

Historical Olivelihoods begins new era

Classes no longer use temporary buildings that made up campus

By Erinn Hutkin

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Hammer in hand, Carol Vines whacked a nail into a lobby wall at Olivelihoods School in Santa Paula. Then, she mounted a wood frame holding a program from last week's school dedication.

The frame hung above a shiny silver shovel used to break ground for the building.

The story of the Foothill Road school reaches back to 1913, when Limoneira Co. gave the site to the Briggs Elementary School District.

For decades, the school served children of Hispanic farmworkers and others. Then it grew old and unsafe. In September, the school was torn down after an attempt by Ventura County to keep the building as a historic landmark.

A new school was completed in August. And Jan. 16, one chapter of the campus' history closed and another began when a dedication was held celebrating the opening of a new Olivelihoods School. Although many were sentimental about seeing the old building destroyed, they felt the result — a modern, more spacious and well equipped school — was long overdue.

"It was sad because it had been there for so long," said Gina Ritenour, president of the school's Parent Faculty Organization. "But they'll have a much better learning experience in the new school."

Vines, superintendent of the school district, said a 1997 study showed the two-story school was structurally unsound. Its foundation would be shaky in an earthquake, and the building's age created everyday problems.

Plumbing had problems, too

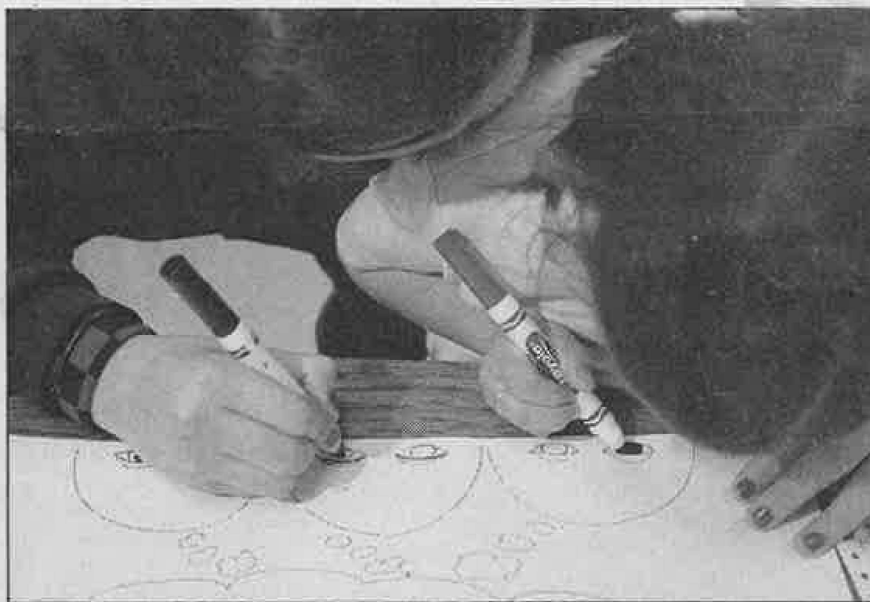
The electrical system was old, and so was the plumbing. Staff members recall plumbing problems were once so severe that portable bathrooms were brought to the campus. Others remember the bathrooms smelled from old plumbing and mold.

The building was becoming too small for the school's 180 students from kindergarten through third grade. Lack of insulation between the first and second floors resulted in lots of noise. There was no parking, no multipurpose room. Lunches and student assemblies were held outside, even on cold



Photos by Jason Redmond / Star staff

Olivelihoods kindergartners Alexa Villa, left, and Lilliana Guzman explore the library at their new school. Students like the new playground, and teachers appreciate the multipurpose room, up-to-date classrooms and the large library.



Seventh-grader Laniah Lee, 13, left, and first-grader Anahi Arroyo, 6, work on a project to apply Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech to their lives.

mornings.

"It was a 1913 ... building," Vines said. "It just didn't meet the needs anymore."

By 1999, Olivelihoods' unsafe conditions earned the district state funds to replace the school. The money was coupled with general funds and a \$2.5 million construction bond approved in 1999. Then, in early 2000, the students and staff moved into portable buildings. Classes were held there until the new, \$4.5 million school opened in August 2003. They were years spent without running water in classrooms, and recess was held in what is now a parking lot.

Building couldn't be saved

Meanwhile, when the district applied for a demolition permit from the county's Cultural Heritage Board, the group wanted the school kept as a

showing the history of segregation. In its early days, said Kim Hocking, a senior county planner, only children of Hispanic immigrants went to Olivelihoods. It was also designed by a well-known local architect, Roy Wilson.

