

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!



Richmond Symphony Orchestra, Opening Day, Kennedy Grove, October 22, 1967

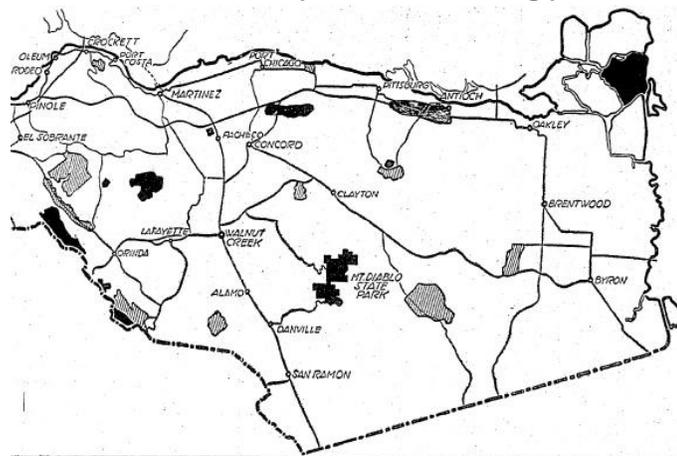
**Kennedy Grove—First Park in
El Sobrante** *Donald Bastin*

Kennedy Grove Park opened in 1967, but the idea of a local county park dates back to at least 1953, and possibly earlier. According to our

local newspaper, the *El Sobrante Herald*, the “County Park & Recreation Council” met in mid December of 1953 to “point out the need for future park sites in Contra Costa County.” It is not entirely clear what authority the “council” had, but it appears to have been an unpaid advisory group. As such, it pointed out its concern that the county “does not see the necessity of acquiring park sites before they are gone.” The council went on to identify a few sites which were suitable and available, and which included the Briones area.

It would be nearly three years before action was taken on the council’s recommendation. In October of 1956, the *Herald* reported that the County and EBMUD had come to an agreement on the purchase of 1,425 acres of land in the Briones Valley, at a cost of \$550,000. Unfortunately, the county had only \$75,000 in its park fund, so the plan was to pay for the property over a 10-year period. A contract was negotiated and approved in February of the next year, but it was pointed out that no portion of the park could be opened for at least three years, pending construction of roadways and other facilities.

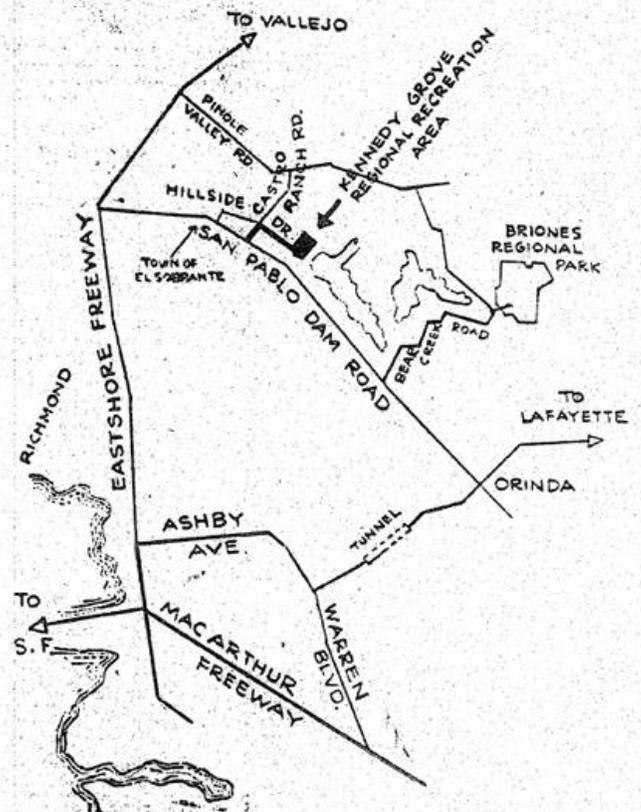
Another three years would go by before we hear any more about county parks. In December of 1959, the *Herald* reported that the county was setting up its “first park department,” with a paid “park director” whose job would commence in January of the following year.



