

### **III. The New School System Takes Root: the 1850s, '60s, and '70s**

The County of Santa Cruz was officially born on February 18, 1850, and the State of California on September 9, 1850. The years that followed were ones of confusion and excitement for the new state and the new county.

Men who failed to strike it rich in the gold country looked for other avenues to fortune, and many found them in Santa Cruz County's rich farm lands and thick redwood forests. In those days the county's resources must have seemed infinite, endless. And, looking about them and seeing what seemed to be a paradise of climate and riches, the men sent for their wives and families.

What was it like in Santa Cruz County during those early years of California statehood, as the embryo public school system was struggling to be born?

The new county was geographically unique. It was second smallest in the state and among the most beautiful. It had never been on El Camino Real ("The King's Highway"), the main link running north and south between the Missions. It was considered an isolated county, off the main roads and rail lines. (Two main roads leading from the county were completed in 1858-59, connecting it with Santa Clara County, but the railroad line between Santa Cruz and Watsonville was not completed until 1876 and for the most part travel was considered difficult in the county, especially in the winter months.)

An early census count says there were 653 people in the county in 1850 and 200 "census children" in 1851. But the accuracy of such counts should probably be viewed with a little scepticism; many areas of the county were relatively inaccessible to the census takers, who had to travel long distances afoot or on horseback over rough terrain with no roads to speak of. And--the Indian population was not included in the count.

The legislature of the new state had the power to tax for the benefit of its public schools. As counties were formed, each county board of supervisors decided what was needed. But money for public education, then as now, was hard to come by. The first state Constitution planned for schools but didn't allot any funds for them.

In 1854 the county schools' tax rate was five cents on each \$100 of taxable property. One might have supposed that tax money would have rolled in to support the schools. However, "taxable property" was scattered far and wide over the county, roads were rough trails, and a tax collector could labor for days trying to track down taxable properties.

The wheels of the new government moved slowly--often too slowly for parents who wanted education for their children. Some groups of parents formed small centers in homes and churches where their children could be taught to read and write.

In Santa Cruz the First Methodist Church served as one of those centers in 1849-50. Benches were rearranged each Monday to suit school needs, then were replaced church-style on Friday afternoon.

The small frame building was located on the corner of Green and Mission Streets. A year or so later the class was held in another small frame structure on the bluff at the end of School Street on Mission Hill. H. S. Loveland was the teacher, and the school was maintained by Methodist families. Teachers, who came and went at short intervals, included C. K. Ercanbreck, the Rev. D. A. Dryden, and George Frick. Teachers were paid out of funds collected from the parents.

In Watsonville school was also located in a church--the Methodist Church South building. This could be considered the start, in 1853, of the Pajaro School District. The first teacher was Mr. Seneca Carroll. Other early-day teachers included John K. Lutrell who was later elected to Congress, Professor Dunne who became a district judge in Nevada, and John Grant who went on to take up medicine. Miss Fanny Cumming, who later became Mrs. John T. Porter, was an early teacher also.

In 1855 the Franciscan padres from Santa Barbara Mission came to the Pajaro Valley to establish the St. Francis School for Boys. The widow of the well-known Spanish Don, Jose Amesti, and her four daughters gave 130 acres of land for the school and orphanage, where boys who had no families were taken in, taught, and cared for.

St. Francis School was probably the first bi-lingual school in Santa Cruz County. Academics were taught in both Spanish and English. The boys also learned farming and raised all the foods used at the school. For years the Amesti family (for whom the present Amesti Elementary School in Watsonville is named) subsidized St. Francis School. In those early years it sat far out from town, on a cattle trail which wended through the hills to join El Camino Real. (In 1919 the Franciscans turned the school over to the Los Angeles-Monterey-Fresno Diocese for greater support, and in 1921 the Salesian Society took it over and has administered it ever since. It now serves as a seminary for young men studying for the priesthood.)

But the people of the new county wanted a public school system with a public school house. And in 1857--nine years after Mary Case

taught class in her Santa Cruz home--they finally got one. Santa Cruz Public School District 1 came into existence following a hot dispute as to where the schoolhouse would be located.

Frederick A Hihn, who was to become the county's first millionaire, wanted the school down on the flat (about where the Santa Cruz Public Library now stands), and offered a lot for about \$200. But those parents who lived near Mission Hill wanted the school up there, and Isaac Pierce had a lot there he said he would sell for \$400. After a lively meeting, the hill dwellers won out, and Pierce's lot was purchased with \$400 raised by subscription, most of it at the meeting.

