

# Glorious ... once again



The planned rebirth of the Carson Block

By Kathy Dillon

Despite everything – the missing turret, the cracked stucco siding, the faded remnants of the building's once-glorious theater – despite it all, the Carson Block is still recognizable as one of Old Town's grandest structures. But just barely.

"Sadly altered" is how it is described in the Eureka Heritage Society's architectural survey files, which were compiled in the 1970s.

"May the idiot who tore off the [turret] ... be crushed with feelings of guilt!" was how Ralph Dyer, the architectural editor of the Los Angeles Times, phrased it at the time.

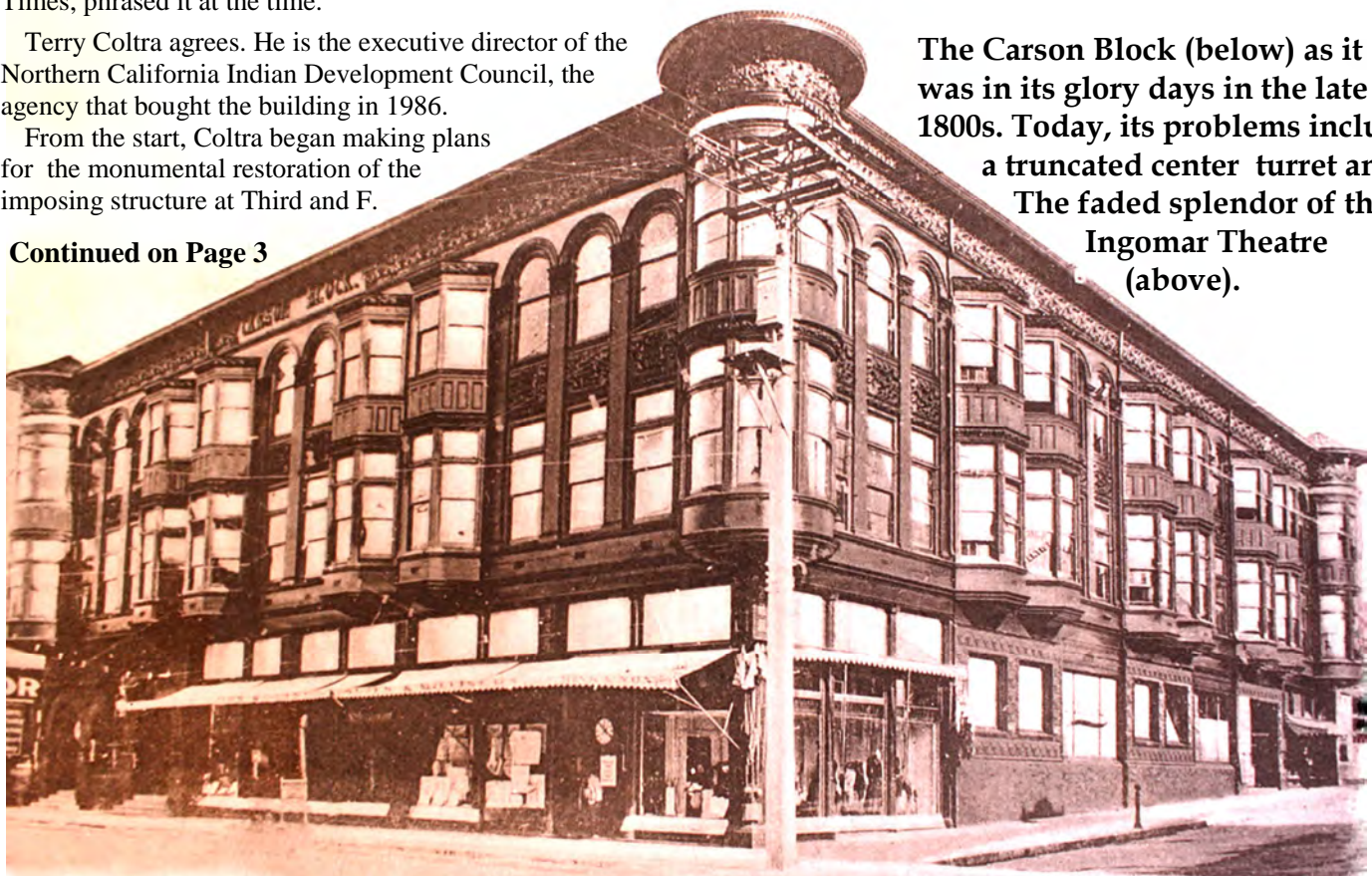
Terry Coltra agrees. He is the executive director of the Northern California Indian Development Council, the agency that bought the building in 1986.

