

# THE LEFTOVERS

Published by the El Sobrante Historical Society

Issue #19

Summer 2016

*This newsletter is issued quarterly, as part of the mission of the ESHS, to preserve and publicize the history of the community of El Sobrante. If you would like to comment on this newsletter, or submit your own article for publication, please do so via: [ESHHistory@Gmail.com](mailto:ESHHistory@Gmail.com). Thanks!*

**60 Years Ago:** Winter Rains Threaten Montara Housing Development *Donald Bastin*



*The winter of 1955-56 was wet. Very wet. The Montara (sometimes spelled Montera) housing development was a small one—only 27 homes. But the damage caused by the rain and the resulting slides foreshadowed similar problems that would bedevil much larger developments that would begin to move up the hillsides of the El Sobrante Valley. The images in this article were donated by Sharon Kersey Crow, whose family lived above the Montara development, along Hillcrest Road. The boy in the photo above is Sharon's brother, John Kersey.*

The Montara housing development was unanimously approved by the County Planning Commission in late December, 1953. Until that time, the area along Hillcrest Road, which runs into the San Pablo Dam Road near the center of the downtown area, was largely undeveloped, with only a smattering of

private homes along its winding way. The Kersey family moved from San Pablo to their new home along Hillcrest in 1946. At that time, Hillcrest Road was unpaved, as the picture below shows.



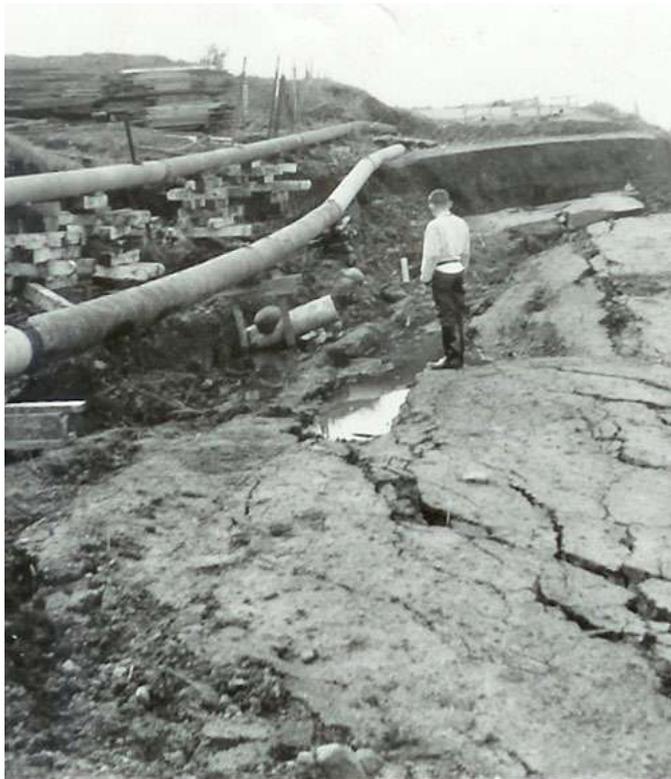
Construction of the project began in earnest in 1955. The image below shows that grading has been completed and houses are in various stages of completion.



By the winter of 1955-56, all the houses had been sold and families had moved in. Unfortunately, what was described as a “series of record-shattering rainstorms” hit the area in December of 1955 and January of 1956. While other areas suffered (particularly the homes near the new De Anza High School), the Montara subdivision, according to the *El Sobrante Herald*, “appeared to be the hardest

hit in the entire community.” Four homes began to slide, and the families were ordered to evacuate. The homes were built in a terraced fashion, with the topmost terrace along Hillcrest Road.

In addition to damage to homes, streets and sidewalks were severely damaged and unusable.



Due to danger of breaking gas lines, PG&E installed above-ground gas pipes to supply the homes that were still occupied. In this photo the pipes are clearly visible, as are the earth-slides and the buckled street.

