



## The Novato Community House

By May Ungemach

*This story written by May Ungemach appeared in the Novato Historical Guild newsletter of March 1982. The photos were added for this reprint and are from the museum collection.*

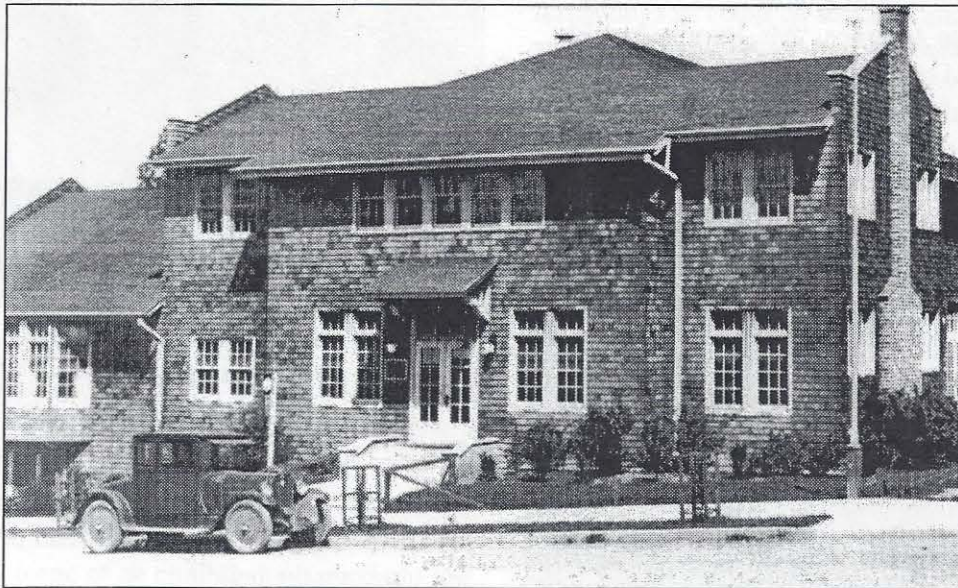
"It is hoped and expected that this Community House will be to the community what a real home is to the family – a place where the needs, interests and happiness of each one is the concern of all the rest." This hope was expressed in the Novato Advance, December 2, 1922, when work began on the new Community House. We believe the writer's wish has been fulfilled.

The first Community House was a rather modest accommodation. As a matter of fact, it was located in a vacant store next to DeBorba's. (Old Town Photo is on the site now.) According to Mrs. Leonora White, wife of a Novato realtor, "when Mr. White and I landed in Novato via the railroad in February 1918, my heart sank as I looked down the unpaved main street from the station. But most depressing of all was an unused store building on Grant Avenue, its dusty windows covered

with old circus posters of by-gone years." The sight of that empty store inspired Mr. White to speak to its owner who agreed to turn it over to Novato residents for use as a place to hold community meetings. With the help of volunteers, the building was cleaned up and a dance floor was laid in an adjoining warehouse. The first

Community House was opened on George Washington's birthday in 1919.

It soon became evident that the facility was inadequate in many ways and planning began for a new building. The old store building was sold for \$4500, then, with the help of organizations and individuals,



*The Community House, 1927*

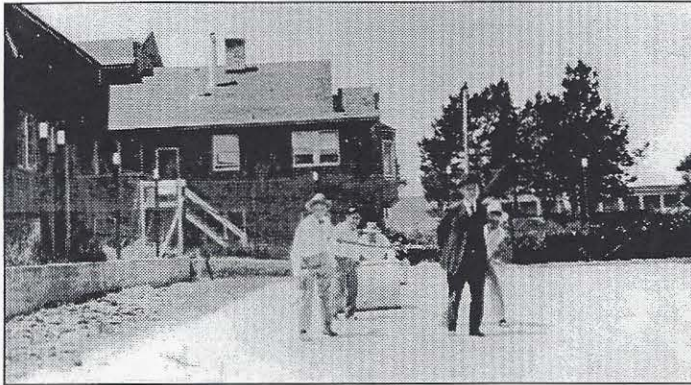
construction began on our present Community House at Machin and DeLong Avenues. Records indicate that the building would have been impossible without a loan from the Presbyterian Church. (Such financial assistance was proffered with the stipulation that the Community House would be taken over by the City of Novato when the city became incorporated.)