From the start, Coltra began making plans for the monumental restoration of the imposing structure at Third and F.

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The Carson Block (below) as it was in its glory days in the late 1800s. Today, its problems include a truncated center turret and The faded splendor of the Ingomar Theatre (above).



# Saving the grand old windows

## GOING GREEN:

### Restoring the Carson Block's many windows

Opening one of the Carson Block's restored old-growth redwood windows with ease, Don Moeller smiles.

"It's wonderful to see them come back," he says.

Known as the Old House General, Moeller has been working on the building's windows, on and off, for 1½ years and is half way through the restoration project he calls "a labor of love."

"It's a fascinating experience doing this work," he says.

No unsightly replacement vinyl windows for this noble structure, adds Terry Coltra, executive director of the Northern California Indian Development Council, the agency that owns the building.

"That's not historic restoration," Coltra said, adding the windows — the entire building, in fact — is made with "some of the finest wood you'll ever find."

Moeller believes maintaining old windows is a wise environmental and financial choice. Maintenance is the key. As with anything, decades of neglect and improper maintenance take a toll. Such is the case with the Carson Block's many windows.

"They were coming apart, essentially," Moeller said.



Kathy Dillon

**Don Moeller, the Old House General, stands by the curved windows in William Carson's original office.**

So the methodical restoration has begun: Remove each window to Moeller's shop, where it is dismantled and repaired.

The work includes repairing tenons and balance systems. Dry rot has been the least troublesome problem. What is found is replaced with old-growth parts.

More common woes include damage caused by people forcing a window open as well as dried-out wood. The latter happens when paint wears off and raw wood is exposed to sunlight.

"We have a mixture of boiled linseed oil and mineral spirits that thin it down so the oil will penetrate back into the wood," Moeller explained. "We've weighed the wood before and after, and it's gained 50 percent of its weight by feeding it with oil."

The restoration process takes an average of 15 hours per sash, but the result is worth it, Moeller says — whether it be for a grand commercial structure like the Carson Block or a humble, old house.

Craftsmen of the late 1800s built windows "to outlast themselves," Moeller said.

"There was no planned obsolescence. There was pride of manufacturing, pride of design."

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In 1958, the Carson Block lost its center turret and was coated in stucco. Inside, original oak wainscoting along the stairways and on the third floor survived. Carson ordered the oak from France.

All current Carson Block photographs by Kathy Dillon

# GLORIOUS — Continued from Page 1

“It was a tragedy they took the turret off,” Coltra says, shaking his head “We have to have the turret back.”

Visual aesthetics are not all the building needs. Add in a seismic retrofit, new roof and gutter system, and windows in need of repair. They come first — and are scheduled to be completed within the next 1½ years, Coltra said.

After all, the building has a noteworthy history to live up to. It was constructed in 1892 for William Carson, Eureka’s wealthiest lumber baron. He hired famed architect Samuel Newsom to do the job. It was Newsom, along with his brother Joseph, who designed Carson’s opulent mansion a few years earlier.

The solo Newsom created the Carson Block in redwood, brick and tile — dressed to impress. The three-story red building boasted

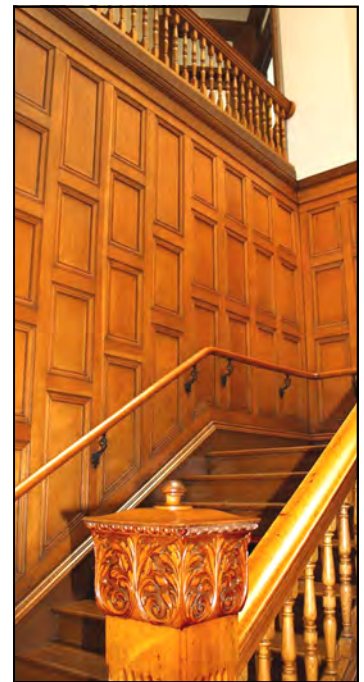
heavy arches, three turrets, and was laden with ornamentation.