The Montara homeowners quickly banded together and formed the “Montara Tract Protective League” in order to attempt to recover losses that they had sustained. In a meeting attended by most of the residents in late February, they were advised that payments had to be kept up pending an investigation by the Veterans Administration. A county building inspector added little to the discussion by blaming the slides on the “heavy rain” and a spring in the area. Nothing, apparently, was said about developer negligence. In response, according to the *Herald*, “Residents of the area have expressed the opinion developers of the tract and county officials should have provided more

stringent engineering investigation before construction of the Montera homes was approved.” This would become a familiar complaint in the wet years to follow.



In this photo, taken in 1959, we can see the Montara tract from a point just below the Kersey home (not shown). Some slide damage is still visible, but life had apparently returned to normal. It is not clear what happened to the legal challenges made by the

homeowners, or whether the three homes that were deemed to be uninhabitable were rebuilt, but the Montara tract is still very much a part of the El Sobrante fabric. Over the years Hillcrest Road has added more homes and short streets along its path, and of course the Sikh Temple has become an obvious addition. In the next photograph, taken recently, and not far from the image above, we see

the area today, the most obvious change being the trees, which were nowhere to be seen to the north of Hillcrest Road when the tract was built.

*Thanks to Sharon Kersey Crow for the historic images*



### **Roadside Dumper of Refuse Given Cleanup Chores** *(El Sobrante Herald, March 22, 1956)*

Joe M. Souza of Richmond, has his work cut out for him this Saturday. Souza, under the supervision of Fire Chief Charles Matteson of El Sobrante will spend most of the day cleaning up debris along a quarter-mile stretch of Castro Road.

The task was decided when Souza appeared before Judge Wilson Locke of the San Pablo Judicial Court Monday in response to a complaint signed by Matteson accusing him of “litterbug” activities last week-end. Souza conceded that he had tossed waste materials from his car.

In giving Souza a choice of paying a \$100 fine or cleaning up the El Sobrante roadside, the court told him that “there’s no excuse for littering the roadsides when there are public garbage dumps available in your community.”

The fire chief said he was enabled to trace Souza because of letters and personal papers in the roadside trash.

Matteson warned of a drive against

litterbugs here after he and a crew of firemen cleared up the so-called Castro Road “dump,” long used illegally as a catch-all for refuse.

*Where is Chief Matteson when we need him today?*



*Judge Wilson Locke was a Justice of the Peace, well-known in*

*El Sobrante. He is shown here supporting the ES Fire Department. The local justices handled minor legal matters in the County for well over 100 years, and were usually strongly supported by their local communities. Sadly, they were eliminated with the advent of the Municipal Court system, which debuted in the 1950s. Today, only the Superior Court remains in Contra Costa County, as the Municipal Courts were in turn eliminated in 1998.*

## Don Victor Castro: West County Pioneer

*Charles Smith*



It was the morning of January 1<sup>st</sup> 1900 and Don Victor Ramon Castro lived to see it. As he stood in his doorway that morning in his home in El Cerrito, he looked west towards his birthplace across the bay in San

Francisco. Even though the distance is short as the crow flies, there were many thousands of hard miles between his birth in 1820\* and this first day of the twentieth century. The distances were a function of the man of peace and the man of war, both manifestations he displayed in the trials he faced in dealing with the management of his land, the continuous encroachment by the Americanos after becoming part of the United States in 1847, raids by the local indigenous peoples and the troubles of revolution and invasions by the French in his beloved Mexico.

