



THE LEFTOVERS

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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!

The CCC in El Sobrante

Donald Bastin

On June 19, 2010, at the San Ramon campus of DVC, members of the Contra Costa County Historical Society were treated to a very special lecture by Professor Gray Brechin, who has taken on the task of identifying and cataloguing sites around the country that were part of President Roosevelt's various work programs (CCC, WPA, PWA, etc.). A great many of those sites happen to be located in California, and many are in Contra Costa County (visit: livingnewdeal.berkeley.edu). In fact, the CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) was active near El Sobrante. Specifically, the CCC did a lot of work around the San Pablo Dam over the course of several years during the 1930s.

Professor Brechin showed several slides of the boys working around the Dam and indicated that he had looked for, but had been unable to find, a particular rock wall that appeared in several of the photos that he had uncovered. All of this was of particular interest to me, as I was in the process of putting together a history of El Sobrante (Arcadia Press), and was unaware that the CCC was active in our area.



Road work, NE side of Dam, 1934

Living within walking distance of the Dam, however, it would not be that difficult to nose around and try to find evidence of the work that was done over 70 years ago.

A few days after Dr. Brechin's lecture, my wife, Clementina, and I walked along the old Dam Road (which has served as a service road for the reservoir since the new road was built in the 1950s) looking for any signs of the kind of cemented rock work that was typical of the time, and which can be seen at Alvarado Park, at the entrance to the Wildcat Creek trail. We quickly came upon some intriguing blocks of what may have once been a rock wall, but had appeared to have been moved from somewhere else. We then spoke with an amiable ranger by the

name of Tom Brackett, who was not aware of any rock walls, but who did mention that it was common knowledge among EBMUD staff that the CCC had done a lot of work at the dam in the '30s, including planting trees, cutting roads, and constructing a series of "check dams" along some of the ephemeral creeks that drain into the reservoir or into San Pablo Creek, above the dam. These areas, unfortunately, were not open to the public, but he graciously offered to escort us to one of the better sites when he had some free time.

A few weeks later, we met ranger Brackett at the staff center just off the Dam Road. A short drive along Bear Creek Road took us to the mouth of Mistletoe Creek, which drains into San Pablo Creek just above the road. Neither Clem nor I were expecting a great deal. Perhaps we would find some jumbled rocks or a piece of a cracked wall to indicate where a dam had been, that is all. We were really not prepared to come upon no less than twelve intact rock dams, still doing their job of checking water flow and trapping silt, extending perhaps a half-mile or so up the hillside.



Ranger Brackett, standing on one of the check dams

The dams were clearly well-built and well-engineered, typical of the high-quality work that was done by the CCC and other workers in Roosevelt's programs. Some of the lower

dams showed some cracking, evidence of earth movement. But the upper works were pristine, and could have been built last week.

After almost two hours of clambering over rock walls, and snapping almost 100 photographs, we were obliged to leave little Mistletoe Creek, and its unexpected treasures. Our guide assured us that other dams had been built along other streams, but that he did not have the time to take us to any other sites. We were more than happy with what we had seen, and expressed our appreciation for his generosity.

These rock structures, built to serve a utilitarian purpose, and to keep young men busy and active, may not seem to be particularly impressive, but their very existence, along an inconsequential creek, is amazing and quite unexpected. They should be treasured. They serve to remind us of a low time in our county's history, when young men learned the value of hard work, and doing a job well, no matter how pedestrian.

But what of the rock wall that sparked this quest? Fortunately, Professor Brechin was able to direct us to a cache of photographs that had originally been part of the collection of the East Bay Regional Parks District. The images covered about three years, from 1934 thru 1936, and showed young men engaged in all kinds of activity, including road construction, tree planting, tree clearing, and inter-camp sports competition. All of the images, over 100 in all, were snapshots, un-posed, showing men and boys engaged in some kind of activity. I was able to scan about 80 of the better images. This is an amazing collection, and sheds light on a part of West County history that had been very little known, even, apparently, among the staff of EBMUD, operators of the San Pablo Reservoir.

