

# THE LEFTOVERS

Published by the El Sobrante Historical Society

Issue #17

Winter 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: [eshistory@gmail.com](mailto:eshistory@gmail.com). Thanks!*

## Happy New Year



The little fellow at the left appeared in the final edition of the *El Sobrante Herald* 60 years ago, on December 29, 1955. The coming New Year was heralded with a lot of rain and many huge construction projects underway, which would change the look and feel of our rural, but rapidly growing community. The rain was already having an impact on the recently-completed Montera housing project, located along Hillcrest Drive. Several mudslides had seriously damaged many of the homes, and several families would be forced to evacuate. Lawsuits would ensue, which were carried on for months (more about this project in a later issue). Mudslides, it would seem, were a permanent feature of the surrounding hillsides, and would become a recurring theme of future developments.

After several years in the planning, work was finally going ahead on the widening (to four lanes) of the San Pablo Dam Road, and the building of an entirely new road along the San Pablo Reservoir. At the same time, planning was going forward on the building of a new freeway to bypass the old Highway 40; this was just a small part of the gigantic highway

program begun during the Eisenhower Administration, and which would forever change the way people moved in the U.S. and how they viewed the automobile as a way of traveling fast and far.

Naturally, construction projects inevitably lead to detours and delay. Of particular irritation to the local population was the closing of China Hill to through traffic, due to the widening of the San Pablo Dam Road from San Pablo Avenue. So many drivers had ignored the detour signs that local police and the Highway Patrol started issuing tickets on a regular basis. One 55 year-old resident by the name of Charles Milner was so incensed by being ticketed that he set up his own road block before the construction site and accosted oncoming motorists with the following message:

*Hey, the cops up there are giving out tickets. I'm saving you a \$5 fine. I'm unemployed. You give me a dollar so I can pay mine."*

When ordered by the police to move his car, Mr. Milner refused, and was arrested. Judge Wilson Locke assessed a 30-day sentence, which was suspended.

The arresting officer reported that Milner had \$4 in his hand, "apparently collected," the *Herald* reported, "from cooperative motorists who saw eye-to-eye with the driver's pitch."

The winter was also the start of the polio season, and with it, the annual March of Dimes campaign to combat this terrible disease. As it turned out, this would probably be one of the last of the big pushes to raise money to fight polio; just the year before, in April of 1955, Dr. Jonas Salk had perfected his polio vaccine (with significant support from the March of Dimes). But the fight was not over. Many children and adults still suffered from the disease, and the effort to vaccinate every child in the country was on-going. Heading the fight

in El Sobrante, as she had for many years, was Teresa Banducci, wife of Ed Banducci, owner of Ed's Tavern. But the big news was the extraordinary trek, to raise money for the March of Dimes campaign, of Richmond police officer Joe Olvera, and his little burro Bonita.



Olvera, a naturalized citizen who was born in Mexico, wanted "to do something for my adopted country," he said. So with his burro he began his walking journey from Los Angeles to El Sobrante, taking 31 days to make the trip. Everywhere he was greeted with police escorts, bands and parades, and the visits of school children, many of whom were let out of school to meet the now-famous policeman. He managed to raise around \$14,000, which was a very large sum (about the price of a new house at the time). In the photo above, Joe is in middle, with his burro to his left, along with Mrs. Banducci. El Sobrante *Herald* publisher Ed Galli is the other man in the picture.

According to officer Olvera, Bonita was not very cooperative at first: "I had trouble with her for the first five days until I learned that she didn't like to be led. At Bakersfield I found out she wanted me to follow and after that everything was dandy."

"It was a tough go but it was worth it," said the weary traveler.

## El Sobrante's Canyon Park and Rancho Vista Neighborhoods The "Flat-top" Smith Legacy

*Maurice Abraham*

Earl Smith, one of the Bay Area's largest post-war home builders, was an early influence on two nationally acclaimed builders, California's Joseph Eichler and Kansas City Builder, Donald Drummond. Eichler and Drummond homes from the 1950s and '60s today have a dedicated, cult-like following of owners -- many artists, designers, architects, and realtors among them -- who appreciate their open plans, post-and-beam structure, and expansive glass.