The one-room, 30' by 40' schoolhouse was built in 1857 at a cost of \$2,233. Of that sum, \$400 came from county taxes, \$1,416 was raised by subscription, and the rest was assumed as a debt by the district. And even in those days administrators had trouble with school financing. An article appearing in the July 2, 1857, edition of the Santa Cruz Sentinel notes:

SCHOOL HOUSE--This new edifice is about completed. It will be ready for delivery in about a week or ten days.

It is a splendid building--and does credit to the school trustees who so energetically have accomplished this project.

Of course they will have to call on the citizens for the balance of their subscriptions, and will expect them to be ready to pay up, as the builders and workmen will want their full compensation.

Trustees of the new school were wagon-maker Richard K. Vestal, tinsmith William Anthony, and tanner Richard C. Kirby. The site of that first public schoolhouse on Mission Hill is where the Santa Cruz City School District administrative offices stand

today. Before long a second room was added to the schoolhouse to accommodate the growing number of school-age children in Santa Cruz.

In the next four years five more public schoolhouses were built in the county. But in the Watsonville area children continued to attend school in rented halls or in private homes. In the Pajaro Valley Mrs. William Roache set up a school for English-speaking pupils in her parlor. She and her husband had come to Santa Cruz County from Monterey County in 1860 and settled outside Watsonville. (In 1866 a school district named in the family's honor was established and the Roache School was built. It continued in existence until 1946.)

And that school conducted in the Methodist Church South building continued until around 1860 when L. D. Holbrook arrived in Watsonville from Placer County with his family. He built a home on East Lake Avenue and was hired to provide a classroom and teach school. He also had to make out the rate bills and collect them for every child. For two years Holbrook taught the Watsonville Primary School on the second floor of his home, at a salary of \$100 a month.

We have a report (see Appendix) prepared in 1861 by D. J. Haslam, then serving as County Superintendent of Schools, which gives a brief overview of the county's public school system at that time. With what sounds perhaps like a note of censure, Haslam says of the fledgling Pajaro district: "This District rents the second story of a dwelling house for holding their School; it is twenty-six feet long by twenty-four wide, about nine feet high. The people of this District do not care to spend any money to build a school-house; they have just refused to be taxed to build one. No furniture belonging to the District. Average daily attendance, thirty-two."

According to the report, however, the other six school districts in the county seemed to be faring better. Each had a schoolhouse, all built of redwood. There was Pescadero School to the north (outside the county but still administered by Santa Cruz) with two rooms and "very ordinary" furniture, and Oak Grove School in

the Corralitos area, also with two rooms and furniture described as "fair." Soquel School, having one 33' by 22' room with 12-foot high ceiling, was described as "a good School-house, well furnished, and well ventilated," and had an average daily attendance of a little over 24.

Haslam reported that the very newest district, added just that year, was San Andres (spelled San Andreas in later reports). It had a redwood schoolhouse 16' by 20', an average daily attendance of 10, and was "not very well furnished."

"Santa Cruz No. 1" on Mission Hill, the first public school to be built, and now expanded, was the largest and best attended of the county's seven public schools. It had a grand average daily attendance of 58 and two rooms: a huge 54' by 28' main building and a 26' by 20' wing, both with 14-foot high ceilings. "This School-house is very well ventilated," Haslam reported, "and the furniture of a very good kind." It was also graded--the only one in the county with enough pupils to allow the student body to be divided into separate grades.

Haslam's report shows that by this time the city of Santa Cruz had built another schoolhouse, "Santa Cruz No. 2," which was much smaller than the first (24' by 20') and had an average daily attendance of only 20.

Although it might seem as if education were making great strides in 1861, the report reveals a startling fact. Haslam notes that there were 1,312 children in the county at the time, but only 395 were enrolled in school. And the county-wide average daily attendance was only 199! Haslam stated, "Some plan should be adopted to compel the attendance of children who are idling their time around the streets, without occupation."

However, he acknowledged that laziness was not the main reason for the poor attendance. "Some Districts are very large," he wrote. "Santa Cruz No. 1 is eighteen miles in length and twelve wide. If the population were more condensed, the attendance would be much better; many find it impossible to send, not being able to pay board bills for their children."

