

# All Hands On Deck To Save Pacifica's Historic Dollaradio Station

Interview with Joan Klass Levin, October 11, 2017

By Jean Bartlett

So often, architectural history is demolished to make way for progress. Architectural photographer and historic preservationist Richard Nickel, 1928-1972, made it his lifelong struggle to bring public awareness and attention to saving America's architecture. Often referred to as an architectural preservation hero, Nickel used photography to preserve what so many times the bulldozer challenged or took. In many cases, his photograph became the final option for preservation.

On October 18, 2017, the 1927-built Dollaradio Station, which became a private residence in 1950 and is one of Pacifica, California's few landmarks, is going up for public auction to the highest bidder for cash. Joan Klass Levin, who purchased the property in 1977, is leading a determined fight to save it and its history.

"I am asking friends and individuals who want to help preserve this historic property to loan me a minimum of \$100,000 or more, which would be paid back with interest," Joan said. "The loans would be paid out after the sale of the property to the correct buyer, or as a result of real estate litigation involving the prior sale of the property."

**The history.** The Dollaradio Station was built as part of a communication network operated by Dollaradio, to serve the steamships owned by the self-made lumber and shipping magnate Robert Dollar. The ship-to-shore radio and telegraph station was composed of two buildings: a transmitting station with nine towers, two of them 250 feet high (demolished in the 1940s to build Pacifica's Fairmont West); and a receiving station perched along what is now Palmetto north. Morse code transmissions once rang through these towers. They also allowed Admiral Richard E. Byrd to report in from his 1928 Antarctic expedition. Time and progress eventually left the receiving station silent and in 1950, George Wesley Patterson and architect Robert Poehler bought the station and converted it into a private residence. The two men honored the historic landmark by building their home around it. The original face of the station entrance can still be viewed from the home's magnificent enclosed courtyard. Following Poehler's death, Joan and her husband Marvin bought the historic property from George Patterson.

A resident of San Francisco, where she still owns a home, Joan founded the dog and cat rescue organization, the San Francisco Friends of Animals, which she also ran at that time. In addition, she started the San Francisco SPCA pet adoption service. She saw this coastal building not only as a residence for herself, but as a place to rescue animals.

"At that time I was kenneling dogs and cats in need of homes in different places," Joan said, "but here was a place where all of them could be placed in one spot until they found homes."

She said her goal was to save lives – to place each pet in a good home. Over the years, she estimates that she personally fostered close to 1,000 dogs. Often when a dog was hard to adopt, Joan became their fairy godmother. She additionally fostered cats, with some cats making it clear they were moving in with her permanently. Needless to say, approximately 800 cats were adopted through Joan's guidance.

**The location.** "Nestled between sand dunes to the north, an adjacent vacant lot, a private forest of trees, and a small condominium development to the south, 100 Palmetto Avenue in Pacifica is perched 120 feet above the Pacifica Ocean," Joan said. "It's just 15 miles south of San Francisco and approximately 40 miles north from Silicon Valley."

**Erosion.** The receiving station sits on an eroding bluff. During the winter of 2009 and 2010, Joan lost 125 feet of her coastside property. Sloughage during winter storm conditions typically occurs in the form of vertical slabs. A fighting force – despite medical conditions that have included two hip replacements and severe scoliosis that will eventually require surgery – Joan worked proactively to stabilize the property's hillside. Tons of rock riprap were used to prevent wave erosion at the toe of the bluff. In addition, stitch piers and tiebacks were installed. These were fixes, not final solutions.

**What is needed to save the bluff.** An actual seawall costing anywhere from \$4 million to \$7 million will take care of the permanent solution. Joan estimates \$1.5 million for immediate preventive maintenance.

**How did it come to be auctioned? The short version.** Joan sold it in 2016. She believed the buyer was going to prevent further bluff erosion. Unfamiliar with "seller's finance," Joan was advised the deal was good, and it was not uncommon for the seller to be the bank. The house and property were sold for \$2.5 million. From a \$600,000 down payment, Joan received only \$300,000. The other \$300,000 went to attorneys and litigation escrow expenses.

A year and a half later, the buyer defaulted after having used the property as collateral for another loan that the buyer used on other properties that she and her investors owned. In addition, the buyer and the real estate agent placed the buyer's loan on the contract as a first loan, putting Ms. Levin in second place. What that means is that the first loan, at \$2.1 million, has to be paid off by October 18, 2017, leaving Joan without any property and any payment.

"The first loan is foreclosing on the property," Joan said. "The lender really doesn't want the property. They just want to be paid back \$2.1 million. My hope is to buy the property back at the auction and find a buyer who will preserve it and use it as their home or turn it into a nonprofit. There is also room to build a single-family home in addition to preserving Dollaradio."

"As I told the lender, if this was an ordinary house, I could walk away and my only interest would be to be reimbursed for the sale amount of the property. But it is in fact an extraordinary piece of world history."

If you are interested in helping Joan preserve the property, please phone her at 650-291-2988. Also, if you would like to make an appointment to view the property, call Joan before October 18.