



NORTH BAY DANCER .. WINTER 1998

Past and Present

The Story of Monroe Hall

BY EMILY FLOUTON

It's always a pleasure to come to our monthly contradances at Monroe Hall, and enter that fine old building with the certain feeling that it is steeped in tradition. Indeed, it is in use morning, noon and night every day of the month, for classes or for public events, including our contradances,

T' ai Chi, aerobics, tap, jazz and ballroom, country and western, swing, and of course, square dancing! We can see on the sign out front that it was built in 1922, but curiosity about more of its history led me to an interview last August with the owner, Clarence Freitas, who also shared with me the condensed history of the building, which you can find framed and posted in the rear of the dance hall. As it happens, August was the month, twenty years ago, that Clarence and his wife Charlotte first bought the hall from its original owners-and therein lies a story ...

In the winter of 1915, nine women living in the Monroe District formed a social and service club. With proceeds from dances, cake bakes, and card parties, they donated services to Red Cross efforts during World War I, making leg wraps for the soldiers and sending more than 500 jars of jelly to the hospital in Fremont. By April of 1922, incorporated with a membership of thirty-four, they built and inaugurated The Monroe Neighborhood Clubhouse. The original half-acre, on what was then part of Guerneville Road, was purchased for \$10 in 1921!

The loan papers for the building had to be co-signed by some of the members' husbands, since money could not be lent solely to women. Twenty-five years later, in 1947, the present dance floor was laid.

In its early years, the hall was a true community center, with dances, plays, card parties, and Monroe School events. Later, the clubhouse was also rented out for weddings and private parties, to defray costs; and the club held on, continuing with their loyal community service work of making lap robes and quilts and gifts and food baskets for the local needy. They kept their sewing machines in the storeroom off the dining hall.

In 1954 Monroe Hall became the headquarters for four folk and square dance clubs, and continued as the folk and square dance center of Sonoma County. It was this connection that enabled the Freitases to purchase the hall in 1977 when the club wanted to sell it, thus rescuing it from the manager of the Flamingo Hotel, who wanted to turn it into a rib house! At the time of that sale, the name was officially changed to Monroe Hall, and it is now in use every night of the month.

Ten years ago, the remaining Monroe Club members called Clarence and they met at the hall. They were still actively meeting once a month, and enjoyed taking a walk through their old clubhouse. Touched by the historical synopsis posted in the back of the hall, they could be seen wiping tears from their eyes. This building was a crowning achievement in their list of efforts.

Monroe Hall was at one time a candidate to be designated as a historical landmark, but Clarence declined, since the pursuant zoning restrictions would have limited his options to make changes. Clarence told me some of the changes he had made: from termite work and replacing the floor joists, to building the current rest rooms (they used to be where the lounge is now) and replacing the pillars out front with steel columns. The photo in the back of the hall is from the 1970's. The fascinating collection of agricultural antiques and art has also been added by Clarence and Charlotte, as well as the seasonal decorations that change monthly. Many people comment on the fantastic fragrance of the roses in vases all about the hall; they come directly from the Freitases' 30-some rosebushes. The latest addition, my personal favorite, is the stop sign that reads, "WHOA" as you exit the driveway.

Clarence, now 75, says, "I dance a lot with folks who are 7D-80-year-olds, and some of these dancers have been coming here since they were 8,9,10 years old. One fella's mother was one of the originals. One fella will point out the bench he used to sleep on when his parents would come to a dance." When the impact of that living history sinks in, and knowing that there have been wishful buyers sniffing around (a church and a day care), one fervently hopes this unique, irreplaceable landmark can somehow hold on in its tradition as a true community hall. †