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Preserving Novato's History

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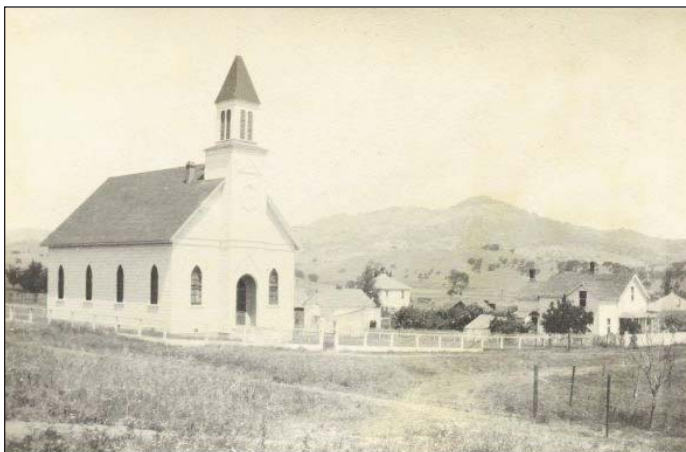
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History of 901 Sherman Avenue

By Mike Read and Diane Campbell

In 1889 the lots at the corner of DeLong and Sherman Avenues were originally donated by Mr. Chase, owner of the Black Point Ranch, for construction of a Methodist Episcopal Church. At the time, the Methodist congregation was meeting in the schoolhouse. There were many discussions about the need to build a church in the near future. For some reason, the site offered by Mr. Chase was not acceptable to the members of the Methodist Church.



Novato Presbyterian Church—Novato, CA in 1906.

On February 2, 1896, a group of Novatans, who had been meeting as a Sunday School class, was organized by the Presbytery of Benicia as The Presbyterian Church of Novato, thus becoming the first Protestant congregation in town. Early meetings were held in Scott's Hall, a room in the general store of A.D. Scott. Records of the first session list three charter members: Walter Harper, Ella Riddle and H.F. Blucher. They were soon joined by others.

Donated Land

Less than three weeks after the organization of the

church, the church officers, Elder and Trustee James Smith, and Trustees A.D. Scott, Walter Harper, William J. Steele and David Wright, were authorized to proceed with the building of a church.

A lot on the corner of Sherman and DeLong Avenues was donated to the church by the Novato Home and Farm Co.; an



A.D. Scott house and church 1903.

adjoining lot was purchased for \$50. Captain Robert Dollar of San Rafael provided the lumber, and church members and local workmen offered their labor.

Laying the Corner Stone of a Church

On March 21, 1896, according to an article in the Marin IJ, "The foundation of the Presbyterian Church of Novato, as far as the concrete wall is concerned, has been completed, which reflects credit upon the thoroughness of Mr. Hart's workmanship, in that line. On Saturday afternoon at 3:15 the southwest corner was the center of attraction when Mr. Reynolds called the attention of goodly assemblage of merchants and citizens of

Novato and a large representation of the ladies from all parts of the district to the object of the meeting.”

“Mr. Darden opened Sunday service here some four years ago. Then Miss Hoffman, teacher at Ignacio and a member of the Christian Endeavor, kept alive the higher spirit among us. About March 1895, Mr. Kelly rallied the meeting again into regularity until about October, when Mr. Reynolds took the wheel with increased persistency and steered her into organization on February 22nd of this year with Messrs. Scott, Harper, Steel, Wright and Smith forming the Board of Trustees. Since then, the work of mooring has been kept up among the members and friends, and Saturday, furnished the happy assemblage with a full and complete satisfaction of her safely, and recompense for her arduous labors.”

“The records of the first church of Novato, with a list of its members, a copy of the Holy Bible, together with copies of the Marin Journal and Sausalito News carefully sealed in a copper box were laid under the corner stone. Mr. Reynolds made a few appropriate remarks suggestive of the occasion and the people of Novato witnessed another step of her advancement that can never go back.”



Uncovering the cornerstone December 5, 2008.

Steele, who drew up the plans, agreed to oversee the construction for \$2.25 per day. When completed, the white frame building, topped by a steeple, was valued at \$1,500.