In the early 1950s, Earl Smith's homes stood out; he employed flat roofs on his houses, a choice that earned him the nickname "Flat Top" Smith. It was those Earl Smith home designs that initially inspired Eichler and Drummond to start building unconventionally modern tract homes. And those



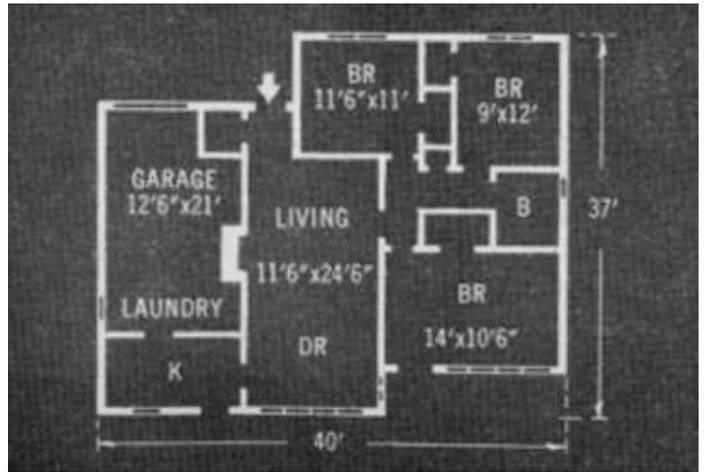
milestone Smith designs can be seen locally in El Sobrante's Canyon Park and Rancho Vista subdivisions. Canyon Park, a relatively secluded early 1950s neighborhood of modest flat-roofed



homes, is situated just southwest of the San Pablo Dam Road and Clark Road intersection. Rancho Vista, completed about the same time, or a little earlier, is just west of the San Pablo Dam Road and El Portal intersection. The photo above shows the Rancho Vista project (also called the Serpa Tract) in 1950. In the distance can be seen the old Rancho Elementary School, which opened in the same year. At the left, is a photo, taken in 1973 (a rainy year, it seems), of a home in the Canyon Park subdivision.

Joseph Eichler studied the construction techniques of Earl Smith, especially the poured concrete floors and flat roofs Smith had used in constructing defense worker's housing in Richmond. He would go on to use the Smith flat-roof design for his earliest housing development, 104-unit Sunnyvale Manor, in the South Bay's Sunnyvale community. For Donald Drummond, it would be his wife that would first see a Smith flat-top and introduce the design to him.

During a 1951 visit to San Francisco, Francie Drummond met "Flat-top" Smith and toured his East Bay houses. She was quite impressed, particularly by the way his new house plan functioned, and returned home to Kansas City with copies of Smith's flat-top plans. Don liked what he saw and began building flat-top homes from Smith's design. However, Kansas City's more harsh weather demanded changes in materials and structure, but the overall Smith design was not compromised. The vintage photos shown here are a Smith model and floor plan of that era.

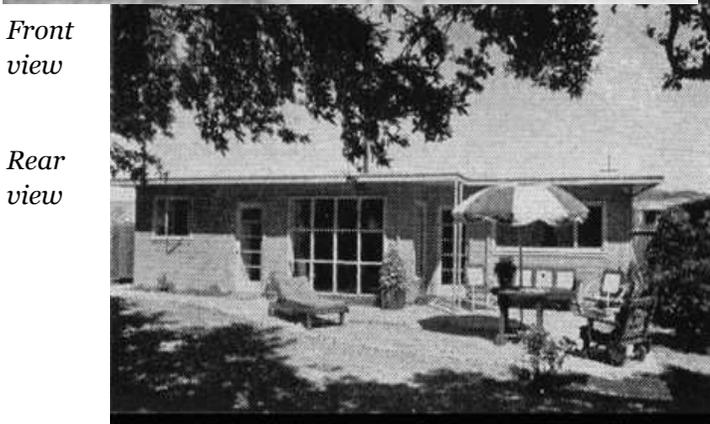


*Typical home floor plan for an Earl Smith home from the 1950s*

In the early 1950s Bay Area, Earl "Flat-top" Smith had achieved remarkable volume with his modestly modern houses; he built 2700 new homes in 1953 in over fourteen different Bay Area cities. Smith's 1953 houses ranged in price from \$7000 to just over \$8,000, while Eichler's Bay Area models during that year cost between \$14,000 and \$20,000. In time, both Eichler and Drummond dropped the original Smith design in favor of a more modern and pricier architect-designed product. The Eichler firm built over 11,000 homes in both Northern and Southern California; the Drummond firm, building in a smaller more conservative market, constructed 1,100 homes. Both builders clearly left a lasting legacy.



*Front view*



*Rear view*



*A mid-'50s South Bay Eichler Home*

There is yet another fascinating, albeit indirect, connection to Earl Smith and his Canyon Park homes. His unusual flat-top homes appear to

have been inspired in part by the work of architectural-great Frank Lloyd Wright. Earl Smith's use of the flat-roof with wide overhangs, large windows that visually brought outdoors in and concrete slab-on-grade floor with radiant heating were all characteristic of Wright's "Usonian Homes".