Tuition was also a problem to many parents. At that time state and county funds paid only about one-fourth of the expenses of the schools. In most districts children attended school on a rate basis, with parents paying a set fee per day. Poor families were not expected to pay, but the arrangement no doubt kept many proud parents from accepting what they termed "charity," and their children stayed home. Others didn't go to school because they were needed at home during crop times, and still others because they lived out-of-the-way places with no transportation.

In Santa Cruz District No. 1 the school was kept open by subscription--voluntary contributions. "Those willing to aid the Schools," Haslam wrote, "donate per month, and are regularly waited on by the Trustees when pay-day comes."

The tight financial situation was reflected in the salaries of teachers, many of whom had to have other jobs on the side in order to make ends meet. Haslam reported that only two of the county's teaching staff planned to make teaching a permanent profession. "It does not pay very well in this county to teach School," he wrote, "and those who have followed no other occupation do not intend to continue teaching any longer than they can help."

In spite of the small number of children attending school, Santa Cruz County enjoyed the distinction of having a longer school year than almost any other county in the state. At that time state law said that the minimum amount of time a school should stay open was three months out of the year, and the average school year in California at that time was six months long. But Santa Cruz schools stayed open an average of eight and a quarter months. Only three other counties in the whole state (San Francisco, Monterey, and San Diego) did better than that. Of course the amount of time an individual child spent in school depended on where he or she lived; children attending Soquel School had a ten-month school year (longer than they have at present), while those in the new San Andreas District, for example, only had to go to school for three months out of the year.

Haslam closed his report by deploring the poor attendance at school in 1861 and wrote: "This certainly should be remedied, if

possible, but certainly cannot be done until School-houses are more numerous."

And, predictably, they did grow more numerous as new districts were formed, each with its small, one-room public school. By 1865, just four years after Haslam's report, the number of schools had tripled. There were then 21 schools serving 1,756 children.

And Watsonville finally got its school. Classes had been held in the Methodist Church building and in teacher Holbrook's home and (with A. F. Knowles as teacher) in Scotts Hall. But after nine years of this pillar to post moving around, parents decided they'd had enough of temporary quarters. In 1862 an election was held for a proposed school tax which would build a real schoolhouse. Voters turned the tax issue down most emphatically, but a second election in the following year passed.

The trustees then called a meeting at Scotts Hall to select a site for the new school. However, community involvement was not all that could be desired--not a soul showed up except two trustees. But an amateur band happened to be rehearsing in the hall that night. They stopped practicing when the trustees, Judge R. F. Peckham and G. M. Bockius, called the meeting to order. Then--since there was no one else in the audience to do it--band members offered their opinions as to where the new schoolhouse should be built, and then resumed playing. Trustees carried out the band's instructions and later purchased the site and, in 1864, built Watsonville Primary School. Thus a brass band decided the location of Watsonville's first public school building.

The school was located on East Lake Avenue (then Fourth Street). Professor William White was hired with Miss Gates as assistant teacher. Successive teacher-principals included H. P. Tuttle, C. T. Johns, and a Mr. Woodbury. In February of 1866 a special tax was levied and two additional classrooms plus a set of stairs were built.

During the same period of time, private schools continued to serve the educational needs of the community. In 1862 the Daughters of Charity (also called the Sisters of Charity) had sailed from the

East Coast of the United States to Panama, where they rode mules across the Isthmus. On the Pacific side they boarded a sailing ship for San Francisco. They arrived in Santa Cruz to set up an English-speaking day school and boarding school for girls, two institutions which were to fill a real need.

At first the nuns held classes in the old adobe Eagle Hotel building which stood on the corner of Emmett and School Streets. In 1865 the first new wood building was constructed, and in 1890 it was greatly enlarged. (It stood until 1944 when it was demolished. Holy Cross High School was constructed in 1926 on High Street and operated until 1970 when rising costs closed it. The elementary school was built in 1957. Nuns of the Dominican Order replaced the Daughters of Charity as teachers and administrators in 1943.)

The late Mrs. Phyllis Patten, Santa Cruz historian and author, entered the Holy Cross Boarding School as a young girl when her mother died. Phyllis often spoke of the kindness and concern of the nuns and about the classes in elocution and literature. Even the mealtimes were not idle; a reader was always present to read aloud from the classics or other edifying educational materials while the girls ate.

