcata event. Now her work can be seen in several local galleries and businesses.

"I didn't know if they would be accepted," she reflected, "but they've taken on a life of their own."

Photographer and Photoshop artist Becque Olson of McKinleyville has created the fantastical "Planet Humboldt," inhabiting it with some of the county's finest Victorians.

"I evolved into this kind of work via Photoshop contests online," she said. "One was asking for original 'planets' and had a tutorial on how to get a basic land mass."

Becque had already been photographing Victorians.

"The two ideas merged when I set to create something for the Humboldt County Fair," she said.

Becque's criteria for the final selection of Victorians: they needed to be unobstructed, well-maintained — and stunning. It was so hard to choose, she had to add islands linked to the main planet.

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There are plenty of happier stories. One of my favorites is about the 141-year-old Georgian-style house near Three Corners. It was built for the Long family, who sold it in 1931 to Finnish immigrants Victor and Hilma Anderson. Their descendents still live there.

The story began in the 1850s when Pennsylvanians William and Lydia Long and their children endured a grueling, cross-country ox-driven wagon train journey to California.

By the time they made it to Sacramento, their oxen had died and they were broke. A friend had gone ahead to secure a footing for all of them in their final destination, Humboldt County. With no other options available, the family walked the remainder of the way to join him.

Once here, William tried his luck in the gold mines — and won. By 1856, he bought 240 acres in Freshwater, where the family home was built in 1871.

Another astonishing, albeit shorter, journey occurred in 1895, when an imposing, two-story Queen Anne house was barged across the bay from Arcata to Eureka.

Similar events occurred after World War I. A series of bungalows were built on the peninsula in Fairhaven for employees of Rolph Shipyards. The work ended with the war, and the workers moved on. So did the houses — across the bay to Eureka.

Moving houses was not uncommon. Between 1904 and 1922, 81 buildings were relocated within the city limits.

“It was no big deal,” says Kathleen Stanton, a historic resources consultant and local Realtor “These buildings were considered resources. Even though lumber was plentiful, it was still something you wouldn’t just burn up.”

People like Xandra Manns are glad they were saved. She bought one of the barged bungalows, now on C Street, after retiring to Eureka in 2004.

It was while she was attending college in Washington, D.C., in the 1960s that the preservation light clicked on for Xandra. She was among groups of students who rented rooms in aging Victorians in the then-rundown South Capitol area.

“They were all painted over inside, but some of the students started chipping the paint and found beautifully carved marble and wood,” she recalled. “I thought that was pretty neat.”

Xandra went on to a 30-year career as a city planner, and her work included getting properties listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

These days, her preservation-minded volunteer efforts in Eureka include ringing doorbells of historical homes in search of prospects for the Heritage Society’s annual home tour in early October. For old-house lovers, the tour is a can’t-miss event.



The Long House (above) and a Queen Anne floating across the bay. Below, Xandra Manns in her relocated bungalow.



Humboldt County Historical Society



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“What if nobody comes?” Janet Warren, the home tour’s director, asked me in a fleeting moment of concern.

Janet later told me about one particular old house from her childhood.

“My grandmother lived in the house that was built in the 1860s by my great-grandfather in Wisconsin,” she said. “I spent my summers there ... but it was torn down in the late 1970s to make way for a parking lot.”

Such inspiration eventually led Janet to the Heritage Society. Each fall, her 1904 Colonial Revival on 15th Street becomes tour-planning headquarters.

Janet needn’t have worried about the turnout. Coming via car and bicycle, on foot, pushing baby carriages or using walking canes, hundreds of North Coasters showed up to look inside a sampling of Eureka’s fine old houses.

As a member of the EHS board of directors, I was assigned to take tickets at the circa-1900 house on C Street, which has recently undergone a remarkable renovation thanks to Karen Smith and Chaz Lord. A contractor, Lord has given the building — once a derelict grow house — new life.

“Eureka needs a couple of hundred more like him,” one tour-goer told her nodding friends after walking through the house.

One hears many such comments on this remarkable day of widespread community welcoming. “Oh, I remember that from when I was a kid,” is a common one. Or, a mother will ask a son: “Remember, what’s the rule?” “No touching,” he replied.

And at one house, a toddler loudly proclaimed to her father: “This one is the most beautiful-er.”



Home-tour-goers take in the sights at this year’s popular event in October.



“Everyone has had hopes for decades of Eureka getting to the point where it could really tap into its potential. ... It’s never regressing. It’s always advancing, but it’s like watching a flower grow. ...” — Steve Lazar

Seeds of the tour were sown in the early 1970s when a preservation professional, Robertson Collins, visited Eureka and had a fateful talk with Dolores Vellutini. He told her a building survey was the

first step on the road to preservation and restoration. Dolores then teamed up with journalist Muriel Dinsmore, and they met with Mayor Gil Trood.

In the years and decades after, the Heritage Society was formed, the survey and Green Book were completed, and a restored Old Town was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. This and more is the sum of individual, business, academia and government efforts. And it has required patience.

“Everyone has had hopes for decades of Eureka getting to the point where it could really tap into its potential,” Steve Lazar said. “It just doesn’t happen at the pace anyone wants. It’s never regressing. It’s always advancing, but it’s like watching a flower grow. You have to go back years later to see the difference.”

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Beauty, history, craftsmanship and practicality are all recurring themes in the “why” of it all.

Richard Evans, who has been part of the grassroots effort to turn the 1940s Jefferson School into a community center, often takes walks with friends to admire the city’s remarkable architecture. (See photo, Page 1)

“Someday the mall is going to die, and nobody will care because there’s nothing there to love,” he said. “I was standing at F Street and Second: Each one of those buildings was done by someone who wanted to express their arrival, who wanted to give something to the street. Preserving the old buildings reminds us of the values of love and pride and giving we need to nourish.”

Ron and Melanie Kuhnel know how he feels. They have rehabbed their 1908 Queen Anne, known as the Zanone

House, on G Street (the first house on the top, left-hand side of “Planet Humboldt,” Page 4).

“They’re things of beauty. They connect us to our past,” Ron said. “They are also an economic engine for the city. An enormous amount of tourism is generated by people who come here to see our architecture. I don’t think Eureka has even begun to maximize its potential. But they’re fragile: They burn down. They get torn down. They get changed in horrible ways. So we need to protect them.”

CR preservation Professor Bill Hole empowers people with practical know-how to save this legacy. His motivation comes from “looking backward in time and honoring the people who created and built the things before me.”

For Bob Libershal, whose avocation is researching the history of old houses, Eureka tells a “really dynamic architectural story,” one that spans from the mid-19th to the mid-20th centuries.

“There are extraordinary stories about people,” he added. “It’s not just elite. Even ordinary people seem extraordinary when you delve into it.”

Mary Ann McCulloch, a longtime EHS board member, also sees the city’s old buildings as its greatest asset. “Fishing’s kind of gone, timber’s kind of gone. We have tourism,” she said. “When I go to Irvine where my daughter lives, it’s the most boring place I’ve ever been: It’s shopping centers, apartment complexes and housing tracts, with a few green spaces thrown in. But we tell a story just by our architecture.”

And when it comes to decking the halls for the holidays, she added, nothing beats a Victorian or early Craftsman house.

“They’re so full of personality,” Mary Ann said. “They have so much character.”

Architectural Legacy can also be found online at www.eurekaheritage.org. Comments may be sent to dillkm17@gmail.com or to: Eureka Heritage Society P.O. Box 1354, Eureka, CA 95502-1354.



Big, small or in-between, older houses have many pluses, including their ability to look especially jolly when all decked out for the holidays.



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