



THE LEFTOVERS

Published by the El Sobrante Historical Society

Issue #5

Winter 2013

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: eshistory@gmail.com. Thanks!

County Library Turns 100! Year-long celebration planned

On July 21, 1913, the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors passed a resolution establishing the “Contra Costa County Free Library.” The intervening 100 years have seen steady growth in the library system as well as substantial challenges to the library’s mission.

The first county librarian was Alice Whitbeck, who began work in October of 1913 along with one assistant. A room was rented from the Martinez Library Association, and steps were immediately



taken to establish branches around the county and to involve the schools. Miss Whitbeck actually began work in 1909, as the first librarian of the Richmond Library, which was, at the time, the only tax-supported library in the county. A few years after she left to head up the county library, the Richmond Library withdrew from the county system and has been

run by the city of Richmond ever since.

Under the leadership of Mrs. Whitbeck, the county library system grew, by 1928, to include 45 branches and was affiliated with 64 schools. The branches ran the gamut from buildings

built expressly as libraries (often with grants from the Andrew Carnegie fund) to rooms in women’s clubs, stores, post office buildings, or in private homes.



Both the San Pablo Library (above) and the Lafayette Library

started out in the local Post Office.



The home of Dr. Brennerman served as the library for El Cerrito from 1914 to 1925.

started out as the Bank of Pinole, and was apparently moved to Crockett, courtesy of the C&H Sugar Company, for use as a library. Like Rodeo, Crockett's library actually started out in 1914 and rented space elsewhere until it acquired the bank building.



Inside of Crockett Library, October 1, 1919.



Inside of Crockett Library today. Notice that very little has changed except the light fixtures.

West County is home to two of the oldest structures still serving as county branch libraries. The town of Rodeo opened its first library in 1914 and acquired a permanent structure in 1926, shown here. Below is a photo of the inside of the building today, with librarian



Carol-Anne Tucker-Watt at the helm. Incredibly, even the light fixtures are original (Carol-Anne says she absolutely refused to have them replaced).

The town of Crockett boasts the oldest library building in continuous use. This picture was taken in October, 1919, when the library first opened. The story is that the structure had



Alice Whitbeck died unexpectedly, of an illness, in November of 1931, while still holding her position as head county librarian. It was not until the following year that her replacement, Jessie Lea, was appointed. Jessie had started out as a cataloger shortly after the county library was formed. She would serve for 22 years, retiring in early 1954.

It was during the tenure of Jessie Lea that a small "station" library was first established in El Sobrante, in the home of Mrs. Blanche Burg, in December, 1938. Beginning with only 200 books, Mrs. Burg loaned out books until September, 1943, when she took a war job.

With no other space available, it was four years before a new library space was found in a small building on Maloney (now Valley View) Road. This served for two years until a more permanent space became available in the Mitchell Building (located at the “Y”



intersection of Valley View and Appian Way). The Mitchell Building would serve as the El Sobrante Library until a brand-new building was

constructed and opened in June of 1961.

In October, 1956, the El Sobrante Library was elevated to full branch status, and a new librarian,

Mrs. Thea Babbitt, was appointed to oversee the operation upon the retirement of the previous librarian, Mrs. R.E. Radke. Mrs. Babbitt can



be seen behind the desk in this picture, taken in the late 1950s. By this time it was clearly evident that larger quarters were needed, and a search for a new site for a brand-new building was initiated.

Beginning around 1960, under the direction of the county’s third head librarian, Bertha Hellum, there was a county-wide push to build modern, new library buildings or to expand existing structures. The reason was simple: population had expanded to the point that demand was too great for the aging facilities in most communities. El Sobrante was no exception. Ground-breaking for the new library, at the corner of Appian Way and

Garden Road, took place on November 28, 1960. Construction was rapid and the new building opened to the public in June of 1961.

At right is an artist’s conceptual drawing of the finished product. The new library was



an immediate hit with the public, and it was found to be too small to meet the still-growing demand. Therefore, in 1975, the building was substantially expanded, with one room dedicated to civic use. While libraries are important in any community, the El Sobrante Library has become, in many ways, the heart of the community, where meetings are held and important decisions are made. In an unincorporated area like ours, it has come to function as a city hall.

The libraries of other West County communities have all experienced significant growth. El Cerrito led the field when it constructed this modern facility in 1949, which was expanded in 1960.



Pinole’s first dedicated library, built in 1926,



also housed the police station. A modern library was built in 1974, which, for a

time, also served the community of Hercules. In fact, Hercules had no library of its own from 1970 to 2006. A Dramatic population increase in the final decades of the last century

mandated that a new facility be built, which is a far cry from the original library that was housed in an old building on land belonging to the old powder company.

Today, the Contra Costa County Library system comprises 26 community libraries, with close to half a million card-holders and over 7 million items borrowed annually. The central library is located in Pleasant Hill (this photo



shows the library at the time it was dedicated in 1961). In addition, the library provides access to extensive materials on-line, including e-books, audio books, podcasts, and MP3s.

The new electronic environment has created a substantial challenge to the viability of traditional book publishers, sellers, and, of course, libraries. But the signs are that libraries, at least in our area, are weathering the challenge. The El Sobrante Library, under



the current leadership of Ian Richards (who also heads the Pinole Library) is always busy.