But was there anything showing the construction of a rock wall? Sure enough, after going through almost the entire collection, we came upon about five images that seemed to be oriented to the construction of a rock wall. In several of the shots it could clearly be seen that the site of



the wall was right alongside the old Dam Road and very near the water. It was also evidently near an outfall tower. As the reservoir has only one such tower along its length, it would be an easy matter to locate the current site of the wall, assuming that it had not disintegrated over time or been removed. On several of the photos, dated January, 1935, someone had written the term “Observation Point.” Apparently, the purpose of the wall was to provide motorists with a place to stop and view the lake. And as can be seen from the picture of the finished wall, this was not just an exercise in engineering but was something that was meant to be an attractive piece of architecture. But was it still there?

In September, 2010, with my wife and girls, I visited the San Pablo Reservoir. After parking, we hiked along the service road (the old Dam Road), all the while looking for the old outfall tower. After about three-quarters of a mile, we found ourselves opposite the tower. The site had changed considerably in the intervening 75 years, and was now covered with trees and brush. Also obscuring the site was a visitor toilet facility. But neither time nor toilet could hide the

stone wall that immediately commanded our attention. There it was—about half covered by dirt and obscured by a thick cover of poison oak, but without a doubt the very wall that we had been seeking. At the right end and in the middle were the decorative



little pillars that we had seen in the photograph. The middle pillars, flanking a gap in the

center of the wall, held a surprise. On the other side was a broad stone stairway,

leading down almost to the water’s edge. Now the meaning of that little gap in the wall made sense.



But still it was a surprise, as it was not until 1973 that the reservoir was opened to the public. Yet, here was an overlook and a stairway, built in 1935, that invited the visitor to enjoy the lakeside without hindrance. Curious.

Over the years, the left end of the wall has fallen away, victim of a small earth slide. But most of it, including the stairway, remains intact. It would take little effort to clear away the obscuring brush and earth and bring back this artifact to something like its original condition, providing a unique and historic amenity to the San Pablo Reservoir experience. As mentioned, the EBMUD staff, while aware of some of the activities of the CCC, were not aware of the existence of this wall, and were excited to learn of it. With the addition of a small interpretive exhibit, a small part of the CCC story in El Sobrante may yet be told.

EL SOBRANTE'S HERITAGE TREE – A NATIONAL RECORD HOLDER

By: Maurice P. Abraham

El Sobrante has its own Big Tree; not a Giant Redwood or Sequoia, but no less significant. It is a large Sargent Cypress (*Supressus Sargentii*) and is recognized by the National Register of Big Trees as the largest of its species known to exist in the United States. ¹

The age of the tree is estimated at approximately 150-years according to the coordinator of the California Register of Big Trees. This would place its beginnings to



around 1850-1860, the era of California's Gold Rush and Statehood and the U.S. Civil War. The tree was nominated to the Register by R. Nichols in 2001. It

measures 58 feet high, with a trunk circumference of 244 inches and a crown spread of 63 feet for a size-ranking total of 318 points. ²

This stately Cypress stands on the north-facing slopes of San Pablo Ridge adjacent to Clark Creek. While the tree is located in the El Sobrante Valley community, it is technically within Richmond's city limits. It

is situated a short distance east of the EBRPD trail that begins at the end of Clark Road. The EBRPD trail is a right-of-way over the private property on which the Sargent Cypress is located. ³ Therefore it's important that persons interested in viewing the tree be respectful of the private property by staying on or close to the trail, closing all gates and not harassing the livestock.

The National Register of Big Trees, a program of American Forests, lists about 800 champion trees nationwide. Of these, more than 80 are located in California, making them state champions as well. The California Register of Big Trees is a program of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection and the Northern and Southern California Societies of American Foresters. It maintains records for the largest specimen of each native and naturalized tree species growing in California.

Each registered big tree has its own history, its own story. We will never know the true history of this particular tree; did it occur naturally? If not, who planted it and why? And what natural disasters has it managed to survive?

However, it's not difficult to imagine the history this tree has witnessed these past 150-years as it stood in silent magnificence overlooking the El Sobrante Valley. It sprouted to life when California's early Mexican and European ranchers rode the surrounding hills and their cattle grazed the valley's abundant grasslands. Imagine if this tree could talk; it would surely have much to tell us.