However, Hocking said, a

demolition permit was granted because denial would have delayed plans long enough for the district to lose state funds for re-building.

Although the building is gone, Vines said, a block wall bordering long-gone student rock gardens will be preserved. Plans also call for placing a display about the old school inside the new building.

At the school, kids like the bright new playground and grass that leaves stains on their jeans. Teachers appreciate the multipurpose room, up-to-date classrooms and a library so big, voices echo within its walls.

"It was a long, tough road getting here, but it was certainly worth it," said first-grade teacher Kathleen Petersen. "It's so nice being in our new school."

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Photos by BRYAN CHAN / Los Angeles Times
treet during Ventura's parade.

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MORE INSIDE

Oh, say, can you see: Southland is alive with festivities. **B4**

Missing intern: Rep. Condit cancels parade appearances. **B8**

Independence Day ceremony.

In Ventura County, the Ojai Lions Club put together a daybreak pancake breakfast, while a host of presidential look-alikes gathered at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library near Simi Valley.

Police and firefighters in Ventura County were busy Wednesday night responding to reports of gunshots and firecrackers.

In Fillmore, sheriff's deputies broke up a brawl outside a market. At least three people were beaten badly enough to require hospital treatment, Sgt. Larry Meyers said.

Earlier in the day, seven people were injured in a collision between a minivan and a motor home in Piru, according to the California Highway Patrol.

Back in Ventura, the sun poked through the clouds, and dancers twisted and spun as a swing band played. Vendors sold toys, jewelry and clothing. Community groups set up booths to broadcast their ideological messages.

Please see **FOURTH, B9**

To Some, Old School Offers History Lesson

Santa Paula: Preservationists hope to save one-time segregated schoolhouse, but district wants it razed.

By STEVE CHAWKINS, TIMES STAFF WRITER

When a tiny school district in Santa Paula barely managed to pass a \$2.5-million construction bond two years ago, educators and parents thought they could soon tear down and replace an old elementary school the state had declared unsafe.

Now, however, the Briggs School District must clear an unexpected hurdle. The 1913 Olivelihoods School, it turns out, was among Ventura County's first segregated schools—one that should be kept whole, historic preservationists argue, as a reminder of an era that many would sooner forget.

In principle, the conflict doesn't differ much from the familiar face-offs between developers revving up bulldozers and residents struggling to save a timeworn farmhouse or a grand old oak. In this case, however, the aim is not to save a cherished piece of the past, but to highlight the institutional prejudice of a bygone day.

"This is a unique opportunity to not exactly make amends, but certainly to be honest about our past," said Kim Hocking, a Ventura County planner who serves as a staff member for the county's cultural heritage board.

Perched on a rise above a sea of lemon trees, the Olivelihoods School was started by the Limoneira citrus operation for the children of its Mexican farm workers. As increasing numbers of workers from Mexico arrived to tend California's fields, many other communities also established "Mexican schools," which often were run by administrators unashamed to declare non-whites intellectually inferior.

Hocking has urged the cultural heritage board, which makes recommendations to county supervisors on places of historic interest, to reject the district's plans for razing Olivelihoods and installing a parking lot in its place.

While Olivelihoods has not been declared a landmark, it meets the standards for landmark designation, and, consequently, falls under the cultural heritage board's jurisdiction, Hocking said.

He has suggested the building be moved, turned into a museum devoted to the local Latino community, or used for storage or offices when the new school goes up on an adjacent playing field.

Please see **SCHOOL, B9**

SCHOOL: Building Debated

Continued from B1

But to Carol Vines, superintendent of the two-school, 460-student Briggs district, such alternatives, while perhaps high-minded, are also impractical.

"The building has been declared structurally unsound and the state made us abandon it," she said, pointing out that the school's 200 kindergarten through third-grade students now attend classes in portable units rented from the state. "We can't leave it there. It's not safe."

The building's concrete foundation is so badly deteriorated that it "could be wiped away by hand," according to a district report. State inspectors have found defects so serious that restoring the school would cost more than the \$3.2 million it would take to build a new one, Vines said.

Saving the building would mean reducing the size of the proposed parking lot—and that too would pose safety risks, according to parents active at Olivelihoods.

"When parents and buses are dropping off kids at the same time, it can get very dangerous," said Laura Galvan, whose son graduated from Olivelihoods last month. "There's a great need for a larger parking lot, with a designated area for parent drop-offs."



MEL MELCON / Los Angeles Times

The 1913 Olivelihoods School in Santa Paula was among the county's first segregated schools.

