

# Historical Significance of West Butte School

by

Judy Irvin, Architect  
MPM/Engineering, Chico, CA



*The community of West Butte was established in the 1850s, and in 1860 a one-room schoolhouse was built for the area's children. That school burned in 1908 and was rebuilt in 1909, and the second building still stands at the corner of Pass and West Butte roads in the Sutter Buttes, although it ceased to be a school in 1943. It was used as a residence for a time and is now vacant.*

*In 2005 the building was given to the Middle Mountain Foundation, now the Sutter Buttes Regional Land Trust (SBRLT). Since then SBRLT members have worked to clean up the building while considering how to preserve and use it. This summer SBRLT hired MPM/Engineering to conduct a feasibility study to determine what uses might work for the building and how to renovate it for those uses, and to apply for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places with the U.S. Department of Interior, National Park Service.*

*The application for the National Register denotes two important historical aspects of the building – its association with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history, and its representation of the work of a master, architect James T. Narbett.*

*Judy Irvin did an excellent job researching both the history of the West Butte School and of the architect. The story she discovered is a fascinating piece of local and California history. While this application has not yet been accepted by the California State Historic Preservation Office, both SBRLT and the Historical Society are optimistic that the work done by Ms. Irvin will provide the compelling detail necessary for inclusion on the National Register.*

## **Description of West Butte School**

The West Butte Schoolhouse sits slightly back from and faces Pass Road.

The schoolhouse consists of one large classroom about 23 feet by 28 feet with 13 foot ceilings. A bell tower on the west side of the building forms an entry vestibule with a ceiling height of about 8 feet. The bell tower cantilevers over the main room slightly. The 10' by 10' tower has large louvered vents on all sides with decorative balconettes below. The front door is a typical 3/5 Craftsman paneled door with canted stiles below and glazing above and a transom over. An "ample cloak room" is located off the entry vestibule.

There is a door with a gable end roof over at the rear that leads to an undefined area that once served as a playground. An historic photograph shows a small tree on the playground that is now mature but in declining health. The main room and tower have moderately pitched hip roofs with extended eaves and exposed simple rafter tails. At the apex of the hip roof on the tower, there is a tall, tapered spire that once served as a flag pole. The entire building was sided with horizontal wood three bead siding painted white. Most of the historic siding is extant; some on the east and south sides has been replaced by plywood or manufactured board siding.

The original windows have been removed but filled in openings indicate that there were three large 4 foot by 8 foot windows on the east side and two similarly-sized windows on the north side. A small, high hopper window was also located on the north side. From the siding patches, it does not appear that there were any windows on the south side. There are patched openings for two windows on the west side, one in the tower and one in the "cloak room." From historic photographic evidence, the windows in

the main room appear to have been double hung with divided lites. A wood burning stove in the classroom provided heat. Electricity and electric lights were added in 1937. Until that time, the large windows provided the only illumination. Water was provided by a hand pump in a lattice well house behind the school. There was no indoor plumbing. Two no longer extant outhouses, one for boys and one for girls, were located on either side of the playground.

The school use ceased in 1943. The West Butte Schoolhouse was then converted to residential use, the ceiling was lowered and partitions installed in the interior. The original windows were replaced by horizontal aluminum slider windows and the siding patched. Indoor plumbing, a septic system, a pressurized water system with water heater were added. After acquisition by the Sutter Buttes Regional Land Trust in 2005, the residential interior finishes were removed to expose a sophisticated structural system that resolves lateral forces and carries the offset load of the bell tower. Evidenced by holes drilled in the ceiling of the classroom in the area where the tower cantilevers over, it appears that the Architect designed the tower to be a component of a passive cooling system designed to draw cool air from the intermittent watercourse up and out of the building through the vented bell tower. The orientation of the windows to the north and east, the extended eaves, the lack of openings on the south side, the high ceilings, the massing of the "cloak room" on the western façade and the white exterior paint to reflect sunlight all help modulate interior temperatures. Narbett's attention to

climate control devices and building science sets the West Butte Schoolhouse apart from earlier pioneer one-room schools still found throughout California.

### ***West Butte Historic Development Pattern***

West Butte is so named because it is west of the Sutter Buttes, the jagged remnants of the core of an ancient volcano jutting out of the middle of the lush, agricultural Sacramento Valley. The Maidu, who lived in its shadow for thousands of years, called it *Esto Yamani*, which means "the Middle Mountain," and considered it sacred. The area was first settled in the early 1850s as men seeking their fortunes during the Gold Rush decided that more dependable occupations such as farming, ranching or commerce might be easier and more lucrative. Following closely on the heels of Federal surveyors extending the Jeffersonian land grid into California, settlers moved onto lands they deemed undeveloped and claimed them under squatters' rights. These land claims were later formalized by the Federal government.

