



Victim Of Progress Old Timers Mourn Demise Of School

Alice Yarish

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Many Novatans are saddened at the fate which is overtaking Grant School.

No One feels sadder about the impending destruction of the old school than its first principal, Miss Lulu Sutton.

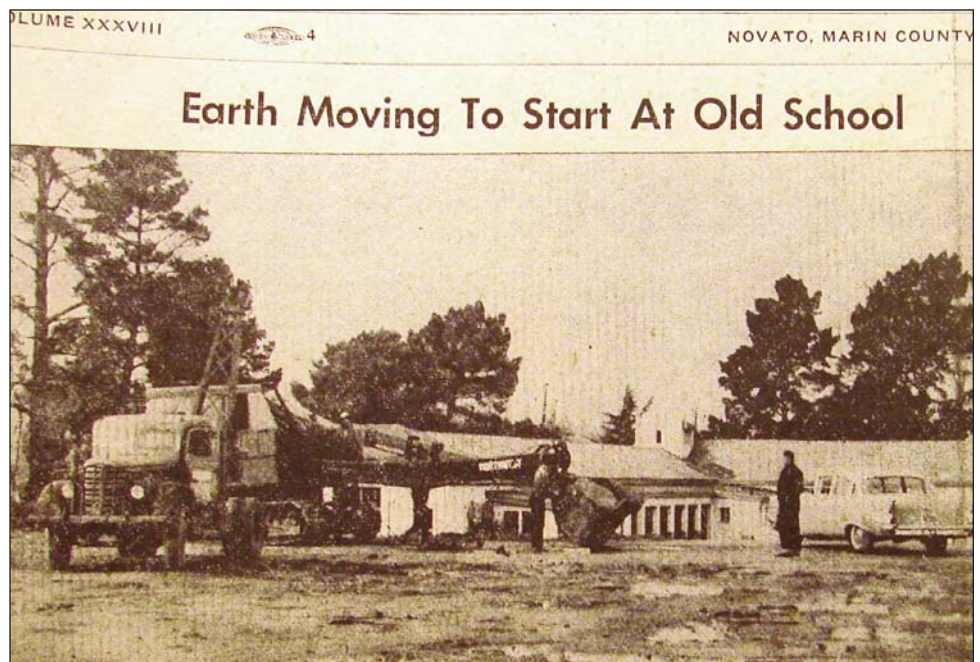
As the bulldozers gouge out tons of earth to bring the site down to street level, as axes bite into the venerable trees, and as the date for the demolition of the lovely old building draws near, Miss Sutton and many other old-time Novatans regard sadly the passing of an important landmark.

Not the least disturbed are the members of the Latter Day Saints Church who expended much time and money to rehabilitate the vandalized building last year to turn it into an attractive, roomy, and convenient church.

However they were unable to get a long-term lease on the building and rented it on a month-to-month basis knowing that sooner or later it would fall to the wreckers. They were given till February 15 to

vacate the building, but yesterday the time was extended for several months.

Grant School was a wonder to behold and the delight of the community when it was completed in 1922. Its architecture was the latest thing with access to the out-of-doors from each classroom to reduce fire hazard to the children.



HEAVY EARTH-MOVING EQUIPMENT was moved on the old Grant Avenue School property to start moving earth and eventually tear down the historic school structure now declared unsafe for earthquakes by the state. Owner of the property now is John Pedranzini of Santa Rosa, who reportedly paid around \$250,000 for the property. Once some tenants can be lined up, a commercial building is to be erected on the spot with ample off-street parking facilities according to San Rafael real estate man, H.C. Granlee, acting as agent for Pedranzini.-(Advance Photo.)

It had a beautiful auditorium with a stage. It was well lighted and ample in size, and after the old four-room wooden building which preceded it as Novato's school, it seemed positively luxurious.