A photograph of the interior of the Presbyterian Church was donated to the Novato Advance in 1923 by Mr. and J.A White, of Ignacio. The picture was taken at the time of dedication, July 19, 1896. Mrs. White made the letters for the inscription placed on the wall over the pit- “The Lord is in his holy temple” - and with Mr. White, decorated the church in a very artistic and beautiful manner. Coal oil was used for illumination in those days, and the ladies wore long dresses cut high at the neck.

R. Reynolds, a student from San Francisco Theological Seminary in San Anselmo, served as acting minister during this period of organization and building of the church. By 1901 the Church had grown to 22 members. (The population of Novato Township was 884 in 1900.)

Bell Hung and Removed

In 1906, the church bell was purchased for under \$100 and

was hung in the church steeple. In October 1976, the bell was removed by Novato firemen; a snorkel truck from the Novato Fire Department gingerly hauled the heavy metal bell from the steeple atop City Hall. The move was to the Presbyterian Church of Novato’s temporary home at 710 Wilson Avenue. In January 1978 the bell of the Presbyterian Church was permanently installed at its current location on Wilson Avenue.

Reverend Christensen

In 1915 Rev. Charles Christensen was installed as the pastor. He had come to California from Oklahoma in 1914, living first north of Santa Rosa at Dry Creek Valley, where he lived in a tent while building his first home. His daughter, wife, and mother joined him in 1915. By 1916, the membership numbered



Photo of Sunday school addition and yew trees.

35. A manse had been built next door to the church the year previous by Rev. Christensen, who also built several houses around the town with his own hands. He used the rentals as a supplement to what must have been a rather sparse living from the church.

Rev. Christensen and his family lived in the manse during the 20 years of his ministry. The two yew trees planted in front of the manse were affectionately nicknamed “Charlie and Hattie” for Rev. and Mrs. Christensen.

In 1922 Rev. Christensen was one of the major builders, if not the planner, of the Community House and its additions. In February 1933, he helped with the installation of the old passenger train car on the lot behind the church. The car was equipped with sewing machines and other equipment to teach the young members of the 4H Club useful skills. The Pastor and his wife were most enthused, and taught their crafts to the teenagers there. The tennis court was installed in 1934. Under his leadership, the membership of both the church and Sunday school tripled. (Novato Township had grown to 1,540 by 1930).

Sunday School Room

Novato Advance wrote — May 19, 1934 — “Addition to Church Proposed – A movement is on foot to build an addition to the Presbyterian Church for the purpose of securing additional room for Sunday school work. For some years the primary

department has met in the Community House. The proposed plan involves the erection of a wing to the present building on the south side. It would be eighteen feet by thirty, and would include a primary assembly room and have two classrooms. It is hoped that those interested will help as generously as possible



4H club house behind the church.

and that much labor and material will be donated.” June 22, 1934 - “Attend Dedicatory Services Sunday – The dedication of the new rooms added to the Presbyterian church will go forward as planned tomorrow. Dr. John E. Wishard will lead in these services. The dedication will take place during the Sunday school hour, 10 a.m., as the new building is primarily for this department.”

The added room was later named in Rev. Charles Christensen’s honor as the Christensen Room. He would retire in 1935. Rev. Daniel H. Trevitt, who had been a student assistant, became pastor and served until he left to be a chaplain with the armed forces in 1942. From 1942 to 1946 membership grew from 155 to 190.

Trevitt Hall

After lengthy discussion and negotiation among all parties involved, a citizens group incorporated in 1948 as Novato Community, Inc., desired to take over the title and management



New wing added. “Trevitt Hall, 1950.

of the Community House from the Presbytery of the Redwoods for \$6,000.

Given this loss of space, the church then reactivated plans for a major addition of its own. Funds were raised for a wing to provide seven church school classrooms, a fellowship room, a kitchen and offices. Work was begun in 1949 and the dedication was September 17, 1950. The architect was Lloyd Rasmussen, carpenter was Eugene MacDonald, plumber was E.E. Howell and electrician was Laurence Tresch. The structure was named Trevitt Hall in honor of the former pastor, who died shortly after the end of WW II.

