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—Preservationist Barbara Milkovich

# Beach Town's History Buffs in Saving Mood

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By MARIA L. La GANGA, Times Staff Writer

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Jerry Person stood outside Merrilee's Boutique at 124 Main St., opened up his 1977 datebook and began to read to his small handful of companions: "In 1922, this building was the Huntington Beach Stock Exchange, Fowler's Paint Store, Lynn H. Colburn Real Estate, Economy Market and Model Tailor—all at the same time," Person said. "There's history in these buildings, and we have to save it."

As Person spoke, a saleswoman came out of the bright pink beachwear and sportswear store, peering curiously at the small crowd.

"Who are you?" she asked. "What's going on?"

"We're trying to do a historical survey of downtown Huntington Beach," Person said, warming to his new audience.

"Oh," she said, losing interest, quickly turning, walking back inside. "I thought you were from the city or something."

Person was not surprised at her reaction. In any other part of the country, this strip of scruffy surfboard shops and bikini boutiques built primarily in the 1920s and 1930s would hardly be considered remarkable.

## Grabbing History While They Can

But this is Southern California, a region permanently racing toward the future, and historical preservationists have to grab their history where they can find it.

Person and his companions—a small group of displaced New Englanders, longtime residents and Huntington Beach natives—have found their history in the city's 3.2-square-mile downtown, and they intend to save it.

"Unless we save it now, it'll never get to be old enough to be *real* history," Person said. "We're trying to create something now that will be history tomorrow."

These preservationists—all members of the Huntington Beach Historical Society—will go before the City Council tonight to ask for a historical survey of downtown Huntington Beach that they hope will help spare some of the area's "aging gems" from the wrecking ball that precedes all redevelopment.

## To Catalogue Every Building

Barbara Milkovich, co-chair group, said the survey will catalogue in the downtown, eventually culling a list of the most historically significant sites.

"This survey isn't necessarily looking for the Frank Lloyd Wright buildings, because we don't have any such thing," Milkovich said. "In fact, the first time I looked closely at the downtown, I thought it was hideous. . . . But the survey is looking for the buildings that mean something to the growth and development of the city."

National preservation experts say that 20th-Century cities across the country are working to preserve neighborhoods built in the 1920s and 1930s—areas once thought not new enough to be fashionable and

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not old enough to be historic.

"Before, it was just, 'Who needs this junk,'" said Beverly Reece, spokeswoman for the Washington-based National Trust for Historic Places. "But there's been a change in awareness, and it's happening all across the country. People are awakening to the idea that there are buildings built in the 1900s that are important to their community."

And for Huntington Beach preservationists, this awareness did not come a moment too soon, because a redevelopment project that could permanently change the downtown's character is imminent for the first time in nearly 30 years, city officials say. Clusters of Mediterranean-style hotels, motels and shops—with buildings as tall as 12 stories—are planned for the downtown area.

## Looking at Alternatives

"Since the late 1950s, the city has been looking at the various alternatives for the beach area," said Michael C. Adams, the city's principal planner. "This is as close as the city has ever been to having anything done with redevelopment."

The City Council could give preliminary approval as early as Aug. 19 to a complex of shops and a 300-room hotel—a project that would cost as much as \$100 million and take up to two square blocks bounded by Main and Second streets, Walnut Avenue and Pacific Coast Highway.

If the project is approved, it would endanger an area that the preservation group contends contains some of the downtown's most historically significant sites, including:

- The Golden Bear, built in 1929, which helped launch the careers of such performers as band leader Stan Kenton. Although the paint is peeling on its Mission Revival facade, preservationists contend that the cafe-turned art gallery-turned nightclub was a key attraction when the 86-year-old city was a bustling resort town.