Map of planned County Parks

The need for parkland had clearly grown, as the county was now considering the purchase of 4,900 acres of land, in addition to the Briones property, for a total expenditure of \$2,500,000. A bond issue was suggested as the most likely mode of raising the necessary revenue. Nonetheless, we hear nothing about a possible opening of Briones Park.

It was not until over three years later, in June of 1963, that the *Herald* reported the following news: “The Eucalyptus Grove, situated immediately northwest of the El Sobrante end of the San Pablo Reservoir, is scheduled to become the county’s first public park.” Like the Briones property, the land was owned by EBMUD, which agreed to sell the 95 acres for a total price of \$125,000. Work on improving the site would begin as soon as the transfer was completed. The eucalyptus grove, (later to be named Kennedy Grove) was already used as a park site by the Recreation Department of Richmond and by local Boy Scout troops. One element of the plan, which would prove to be problematic in the future, was the location of the park entrance, at the end of Hillside Drive.



Increased traffic along this quiet residential street would eventually lead to a new entrance being constructed off San Pablo Dam Road.

At this time, the Briones property was still not fully paid off, and funding for the additional acreage and for improvements was still an unsolved problem for the county.

Money problems finally doomed the county park system. By late 1963, while the parks commission had requested \$882,000 for parks development, only \$299,000 had been approved. The commission threw in the towel, and formally requested that the county be incorporated into the East Bay Regional Park District (EBRPD), an organization that had years of experience in developing parks (established in 1934) and was much better at raising funds for park development. Though the Board of Supervisors opposed the plan, the matter was turned over to the county commission on annexations (LAFCO). Following their anticipated approval, the matter would go to the voters.

The election on the park transfer went to the voters on June 2, 1964 and passed overwhelmingly, having the support of virtually all concerned groups. A month later, the Board of Directors of EBRPD made it official. Contra Costa County was now part of the East Bay Regional Parks system. But it would still be over three years before El Sobrante would have its own park.

By February of 1966, a drawing of the new park (now named Kennedy Grove, in honor of the late president), was available, showing picnic areas and passive and active play areas. A few months later, in spite of much local opposition, the park entrance at the end of Hillside Drive was officially approved, with a vote of 6 to 1 of the directors. The cost of an alternate entrance from the San Pablo Dam Road was deemed prohibitive, and director Paul Badger felt that

“we would be criticized for spending this kind of money to benefit 400-500 people.”

In early May of 1966, the county officially abolished the position of County Park Director.

By April of 1967, work on Kennedy Grove had advanced to the point that an opening date in early August was predicted. That was later pushed ahead to a date of September 22. But the usual delays set this date back to October 22. Such a late date in the year brought up fears that rain might spoil the opening festivities, necessitating a move to De Anza High School. But the weather proved to be fine.

Events were scheduled all day, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. at Kennedy Grove. For the first two hours, a camping demonstration was put on by



local boy scouts. At 11 a.m., an inter-

denominational church service, with a choir, was offered; the service was conducted by Reverend Franklin Scott, of the El Sobrante Community Methodist Church. The rest of the day consisted of music interspersed with speeches.

The first musical group to play was the Salesian High



School Band, directed by Father Innocent Clementi. This group held forth for about an

hour, and was followed by a flag-raising ceremony.

Following the Salesian High School Band was a “Pops” concert by the Richmond Symphony Orchestra, conducted by musical director William Jackson. Their primary offering was a Tchaikovsky piece, the piano concerto in “B Flat Minor.”

At 3:30 p.m., the dedication address was delivered by State Senator George Miller Jr., (the father of George Miller III, who recently retired from the U. S. Congress). We have a



copy of the Senator’s address, which was a long one, and which contains many

interesting and compelling points. For instance, he points out that this is the first time in his 21 years of state service that he has participated in the dedication of a park: “We have dedicated a lot of monstrous freeways. We have dedicated some mighty ugly bridges; . . . some monstrous buildings. . . . with all the other things we do . . . we spend so little time and so comparatively few dollars attempting to utilize and maintain that which God made.” He also complained that much money had been spent on acquiring land for parks in the state, but not much had been allocated for improvement and maintenance: “Over half of the State park lands in the State of California today, I am ashamed to say, have ‘keep out’ signs on them.” What was needed, he insisted, was a greater emphasis on park development, especially in urban areas: “The need for physical activity is increasingly recognized as

essential for everyone. The average American will swim and golf, and even take a hike, or ride a bicycle. But I think we must remember, too, that if there is no open space or recreation amid dense populations the ‘sports’ can sometimes become pretty deadly.” For a speech given almost 50 years ago, Miller’s comments sound very timely.

