

## Kathy Barberich: How the mall lost its swagger

By Kathy  
Barberich

“Wow, Grandma’s got swagger!” the 14-year-old boy said when I walked into the room wearing a new, large-billed green hat with a silver swoosh.

“That’s the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me,” I said with a laugh.

“Really cool look, Grandma,” the teen said.

“Cool enough to wear to the ice rink?” I asked.

“Yeah, let’s go,” said a younger grandson, a little impatiently.

We had a date. Five of my grandchildren — four boys and a girl ranging in ages from 10 to 17 years old — had accepted my invitation to go to the outdoor ice rink on the downtown mall and then do lunch.

We parked in the city lot on Broadway Plaza and then piled out of the vehicle.

“So, this is it?” one asked.

“Where’s the rink?” another wanted to know.

“Follow me,” I said. “It’s on the mall, by the clock tower.”

As we rounded the corner and stepped onto the Mariposa Mall, one of the

boys said, “OK, we see the ice rink and we see a big clock, but where is the mall?”

“You’re walking on it,” I said.

“You’re kidding, right?” said the oldest, with a perplexed look.

My excitement at getting them to the mall was waning.

“Wow, this looks fun,” said one of the younger boys as he eyed the ice and heard laughter. The focus changed from the drab-looking mall to the gleaming ice. After a bit of difficulty, every one — with the exception of the grandma who volunteered to be the keeper of shoes and cell phones — put on boots and gingerly stepped onto the ice.

With the confidence of someone who had skated before, the oldest made his way around the rink with some aplomb. The 14-year-old, while being a newcomer, was not far behind.

With visions of crutches and casts skating in her head, the result of cheering and volleyball mishaps, the 13-year-old granddaughter did not separate herself from her new best friend – the guard rail. In less than an hour, she hung up her skates, rubbed her aching ankles and kept me company.

Her younger brothers, 10 and 11 years old, eventually blended in with other newbies-on-ice struggling to keep their balance, picking up themselves when they fell, but never failing. All was done with good humor.

After two hours, the siblings and cousins were finished and famished.

The big question looming was, “Where are we going to eat?”

“Somewhere on the mall,” I announced.

An earlier question was repeated. “Where is the mall?”

“This is the mall,” I said, pointing in all directions. This is the Mariposa Mall.

This is the Fulton Mall. I used to eat and shop here when I was younger, albeit much younger. ”

We walked a little south and not readily seeing anything, made a U-turn.

“Hey, If you look out this way, you can see the courthouse and check out the architecture of the beautiful old former bank building,” I said, sounding like a tour guide.

“Is there a restaurant in there?” someone asked.

“No, but we will find something,” I said only somewhat reassuringly. As we walked north, the children could not help but notice the numerous homeless folks, some in front of empty store fronts and others snoozing on benches.

“Look at all the beautiful mosaic tile above some of these benches,” I said. “And look at these fountains...”

“Grandma, in case you haven’t noticed, they are empty and dirty,” I was told.

“Are you sure you are wearing your contacts?”

About this time, an elderly man standing in front of a small but open business nodded his head at us and said, “Hello.”

“We are looking for a good place to eat,” I implored. “Any suggestions?”

“Cross Fresno Street then go down a little ways,” he offered.

After passing more empty businesses, we were exuberant to find not one eating place, but three from which to choose. Posted menus made the choice an easy one. While the eatery was small, the burgers and fries were big and satisfying.

As they ate, the children recounted their experiences on the ice and laughed at each other’s mishaps. They were enjoying themselves. Too bad it was time to walk the mall again.

“You know, before this was a mall, this was a street where teens drove their cars on Friday and Saturday nights at a snail’s pace,” I said, trying my sales pitch one more time. “It was called dragging the main and everyone had his or her windows down and flirted with the guys or girls in the cars next to them. It was so cool.”

The 17-year-old, who has a car of his own, was now listening.

“So what happened? How did it turn into....this?”

“Well, the street was torn up,” I said to my audience of one. “My friends and I grabbed little pieces of the asphalt one night so we would have a piece of the main forever. We thought we were being so bad. Fifty years ago, the street was turned into this shopping mall, with canopied trees, fountains spilling with water, planters brimming with flowers, bronze and metal sculptures gleaming in the sun, winding painted-concrete waterways, twinkling lights, piped-in music and trams that you could ride to all of the stores.”

“The trams weren’t as fun as the cars,” the oldest said knowingly.

“Well, no, but...”

We were back at the clock tower. “I know it looks old and splintery to you guys, but this tower is just one of the many pieces of treasured art on the mall. If you would like, I can show you ...”

“That’s OK, Grandma,” a grandson said. “I have a haircut appointment.”

“And I have blisters on my feet and need to take off my shoes,” said another.

As we walked to the parking lot, I paused and looked back wistfully. I had so wanted my grandchildren to see the mall that I loved, but they just couldn’t see it.

And now, neither could I.

“The short answer to what happened to the mall,” I finally said, “is that through no fault of its own, the mall lost its swagger. And its soul.”

Kathy Barberich of Fresno is a retired Fresno Bee award-winning reporter and columnist.