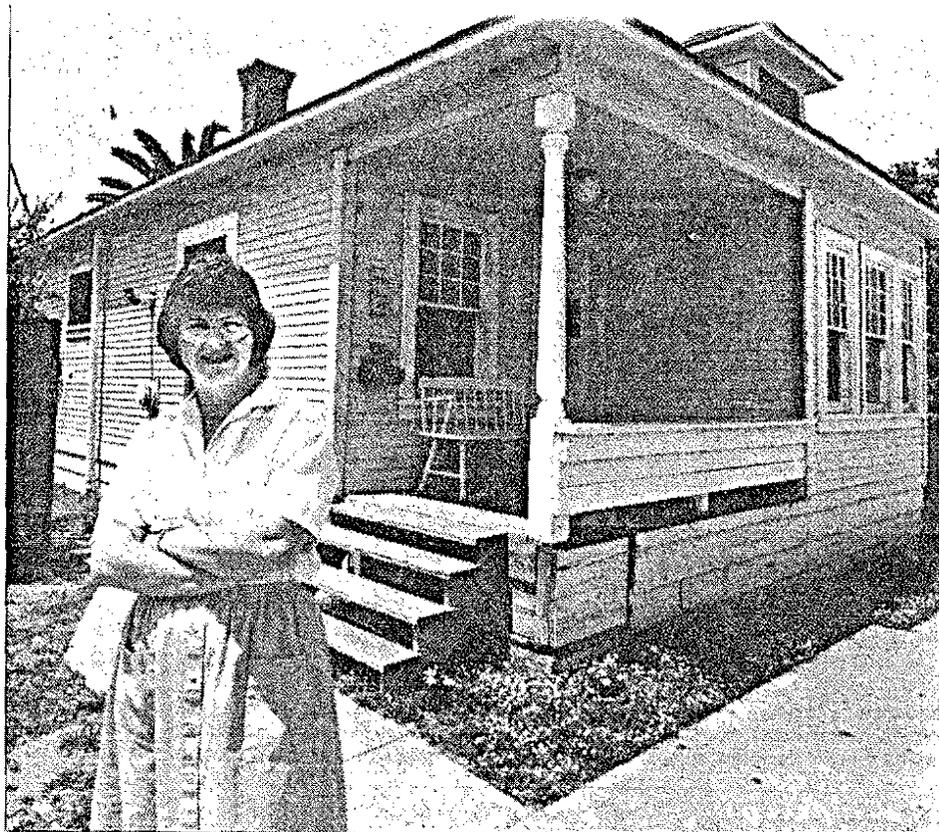
- Wayne's Automotive, standing next to the Golden Bear on Pacific Coast Highway, which was one of the first automobile dealerships in Huntington Beach. Its beige art deco facade is sorely in need of a face lift, and it is doubtful that the structure would be included on a roster of historic buildings in any other city.

## 'It's the Memories'

"But the significance of this is not just the building," Milkovich said. "It's the memories, the people who say, 'My daddy bought his first car there.' That's what we want to save."

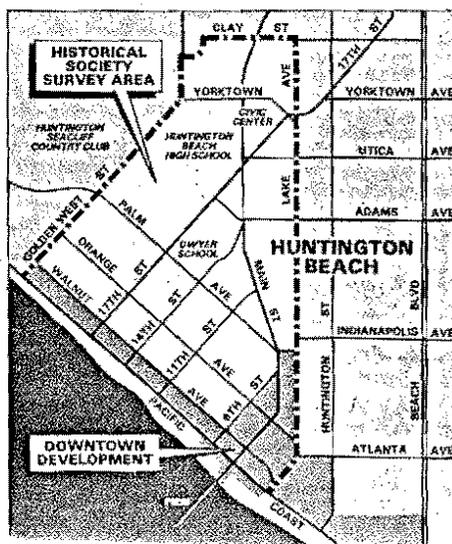
By itself, a historical survey would not save a single building; its purpose is solely to bring significant sites to the attention of the city government. Preserving these structures would take City Council action.

Possible alternatives to destroying the old buildings could include using the survey results to designate neighborhoods as historic zones, requiring



Preservationist Barbara Milkovich stands before a cottage of the early 1900s while, at right, youths lounge in front of history-rich Golden Bear. Map shows area of proposed historical survey.

GAIL FISHER and GUS KELLER / Los Angeles Times



developers to build around historic sites, moving such buildings or including design elements from the old structures in the new construction.

Orange, Santa Ana, Yorba Linda and San Juan Capistrano have already enacted ordinances to protect some of their historical buildings, according to state preservation experts.

#### Planners' Recommendation

Although the City Council has not yet approved the survey, Adams said, city planners have recommended that a survey be done before the upcoming downtown redevelopment begins.

"The overall outcome of a survey would direct the city in policy matters," Adams said, "to possibly develop ordinances or at least design guidelines for the development of projects in the downtown. But it doesn't mean necessarily that buildings will be saved."

Preservationists say that incorporating historic buildings into the redeveloped downtown would save Huntington Beach from going the way of Newport Beach and Marina del Rey—communities they regard as cold, sterile and much too clean.