The architect of the new building was Walter H. Parker, and the building committee included R.H.



Trumbull, J.W. Cain and Rev. Charles Christensen, among others. A contract for construction was awarded November 15, 1922, to Charles Schuetz of San Francisco for \$18,894.

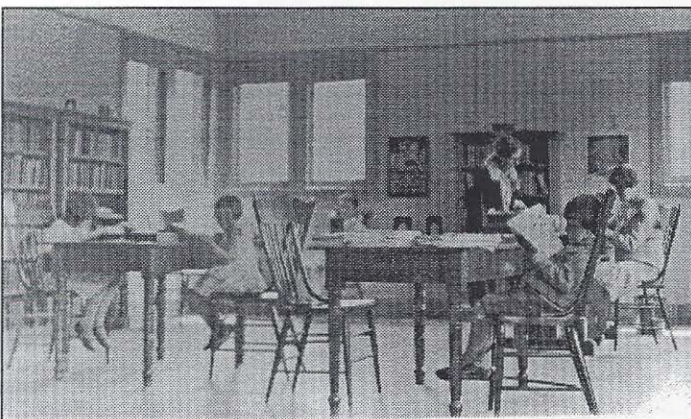
The new Community House was dedicated August 28, 1923, with 700 people attending the elaborate ceremony. The Novato Cornet Band performed, Mrs. Trumbull sang a solo, and Al Herman of Penngrove gave



*Tennis court preparation, 1924 is the caption on this photo from a Community House series of photos; however, this tennis court is not mentioned in the article.*

an imitation of 12 different breeds of roosters crowing. According to the Novato Advance, "Mr. Herman would make a rooster ashamed of himself." After Mr. Trumbull paid tribute to Rev. Christensen, a leader in the project, coffee and cake was served, and the guests danced until 1:30 a.m.

The Community House became the center of civic, social, and cultural activities in Novato. Club meetings



*Second floor library in the 1920's.*

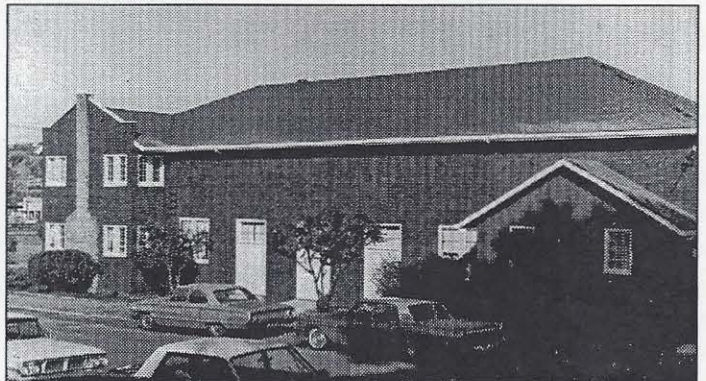
were held there; movies were shown; and the Community Players performed. There were ladies' luncheons, ballet classes, tots' music time, and even slumber parties. Facilities included a reading room, a men's meeting room, a women's room, a mothers' room and a boys' room. Landscaping was done by Novato Farm Center

members who also contributed \$150.

The Community House Board members in 1926 were Mrs. O. L. Boone, Mrs. Charles Olson, Mrs. Annie Tuckett, Rev. Charles Christensen, Bill Gnos, Mrs. Elodie Cole, Mrs. Al Mills, D. D. Pittman, A. D. Scott, Margaret Tracy, and Al Cain.

The Marin County Library authorized a Novato branch, Feb. 14, 1927. The new branch opened, in August of that year, upstairs in the Community House. The first librarian was Mrs. Margaret Clark. Others who followed were Mrs. Margaret Tracy, Mrs. Viola Derrickson, and Mrs. Elsie Andersen.

The 1930s found the Community House in disrepair. In 1947, a group of Novato residents formed Novato Community Inc., who took over ownership of the building and made repairs. The Novato Improvement Club was formed to raise funds for upkeep of the building. Some of the members were Capt. & Mrs. Charles Clarkson, Peter Ferrarese, William Q. Wright, Eleonora Lafranchi, Alice Yarish, and Paul Terry. Dances, plays,



*Delong Avenue entrance of Community House*

arts & crafts classes, etc. were given to raise funds. Membership in the Club numbered 600 during the 1950s.