All that was in the past now and he credited his longevity to the avoidance of liquor and tobacco, and spending his time raising children and cows on his rancho instead of carousing around. His passion was caring for his land and seeing that all were treated fairly under his purview. His basic loyalty was to his beloved Mexico. His father Francisco Maria Castro had come up from Mexico to San Francisco as a child of 5 years with Victor's grandfather, Joaquin Ysidre de Castro; they were part of the De Anza expedition of 1775. The expedition was instituted to place settlements along the Californian coast up to San Francisco Bay partly to counteract the settlements along the

northern California coast by the Russians. The Castro's were very proud of their Spanish heritage. Don Victor could trace his ancestry back to the early 1600s in Spain. Don Victor was the 11<sup>th</sup> child of 14 that were born to his father. However, his father died when he was 10 and as a result he was on his own at an early age. In fact, the doorway in which he stood, was the house he started building when he was just 16 years old.

Having started at such an early age on his own he became very skilled as a horseman which was needed as he participated in great roundups where cattle were separated for branding. Because of his personal honesty, he was made the "jeuz de campo" or "judge of the plains" in 1840 and as such had complete control over these yearly roundups.\*\*

In 1841 he and his brother Juan Jose Castro were the grantees of Rancho El Sobrante. In 1852, he was elected Contra Costa County supervisor after California became a state. Even though he was now an American, his love and concern for his beloved Mexico had not diminished. In the 1860s while the United States was in the bitter struggle of the American Civil War, France tried to move in and annex Mexico and installed their puppet governor, Archduke Ferdinand Maximillian, as Emperor of Mexico. A rebellion immediately erupted and the struggle to throw off their French occupiers began.

President Benito Juarez became the leader of the rebellion and now needed money and fighters to join the cause. As part of the effort, President Juarez sent General Placido Vega to California to seek help from the people of California. The general met with the leading families of Contra Costa in 1864 and soon had 8000 rifles and 24,000 muskets on their way to Mexico. But that did not stop there. The Pacheco, Castro and Vallejo families

contributed money as well. Don Victor loaned General Vega \$24,000.

But giving money to help with the cause was not enough for Don Victor. He managed to raise a company of men and in 1866 was on his way to Mexico having been commissioned as a Captain in the Mexican Army. Don Castro was with the rebellion until the end when Maximilian was captured and shot. As a result of his loyalty and actual participation in battle, Don Victor returned home as a Colonel.

Upon his return, Don Victor now had to deal with the ongoing problem of keeping title to the Rancho El Sobrante. Even though in 1849, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo said that all original Mexican land grants would be honored, many settlers claimed to have ownership before the treaty and were going to court to press their claims. As a result of court decisions, lawyer fees, titles that could not be confirmed and appeals, Don Castro ended up with only 205 acres of the original 20,565 acres that had been granted him and his brother in 1841 by Governor Juan Alvarado. In the end, the process was the longest court case in American history lasting almost 40 years.



Personal tragedy was part of Don Victor's life as well. He was widowed twice. He had eight children by his first wife, Luisa Antonia Martinez. One child by his second wife, Felicidad Carrillo and one child by his third wife

Julia Townsend Lupton.

***Pictured above is Patricio Castro, son of Victor and Luisa. Born in 1843, he moved to the El Sobrante area at age 25, establishing a cattle ranch where he lived for the rest of his long life. . . Editor.***

Victor's thoughts soon came back to reality as he heard his name called out. Breakfast was ready. He turned and disappeared into the house. Don Victor did not see much of the twentieth century for he died five months later and was buried in his backyard alongside of many other family members.

*The author, Charles Smith, is a member of the El Sobrante Historical Society. We encourage all of our members to submit articles for publication in our newsletter.*

*\*There appears to be some confusion regarding Victor's date of birth, some sources stating that he was born in 1820 while others claim a date of 1817.*

*\*\*The "Judge of the Plains" was an important official both before and after 1850, when California achieved statehood. In Contra Costa County, after California became a state, the judge was appointed by the County Judge for a period of one year. During that time he attended rodeos and verified ownership of horses, cattle, and all manner of farm animals.*

## **Interested in the History of the Law in Contra Costa County?**

Visit the Contra Costa County Historical Society, in Martinez. Board member Donald Bastin and his wife, Clementina Diaz, have put together an exhibit outlining the evolution of the court system in the county.



