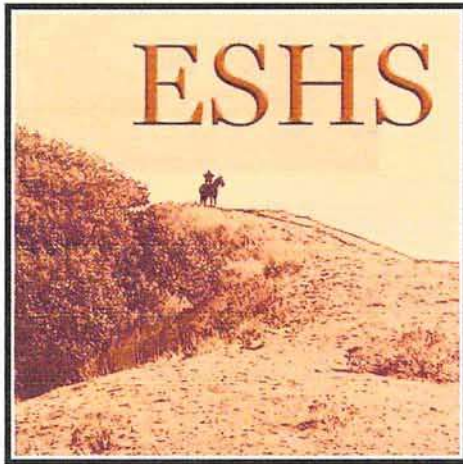


# El Sobrante History Walk

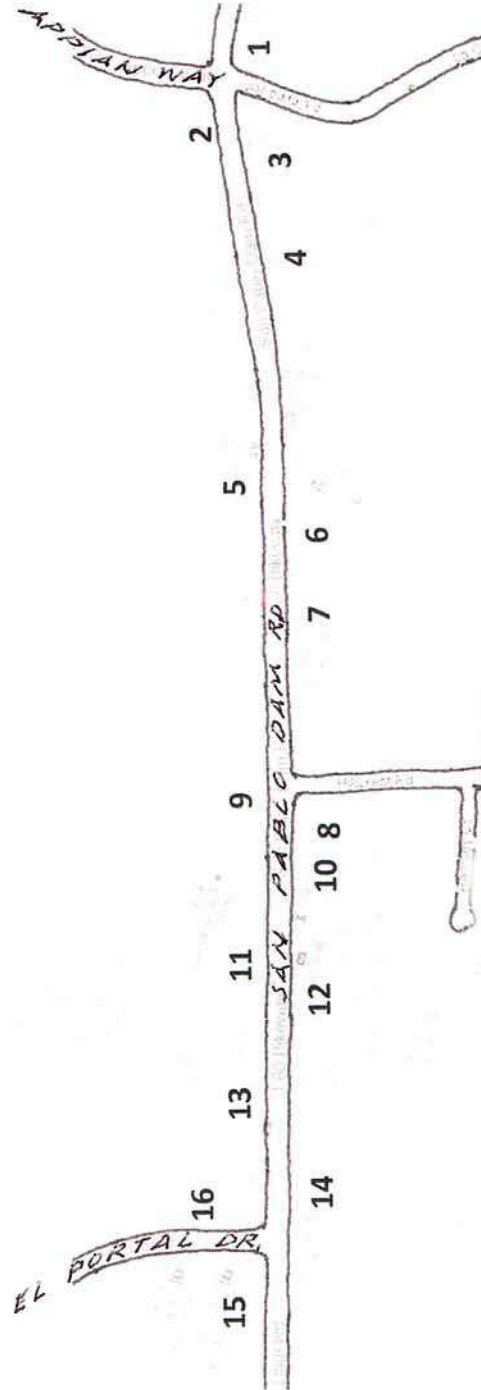
A Self-guided tour of historic places  
along the El Sobrante Stroll route



Presented by

The El Sobrante Historical Society

September 16, 2012



**ELSOBRANTE STROLL HISTORY WALK – Along San Pablo Dam Road beginning at Appian Way and ending at El Portal Drive**

**1. CALIFORNIA & NEVADA RAILROAD**

As you stroll the San Pablo Dam Road you are retracing a seldom know piece of El Sobrante’s history; the approximate route of the C&N Railroad. Along the Stroll route the tracks roughly followed San Pablo Dam Road (formerly San Pablo Creek Road) between the road and the San Pablo Ridge hillsides.

The C&N operated between the towns of Emery (now Emeryville) and Orinda between 1885 and 1900. It was planned to end in Candelaria, Nevada to link with the Carson & Colorado Railroad (eventually the Denver & Rio Grande). The train was primarily run for weekend excursions. After suffering numerous costly landslides through the El Sobrante Valley, the railroad was eventually forced into bankruptcy and foreclosed upon. Emeryville founder and Industrialist, Joseph Stickney Emery, President of the Oakland Railroad Company was a C&N stockholder and one of the leading forces behind the railroads beginning.



*Fireman George Pope (L,) and Engineer H. Aleck Robertson (R), with Engine No 3, “Mt. Diablo”. Photo taken at Tewksbury Hill below today’s Raley’s shopping center. Circa. 1894.*

**2. OLIVER’S CEHVRON STATION AND HARDWARE (now Valero Service Station)**

This location has for nearly 70 years enjoyed the same use, but the old building was replaced with a new, modern Chevron Station, most recently

changed to Valero. The hardware store moved to the neighboring former Pete’s Club building, rebuilt after being destroyed by fire. For most of that period, these properties have been under the ownership of the Oliver family. The hardware store is now Ace Hardware and still in the Oliver family. It is operated by Richard Oliver.