After Novato became incorporated in 1960, the Community Club did not want to give up ownership of the Community House. The city had to instigate a lawsuit to obtain the building.

In 1967, with tax money appropriated by the City Council, Mrs. William Carpenter offered her talents as an interior decorator. With a group of volunteer workers, she created a delightful setting for the community activities of all Novato citizens. Other improvements have been made since, but none could surpass the enthusiasm generated by the efforts of Mrs. Carpenter and her committee.

Today, the Community House is still the center of activity in Novato. We believe it will serve future generations equally well.



# History in Weatherbeaten Walls of Brown Building

By George Barnwell

*This story appeared in the Editorial section of the Novato Advance dated May 7, 1956. Editor George Barnwell. The photos were added for this reprint and are from the museum collection.*

If there is any building in Novato which can be said to have developed a "character" all its own it is certainly the 32 year old Community Club House on Machin Avenue.

The diverse and myriad activities which have taken



*Front entrance in the 1960's*

place within its weatherbeaten walls during its lifetime have developed it into a colorful personality of as much stature and importance to this community as any person who has ever lived here.

It has been the scene of all kinds of events from weddings to heated political hassles. Many of Novato's best parties and its greatest gaiety have taken place in the Community Club House. There children have learned the techniques of ballet and modern dancing.

## Community Scene

It has been the scene of an endless procession of plays, church services, dinners, banquets, fashion shows, intellectual discussions, political battles, formal balls and youth activities.

It is the birth place of many of the most progressive ideas for community betterment, politically, civically and artistically. Within its walls literally hundreds of gallons of blood have been drained from the veins of Novato donors for the American Red Cross blood bank.

It is the offspring of an earlier community house, which had been "created" by hard working volunteers out of an old vacant store building on Grant Avenue which

belonged to G. P. McNear of Petaluma. In 1919, the old building was purchased with funds donated by residents of Novato at a nominal price.

## Early Account

An account of the early clubhouse is contained in a letter written by Mrs. Leonora White who was the wife of a real estate man in Novato who did much of the labor of refurbishing the old store and turning it into a clubhouse. Mrs. White had formerly been a reporter of the Petaluma Argus Courier.

Her letter is in the possession of the Novato Community Club and reads in part as follows: "The old store was opened and the accumulation of rubbish was burned and the place cleaned. Some lumber was bought and a fine dance floor laid in the warehouse adjoining the store itself."

"Investigating small boys were told 'We're going to build a community house, son. Want to help?' The building was finally opened on February 22, 1919, with such furnishings as could be solicited and with magazines and papers available where people could spend a few restful hours."

## Appeal for Funds

Later an appeal for funds was made to the Country Life Department of the National Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, to build a new and better community center.



*First Floor and Balcony*

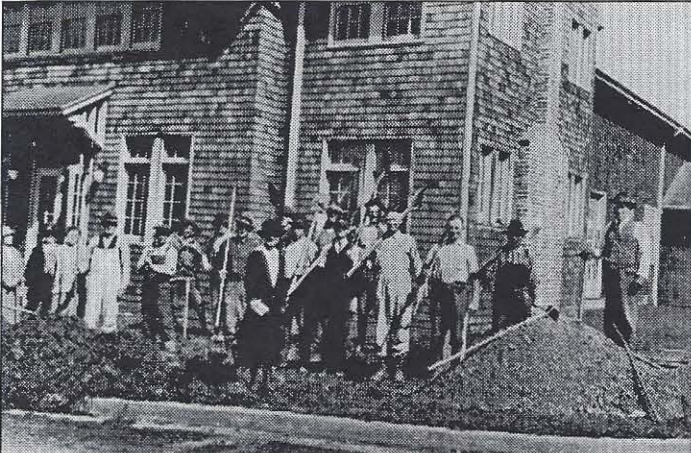
The old store building which had come to be called "that awful place" was sold for a profitable \$4500.

Mrs White's letter continues: "The Presbyterian Mission Board offered to loan sufficient funds to finish



the building as security with the definite understanding that if, when Novato became incorporated, or any business or organization legally qualified to take over the property, it would return to the people of Novato who built it and paid for it, after the mortgage, insurance costs . . . and other expenses had been paid . . . .”