The History Center is located in downtown Martinez, at 724 Escobar

Street. The center is open Tuesday thru Thursday every week, and on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Saturday of every month. Visit CCHS at: [www.cocohistory.org](http://www.cocohistory.org) To view a video of the opening, click here: [https://youtu.be/P43ap0R0\\_hc](https://youtu.be/P43ap0R0_hc)

## Rock Wall Update: Moving Ahead-Slowly

As some of you may recall, the El Sobrante Historical Society, some years ago, identified a rock wall and stairway, located along the San Pablo Reservoir, built by the CCC in 1935. Since then, with the cooperation of the folks at EBMUD, we have been working to stabilize and preserve the deteriorating structures with an eye to creating a more accessible site and one in which the historical significance can be displayed. With our conflicting schedules and other demands on our time, the work has been slow, to say the least. But progress has been made, and with a few more days of work, we hope to be done with the job of stabilizing the wall and stairs, and turn our attention to making the site generally more attractive.



*Steve James, working on the stairway*

So far, we have focused our attention on the portion of the wall to the right of the stairway (looking toward the lake-- the left part of the wall is too far gone to restore, though we might attempt some stabilization work there). Several large cracks have been filled with mortar and rocks. We are not masons, but we felt that it was more important to stop the deterioration rather than to focus on recreating the original wall. In fact, in line with accepted practices, it is probably better to create repairs that are

readily identifiable, in order to be able to tell



what is original and what is not. The only part of the right wall still awaiting repair is the very end, shown here. As can be seen, about 7 feet of the wall has broken away and is slowly sliding down the hill, toward the lake. What we have to do is uncover the base and lever the

piece back into alignment with the rest of the wall. This is a big job and will require some thought. For now we are concentrating on the stairway. One or two more days should complete the work on the stairway, which is tedious, but not particularly difficult. The stairway is cracked in many places and some stones are missing, and will have to be replaced. But the results have been pleasing,



we think, as this picture shows. We took a large step forward some months ago by removing the old iron tracks which ran down the steps, and made them almost inaccessible. They had nothing to do with the original rock construction.

Once the rock work is done, we will turn our attention to the landscaping and the interpretive exhibit. Stay tuned!

## New Acquisitions!



This Richmond Creamery milk can was delivered to Lyle Miller, and donated by **Margaret Faria- Prather**. The Richmond Creamery, as you recall, was the business name of the Skow Dairy, which operated in El Sobrante for over 50 years. We would love to have one of their

glass bottles. So if any of you know where one might be hiding, please let us know.



This ashtray from Rancho Lumber was donated by Maury Abraham, who purchased it on EBAY. Maury recalls going with his dad to the Rancho lumber yard in the early 1950s, and says that it was located about where the Café Soleil is today. Apparently, the sales building used to be the Trocadero Club, which had a shady reputation as a gambling house.

*The El Sobrante Historical Society is an informal nonprofit organization, dedicated solely to the preservation and display of the history of the community of El Sobrante. We depend on our members and local residents for the information, artifacts, and photographs that make up the society's collection. Become a member and help out! It's free and simple. Just visit the website, at [eshist.org](http://eshist.org).*

Visit us on **Facebook**.

### Mission Statement

*To promote the awareness and appreciation of El Sobrante Valley history through preservation and education, and chronicling of the community's heritage for current and future generations.*

### ESHS Steering Committee:

#### 1. Maurice Abraham:

Administrator, Facebook Page; Historical Researcher and writer.

2. **Donald Bastin:** Administrator, Website; Newsletter Editor; Historical Researcher and writer.

3. **Steve James:** Membership and Communication Secretary;

4. **Lyle Miller:** Community Liaison and general support.

Visit us on-line at: [www.eshist.org](http://www.eshist.org)  
Questions, Comments, and other communication? Send to: [ESHISTORY@GMAIL.COM](mailto:ESHISTORY@GMAIL.COM)