New Church

In 1956, after taking a long look into the future, the congregation purchased three acres of land on Wilson Avenue from Captain Charles and Retta Clarkson for \$10,000. By this time several other Protestant denominations were established in Novato and all were experiencing the pressure of expanding congregations. The Presbyterian Church of Novato temporarily solved this growth problem with two morning services and double sessions of Sunday school. But the little white church continued to bulge at the seams. In 1957, a new manse was purchased at 7 Estates Drive, which released the old manse next to the church for more classrooms and the church office. In 1960, Novato became incorporated as a city. The population was now 17,881. In July of 1961 planning began for construction of the new church facilities on the Wilson Avenue site. In March 1962, an agreement was reached at a reported price of \$62,500 for the purchase of the Presbyterian Church property on Sherman Avenue by the City of Novato for use as a City Hall. The Novato police department took over the church office in April 1962 (the former manse house). The City was notified that the church would vacate by January 1, 1963. The Council notified Mrs. Rosa Silva that the City would move from their then present quarters on Grant Avenue by March 1, 1963. Mrs. Silva was the owner of the two buildings which the City was occupying at the time.

Remodeling Plans

In the meantime, City Administrator John Baget met with architect Gordon Phillips (also the architect for the Community House) to determine space requirements to remodel Trevitt Hall. The church building itself would be used by the City Council for meetings, along with other governmental agencies and commissions. Phillips was told that this would be a “temporary City Hall for a short time.” For this reason, remodeling costs were cut wherever possible in making his plans. The largest single cost would be about \$7500 for electrical work. Phillips remarked that an electrical engineer had estimated \$15,000 for good wiring, but the amount had been chopped in half.

Present lighting facilities in the building would prove inadequate, and more power was required to operate electric office equipment.

The church building had to be painted both inside and out. The exterior was painted rust brown with white trim. Gordon said the rust brown paint would prove to be both suitable in color for a city building and very durable.

Total office space would be 5,184 square feet, Phillips said. He foresaw the need for 7,490 square feet of office space by 1966. The new City Hall would be occupied by offices, and the Council would continue its meetings at the Community House.

The City Council accepted the bid of \$28,360 from Lloyd



City staff stands before new City Hall just before moving in. August 12, 1963.

Hunter Construction Co., Novato, to remodel the former Presbyterian Church and Trevitt Hall and transform the buildings into a new City Hall.

Rooster Installed

In c.1964, Al Bowman, a local business man, came up with the plans to install a rooster weather vane on the steeple of the City Hall. John Giari of John’s Welding built the vane and Dave Milano and Bob Manzoni of Aaero Heating climbed up the City Hall steeple and installed it.

Clock Installed

In August 1977, Edral de Soto, a carpenter for the City of Novato, installed an octagonal clock, Novato’s official time-piece, atop the City Hall steeple. The clock, designed to match the building, was donated by the Novato Soroptimist Club and cost \$525 to build. The club ran out of money after it was completed and was afraid it couldn’t afford the installation. But de Soto, with a boost from a fire department snorkel, did the job himself.

Moved Out

The area along Sherman Avenue between Grant and DeLong Avenues was referred to as the civic center. It included 11 structures, including the Community House and City Hall, some of which were called “substandard and potentially life-threatening” in a 2004 report. Many of the civic buildings were condemned and then vacated as City offices in January 2005. The future of the civic center complex sparked debate over the years and prompted several proposals for a new City Hall. A 1980’s plan was dubbed the “Taj Mahal” by critics, mostly because of its grand size. The fallout from that plan resulted in the 1987 passage of Measure D, which restricted how much the

City Council can go into debt for public facility projects without voter approval. A 2001 plan suggested a multi-building alternative with two new buildings and six renovated structures. A 2004 plan proposed by Jeanne MacLeamy offered a single-building scheme.



Sketch of City Hall and Police Station by Bob Sebring.

The final approved project zeroes in on just the church structure. “The difference in the current scheme is that it is a single building that everyone agrees should be saved,” MacLeamy said. “We have the money on hand and do not have to go to voters for bonds.”

The plan included removing structures at 905 and 911 Sherman Avenue to make way for a civic green.

The restored City Hall will function as Council chambers and public meeting space with seating for about 120; as a banquet space with seating for about 90; and as a theater with seating for about 100. The new City Hall is scheduled to open November 20, 2009.



Our new/old city hall showing the new patio, retaining wall, benches and part of the lawn area on the north side of the building.