The architecture has been described as having both Richardsonian Romanesque and Sullivan-esque traits. Both were popular symbols of prestige in the East but were something new in Eureka, which in many ways was still a bawdy frontier town. The notorious waterfront was a haven for boisterous sailors and lumbermen lured by cheap hotels, saloons and prostitution.

Carson envisioned a different Eureka. Born of the working class, he was a pious man whose sense of refinement grew with his wealth. The Carson Block reflected the man.

“It was planned to be the center of attention when it was built,” Coltra said. “It was one of the first buildings in Eureka to house professional offices and a very large retail space.

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# GLORIOUS

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The opulent Ingomar Theatre, on the second and third floors, was an afterthought. At the time, Eureka had a few small theaters but nothing substantial nor highbrow. Many believed it was time for a change.

As early as 1883, the Times-Telephone newspaper editorialized that the refinements of the “legitimate stage” — often called an opera house — would have a profound effect on the “moral and intellectual character of the community,” according to Benjamin Sacks, author of the 1979 book “Carson Mansion & Ingomar Theatre: Cultural Adventures in California.”

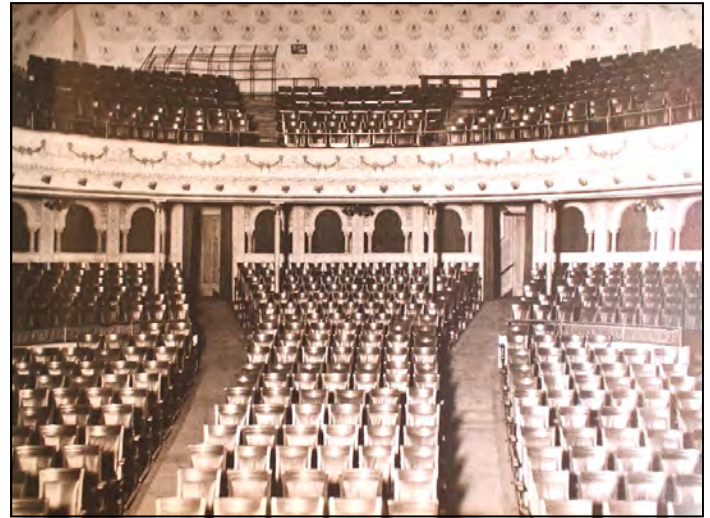
Carson eventually agreed and made plans to include a theater in his new building — boosting the final cost from \$115,000 to \$145,000.

The theater’s name was an ode to Carson’s favorite play, “Ingomar the Barbarian.” Written in London in 1851, it became tremendously popular throughout Europe and America. Set in ancient Greece, the play tells the story of a farmer enslaved by marauding barbarians led by the young Ingomar. The farmer’s daughter exchanges herself as a hostage and — after a series of tribulations — transforms Ingomar.

According to Sacks, the story reflects a range of noble characteristics: “Wisdom and truth, the love of beauty and goodness, the purity and elegance of the English language, the refinement of public taste and manners, and the mystery of the soul.”

Lofty goals for isolated Eureka. Yet, Sacks maintains, for Carson, “well-conversed with its plot and inspirational message, a frontier community could assuredly do no better than follow its precepts.”

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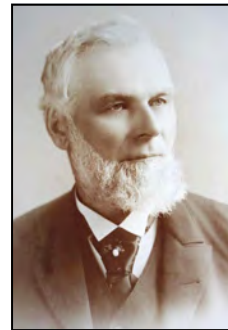
**The Ingomar Theatre’s auditorium is seen just before and after its plush seats were installed in 1892. The programs for the performances featured an elaborate drawing.**

Historic photographs courtesy of the Humboldt County Historical Society



**Originally red, the Carson Block was made of red-wood, brick and tile and featured arched openings. The alley closest to the theater was soon dubbed Opera Alley, and remains so today. The neighborhood also boasted impressive Victorian-era structures on each corner.**

**During the theater’s final hour, a sentimental crowd gathered and sang “Auld Lang Syne.”**



**William Carson**

Cultural hyperbole aside, the end result was a theater of striking beauty that soon would be considered the grandest venue of its kind between San Francisco and Portland.