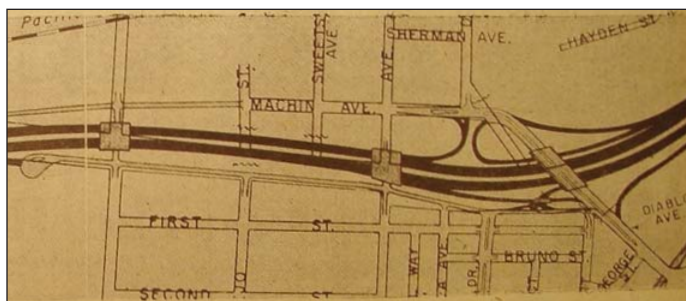
The former school structure now stands at the corner of Sweetser and Highway 101 where it is occupied by the Novato Trading Co. It was formerly located in the middle of the present school site between two hills which have since been leveled. The hill at the back of the property facing DeLong was high, steep, and covered with rocks, Miss Sutton recalls, and had a reservoir on top.

"The boys had to be like mountain goats to scramble over it when they knocked their baseballs out of the yard," she said. In fact the school grounds were so hilly and rock laden that she used to take the boys across the highway to the open fields north of Grant Avenue for their baseball and football practice.

Grounds Levelled

Several years after the school was built the grounds were leveled, the rocks removed, and the old building carted away so as to give the children a place to play.

It never was a good location for a school really," said Miss Sutton. "It was too near the highway even in those days, and we always had to protect the children from the traffic. The big hay wagons and horse-drawn milk trucks were always tearing down Grant Avenue to the cheese factory and the depot and there was always the danger that some child



Map showing proposed route for new 8-lane freeway.—(Advance Photo)

night run in front of a speeding wagon."

The trees on the site were donated and cared for by the PTA. The PTA also raised the funds to build the present retaining wall on Grant Avenue and the steps leading up to the school.

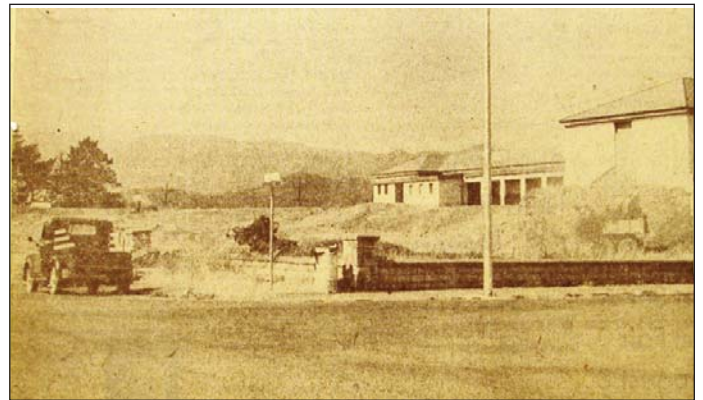
At the bottom of the steps there is the inscription, "PTA - 1924 - P.R." The "P.R." stands for Paul

Renati, the contractor who built the steps and wall. Five of his children attended the school.

The school was built for an original cost of about \$35,000. It opened in 1922 with great fanfare with four teachers, one of whom, Miss Sutton, was also the principal.

Board Members

The Board members who were serving when the funds were raised by bonds and the building was put up were Mrs. William Cole, who had taught two



EARTH-MOVING EQUIPMENT of Fabian Bobo has been at work the last three weeks reducing the hill on which the Grant Avenue School stood, to a flat expanse of ground where commercial buildings can be built. The property belongs now to John Pedranzini of Santa Rosa who has a for sale sign on the lot. If present freeway plans go through, the state will be taking about a third of the property for the expanded 8-lane freeway. At present Bobo's trucks are carting the dirt for use as fill on the property the local telephone company has bought for storage facilities on Davidson Street.—(Advance Photo)

years in the old school; Guy Gage, and Frank Gness, father of the present county supervisor.

Mrs. Cole said today "We were so proud of the old school. It was the last word in every way and very well built."

Mrs. Cole was also the first president of Novato PTA, which was organized in 1922. "We were a very active organization and everyone in town helped us. We furnished the kitchen in the school and we served hot lunches to the children. The PTA bought the school a motion picture machine and we bought the curtains for the stage," Mrs. Cole recalled.