Later a bitter controversy aroused the entire community as to who actually owned the Community House as it was then called.

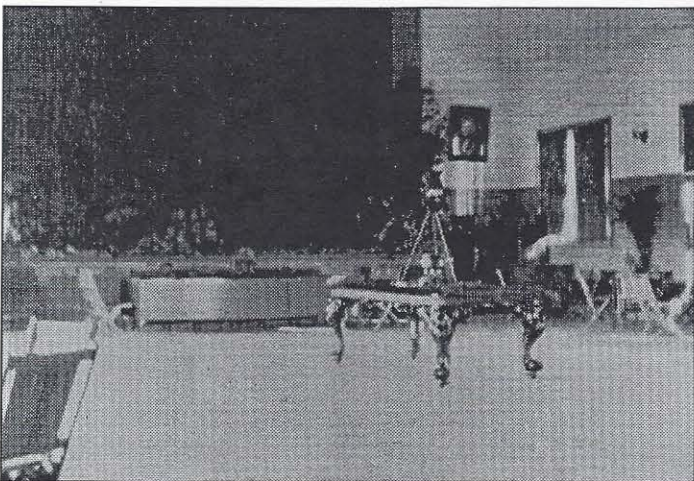


*The Community House, March 1926*

### Opposing Views

Some claimed that the national Presbytery was the owner and that the donations made by 169 residents of the community had actually been made to the church for the building fund.

The opposing view was that the Presbytery had made a gift to the community of \$4,760 for the house and that the title really belonged to the community of Novato



*The Community House stage, 1928*

whose residents had donated over \$11,000. (In addition to those funds a loan of \$4,240 had been obtained to aid in the building costs and was later repaid in full.)

At any rate, a community council was formed “of men and women regardless of religious affiliation to conduct the business of the house and “for the consideration of other civic matters.”

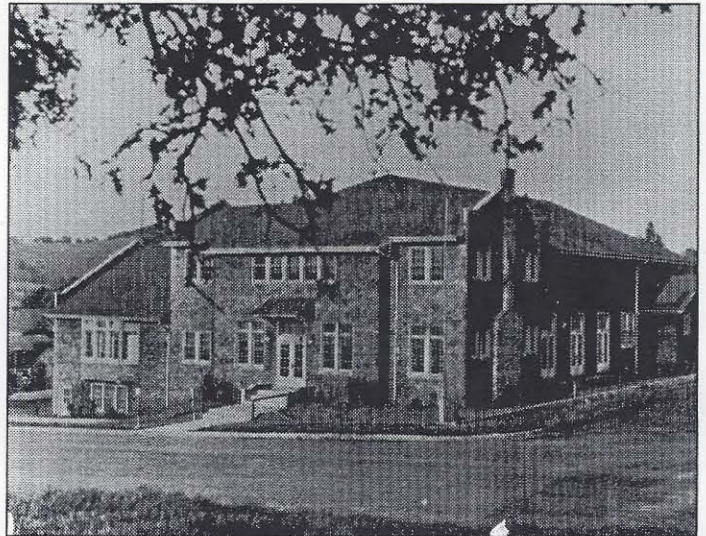
There followed a long period of financial struggle to maintain the big building during which the community council fought a losing battle with red ink on the ledger books. The edifice fell into disrepair for lack of funds.

### Group Formed

Then in September of 1947, Novato Community Inc. was formed and incorporated with the view to promoting wider activities and greater use of the clubhouse.

The corporation bought the clubhouse for \$6000 from the Presbytery of the Redwoods with the understanding that another \$6000 would be required to put the building into sound structural condition and brighten its appearance. A loan for this purpose was obtained.

Thus the management continued until a little over a



*The Community House, May 1926*

year ago when Novato Community Inc. merged with its most profitable tenant, the Novato Improvement Club in to the present organization known as The Novato Community Club.

Still the struggle with that old devil red ink continues but the new organization seems to be gaining the upperhand. More and more social activities are being planned although the consideration of civic and governmental problems has been discontinued as being too controversial.

What lies ahead for the big building no one knows. If Novato incorporates there is a strong possibility that the building or part of it may, by a vote of the members, be turned over to the new city for municipal offices. Till then it will remain the hub of Novato’s busy social life.