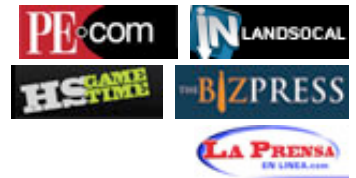


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# As development envelops southwest Riverside County, groups scramble to preserve historic buildings

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The Press-Enterprise

## Photo Gallery: Preserving historic venues

To some people, a worn-down Victorian ranch-style home in Murrieta or a decaying military school site in Lake Elsinore might not have the architectural flair of a true Victorian in Redlands or the historical significance of the Mission Inn in Riverside.

But to preservationists, these and other buildings tell a story of southwest Riverside County's rural past -- a story that is slipping away after two decades of rapid development.

The population of the region's incorporated cities, 101,000 in 1991, is five times that amount now.

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Frank Bellino / Special to The Press-Enterprise  
Ayleen Gibbo, 78, of Murrieta, is fighting a decision allowing for the demolition of the Hedges/Rail house.

Southwest Riverside County was the last Inland region to be hit by the development boom, which rapidly transformed the rural area into bustling suburbia. It is only in the past decade or so that preservationists have had to deal with some of the historical-protection issues that older cities, such as Riverside and Redlands, dealt with decades ago.

In recent years, at least five homes and historical structures have been demolished, and several high-profile historical sites, including the so-called Tarzan House and Elsinore Naval and Military School in Lake Elsinore, have fallen into disrepair.

"It's disappointing, because everywhere you look, we are losing our past," said Ayleen Gibbo, 78, chairwoman of the Citizens for Historic Murrieta, which is challenging a recent Murrieta Historical Preservation Advisory Commission decision to demolish the worn-down Victorian known as the Hedges/Rail place.

Darrell Farnbach, a Temecula historian, said preservationists may have felt complacent in the 1980s.

Now, with few reminders of the region's heritage left standing, historians, longtime residents and in some cases, city officials, are trying to save the structures.

But saving them requires three main groups to cooperate: government officials, private property owners and the community. Finding that support is often elusive for

a number of reasons:

Neglect by private property owners and years of vandalism have attracted developers who see the profit in the land but not the significance of the buildings.

Cities that don't have the money or the staff time to play an active role in preservation. Instead, they leave it in the hands of historical societies that don't have the money to accomplish ambitious agendas.

Residents, many of whom are transplants and do not know the region's history, don't see the worth in the homes and properties.

### **driven to act**

In the older Inland cities, it often took the destruction of a historic property to galvanize preservation efforts. In Riverside, the demolition of the Carnegie Library in 1965 sparked a movement to preserve the Mission Inn and the formation of the Friends of the Mission Inn in 1969, local historian and author Steve Lech said.

In Redlands, the Redlands Area Historical Society was formed in 1972 after a number of Victorians were razed.

Both cities, in addition to historical societies, now have city programs to promote preservation.

Two buildings on opposite sides of Lake Elsinore provide an example of property owners' role in preserving historic locations, members of the Lake Elsinore Historical Society said.

On one side is Aimee's Castle, the blanch-white, mosque-like building that served as a retreat home of celebrity evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson. The structure was restored by the church she founded in the 1920s.

On the other side is the military academy, a former resort that was used as a school from the 1930s to the '70s. The cream-colored, mission-style building is boarded and pocked with graffiti. A caretaker guards the grounds, the result of the city's declaring the property a public nuisance.

Historical Society members put much of the blame for its condition on the property owner, the Temecula-based Garrett Group.

"This building did not look like this when they bought the property," Historical Society President Ruth Atkins said. "It is an absolute shame what has happened to this community jewel."

Garrett Group representatives said the building does not fit into plans to convert it into condo space as part of a residential and retail development. They say they are

looking for public agencies to cooperatively use the building and share the hefty renovation costs. Those plans are on hold until the economy improves.

John Potts, the Garrett Group's vice president of real estate acquisition and development, said it is convenient to blame developers for not keeping up a property, but he said the city and the community must assist in the efforts to prevent the vandalism.

Potts said the Historical Society and the city have not contributed "a penny" to securing the site.

### **Owners' perspective**

Some private property owners shy away from preservation because they believe restrictions on modifying historic buildings will shackle their plans for the property, said Redlands Historical Society president Judith Hunt and others.

In more extreme cases, however, owners might purposefully neglect the property until it becomes damaged to the point they can argue that it needs to be demolished, a practice preservationists call "demolition by neglect."

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Ed Crisostomo / The Press-Enterprise  
Preservation efforts often fall to local historical societies, which might not have the money for repairs. For example, it is estimated that restoring the Elsinore Naval and Military school, above, would cost \$9 million.