One of the early presidents was the late Mrs. Phillip Tucket and it was she who planted the big cypress tree on the corner which until the last few years has been decked with colored lights each Christmas season as a huge community Christmas tree. This, too, must go.

Grant School served the community's needs adequately with Miss Sutton at the helm until the start of World War II and the influx of persons to Hamilton Air Force Base.

Over-crowded

Then suddenly the little school became over-crowded, and by 1948 there were 14 teachers teaching in seven classrooms with each class on double session. The auditorium had been partitioned into two classrooms and one class was held on the stage while another was held at the floor level. "Imagine a teacher trying to teach under those circumstances – with two classes in one room," said Miss Sutton.

Miss Sutton foresaw the coming growth of the community and the need for rapid expansion of the schools. She knew that the principal's time would be taken up with details of building, construction, financing, and the need to keep up with the burgeoning population.

She had devoted her life and interest to the education of children and she decided that the problems of business, construction and finance were not for her.

"I thought it was becoming a man's job," she said. It was then that she approached William J.J. Smith, then the rural supervisor from the county school department, and asked him if he would kindly take her job.

Recommends Smith

At the same time she recommended him to the school trustees and urged them to hire him.

"He had worked with us as the consultant and all of us liked him very much," she said. He went to work as principal of Grant School in July of 1948. In 1949 the first wing of Marion School was com-

pleted and opened under the joint principal ship of Miss Sutton and Earl Farris.

Then Smith was made superintendent of Novato schools, Farris stayed on at Marion, and Miss Sutton moved in as principal of Olive Street School, which was built in 1952.

Grant School became the storm center of a heated row between the citizens and the board on one side, and the state educational authorities on the other in 1953 when the state ruled that to qualify for new classrooms needed in Novato, the old classrooms in Grant school would have to be abandoned.

This was because it had been examined by state building inspectors who decided that the building, though sound, did not conform to the requirements of the Field Act, which ruled that all schools in California should be earthquake proof.

\$100,000 Repairs

It would have cost \$100,000 to make Grant School earthquake proof, according to estimates. If the school were kept in use after the condemnation by the state, the trustees themselves would have been held personally liable for any injury which would result to the occupants during an earthquake.

Reluctantly they decided to abandon the old school and this was done by official action of the board in March of 1955. The children had been moved out of the school with the close of the school term in June of 1954 and the rooms were then used for administrative offices. Even this, the state objected to, insisting that the space used in Grant School would be deducted from future building program allotments unless the school was completely abandoned and vacated. Thus in April of 1955 the administration moved into cramped and inadequate quar-



THE OLD GRANT SCHOOL is being dismantled. Present plans for the site are uncertain. If the future freeway goes through Novato, this portion of the old school grounds would be bought by the state. The Grant School was built in 1922, and within its walls many present day Novatans were educated. It was abandoned five years ago by the Novato School District. —(Advance Photo)

ters at Hill School which had recently been completed, and thence to the high school, finally coming to rest in November in the new administration building at Marion School grounds.

The abandonment of Grant School set off a legal battle between the school district and the heirs of the original grantors, Joseph Sweetser and Francis DeLong, who had sold the property to the

Valentine, a popular and well-known figure in the community, chose the playgrounds area back of the school to shoot himself to death a couple of years ago.

At the time, John Kiker of Novato attempted to lead a movement to have county veteran memorial funds used to remodel the structure as a community recreational center.

Then last May the building was rescued from its ignominy to the Latter Day Saints Church which spent hundreds of dollars and innumerable man hours painting, cleaning, repairing till the old building breathed and came to life again.