The elegance began in a foyer laden with elaborate woodwork and large chandeliers. The richly detailed main auditorium was flanked by 10 boxed seats and topped with a domed ceiling.

The upper-class boxes were trimmed with plush fabric and adorned with brass railings. Decorative ornamentation and gilding were everywhere, including over the stage’s elaborate proscenium arch.

The theater was packed on opening night, Sacks, wrote, yet a reticent Carson held off entering the auditorium. When he finally did, an ovation followed.

Until his death in 1912, Carson maintained the building beautifully, even though Sacks suspected he never made a profit on the theater.

The 20th century brought bigger theaters to Eureka as vaudeville and film emerged. Eventually, the Ingomar’s audiences dwindled. In 1923, the building was sold, and the theater became a store room for a hardware store, which was then located on the first floor.

Sold again in 1958, the Carson Block would become the victim of ill-fitting modernization: Exterior walls were covered with stucco, the center turret was taken out and replaced with a neon sign, and the theater was gutted and divided in half horizontally.

Before the dastardly deed was done, local history lovers were given a chance to present “The Final Curtain Call.” For five days the Ingomar was opened up again, drawing 3,000 visitors for a last look. During the theater’s final hour, a sentimental crowd gathered and sang “Auld Lang Syne.”

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A variety of windows can be found in the Carson Block, and all are being re-stored, not replaced.

# WINDOWS

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The concept included the reality that eventually damage would occur; thus windows were designed to be removed and disassembled, he said. Also, old windows are made of many different parts. As a result, a damaged section can be repaired, or it can be replaced without having to replace the whole window.

Modern vinyl windows, however, are made in one unit. “When the insulated panels fail, you have to replace the whole window. That’s every 10 to 15 years,” Moeller said.

“Unless you get into the very expensive ones with coated glass and exotic gasses, the insulated panels you see all over town give you one additional ‘R’ of insulation,” he said. “If you do get into custom-made vinyl windows, it’s not unusual to spend \$1,600-\$2,000 per window.”

Properly maintained, an old-growth redwood window is something “that can last almost indefinitely,” added Moeller, who is writing a how-to manual on the subject.

The current fad of replacing old-growth with vinyl is beginning to slow, Moeller believes, as the realities of old vs. new are better understood.

Examining wood in Carson Block windows, Moeller has found 85 to 100 growth-year circles in one inch — a remarkable reflection of its ancient, enduring strength.

“The tree gave its all for a thousand years,” he said. “So what I try to do is to get people to consider what they’re doing.”

# GLORIOUS

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Within 20 years, the once grand “temple of the muses” seemed never brought to mind; in his research, Sacks found many Eureka did not know about the theater. Terry Coltra believes that can change.

“It would need a festival similar to Ashland,” he said, adding such an event could include the Arkley Center and Eureka Theatre. “Something where, within a month or two, you would make 60 percent of your income. There’s an American Indian film festival that happens in San Francisco. I’d like to pull it up here.”

Meanwhile, the realities of fund-raising and getting the work done are Coltra’s priorities. The restoration of the windows is under way (see story, Page 2). The seismic retrofit — which includes the new roof — comes next.

“We’re talking somewhere from \$3.5 million to \$3.8 million to do just this phase,” he said.

Funds from the California Cultural and Historical Endowment were awarded in 2006, and the Northern Indian Development Council has 18 months left to use it. All seems on schedule, Coltra added.

“I have the final drawings going to the city,” he said, “and we are in the process of finding a contractor.”

The effort is worth it, Coltra contends, pointing out an old photograph of Third and F streets. It shows the Carson Block in its glory days, looking out on other splendid Victorian-era commercial buildings on the other three corners.

“When you look at that shot — oh my goodness, what was lost!” he said. “I don’t think we can lose any more.”