Frederick Hoke and Frederick Tarke were typical early settlers in the Sacramento Valley. Born in Germany, they came to America in 1844. In 1850, they traveled together across the plains to California. When they arrived in Sacramento, they sold their teams and outfitted for the gold fields to stake their claims. In 1855, they headed back to Iowa to find brides and returned to settle in the West Butte area. By 1860, most of the lands west of the Sutter Buttes had been claimed. Records show that in 1879, Frederick Hoke owned 1,860 acres of which 800

were cultivated. In that same year, records show that Frederick Tarke owned 2,500 acres with 800 acres under cultivation. These two were good friends building two adjacent homes that served as the headquarters for their agricultural operations.

Frederick Hoke and his wife Louisa had four children, Frederick Tarke and his wife Mary had three children. Other people moved to the area to either work for the early settlers or to provide services. As more children became part of the population, it became apparent that a school was necessary so they could obtain a proper education. On February 28, 1860, the West Butte School District was established by the Sutter County Board of Supervisors. Frederick Hoke offered the use of a parcel of his land for the construction of a school building. Although no date for the construction of the first schoolhouse has been found, the schoolhouse was ready for classes in the fall of 1860. Photographic records show that the first schoolhouse was similar to other one room rural schools across America ... a simple wooden rectangle with a gable-end roof, windows on the long sides and a front entry door at the end.

A stagecoach road running from Marysville to Colusa traveled through a low pass in the center of the Buttes. Another pioneer road encircled the Buttes at the toe of the slope. Where West Butte Road intersected Pass Road, the stagecoach made a stop to deliver the mail. In 1870, a U. S. Post Office was established with the official name of West Butte. Other services grew around this hub. A blacksmith shop, a Town Hall, a large general store, a telegraph office, the schoolhouse, the First Christian Church and several

homes completed a small town. George Straub, a blacksmith, arrived in West Butte with his son W. A. Straub in 1880 and the two built a prosperous empire. George built a large blacksmith shop and the Town Hall. In 1890, Straub & Son took over ownership of the General Store which prospered until new roads and better transportation modes shifted commerce to larger, nearby cities such as Yuba City.

A map drawn at the direction of long-time resident Burwell Ullrey shows the ownership pattern of the town of West Butte with the West Butte Schoolhouse anchoring the eastern edge of town. Next to the commercial village center were the homes of George Straub, Frederick Hoke's son August, D. A. Stewart, Charles Hill and W. A. Straub on the south side of Pass Road. On the north side of Pass Road were the homes of J. J. Carroll and the Stewarts. Adjacent to Straub's store on West Butte Road was the Santee home. Other families lived on their land outside of the town. West Butte families remained close for generations. They went to church together, they went to school together, they married each other and they served on the School Board together. The 1871-1872 West Butte School's Honor Roll published in the Sutter County Farmer included the names of 14 children from these pioneer families. An 1897 school souvenir lists W. A. Straub, Louis Tarke and W. M. Hoke as School Trustees and a pupil each from those families on the roll. In 1910, a school photograph includes four pupils from the pioneer Hoke and Tarke families among 12 total students.

Among early West Butte School students were Verona and Eleta Hill, two sisters who spent their entire lives

in West Butte and became well-known teachers in the Sutter County public school system. Charles and Louisa Hill had moved to West Butte in 1887 where Charles was employed on various ranches. He bought a lot next to the church where he built a three-room house in 1896 for his family of seven children. All of the Hill children attended school at the West Butte Schoolhouse. C. G. Kline, one of the teachers at the West Butte School, built a home next to the Hill's in 1887. It was unusual for a teacher to own his own home since it indicated that he planned to stay at a time when teachers usually moved about. After seven years teaching at West Butte, Kline taught at schools in Meridian and Live Oak before becoming Sutter County's Superintendent of Schools between 1895 and 1903. Verona and Eleta Hill went on to graduate from a private school for teachers conducted by Mrs. Kate M. Wilkins in Marysville. Verona Hill, born in 1887, transferred to teach at West Butte in 1919 and remained there until the school was closed in 1943. Verona's younger sister, Eleta, taught school in nearby Sutter for 27 years and at other schools in Sutter County.

#### ***Association with Important Events***

When the original West Butte Schoolhouse burned to the ground on April 2, 1908, circumstances had changed from early pioneer days. Landowners had prospered and the entire North Sacramento Valley had grown increasingly interdependent and connected. A week after the fire, the community pulled together and a special school trustee election was held. The trustees included Ella Hoke and Mr. L. Tarke. Classes were moved

temporarily to George Staub's Town Hall while Architect James T. Narbett was retained to draw up plans for the new West Butte Schoolhouse. Narbett's plans were delivered to school superintendent L. L. Freeman along with an Architect's estimate of construction costs. A special election was held on May 17, 1909, and West Butte voters unanimously approved a Bond for the sum of \$1,500 to pay for the new school. Bids were opened on July 29, 1909. A contract for \$1,325 was awarded to Guy McMurtry and the new schoolhouse was ready for classes in the fall of 1909.