Galvan campaigned for the 1999 bond measure, which passed by seven votes.

The district has offered to compile a photographic record of the old school and to erect a plaque describing its history. But that isn't enough, said Hocking, who likened the reason for saving Olivelihoods to the reason for preserving Manzanar, the World War II internment camp for Japanese Americans in Central California.

Olivelihoods was built as a two-room schoolhouse and enlarged in 1924 by Roy C. Wilson, a prominent Santa Paula architect.

"The foreman's kids and the kids in the rest of the neighborhood went to the Briggs School," said Judy Triem, a local historian who advises the cultural heritage board.

Triem said she knows of no earlier segregated school in Ventura County. Olivelihoods was certainly the first set up by a company for the children of its Mexican laborers, she said.

"It will be too bad if it ends up having to come down," she said.

Legal segregation in California dwindled with the onset of World War II and ended with a 1946 federal court ruling in a suit against

the Westminster school district. Until then, it thrived in many communities.

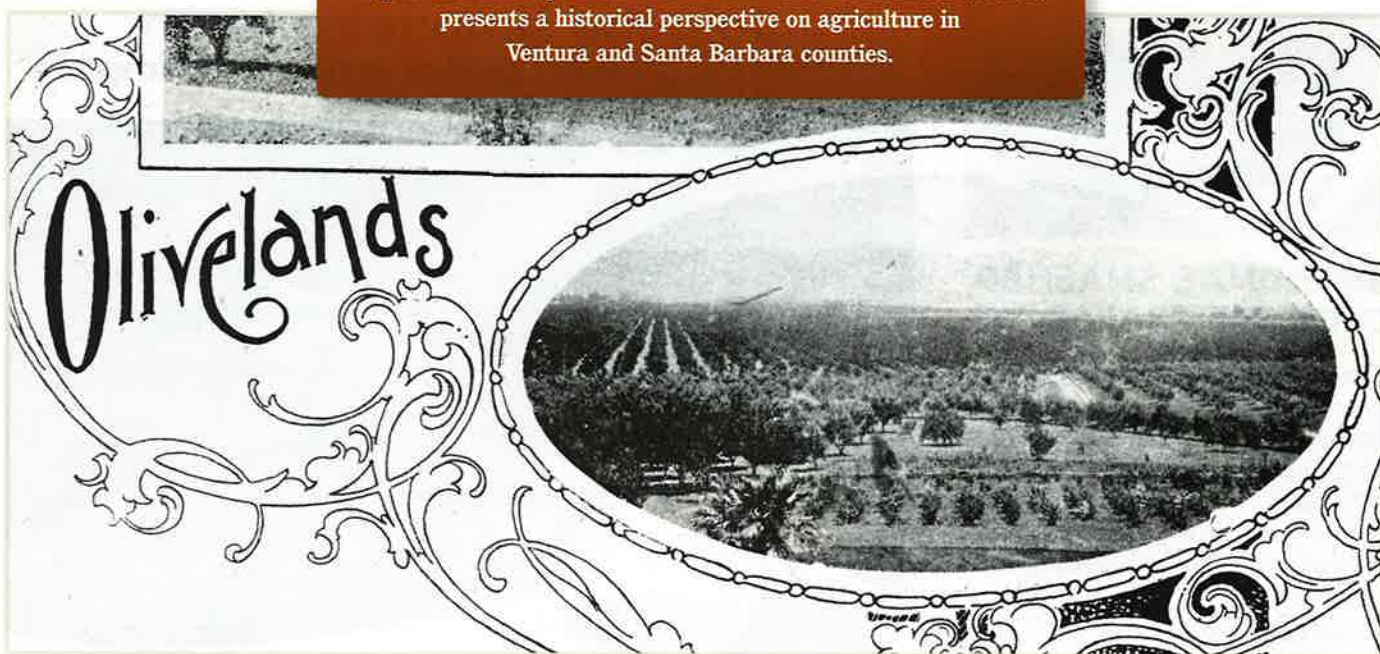
"It was accepted as a way to deal with what was claimed to be a bilingual problem—when, in my opinion, it was racism," Simi Valley historian Patricia Havens said.

In Simi Valley, Havens said, Spanish-surnamed children—regardless of their proficiency with English—were once educated in bungalows on the grounds of a school that excluded them from mainstream classes.

"Even now, there's a smoldering resentment about it," Havens said.

Ag Roots

"Ag Roots" is a regular feature of Central Coast Farm & Ranch. It presents a historical perspective on agriculture in Ventura and Santa Barbara counties.