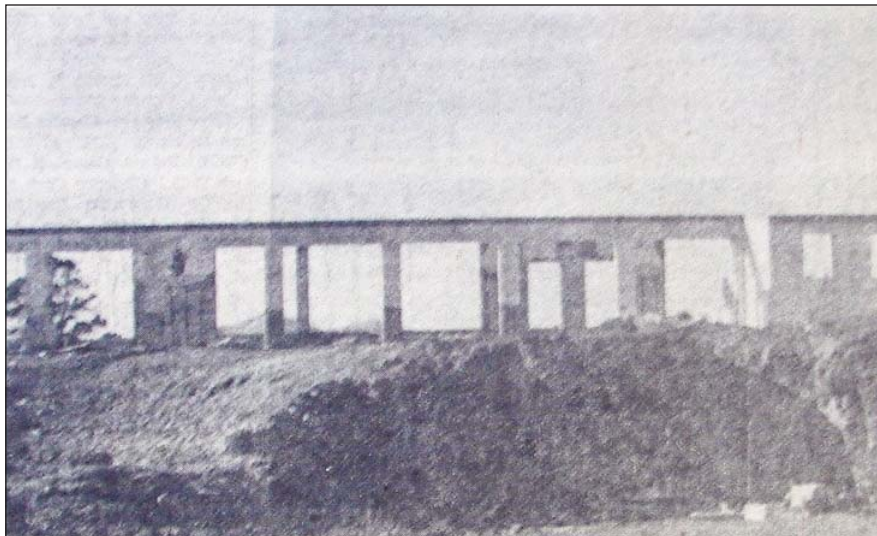
Classrooms Used

The partition which divided its auditorium in half was removed to form an attractive and roomy chapel. Its classrooms were used for Sunday school rooms, meeting halls, and put to other useful purposes.

The building has only a few days of life remaining when it will be erased forever from the local scene, the victim of outmoded state school laws, legal battles, and "progress." Many will mourn the passing of this great and good landmark, still structurally sound, still architecturally attractive, but unfortunately situated.

What will rise in its place no one seems to know, but it is conjectured that a row of commercial buildings and shops will be built.

Eventually the widening of Highway 101 and the building of an overpass at Grant Avenue will lop off a portion of the west side of the property and the traces of its academic past will be completely blotted out.



THE GUTTED REMAINS of the old Grant Avenue School have become the object of a Novato Chamber of Commerce move to have the building torn down as dangerous to life and limb. A request was made at a recent meeting of the Chamber directors to the council to pass an ordinance that would require all dangerous buildings to be torn down. At present the old structure is a huge eyesore in the middle of the downtown business area.—(Advance Photo)

school district in 1873 for \$275 with the proviso that if the property should ever be put to "other than school use" the title would revert to their heirs. The school district attempted to have the proviso set aside in a court action but lost.

Heirs Battle

Then the many heirs of Sweetser and DeLong became involved in a court battle over whose heirs should get title to the land and the Sweetser heirs won. The reversion was completed and the portion of the estate which would go to each was determined in court. Then the property was sold to the present owner, John Pedranzini of Santa Rosa sometime last year (1958) at an undisclosed price.

Meanwhile, after the abandonment of the school by the trustees it lay idle and unprotected for several years. It became the butt of vandals who broke its windows, punctured its walls, pulled out its plumbing and generally desecrated the old building.

Its history was further saddened when Carl

For Sale Sign Sought At Grant Ave. School

Apparently the old Grant Avenue School property located between Grant and DeLong Avenues just east of Highway 101 is for sale or lease.

The owner, John Pedranzini of Santa Rosa, through his real estate agent Paul B. Granlee of San Rafael, has applied to the Marin County Planning Commission for a permit to put a four by six foot sign on the property advertising "the sale or lease of the property."

The old school site was recently sold by the heirs of the Sweetser, a Novato pioneer family, for over \$100,000 to Pedranzini, who announced plans to build retail shops on the site.

It was known at the time that the state planned to appropriate the entire western side of the property for its forthcoming freeway, although

it had made no overtures for the slice.

This spring heavy excavation was started on the site but no work has been done since April, causing what many Grant Avenue merchants and property owners have called a "downtown eyesore." At least one property owner has threatened a taxpayers suit to have the area "cleaned up."

Several weeks ago the Church of the Latter Day Saints were notified that they could continue to use the old school for a meeting place.

A column from the Advance explaining information regarding sale of Grant School land.