Narbett, licensed as an architect in 1907, had the requisite experience. At the time of the West Butte fire, Narbett was involved in the construction of an addition to the State Normal School in Chico. In 1887, Chico had been selected by the State of California as the site of one of the accredited State Colleges dedicated to the training and education of teachers in the art of instructing and governing the public schools of the state. Capable teachers had been scarce on the frontier. As the State of California grew, a ready supply of teachers meeting uniform standards was deemed essential. The facilities under construction at the Chico Normal School at the time of the West Butte fire included an Experimental Teaching College, a children's playground and a Model Rural School. These facilities were designed to provide a laboratory to test the effectiveness of new teaching methods and pedagogical theories on local children. The growing recognition about the importance of a physical environment conducive to learning is evidenced in the design of the Model Rural School at Chico and

furthered at the West Butte Schoolhouse.

Pedagogical theories were not the only social changes. As women gained the right to vote, they became more independent, capable and confident. West Butte residents Verona and Eleta Hill were among those emancipated women who chose teaching as a career. They may have been influenced by their next door neighbor, C. G. Kline, or watching their mother raise seven children. Verona and Eleta Hill never married and lived their entire lives with their bachelor brother Arthur in the tiny family home, commuting to work first by horse and buggy and later by Ford Model T. The two Hill sisters were a far cry from the prim schoolmarm of popular legend. One West Butte School student, Burwell Ullrey, remembered lessons taught outside, schoolyard pranks and rattlesnakes in the well house. A photograph of young Eleta Hill in bloomers standing jauntily on an orchard ladder reveals a thoroughly modern woman capable of handling rattlesnakes and rowdy boys.

The West Butte Schoolhouse fire provided an opportunity to replace an old one-room schoolhouse with a new one that would support the latest trends in education. Although the 1909 West Butte School is only one room, it is distinctly different from pioneer one-room rural schools. The building is illuminated by oversized windows oriented East and West to maintain even day lighting. Design elements for climate control reflect the concern for providing a hospitable environment to facilitate learning.

*"If progress in education is observed from the time when it was*

*dispensed within a small box-like building with its poorly lighted and badly ventilated rooms, to its present expanded and still expanding status as carried on within the modern complex structures completely equipped and embracing all facilities for education, health, and safety, it will be seen that architecture has kept abreast with each succeeding step of the educational program, in which the course of studies has become more and more extended to meet the requirements of the industrial, commercial and social life of the nation."*

*John J. Donovan, Mar. 1921,  
"Architecture, Planning and  
Construction of Schools"*

The period of significance ends with the change in use in 1943 when bussing rural students to consolidated schools to allow grade segregation became the norm. After the school use ceased, land ownership reverted to the successors of the original grantee. The building was converted to a residence and the interior modified significantly. On August 21, 1979, the Sutter County Board of Supervisors declared the West Butte School to be a historical monument in order to invoke the State Historic Building Code for future work. In 2005, Sutter County conditionally accepted the donation of the building and the site with the explicit intent of transferring ownership to the Middle Mountain Foundation to be used for purposes consistent with its mission statement and goals.

The West Butte School is important because it serves as a bridge between early frontier one-room schools and modern pedagogy. The

West Butte School is the only remaining one-room schoolhouse in Sutter County and the only schoolhouse designed specifically for its site by an experienced architect incorporating building science such as climate control and daylighting. It is also the only remnant of the pioneer Town of West Butte.

### ***The Work of a Master***

Largely forgotten now, James T. Narbett (1874-1936) was in his day one of the busiest architects in Northern California, according to Daniella Thompson in "Berkeley's Two Campus Theaters" published in the Journal of the Berkeley Architectural Heritage Association. Historical information is scanty and reveals little about his career development as an architect. According to a biography published in 1917, Narbett is described as taking up studies with unnamed "eminent architects" passing the architectural licensing exam in 1907 when he was 33 years old. When the West Butte School burned in 1908, Narbett was under contract to build the Experimental Teaching College at the State Normal School (now Chico State University) which was completed in 1909.

Narbett was born on August 31, 1874 aboard a ship off the coast of Rangoon, British Burma. His parents, William and Eleanor Narbett, were British citizens and his father's profession was listed as "contractor." No information about what types of projects William Narbett would have been involved with or his responsibilities is available but, at that time, Britain was extending its Empire into India and had undertaken a massive effort to create British monuments, civic improvements and

infrastructure as a part of the Raj or British reign. Narbett's father was likely one of the many skilled contractors sent to India on behalf of the British Crown to coordinate armies of Indian laborers.

