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Rohner Creek Flood Control Project
Historic Resources Investigation
Three Bridges and False-Front Building at Main Street Culvert

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Introduction
The first phase of the City of Fortuna’s Rohner Creek flood control project will involve channel modification, widening, and bank stabilization to reduce flooding of bordering properties. Three private bridges that provide access to residences will be replaced. Also proposed is rocking along the toe of the Main Street culvert. To comply with the California Environmental Quality Act, Section 15064.5, (CEQA), the bridges were photographed and assessed. Although no impacts are anticipated to the false-front building at the Main Street culvert, its history was researched.

Findings
1. None of the three, wood bridges is of architectural or historic value. Their demolition will not result in a significant impact to the environment under CEQA.
2. The false-front building, located over the creek at the Main Street culvert work, dates to the mid-1920s and over the years, at various times, served as a motor vehicle repair garage and as a warehouse. Flood control work will not affect this building.

Methods
Land ownership histories were researched in the Recorder’s Office, Humboldt County Courthouse, Eureka. In order to understand why it was constructed over the creek, considerable time was spent researching ownerships for the false-front building. Other helpful sources in the Recorder’s Office include surveys, maps, and the Belcher Atlas.

Local newspapers, primarily Fortuna’s Humboldt Beacon; two newspapers, the Humboldt Times and Garberville’s Redwood Record, were read on microfilm at Humboldt State University Library, Arcata. City directories and online sources, including Ancestry.com and California Death Records, were also useful.

False-Front Building
Although this building will not be affected by rocking along the toe of the Main Street culvert, it was addressed in this investigation for two reasons: first, it is located at a project work site and secondly, the building is far too intriguing to ignore, i.e., who would construct a building right over the creek and why?
The False-Front is a one-story building with a gabled roofline which terminates at the street in a stepped false-front. Cladding is v-rustic; along the side walls are fixed, 12-pane windows, two on the southern elevation and at least three on the northern. In the south wall are large, sliding garage doors; another large door is located on the opposite wall, but it is not usable. The street façade has been altered with plate-glass windows inserted into the frames of original garage doors. It is unclear if the person door in this façade is original or added. A concrete bridge railing extends across the front of the building, almost to the building’s wall. Its corner anchor is inscribed with “1948.”

The photograph of the unpainted rear wall shows quite clearly that the building was constructed directly over Rohner Creek. There were originally five, fixed 12-pane windows, but one has been boarded over. At the southern corner of the wall is a boarded-up person door…but what would be the function of door that opened onto empty space above the creek?
Initially it was thought the building was part of the Little Court Addition (Maps 12:45), subdivided by R.R. and Lloyd Smith in 1937. The Bank of Loleta foreclosed on the Smiths in 1941 (Lew Pendens H:69). In 1945 when the State was purchasing rights-of-way for highway widening of Main Street, the Bank granted frontage off several lots, including lots 5 and 6, Block 2, present site of Main Street Feed Co., which rents the False-Front building as a warehouse. The Main Street Feed building, greatly enlarged, incorporates a stucco building which was constructed in 1945 by Francis and Amelia Brown for a new business—Fortuna Locker Storage Plant (Humboldt Beacon 30 March 1945, 23 Nov. 1945). At the same time, they acquired the adjoining warehouse—the False-Front (Deeds 273:402).
The False-Front building is actually on a portion of lot 1, Block 10 of the Eastern Addition, subdivided in January 1902 (Surveys 2:47). Stillman S. Little purchased lots 1, 2, and 3, Block 10 in March and it remained in the Little family until December 1924, when Stillman’s son, Gratton D. Little, sold all three lots to Hans P. Hansen on December 5 (Deeds 78:437; Deeds 168:311).

Tax assessments list only a real estate value for the three lots during the Little family ownership. The 1924 assessment for Gratton valued the lots at $400; with no improvements. After Hansen’s acquisition, the 1925 assessment valued the three lots at $400 and improvements at $200. Although the tax assessment did not indicate specifically what the improvement was or on which lot, the following strongly suggests that it was the False-Front even with the obvious location error:

Hansen to Build Garage in Fortuna—H.P. Hansen of Rio Dell, who sold his garage in that town, has purchased the Gratton Little property on the corner of 10th and C
[sic] in Fortuna and expects to put up a garage and enter business in Fortuna. (Humboldt
Beacon 12 Dec. 1924)

A native of Norway, Hans Hansen immigrated to the United States in 1901 at about age 22, married a woman from Australia and they became the parents of at least nine children (Ancestry.com; Humboldt Beacon 3 Aug. 1972). In the 1910 census, Hansen listed his occupation as blacksmith; 1920, as the proprietor of a garage; and 1930, as a mechanic in an auto garage. His obituary noted that he had been a ship’s carpenter at one time, but “for more than 40 years had been a blacksmith and machinist” (Humboldt Beacon 3 Aug. 1972).