¹ National Register of Big Trees:
<http://www.americanforests.org/our-programs/bigtree/>

² California Register of Big Trees:
<http://www.ufe.org/bigtrees/bigtreelist.lasso>

³ Canyon Park Friends of Open Space:
<http://www.saveelsobrantehills.org/photosmaps.html>

ESHS Hosts Chamber Mixer

On Wednesday, March 14, the ESHS hosted the monthly Chamber of Commerce mixer at the Mechanics Bank. Between 30 and 40 guests were in attendance,

doing ample justice to the excellent comestibles provided by



the Historical Society. Historian Donald Bastin spoke briefly about El Sobrante history and the newly-published *El Sobrante* history book. It is the hope of the Historical Society that our efforts to claim our past will help to inspire a greater sense of community pride.

Exhibit: Pieces of the Past

El Sobrante Library, January 17 thru February 28, 2012.



Through the generosity of long-time El Sobrante resident, Dorothy Philippi, the ESHS was able to put on

display a truly unique collection of Native American artifacts, collected right here along the banks of San Pablo Creek. The ancient site, on land belonging to the Philippi family, was excavated in 1950 by noted Berkeley archaeologist, Robert Heizer. Eleven burials were discovered, along with numerous stone implements. The Philippi family collected artifacts for years and these were recently examined by our own expert on Native American history, George Coles, who taught for years at Contra Costa College and has conducted many excavations of local sites. With this information in hand, we

displayed the Philippi collection, consisting of mortars, pestles, arrowheads, obsidian points, jewelry, net-sinkers, and charmstones. If you were able to see this display, consider yourself lucky, as these items were on loan for just a short time and may not be seen again. If you were one of the lucky ones, please let us know what you thought.

Thanks!

Exhibit: A Place For All Reasons

On display now, El Sobrante Library Periodical Room.



Ian Richards, Head Librarian, in front of current ESHS exhibit, Periodical Room.

A Place for all Reasons is a photo and text exhibit highlighting the history of the El Sobrante Library. Originally housed in the glass case in the library entrance-way, the exhibit is now a (more or less) permanent fixture in the Periodical Room. Next time you are in the library, step in and have a look!

Exhibit: Best Little Town by a Dam Site

On display now, Mechanics Bank

From Rancho to ranches to a real town. It's all here on one wall. Drop in to the Mechanics Bank in El Sobrante and get a 5-minute history lesson.



Marbles - King of the Play Ground

Steve James

There was a day when playing marbles ruled the elementary school playground for boys. In the fall of 1957, at Marie A. Murphy elementary school, I started the 4th.



It was my first year at Murphy. I completed K-3 grade at El Sobrante #1; from there



everyone went to Murphy for 4th through 6th grade, then on to De Anza for 7th to 12th grade. In those years the playground activity had the usual play areas.

Pennants donated by Kenyon Chan

On the asphalt were basketball hoops, kickball field outlines, four square, hop scotch, and tether ball. The dirt field had a baseball back stop, which was close to where the asphalt ended. In this area near the back stop is where the boys played marbles. It was limited to boys. The girls played their games. Boys played marbles.

The check list, before heading to the bus stop, was: lunch, marbles, and homework, in that order. Some boys had homemade marble bags, others just stuffed their pocket full. The assortment of marbles included cat eyes, pureys, aggie, and a boulder (larger than a regular marble) or two*. Among these you had your favorites. Your shooters and the ones you thought were the prettiest,

usually aggie and pureys. Cat eyes were at the bottom of the list and used in games of "keepers." Losing them in a game was no big deal.

There were various games we played. The basic one was a circle drawn in the dirt about six feet in diameter. All players would put up an equal amount of marbles in the circle by dropping them from waist high. Those were the object marbles. Who went first? This was decided by a lag line in the dirt. All player shot to the line. The closest was first, farthest away was last.

We would then take turns, using our shooters to knock an object marble out of the circle. If you knocked a marble out, you got to keep it. If your shooter stayed in the circle, you got to shoot again. The better players could make their shooter stick in the circle and get multiple object marbles in one turn. Of course, like any game, there were players that were better than others. Some boys could really control their shooter and clean out a circle of object marbles in no time.