Lake Elsinore officials said they can't afford to help rehabilitate the Military School, or

any other historic building in the city.

In nearby Murrieta, similar issues have hamstrung the city's efforts at preservation, despite having the region's only city historical preservation commission.

Even so, City Planner Cynthia Kinser said in five instances between 2005 and 2006, the city's commission required the developer to either relocate a structure, incorporate it into the plans, construct a replica or prepare a commemorative plaque before demolition.

And Murrieta officials said they are going to select structures from a list of buildings older than 50 years that could be candidates for a local historical designation similar to those that receive protection on a county, state and federal level.

"I think the city realizes the importance of historical preservation and has a plan," Councilman Randon Lane said.

Some cities lean heavily on historical societies, such as those in Perris, Temecula, Lake Elsinore, Murrieta, Menifee and Wildomar, which have collected artifacts and set up museums to document the area's past.

In some cases, the groups have successfully advocated for properties to be saved, such as recently in Lake Elsinore where the City Council voted to save the Tarzan House, a home where actor Johnny Weissmuller was rumored to have lived or frequently visited.

But those groups don't have the money or the fundraising mechanism for larger projects, such as the military academy restoration, which would cost \$9 million.

In the best of situations, cities and historical societies collaborate.

In Perris, city officials have approved spending almost \$11 million on redevelopment on D Street. Several buildings, including the 117-year-old Perris Depot and the Southern Hotel, have been restored, and work is under way to restore the Bank of Perris building and two others.

"Preserving history in no way prohibits progress. It encourages progress," Redevelopment Agency director Michael McDermott said.

Perris officials credit much of their actions to the Perris Valley Historical Society and Museum Association and the City Council that has steered the preservation vision.

"We all believed it was crucial to preserve our heritage," said Councilman Al Landers, "because after it's gone, it's gone."

Perris officials said community support is perhaps the most important aspect of the restoration campaign.

In Perris, the city held forums where residents were asked what should be saved.

In Menifee, officials of the fledgling city visited historic locations, including the home of the city's namesake, Menifee Wilson. Lake Elsinore Historical Society members in 2007 teamed up with the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel to host the first public tour of Aimee's Castle, which hundreds visited.

### 11-year fight

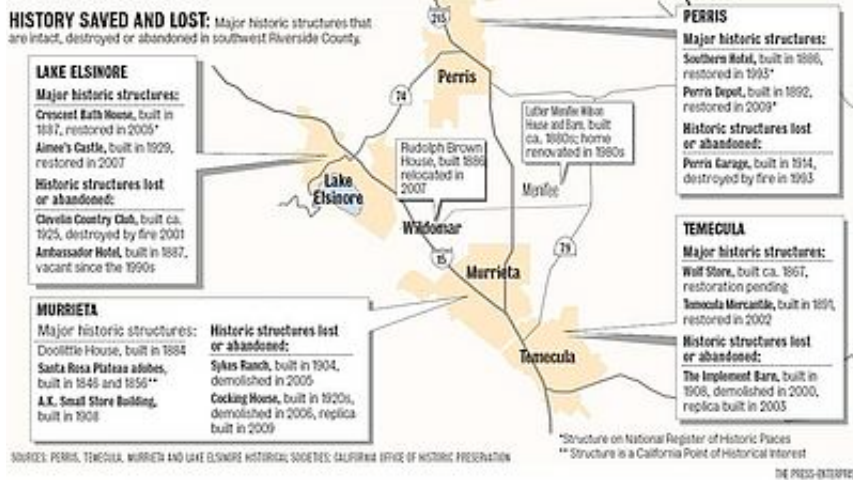
Farnbach, the Temecula historian, and his wife, Rebecca, who co-authored a book on Temecula's history, have fought for 11 years to preserve the last 4 acres of the once 87,000-acre Vail Ranch near the corner of Redhawk and Temecula parkways.

The site, which has five adobe buildings, including the 140-year-old adobe Wolf Store, is called the birthplace of Temecula.

The Farnbachs and others started with the area's youth. They created a program to bring third-grade students to the ranch.

One such student is John O'Brien. The 16-year-old junior at Great Oak High School and his father, Dennis, credit the program for piquing their interest.

Story continues below



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"Going to the ranch, it was nice to learn and gain a lot of respect and to understand what Temecula was and what it has become," John said.

Rebecca Farnbach said small victories such as that give preservationists hope.

Even with buy-in from all groups, however, she said preservationists must be selective.

"If you stretch yourself too thin," she said, "then you're going to lose the important battles, which we can't afford to do."

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