Of interest is this old list of terms at Holy Cross Boarding School: "Terms (per session, boarding pupils): Boarding and tuition with use of bedding, \$150. Music, piano with use of instrument, \$60. No extra charge for the languages. Singing in class, drawing and all kinds of plain and fancy needlework. No entrance fee required. For further information apply to Sister Superior."

The early years of the 1870s presented many problems for the county's public school system, mainly caused by the state's runaway growth and financing difficulties. In 1870 county residents protested taxes and caused property assessments to shrink, which placed an impossible burden upon the public schools--a situation reminiscent of the situation the schools face today, over 100 years later. School funds which were \$17,925 in 1870 were cut back to \$13,660 in 1871. The board of education appealed to the state for relief but county schools were forced to assess themselves an extra \$2,500 in order to finish out the school year of 1873. During 1874 some of the schools actually remained closed.

But in March of 1876 conditions began to improve with the incorporation of a Common Council in Santa Cruz, which included Mayor William F. Cooper, D. Tuthill, Henry Skinner, Charles Martin, and Judge Joseph H. Skirm. They were aware of the problems and worked to alleviate them.

As noted earlier, in 1865 there were 21 schools in the county serving 1,756 children. Ten years later, in 1875, there were 54 schools operating with 3,378 pupils. Compulsory education was now encouraging more parents to send their children to school, and although about one-quarter of the children in the county between the ages of five and 17 still were not attending school, this was a great improvement over the attendance record Superintendent Haslam had deplored in 1861.

In 1875-76 the citizens of Watsonville realized that their 11-year old primary school, even though it had been enlarged, would not serve all the students. They passed a bond issue for \$12,000 to build the Watsonville Grammar School. The schoolhouse was designed by James Waters and built by L. D. Holbrook (who apparently had left teaching for construction), and was considered grand indeed.

The building was 55' by 84', two stories divided into eight classrooms, each with its own small cloakroom. That was more or less standard style for those days. But the Watsonville Grammar School also had a private room for the principal, a library, and two "broad staircases" and "wide and airy halls." A belfry topped the building. At that time it was described as "one of the most substantial, best ventilated, and convenient school buildings in the state, and challenged the admiration of all."

And so school buildings grew larger and more substantial as the school population expanded. In an editorial of the time the Santa Cruz Sentinel urged foresight in planning in the face of that rapid growth:

Presuming the good financial arrangements will continue to prevail, a fund will commence being formed for the construction of a new schoolhouse. This building should not be commenced till the

trustees are justified in expending \$10,000 in its construction. We want no more one story buildings with wings. The Town of Santa Cruz and District contain wealth enough to warrant, at the close of four or five years, the construction of a public school edifice that would at least equal those of Watsonville and Bay View, and the fine three-story building of the Sisters of this place. Build something that will be an ornament to the town and a worthy example of free education--a fountain at which the high and the low, the rich and the poor, may drink alike...

In 1879, perhaps spurred by the example of their neighbors to the south, the citizens of Santa Cruz City built a \$25,000 structure which was designed to hold 600 students. It was constructed atop Mission Hill, where the first school had been located.

It had nine classrooms: four each on the second and third floors and one large one in the basement. Wide halls cut directly through each floor with stairs leading up to the next floor. The fourth floor was to serve as Santa Cruz's first high school.

(The high school operated without state support until the High School Act was passed by the California legislature in 1891. Up until that time Santa Cruz taxpayers, determined to give their children the best education the district could afford, financed the high school out of the county's portion of the school tax.)

The new building contained such innovations as sinks with faucets for drinking and washing hands. A big box stove, fired up each morning by the janitor, heated the building. However, there were no gas or electric lights, and all evening programs were held at the Opera House down on the flat. "Little rooms"--there were nine--adjoined the classrooms and were furnished with a table, bowl, and pitcher, and there were hooks for the teacher's coat and hat. Each classroom had four windows, evenly spaced, and a raised platform

for the teacher's desk--the better to keep an eagle eye on all scholars.

Professor W. W. Anderson was the principal, and Santa Cruzans proudly described their modern new schoolhouse as "inferior to none in California."

Truly, the public school system in Santa Cruz County was growing up. Many schools sprung up during the first three decades of its existence--many of them forerunners of schools which serve our children today.