The "Usonian Homes" were a group of approximately sixty middle-income family homes designed by Wright beginning in 1936 with the Jacobs House in Madison, Wisconsin and widely dispersed throughout the United States. The "Usonian Homes" were typically small, single-story dwellings without a garage or much storage, L-shaped to fit around a garden terrace on odd (and cheap) lots, with native materials, flat roofs and large cantilevered overhangs for passive solar heating and natural cooling, natural lighting with clerestory windows, and radiant-floor heating.



A 1930s "Usonian" Home

A strong visual connection between the interior and exterior spaces is an important characteristic of all "Usonian Homes".

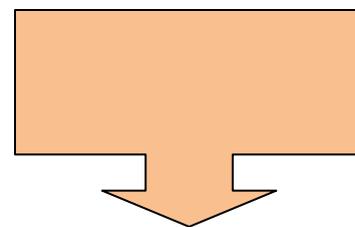
Variants of the Jacobs House design are still in existence today and do not look overly dated. The Usonian design is considered among the aesthetic origins of the popular "ranch" tract home popular in the American West of the 1950s.

There is also documented evidence of Wright's influence on Joseph Eichler and his homes. In

1943, Eichler moved his family into a rented Wright-designed home (the 1939 Bazett House) in Hillsborough, California. About living in that Wright house, Eichler once said, "I admired Wright's rich design, with its wooden walls and beamed ceiling, and I asked myself if such houses could be built for ordinary people."

However, neither Smith's nor Eichler's early homes could approach the overall design, character and quality of Wright's homes. After all, they were mass producing homes for the average post-war buyer, not for the more financially well-off market that eagerly sought out Wright's talent. What Smith and Eichler clearly did do was borrow certain design elements (flat roofs, wide overhangs, large glass areas) and construction details (slab floors with radiant heat, open beam ceilings) that could be cost-effectively incorporated into a mass-market product.

Knowing the origin of El Sobrante's Canyon Park and Rancho Vista neighborhoods casts their homes in a new light. While many of the flat-tops have been extensively altered, including pitched roofs and in some instances second stories added, some well preserved and maintained examples still exist, and owners of the remaining flat-top homes may gain a new appreciation for the heritage of their home and their neighborhood. That appreciation may inspire continued preservation and restoration of these homes to their original character. And those home buyers inclined toward mid-century modern design might find the Canyon Park and Rancho Vista neighborhoods an attractive, affordable choice to buy into.



## Do You Remember La Honda Bowl?

*Editor's Note: The following letter was sent to us a few years back, asking about the La Honda Bowl site, for decades one of the most popular recreation areas in El Sobrante. Sadly, the El Sobrante Historical Society has very little in terms of artifacts, photos, or documents relating to this important site. The letter is here reproduced because of its inherent interest and to generate reader response, leading, hopefully, to the recovery of images and other important items.*

Gentlemen,

I recently found out about the existence of the El Sobrante Historical Society while trying to trace the source of a video of El Sobrante from the 1950's. Last night my sister sent me an email of your news letter. I LOVE it!



*ESHS Photo*

FYI--- It was located on the corner of Valley View and the San Pablo Dam Road. Banducci's Bar occupied the corner on the upper side on the left as you entered the Dam Road from Valley View; the La Honda Bowl property was on the right--bordered by Valley View and the Dam Road. Part of the property was at creek level and continued up a (slope?) hill? on the right side of Valley View.

I think of all the places that I know of in El Sobrante, the La Honda Bowl may possibly be one of the locations with the most 'colorful' past.

When my sisters and I were kids, my Dad and Mom were friends with the owners, Ed and Peggy Smith. My Dad and Ed became friends when Ed owned a Richfield gas station in San Pablo, (probably sometime in the 50's - maybe

late 40's) but during the days of prohibition, Ed was a police commissioner. He knew about the La Honda Bowl because it was a Speakeasy at that time and the police had raided it fairly often. I don't know when he and Peggy bought the property, but I know they lived there during the 50's. They rented the cave to many organizations (unions, etc) and college groups to use for parties. Peggy passed away sometime in the mid-fifties. Ed lived there until his death several years later.

Peggy and Ed had one daughter (If I remember right- she was the only child). When Ed passed away she came and cleaned everything out. My sister said she thinks everything was just thrown away. What a shame!

My sister and brother-in-law (Mona and Don Westbrook) lived in the old streetcar on the lower side of the property when they were first married (1959) and moved into the house after Ed's passing. The house was across a small creek and up an incline from the streetcar.