The vastness of Oliveland's Ranch was on display in the Santa Paula Chronicle Souvenir Edition of July 1899. PHOTO COURTESY OF JOHNNICHOLSGALLERY.COM

The mighty ranch that was

BY CHERIE BRANT

The story of Oliveland's Ranch is almost forgotten.

Modern-day residents may be aware of the elementary school that bears its name, but in the late 1880s this spread was a showplace of the Santa Clara River Valley.

It would prove to be a vast understatement when Oliveland's sale in 1907 to Limoneira was touted as Ventura County's real estate deal of the year. The lives of its owners, Elam and Clarise Harrold, were marked by achievement and tragedy worthy of a TV miniseries.

An Indiana native, Elam arrived in California in 1886 after he and his brother reportedly made themselves millionaires cattle ranching in Texas.

In his late 40s at the time, Elam fell in love with young Clarise Risley of San Francisco. Her wealthy stepfather, J.B. Harris, supervised railroad projects in the United States, Cuba and Central America.

In March 1886 Elam bought more than a thousand acres in the area of Wheeler Canyon between Santa Paula and Ventura. Seven months later, he and

Clarise married and moved to the spread they named Oliveland's.

Experimentation bears fruit

The Harrolds joined the valley's farmers who were experimenting with a variety of crops. Early efforts with olives, walnuts and citrus looked promising. In the 1870s Rancho Camulos began commercial production of olives. Nathan Blanchard and Elisha Bradley already had planted 100 acres of oranges that became a basis for the Limoneira citrus empire.

The ranch's acreage doubled when Harris, Elam's father-in-law, bought 1,438 acres that adjoined Oliveland's and later sold it to the couple for the same price he paid.

By 1892 Oliveland's orchards boasted over 9,000 soft-shell walnut trees and 10,000 olive trees. Workers planted 500 acres in lima beans and grain, and cattle grazed on the hills.

The Harrolds built an elegant residence on top of a hill with a fine view across the valley to house themselves and their three

children. The home was designed, according to the Santa Paula Chronicle, in the southern style with a gallery extending around three sides with long French windows opening on it. Today only a pair of entrance pillars remains.

Darkness falls over Oliveland's

Despite the success of Oliveland's, Elam became delusional and distraught. According to Harris, he grew obsessed with the idea he owed several hundred thousand dollars and was going to lose all his property. Harris looked into the finances and determined that, on the contrary, Elam owed only \$10,000, which he could easily pay.

Worried, the family called in Drs. Cephas Bard and A.L. Kelsey to recommend treatment. On April 12, 1897, Elam tried to hang himself in the barn. The suicide attempt was foiled by his 10-year-old son. Five days later he unloaded both barrels of a shotgun into his stomach in the bedroom of the house while his family ate breakfast, according to an account in the Los

Angeles Herald. Before dying, he apologized and questioned why he had done such a thing.

After Elam's suicide, Clarise stayed at Olivelihoods and involved herself in ranch operations. In 1898 she and four other shareholders bought the Keystone Co., owner of an irrigation ditch built in 1869. The channel directed flow from the Santa Clara River to miles of properties, supplying water for homes, livestock and irrigation.

When the Farmers Ditch Irrigating Co. incorporated, Clarise owned 345 of the 350 shares. In 1904 she sold the company to rancher Leopoldo Shiappa Pietra, the terms of the sale later becoming the subject of a case decided by the U.S. Supreme Court.

Clarise turned her energies to a project on the other side of the country. Around the turn of the 20th century, she purchased and restored Westover, a plantation on the James River in Virginia. Westover is now considered a premier example of Georgian architecture in America. The property includes a five-hole latrine known as "the Cadillac of outhouses."

A bicoastal life

She also found a suitor in newsman William M. Ramsey, who came west from Pennsylvania in 1897 and bought the Santa Paula Chronicle. They were married early in 1900, shortly after she purchased Westover. The couple divided their time between the California ranch and the Virginia mansion. Their match failed, though, and Clarise divorced Ramsey in 1913.

By 1907 Limoneira's owners wanted to expand and had been eyeing Olivelihoods, which adjoined their land. In May of that year, Clarise signed over the ranch for \$400,000, including the house, a large pumping plant and 2,300 acres of orchards and fields.

With the purchase of Olivelihoods, Limoneira began the expansion that later made it a world leader in lemon production.

— *Cherie Brant is a Ventura-based freelance writer and historian. John Nichols, a Santa Paula photographer, curator and author of a book on the St. Francis Dam disaster, contributed to this article.*

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