"Downtown is a small town

within a city, so comfortable to be in," Person said. "I've seen what Hollywood and Marina del Rey have built up, and they're not comfortable, with their high-rises and modernistic buildings."

#### Thinking of Selling

Still, not all Huntington Beach residents would be as sorry as Person to see the old downtown razed. Sylvia Shandrick, 87, contends that the area is no longer safe.

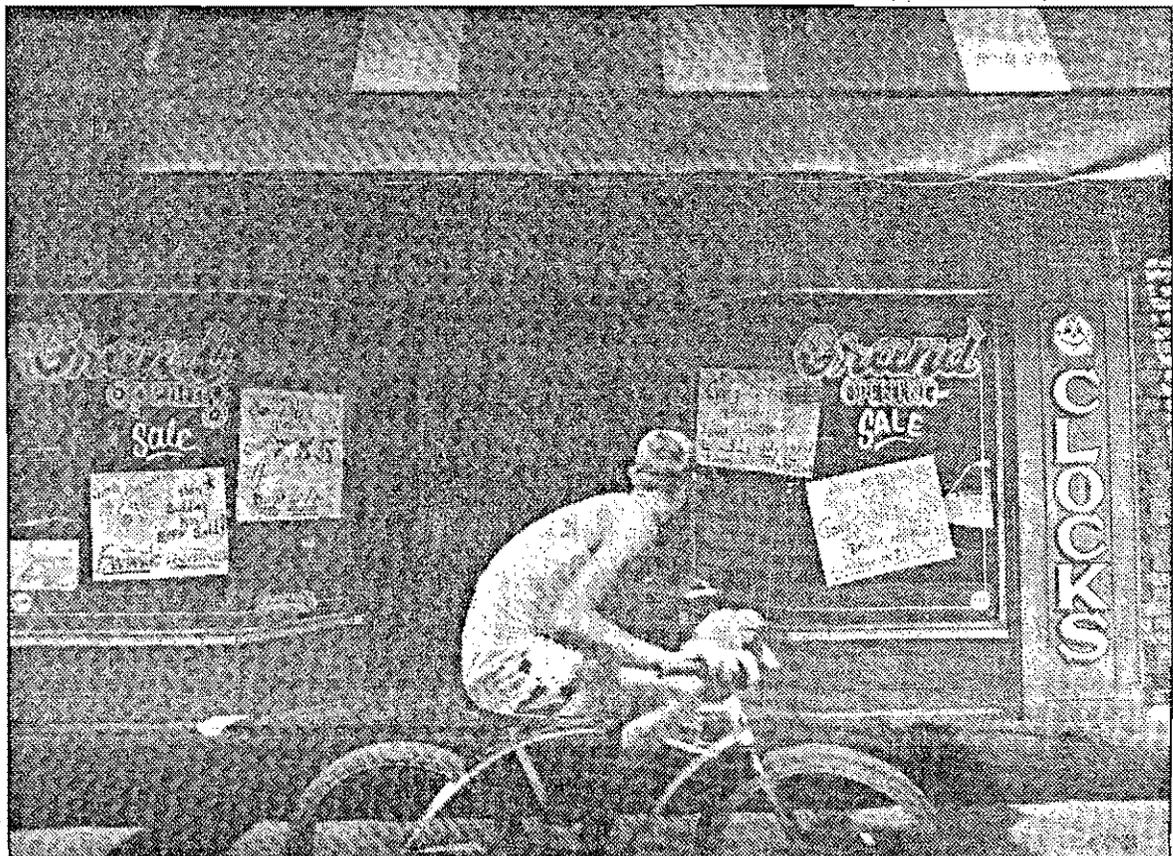
"Everything good is moving away," said Shandrick, who has owned the Clark Hotel at 228½ Main St. for the past 46 years. "I've been thinking very, very, very much of selling my property."