Why would Mr. Hansen build his auto repair garage over Rohner Creek? Was the creek a simple solution to the problem of waste disposal? When the question came up, the first reaction was to recall construction of a blacksmith shop over Arcata’s Jolly Giant Creek back in the 19th century so that waste could be carried away on the current! Apparently the attitude about waterways remained unchanged in 1925.

Hansen only kept the building for another year, selling it in 1926 to Charles G. Offutt, an auto dealer and garage mechanic in Petaluma (Deeds 175:268; U.S. Censuses 1920 and 1930). Offutt apparently never utilized the garage, remaining in Petaluma, where he died at age 32 in 1930. In Dec. 1931, the False-Front was sold to John Collins, who, in turn, transferred it to B.F. Morgan in 1932 (Ancestry.com; Deeds 205:313; Deeds 225:87).

It may have been at this point that the garage became a warehouse. Perhaps Morgan, a partner in Fortuna’s L.C. Morgan Co. merchandising store, needed storage space for the business and here was a vacant building. In 1945, when Morgan entered into an agreement to sell the 85x45 parcel to Francis and Amelia Brown, who were building Fortuna Locker Storage next door, he specifically addressed the False-Front.

The Seller agrees that the Buyer may make such alterations and additions to the building on the property as may be necessary to adapt it to their use.

The Buyer agrees to maintain the building on the property in such state of repair as to permit its use for the storage of goods and chattels…. (Deeds 273:402)

The Browns sold the warehouse and a portion of lot 6, block 2 in the Little Court Addition to Vernon Nicholson and George Head in the summer of 1948, the 85x45 parcel somewhat changed in size after highway right-of-way was taken (Official Records 56:104). The new purchasers were in the furniture business,
carrying a complete line of household furnishings in downtown Fortuna (*Redwood Record* 25 March 1940). Later Nicholson owned Quality Hardware in Fortuna. Certainly, both businesses could use the warehouse storage space provided by the False-Front. The property is still in the Nicholson family, but beginning about 1960 and continuing well into the 1990s, the building reverted to its original use, housing Dave’s Motor Clinic and later Joe’s Auto Glass (City Directories; Main Street Feed Co. employees personal community). Today Main Street Feed rents the False-Front as a warehouse. The proposed rocking along the toe of the Main Street culvert will have no impact on the False-Front.

**Three Bridges**

Flooding of Rohner Creek is nothing new, but development throughout its watershed has exacerbated the potential for flooding and property damage, particularly once the creek reaches its floodplain. Following a December 1948 flood on the creek, local residents organized to explore “ways and means” of protecting their property (*Humboldt Beacon* 31 Dec. 1948). Efforts to form a flood control district were fraught with bureaucratic obstacles, prompting direct citizen action.

First Unit of Rohner Creek Debris Clear—Citizens in the area of Stillman Way and further southwest of the highway arose early last Sunday to begin the clearing of that portion of Rohner Creek from Brown’s Food Locker south to Fred Wolff’s with other citizens to carry on from there to Sandy Prairie Road with the City doing the work from the north city limits to Main Street through Rohner Park. (*Humboldt Beacon* 22 July 1949)

Despite their best efforts, the creek continued to flood, precipitating more meetings until the City Council and Board of Supervisors got involved (*Humboldt Beacon* 10 March 1955, 12 July 1956). Planning for the current project has been in the works for some time involving FEMA, the flood insurance program, and major advances in data technologies.

Three residential bridges across Rohner Creek, two on Stillman Way and the third down a private land between Stillman and Alder, will be removed and replaced as part of the creek’s flood control project. The Stillman Way bridges are similar with wood decks and two-board open railings on both sides. The private-drive bridge has a wood deck and two-board railings enclosed by latticework with brick columns and lights at the ends.

Located at the turn on Stillman Way, Bridge 1, owned by Randy Anderson, was built in 1967 by Ken Hanson. Bridge 2, at the corner of Stillman and Beech, is
owned by Beverly Weitzel and constructed in 1964 by her father, Oliver Huber. Bridge 3, located at the end of a private drive and owned by Gary Huber, was constructed in 1979 by Mr. Huber (GHD 2014). Only one of the bridges is more than fifty years of age, but it is not considered of historic significance. Removal of the three bridges will not result in a significant impact to the environment under CEQA.
Bridge No. 2, Stillman Way and Beech. Photo Feb. 2015.
Bridge No. 3. Private driveway. Photo Feb. 2015.
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