Access to electronic media and the internet, combined with a vigorous out-reach program, has succeeded in drawing in a new generation of library lovers. This effort has been particularly successful in attracting young people. For the very young, story-telling time is a very popular offering, especially when the weather is fine and tales can be told in the little Reading Garden next to the library.

So here's to another 100 years!

Special Message from El Sobrante Librarian Ian Richards:



I'm happy to inform you that the Contra Costa County Library will be celebrating its 100th Birthday on July 21, 2013. In honor of this momentous occasion the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors has agreed to proclaim 2013 "The Year of the Library". Beginning in January 2013, the Contra Costa County Library will begin our year-long celebration to commemorate "100 Years of Bringing People and Ideas Together".

The celebration will kick-off with 5 regional events throughout the county followed by various other displays and programs during the year. The 100th birthday bash will be on July 21. Details are still being worked out but I will be sure to pass on information as I get it. The West County Regional event will take place on **Saturday March 16**, at the El Sobrante Library from 1 to 3pm. The El Sobrante Historical Society will be doing a brief presentation on the history of the El Sobrante Library. However this isn't just a celebration of the El Sobrante Library but of all of the West County libraries. To this end, I would like to extend an invitation to the rest of our West County Historical Societies to see if you would have any interest in joining us in El Sobrante on March 16. If so we would like to invite you to do a presentation on the history of the library from your community at the event.

This should be a fun, whimsical, informative affair and I hope you will be able to celebrate with us.

Contact Ian at: irichard@ccclib.org

El Sobrante Historical Society Honored at Event

Maurice Abraham

At its 2013 Annual Installation and Awards Dinner, which took place on Saturday, January 19, the El Sobrante Chamber of Commerce



presented the “Business of the Year” award to the El Sobrante Historical Society. The award was gratefully accepted by co-founders Donald Bastin, Steve James, Lyle Miller and Maurice Abraham. Bastin, author of the *Images of America: El Sobrante*, provided the gathering a brief overview of how the two-year-old organization came into being. It was Bastin’s research for his book that became the impetus behind the four co-founders coming together to create the organization.

Besides the Chamber award, the Historical Society received two additional honors at the event, both of these recognizing the Society’s contributions to preserving the history of the El Sobrante community. West County Wastewater



District Board member Leonard Battaglia presented the first honor, while Contra

Costa County District 1 Supervisor, John Gioia presented the second.

Both Battaglia and Gioia praised the work of the Historical



Society, stressing the importance to a community of knowing and understanding its past as it moves toward the future. Supervisor Gioia pledged his help in finding a permanent home for the Society.



From left: Maurice Abraham, Supervisor John Gioia, Steve James, Donald Bastin, Lyle Miller

The event also saw the installation of Chamber officers and board members for the 2013 year as well as the Citizen of the Year honor awarded to Chamber Treasurer, Bob Davis.

On behalf of all El Sobrante Historical Society members, we thank these organizations for recognizing and appreciating the work of this organization.

Images of America: El Sobrante, is part of *The Images of America* series by Arcadia Publishing Company and is available from the El Sobrante Historical Society as well as from several local businesses.

60 Years Ago: Stories from the El Sobrante Herald



For 25 years, from 1947 to 1972, Ed Galli published and edited El Sobrante's only newspaper, the weekly El Sobrante Herald. Fiercely proud of his community,



Ed focused solely on local news, ignoring even the most attention-getting national or world events (he printed not a word about President Kennedy's assassination in November, 1963). Fortunately, the El Sobrante Library has collected and digitized most of the issues of this newspaper. Much of what we know about events in this very formative part of El Sobrante's development comes from the issues of the El Sobrante Herald.

July 3, 1952: Cards From Out-Of-Towners Favor Dam Road.

For years, one of the issues that exercised local business leaders and Chamber members was the name of our most prominent thoroughfare, the San Pablo Dam Road. Galli thought the name "lacking in dignity" and canvassed his readers for their opinion as to whether they should return to the original name—Camino Pablo. For Galli, the Dam Road was just a "nickname." In this issue, he is agitated because the paper has received a lot of postcards favoring the Dam Road name. But these cards are suspect, appearing to be written in the same hand and without any return address, or sent from out-of-town addresses.

The issue of the road name would come up again and again, for years, but without any

result. In the end, it became clear that locals liked the name "Dam Road," and, in fact, took pride in it.

July 31, 1952: Tickets Now On Sale For Annual Firemen's Dance on August 9.

Every year the local volunteer fire department sold tickets to their annual ball, to raise money for equipment and to fund an insurance program for the firemen. This was the eighth consecutive event to be held at La Honda Bowl. The local community was tremendously supportive of their fire department and ticket sales were always good. Ticket holders were eligible for a raffle, the prizes being an adjustable television chair, a blender, and a waffle iron with a sandwich grill. The fire department would continue to hold their annual events at La Honda Bowl until 1955, when the facility closed.

(These articles are also featured in the El Sobrante Chamber of Commerce Newsletter)

*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.***

We're On Facebook!

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.

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