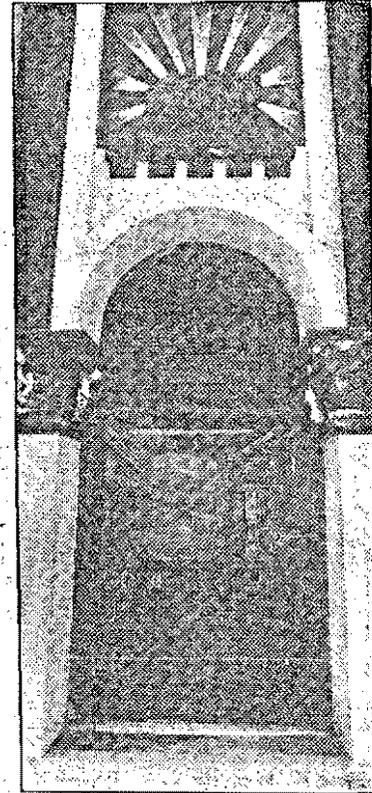
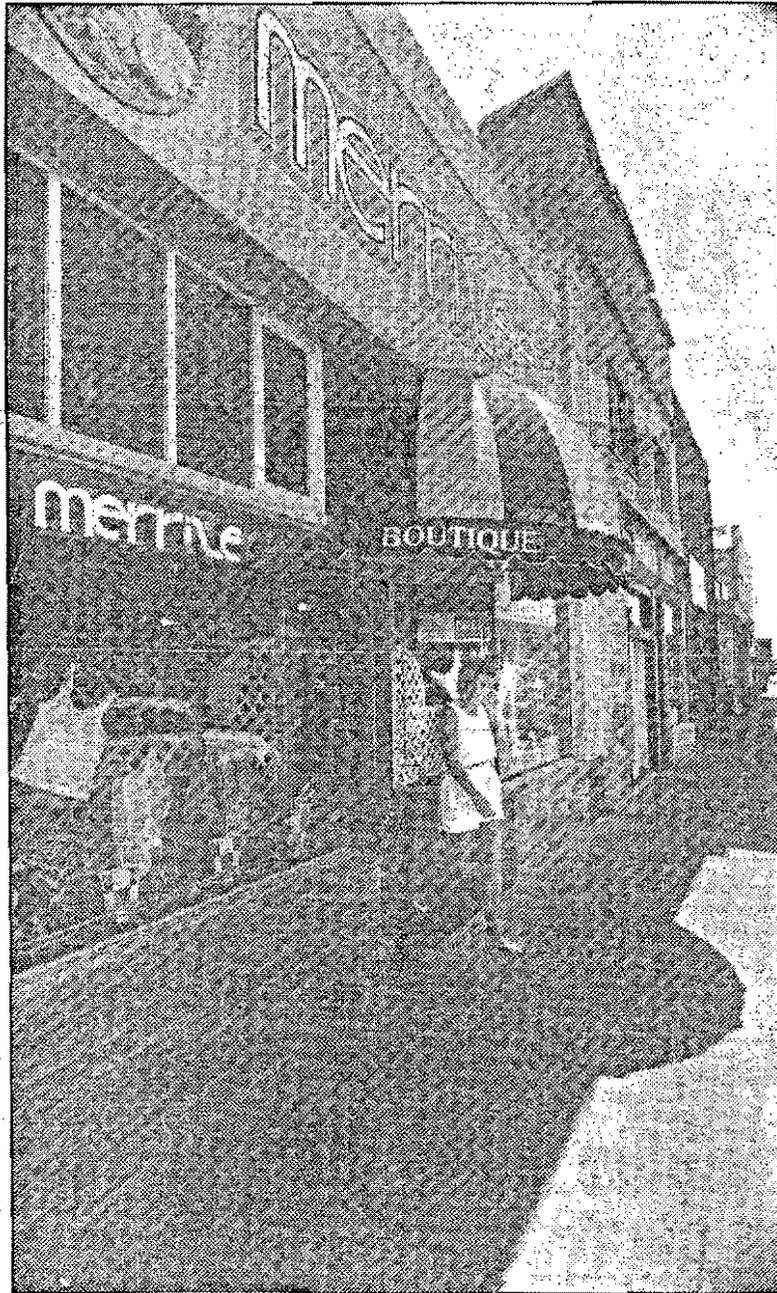
But to Ray Rogers, a 17-year-old lounging just a block away from the Clark on a recent afternoon, a high-rise-filled downtown would be the end of this peaceful beach city.

"Are you kidding?" asked the Huntington Beach native, shaking his long blond hair from his eyes. "If they tore down Main Street, I wouldn't come down here—especially if it was all high-rises like Newport."

Rogers paused, contemplating a downtown without Jack's Surfboards and the Golden Bear.

"It would not be cool," he said.





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History buffs note that Merrilee's Boutique, left, once housed — at one time — the Huntington Beach Stock Exchange, a paint store, a real estate office, a market and a tailor; that the chicken- and fruit-bordered door to Golden Bear, above, once led to a restaurant, and that the Original Good Times Clock Co., below, was Olson's Furniture when built in 1916.