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## Clubhouse restoration project



# Vital, if not visible, work

By Kathy Dillon

After nine decades, the handsome Craftsman remains a fresh focal point in its neighborhood. Well-tended, it still charms the eye in a soft green and white wardrobe of shiplap and shingles, heavily molded windows and bold, decorative brackets. Here is a symphony of old-growth redwood, inside and out.

Thank generations of Eureka Woman's Club members who have worked to conserve their building at 1531 J St. since its construction in 1917.

Their most recent effort was a five-week-long project this summer: The restoration of the seldom-seen back wall has been an unsung but imperative restoration effort.

"It had been delayed for 15-plus years," says Sue Willan, club president. "Accessibility has been the big problem."

Sitting at the edge of a gulch, the building's back portion reaches far down the slope. As a result, nature's wild greenery and the damp had worked their way in, taking their toll on the siding and windows.

"The carpenters took the windows out first," Willan said. "They just about fell out. We've been at risk of high damage."

The work was completed through the efforts of Andrew Colonna, Jeremy Perritt, Tom Picknell, Barbara Russell and Gary Whittaker.

Willan also credits club member



Gary Whittaker and Andrew Colonna work on removing decades of old paint and re-securing nails into the back wall of the Eureka Woman's Club. The building sits on a gulch, so putting up the scaffolding was the first major hurdle in the long-awaited project.

Photos by  
Kathy Dillon

**"The building is extremely important architecturally.**

*— Jean Gladstone Clark,  
Eureka Woman's Club*

Jean Gladstone Clark, the current building coordinator and also a dedicated member of the Eureka Heritage Society, who spearheaded the project.

"The building is extremely important architecturally," Clark said.

The structure was designed by F.T. Georgeson. The renowned architect created many other notable and enduring Eureka buildings including the State Theater, Masonic Temple, Municipal Auditorium, First Christian Church, and the Ritz.

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# Reflecting women's history

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The Woman's Club building has earned a special place in the soul of the city.

"The building is important to the club — and the club is important to the community," Clark said, noting decades of public service projects as well as the numerous special events held in their building by myriad individuals and groups. They include countless wedding receptions; one held last January continued on despite a major temblor.

The organization's story began in 1901 with the formation of the Monday Club, one of three such women's groups in town dedicated to civic, educational and cultural pursuits. Similar clubs were being organized by women across the country. In an era before women had the right to vote, these clubs brought strength in numbers.

In 1908, the Monday Club purchased the 15th Street property for the site of its future clubhouse and began raising money, which included renting the land to a neighbor for his cow at \$1.50 per month.

In 1916, members took on a \$3,000 mortgage and construction soon began.

In 1923, the Monday Club merged with the two other women's groups in the city to form the Eureka Woman's Club. The



Kathy Dillon

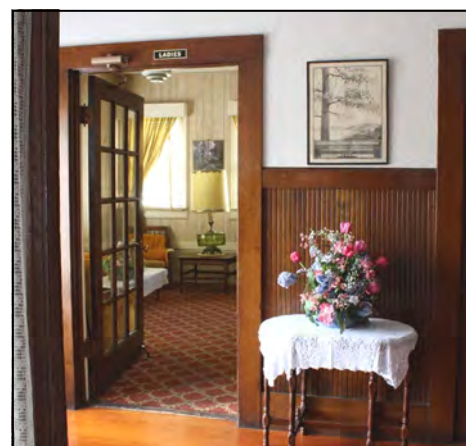
## More familiar to generations of Eureka is the clubhouse's main room and foyer.

clubhouse became busier than ever.

"This building has kept the club functioning when a lot of others fell by the wayside," Clark said. "Because we have this building, and the honor and responsibility of having it, it has really kept the club going."

This summer's work began with the herculean task of installing and securing a seven-layered scaffolding. Then began the stripping of all paint, sanding the residue, replacing decayed boards, and counter-sinking all nails and spraying them with rust retardant. Then the paint: primer, filling cracks and holes, more primer, and finally two coats of color.

"We're not going to be able to get back and do it again anytime soon," Clark said, noting the high expense of renting and



installing the scaffolding. "We tried to do everything we could while we had it."

And so the handsome Craftsman continues as a pivotal — and ever-appealing — site in historic Eureka neighborhood.

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