Another game was chase. This game had a series of holes six to eight feet apart, with the pot hole at the end. Each player would ante up some marbles to the pot hole. The majority of object marbles were cat eyes. At a starting point you would then shoot to the first hole. If you got in the hole you got to shoot again. If you missed the next player shot. First one to the pot hole got the keep the object marbles.

At the end of the day some boys went home with more marbles, some with less, but tomorrow was always another day.

The list of marble names is mind-boggling. In addition to the puree, there was the (similar) peerie, which was another name for the clearey. There is even a name for the study of marbles—it is called **Mibology. __ Ed.*

60 Years Ago.

Excerpts *From the El Sobrante Herald*

January 17, 1952:

New Storm Starts Rumor of Impending Dam Disaster; Officials Watch Water Level

Ugly rumor has reared its head in El Sobrante since the recent storm washed out a portion of the Dam Road and has flooded several residents out. The fire department has been deluged with calls from anxious persons inquiring about the safety of the dam. Many of them had heard that it was ready to break after the heavy rains. Fire Chief Charlie Matteson stated that the fire department, in conjunction with the water company, is maintaining a watch on the dam and on the creek and will alert citizens if there is any sign of danger.

March 13, 1952:

Canyon Park Votes Yes on Street Lights

The proposed lighting district in Canyon Park passed at Tuesday's election with 88 votes for and 31 votes against lighting. A total of 17 lights is reported to be planned for Canyon Park, 16,400 watt lights distributed throughout the tract and one 600 watt light on the corner of Clark and Dam Road.

Bank Branch Petition Being Circulated Here

If enough names appear on the petition being circulated here by Bill Oliver to satisfy Mechanics Bank officers a new branch will be constructed in El Sobrante for the convenience of the public.

Oliver has circulated the petition among the business establishments here and will try to contact others personally also. The petition is now at Oliver's and at Ray and Jerry's on the Dam Road. Those wishing to sign the petition are asked to do so

immediately as Oliver will take it to the branch this weekend.

April 3, 1952:

Sheldon School Granted Final Apportionment

An apportionment of \$220, 406.86 was made to the Sheldon School district Wednesday afternoon. . . . The total cost of the new project will be \$285,507.84. The first step taken on this project was in the early part of 1949 when Lester Skow called the community mass meeting to discuss Sheldon's school building problems. At that time enrollment was approximately 60 students as compared to almost 300 now. The new school should be ready in the fall.

May 1, 1952:

\$5,000 Robbery of Parakeets at Moore Aviary

A \$5,000 robbery of approximately 500 prize and breeder parakeets took place sometime Wed. night at the M and P Aviaries, 4725 Appian Way, when thieves wreaked considerable damage and left several hundred other birds to die. . . . No insurance was carried on the prize stock. . . . Moore stated that he has been unable to meet the demand for parakeets and at present has \$3,000 in back orders.

June 5, 1952:

Saturday Night Variety Show for the Family to Help Build New St. Callistus Church

Performers in the St. Callistus Variety Show will play to a full house at the Park Theatre Saturday night the program committee disclosed yesterday after a tabulation of ticket sales were made. The non-profit show is being staged to help swell the building fund of the new St. Callistus Catholic Church. Plans call for construction to begin June 15.

Recent Acquisitions:

Slide Rule, De Ana High School, c. 1958
Foster's Freeze Menu, 1970s
De Anza High architectural review, 1954
De Anza High 1979 Reunion Souvenir
Thanks to Maurice Abraham

3 School Pennants (El Sobrante Elementary,
Marie A. Murphy, De Anza High School)
Thanks to Kenyon Chan

1983 El Sobrante Chamber Newsletter
1971 copy of the Richmond Independent
Thanks to Bob Letford

Visit us on **Facebook**. Comment on the photos and the posted memories of current and former El Sobrante residents.

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.

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.

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: **ESHIST.ORG**
Questions, Comments, and other communication? Send to: ESHISTORY@GMAIL.COM

*The El Sobrante Historical Society wishes to acknowledge the generous donation of \$50 made by Martha Chan in memory of her late husband, Gene. Gene and Martha Chan were the proprietors of **Manor Market**, from 1952 through 1988.*