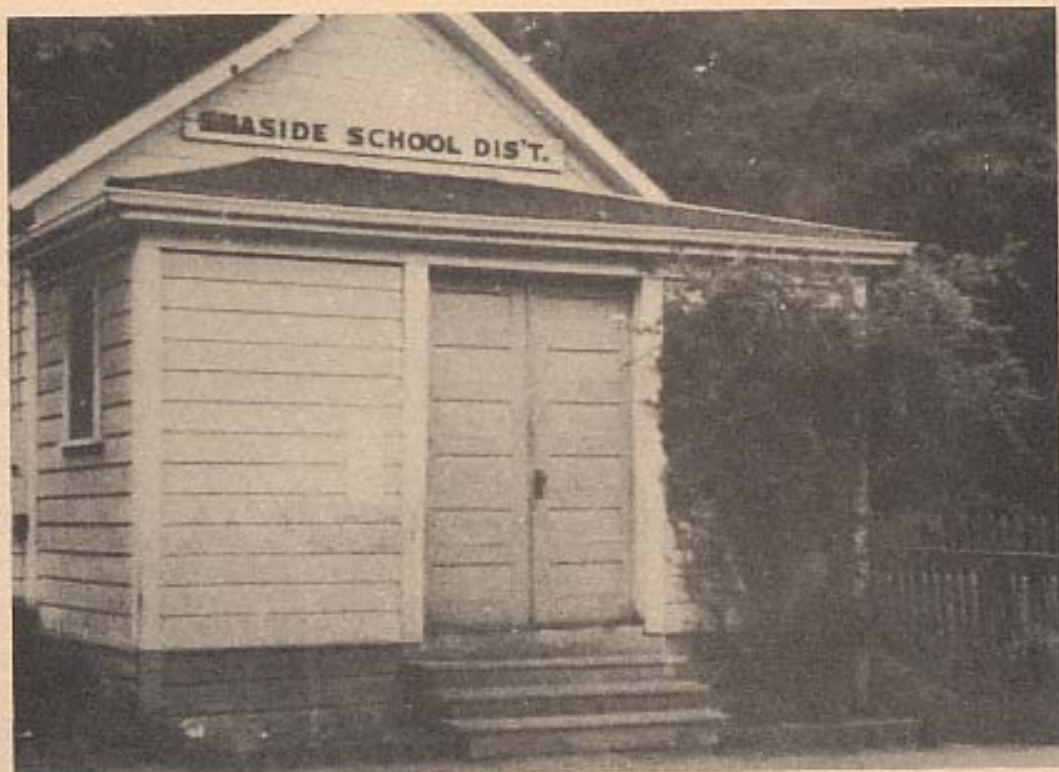
But before giving the histories of some of those early schools, it might be well to take a look at what life was like in those days--in Santa Cruz County a century ago. What was it like to be a youngster of school age then, or a teacher in the public schools? And what were those little schools like?



In the spring of 1889 everybody got out at recess to play ring-around-the-rosey, or shoot marbles as the boys in the foreground are doing. Also note: almost everyone wore hats and many of the girls wore aprons over their dresses. This was Grant School playground. The school was originally established sometime between 1863 and '66--one of the oldest in the Santa Cruz City District. Building pictured above was built in 1881. Closed June, 1966.



At Grant School in 1890 high buttoned shoes vied with bare feet in this early scene taken on the front steps. Teacher is unknown; she wore a long white apron as protection from chalk dust, probably. Not all the children are known, but among them are Ruth Grant, Kittie Pedemonte, Mollie Pedemonte, Alice Hauck, Thomas Thompson, Martha and Alice Brown.



Seaside School in Swanton. Established as El Jaro School in 1865, on coast near Waddell Creek. Changed to Seaside in 1875. Second school built on Gianone Hill. This is the third school, erected in 1907. It was closed in July, 1962, and students went to Pacific School.



Carlton School, established in 1863, rebuilt in 1899. Annexed to Salsipuedes in 1946.



1902 class photo of old Felton School. Established as San Lorenzo School in 1863, changed name to Felton in 1875. Rebuilt 1894. Closed in 1946, joining Ben Lomond and Zayante in San Lorenzo Union Elementary. Teacher shown here is Agnes Cooney. Evelyn Easton (nee Devitt) of Santa Cruz has identified the "third boy over from the left top row" as Bob Devitt, who, she says, later became sheriff of Santa Cruz County.