The Narbetts moved to the United States in 1876 where William conducted a summer resort at Fort Canby in the State of Washington. The family then moved to San Francisco, Oakland and Benicia before settling in Crockett in 1880 with William Narbett pursuing opportunities as a building contractor. During that period, Crockett had a deepwater port connected to the Intercontinental Railroad which was an ideal site for grain shipping facilities, flour mills (1886) and a huge sugar refinery (1896). There would have been lots of opportunities for contractors skilled in implementing major projects. James Narbett went to public school in Crockett and then to the Van der Naillen School of Practical Engineering in Oakland. In 1896, Narbett followed his father's profession and took up contracting. He moved to Alaska for a year and returned to the Van der Naillen School of Practical Engineering, finally graduating in 1900.

The Van der Naillen School of Practical Engineering was a "for profit" trade school, unlike the prestigious universities attended by architects such as Julia Morgan or John Galen Howard practicing in the area at the same time. It focused on practical applications in several engineering fields with the emphasis on gaining the skills necessary for entry into the workforce. An intensive six-month course in structural engineering, mining engineering or civil engineering might cost \$125 for an individualized,

pragmatic program and guaranteed employment. Albert Van der Naillen himself graduated from the University of Ghent as a surveying geometrician before coming to the U.S. and serving in the Civil War as a civil engineer. The school's prospectus offered:

*"....a school where practical engineering should be taught and the principles of construction shown in their simplicity, disembarassed of all the technical bulwarks put around them by old-school fogyism."*

*Albert Van der Naillen*

By 1904, James Narbett had relocated to Chico with his wife and son where he was responsible for Masonic Temples in Chico and Oroville, as well as buildings in Chico, Orland, Willows, Dunsmuir, and Sacramento, including the Colonial Hotel in Biggs and the Shotover Inn in Hamilton City. Some of these buildings may have been Design-Build projects undertaken before he passed the architectural licensing exams in 1907. In 1911, Narbett moved to Richmond, California. His first project there was the La Selle Building where he set up his office. During World War I, he joined the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers where he designed buildings for an expansion of the Hercules Powder Plant. The Company successfully petitioned the War Department to release him from his commission so he might take charge of the construction work. After the war was over, Narbett continued his practice in Richmond and later moved his offices to San Francisco. He is responsible for numerous buildings in Richmond including the Elks Lodge, the Richmond

City Hall, two fire houses, the Richmond Plunge, the Masonic Lodge and all but two of the City's schools. Narbett's renderings for two Richmond schools published in *The Architect and Engineer*, Mar. 1921, reveal his architectural skills. Other known Narbett buildings include the Calistoga National Bank, Brentwood Grammar School, the Captain H. S. Pond Residence in Alameda, Narbett's personal residence in Richmond, Oakley Grammar School, Campus Theater (Berkeley), Danville Veterans' Hall, the Syndicate Building in Oakland and the Nurses Dormitory at the Alameda County Hospital.

Narbett experimented with "modern" materials such as hollow clay tile brick and practical engineering including long span trusses, daylighting and climate control techniques such as operable skylights. His deft use of a range of architectural elements and styles from Classical to Spanish Eclectic shows an understanding of architectural history that is unexplained by his modest education although his membership in the San Francisco

Chapter of the American Institute of Architects would have put him in contact with some of the most distinguished architects of all time. His son, Keith Narbett, graduated from the University of California at Berkeley's Architecture School and followed in his father's footsteps, working on the award-winning Acalanes High School as well as hundreds of dwelling units for the Richmond and Pittsburg Housing Authorities during World War II.

Narbett's work represents a sophisticated balance of style, ambitious structural engineering solutions and practical building sciences gleaned from practical experience, keen observation skills, and a lifetime of immersion in actual construction techniques. The West Butte Schoolhouse, although modest, is an example of Narbett's ability to marry program, site, design and practical engineering.

Bibliographical information is available from the Bulletin editors.

## Calendar of Events

### January

7 Undecoration Day, 9:00 a.m. at the Museum

**18 Historical Society Membership Meeting**  
2:00 p.m. at the Museum  
Program: Larry Green  
Dessert follows the program

### February

- 21 *Rare Chinese School Book Collection* exhibit (from Marysville's former Chinese School) opens at the Museum  
21 Reception for new exhibit, 6:00 - 8:00 pm, at the Museum

**March**

- 8 *Rare Chinese School Book Collection* exhibit closes

**April**

- 5 **Historical Society Membership Meeting**  
2:00 p.m. at the Museum  
Program: West Butte School  
Dessert follows the program

Local high school art department exhibits