*Oliver’s Chevron circa 1950...and remodeled façade circa 1952.*

**3. FIRST FRY’S FOOD STORE & A FRY’S ELECTRONICS CONNECTION (now Jack-in-the Box).**



*Ray & Jerry’s Market, prior to it becoming store No. 1 of the Fry’s Food Store’s chain. Circa. 1952*

Could brother’s Donald and Charles Fry ever have imagined what their humble 1955 El Sobrante beginnings would one day lead to? Starting in the former Ray and Jerry’s market that once stood at this location, the brother’s built a chain of Fry’s Food Stores that by 1961 had grown to 41 stores.

In 1961 they sold to California based Save Mart Supermarkets for \$14 million.

But the Fry's legacy doesn't end there. The history of this site is also linked to the popular Fry's Electronics stores. From his share of the business sale proceeds, Charles Fry gifted each of his three sons \$1 million. The oldest son, John, then persuaded his brothers to pool their capital and together they founded the now highly successful chain of Fry's Electronics stores in Sunnyvale, CA. Just think; It all began right here in El Sobrante.

4. **EL SOBRANTE CHEVROLET GARAGE** (now El Sobrante Wheel and Brake)

The El Sobrante Wheel and Brake building is one of the oldest remaining buildings in the San Pablo Dam Road business district. It was originally built in 1946 by Charles Deabenderfer for his El Sobrante Chevrolet Service Garage and has changed little over the years. The building has been in continuous use as an auto repair shop. Among those that came after Deabenderfer were Auto Service Center & Freemans Towing, Dean Brothers Auto Repair and Wright's Safety Lane. In 1974, Lyle Miller Sr. purchased the building and business, continuing under the Wright name for about two years. The name was then changed to El Sobrante Wheel and Brake. Since 1987 the business has operated under the watchful eye of Miller's sons, Lyle Jr. and David.



5. **EL SOBRANTE'S FIRST FREE-STANDING POST OFFICE** (now Wadsworth Glass)



This building was the third location of El Sobrante's Post Office. The first location was in a local variety store, then in a local grocery store. In 1957, it moved to this location and became a full-service facility. Having once again outgrown its facility, it was relocated to its current larger facility on Appian Way near "the curve".

6. **MECHANICS BANK** (first El Sobrante location, now The Pedaler).

This building was the Mechanic's Bank's first El Sobrante location. Constructed in 1955, the bank served the local community from this location until 1976, when they opened the new and larger facility just a few doors south, its current location. Beyond the building's faux roof facade and splashy wall graphics stands a fine example of mid-century modern design, a recognized architectural genre rooted in southern California and enthusiastically preserved in communities across the country.



*The original Mechanics Bank El Sobrante Branch was classic mid-century modern design.*

- 7. FOSTER'S FREEZE** (now a Subway store).  
 This building was actually the second location of Foster's Freeze in El Sobrante (See no. 17 below). Ernest and Hazel Coryell ran the Foster's franchise at this location from 1958 until 1961. Wanting to retire, the Coryell's sold the business to their son Gene and his wife Joanne in 1961, and the younger Coryell's operated it until 1974. Foster's will be fondly remembered by people who lived in El Sobrante during those years. It was particularly notable as a favorite 'hangout' of the youth of that era.



*This building, El Sobrante's second Foster's Freeze, will soon reopen as a Subway franchise.*

- 8. PARK THEATER BUILDING** (now Peniel Baptist Church)  
 El Sobrante's first and only movie theater, the Park, opened in 1949 with its first film, "Yes Sir, That's My Baby" starring Donald O'Connor. Owned and operated by Richard "Dick" Jeha, the Park was state of the art at the time, featuring reclining lounge seats not found in established theaters of the day. It also featured first run movies. The Park, however, was more than just a movie theater; the theater periodically hosted local talent shows and beauty competitions as well as regular Friday night Bingo games.



*Although still in place after reopening as a church, The Park Theater sign was eventually removed.*

- 9. NATIVE AMERICANS IN EL SOBRANTE VALLEY** (opposite the Park Theater building)  
 Opposite the former Park Theater, San Pablo Creek meanders very close to San Pablo Dam road, making it clearly visible. Imagine this location before the first Europeans, Captain Pedro Fages and Father Juan Crespi, made contact here in 1772 with local Native Americans, later known as the Huichiu. It has been estimated that Native American activity in the El Sobrante Valley dates back some 7,000 years! The discovery of burial and shell mounds alongside the creek indicate that this waterway, a direct connection from the valley to San Pablo Bay, was a favorite place for semi-permanent Native American settlements. Seasonal salmon runs and the presence of clean, fresh water made the valley ideal for settlements as did the presence throughout the valley of wild berries, acorns, grains and abundant wildlife.