The greatest part of historical interest was the cave under the house that had been the Speakeasy. When you stepped out the front door of the house, there was a covered area (like a hallway) where there were two doorways. The first led onto a dance floor with stairs at the far side going down into the cave. The second opening was the beginning of a slide that went down, curved and set you out on the floor at the bottom inside the cave. The slide was always fun for us as kids and even more fun to send someone down the slide and have them end up in pitch darkness not knowing that the cave was there. The cave did have dim lighting but it was more fun to send them down into the darkness and **THEN** turn on the lights! It took a few minutes for your eyes to adjust so you could see that there was very dim light coming in from the outside.

(From the bottom of the slide) on the right side of the cave was a small stage area; straight ahead was the bar; next to it an opening that went to the kitchen, storage, bathrooms and an outside exit; (there were about 5 different exits- they must have had people running in all different directions during those raids!) next to

that is where the stairs from the dance floor above came down and to the left of that was the entrance to a tunnel. The tunnel opened to the outside down close to the little creek. The tunnel was lined with corrugated metal panels. I'm not sure if this is fact or just a story, but I remember hearing that during the speakeasy days, there were slot machines set into the walls of the tunnel and the metal panels were used to hide them.

Across the creek was where the streetcar was that my sister lived in. At the back of the lower area was a big building that had been a dance hall, at the entrance of the driveway an old gate house (or guard house) and near the creek before getting to the outside entrance to the tunnel was a swimming pool that was full of dirt with just a trace of it still showing. I don't know what year it was, but my sister said the reservoir had gotten too full and in order to keep it from overflowing, they had let too much water out---too fast and it raised the level of the creek,

flooding the pool. It ended up full of mud and was just left that way.



*Firemen Al Valentine and Sparky Sanders pumping out the La Honda Bowl pool, early 1950s. ESHS Photo.*

I moved to Oregon in 1963, but my youngest sister still lives in the Bay Area. She said a developer bought the La Honda Bowl property a long time ago. They tore down the house and put in a lot of fill so they could develop the property, so the La Honda Bowl is buried and gone. We didn't get pictures of the cave, house, streetcar, etc. at the time, so other than a few instances where parts of a few of the buildings are in the background of family photos there is nothing left of the La Honda Bowl as we knew it. I wonder how many others remember it or have pictures or memories to share? We are hoping, if you are interested, that you may be able to trace this historical El

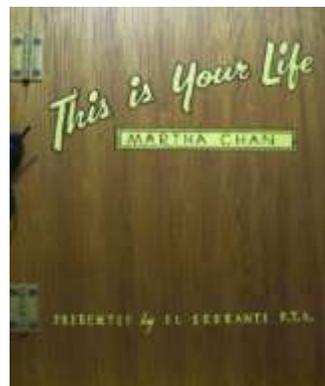
Sobrante site. We don't have any idea how to go about it, however my oldest sister, Mona said she would be glad to try to locate the few photos she has that were taken there and also write down any information that she and her husband Don know on the subject.  
Best Regards,  
Betty Wisbey (Brannon)

## **New Acquisition: Martha Chan Collection**

Some time back, we highlighted the life of Kenyon Chan, who grew up in El Sobrante and went on to become the president of a college in Washington State. Now retired, he cares for his mother, now in her 90s. Martha Chan, along with her husband Gene, owned and operated the Manor Market on Manor Road in El Sobrante, from 1952 to 1988. Both were very active in local affairs. Martha was especially active in the local PTA, and kept detailed records from her work in the 1950s to the 1970s. She recently donated her collection of community action materials, consisting of paper documents, newspaper clippings, and photographs.



*Mr. & Mrs. Chan, De Anza High School, 1965*



*Martha Chan was awarded an honorary life membership in the PTA for her dedicated service to children in El Sobrante*

Until we received this donation, we had no whole-building photograph of the old Manor Market when it was under the management of the Chan family. This collection contained several images of the store in the early 1950s, one of which can be seen below.



*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.*



*Here is a photo of the store as it appears today. Note the stairs at the side which lead to the living area above the store.*

We are very grateful to Martha Chan and her son Kenyon for this donation, which constitutes a valuable contribution to our understanding of community affairs during a formative time in the development of El Sobrante.

### ESHS Steering Committee:

#### 1. Maurice Abraham:

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#### 2. Donald Bastin:

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#### 3. Steve James:

Membership and Communication Secretary;

#### 4. Lyle Miller:

Community Liaison and general support.

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