- 10. ORIGINAL PARK PHARMACY** (@ Peniel Baptist Church)  
 The small boarded up building adjacent to the former Park Theater building was the first location of El Sobrante's Park Pharmacy, operated then by Robert Jeha, brother of the theater owner, Dick Jeha. When Robert built the new and larger pharmacy at its current location, this building became part of the theater lobby, providing a larger and more extensive snack and refreshment bar.
- 11. ARCHITECTS COLLAORATIVE OFFICE** (now the Accountancy & Tax Office).  
 Architect John C. Wilson and his architect wife,



Linda, established their office at this location in the late 1950's, providing design services to the local community and beyond for many years. The firm is most notable locally for designing the El Sobrante Library, done in collaboration with Berkeley architect (and former El Sobrante resident) Robert Chan. The firm also designed the El Sobrante Boys and Girls Club building.



The El Sobrante Library building also serves as the meeting place of several local civic organizations.

12. **FOSTER'S FREEZE** (now the site of Park Pharmacy).

In 1951, El Sobrante's original Foster's Freeze opened in a new building at this location in what is now the Park Pharmacy parking lot. Free ice cream was the highlight of its grand opening, and many of the customers that day arrived on horseback. Ernest and Hazel Coryell operated the Foster's franchise here until 1958 when they expanded into a new and larger store which they built nearby (see site #7).



*People on horseback were a common sight along San Pablo Dam Road, even into the early 1950s.*

13. **SKATE WORLD SKATING RINK** (now Thrift Town).

Local roller skating professional, Charles "Chic" Young relocated his San Pablo roller rink to this new building in Early January, 1973 to make way for a new K-Mart center. He operated the El Sobrante rink for several years at this location. The building was later leased to Thrift Town. Young operated a roller rink in Richmond's Alvarado Park prior to opening his San Pablo rink.



14. **SAFeway STORE** (now a Walgreens store).



*This photo depicts the Safeway store in Lovelock, NV, identical to the former El Sobrante store.*

A modern Safeway store was constructed on this site in the late 1950s. Competition in the grocery

industry and a quickly expanding product line pushed chain grocers into ever larger stores. This brought the closure not only of Safeway but a Lucky store across from De Anza High School, a big loss to the El Sobrante Community. Residents no longer had the convenience of closer-in stores and had to travel farther for their groceries. After its closure and following extensive remodeling,, the building became a County Social Services Agency office. It later was converted to its current Walgreens use. Behind the store façade you see today are the “bones” of a 1960s Safeway and its trademark arched roof.

15. **EL SOBRANTE HERALD BEE-PRESS BUILDING** (NW corner of San Pablo Dam Road and El Portal)  
 El Sobrante’s first and only local newspaper, the Herald was published at this location from 1947 to 1976. For 25 years, from 1947 to 1972, Ed Galli published and edited 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 November 1963 assassination). Mr. Galli, was an enthusiastic cheerleader for the El Sobrante during these years. The original single-story El Sobrante Bee-Press building was extensively renovated and added to in later years bringing it to its current appearance. Mr. Galli and his wife had their home behind today’s Park Pharmacy building.



*El Sobrante’s only local newspaper, the Herald, was published at this location.*

16. **BENINGER BUS COMPANY** (Now El Sobrante Bicycle Shop).

El Sobrante’s first regular bus service operated out of this location beginning in the mid-1950s. Owner –operator, Russell Beninger, provided regular connections from numerous El Sobrante neighborhoods, through San Pablo and into what was then a vibrant downtown Richmond. The small, well-worn Beninger fleet, while lacking in both creature comforts and mechanical reliability, was nevertheless welcomed by El Sobrante residents and frequently-used. Beninger’s fledging enterprise ceased operations in 1960 when the Alameda-Contra Costa Transit District (AC Transit) extended its service into the community.



*The Beninger Bus Company, El Sobrante’s first bus system, operated out of this location.*

17. **HILL VIEW CENTER**

This little strip mall, El Sobrante’s first, was opened in July of 1960, to much fanfare. While businesses have come and gone over the years, the buildings and the sign remain unchanged. The photo was taken in 1975.



**We hope you’ve enjoyed this short tour and that you’ve learned a few new facts about the El Sobrante Community’s History. Visit us anytime at [www.eshist.org](http://www.eshist.org). You can also become a member (no charge) there and receive our quarterly newsletter.**

**El Sobrante Historical Society**