Following Senator Miller’s speech, there was another musical interlude, featuring the Richmond Symphony, playing “Musical Comedy Favorites.” Several more speakers took the podium, including Assemblyman John Knox, of Richmond. The day was capped by some musical offerings from the Lee Schipper Jazz Quintet.

It should be noted that the opening of Kennedy Grove was also the occasion of the dedication of the new Briones Park, which by this time

had expanded to 3,100 acres.



Senator Miller with John Briones, 94 year-old descendant of the Briones family.

But much remained to do before Briones

Park was ready for use. Irwin Luckman, General Manager of the Park District indicated that development would “take some time.” But soon to come were additional parks, including Las Trampas, Brooks Island, Contra Loma, Nortonville, Wildcat Canyon, and others.

But Kennedy Grove was now open and was a success from the start. The *Herald* reported that all the picnic areas were filled with family groups, and “hundreds” of children played on the lawn.

With the formal opening of Kennedy Grove, the county, and El Sobrante, had its first regional park. Through the years it has always been popular, but some problems took time to resolve. The main sticking point continued to be the Hillside Drive entrance.

By September of 1969, almost two years after the park's opening, the residents of Hillside Drive, Patra Drive, and Heidi Court submitted a petition, containing 119 signatures, to the Park District; copies went to the Board of Supervisors, the Sheriff's Office, the CHP, and the County Grand Jury. The problems listed included drag racing, burglaries, and a growing narcotic problem (the petition noted that the park had become a "convenient nest for POT PARTIES and related acts of questionable behavior.") The primary cause of these problems was identified as the park entrance at the end of Hillside Drive. A spokesman for the Sheriff's Department hoped that additional personnel could be assigned to the area, but no promises were made. According to the *Herald*, a Park District representative made the surprising statement that the problems listed were not unique to Kennedy Grove, "since similar problems exist in most of the parks within the district."

About a month later, the Park District responded by having 15 mph speed limit signs erected along Hillside Drive, installing speed bumps at the entrance, and closing the park at 7 p.m. rather than 10 p.m.. These actions apparently had little effect on the neighborhood attitude, as three months later, at a subsequent meeting, residents Will Harper and Don Bartels blasted the park board and demanded that the park be closed until an alternate entrance could be built. The board stated that construction of a new entrance was not economically feasible at the time, and that closing the park to all the residents of the county was not an option.

Over four years would pass until anything further was done to address the concerns of the residents. In April of 1974 the first suggestion was made to convert the park to a rental facility, which would only be open to people who had reserved space. While this only partially appeased the residents, and many of the board members had reservations (no pun intended), in fact the plan was adopted only two months later, and as of June 24, 1974, Kennedy Grove was only open to groups with paid reservations. This was not intended to be a permanent solution to the entrance problem, and the park would drop the new restriction when a new entrance was constructed.

The "Rent-a-Park" plan, surprisingly, seemed to work pretty well. In June of 1975, the *Herald* reported that the Grove was "booked solid," and that "if anyone wanted to book a date for a picnic or outing, he would have to wait until after October 11." Weddings, apparently, were quite popular at the park, as well as company picnics and day camping.

With the help of EBMUD, which owned the easement from the new proposed entrance from the San Pablo Dam Road, and with funding arranged between the East Bay Regional Park District and the County R-9 Committee, plans were finalized in late 1981 for construction of the new entrance, which opened for business the next year. Kennedy Grove was now open to the general public, without the necessity of making reservations.

Kennedy Grove continues to be a popular place for groups and individuals to picnic, play games, jog, hike, or just enjoy the outdoors. In the years since its opening, it has grown from 95 to 222 acres, significantly increasing its attractiveness to hikers and bikers (not motorcycles). Along with the EBMUD reservoir just to the east, it has helped to identify El Sobrante as a place where open space and recreation are values to be cherished.



Stroll 2015. From left: Lyle Miller, Donald Bastin, County Supervisor John Gioia, Maurice Abraham

El Sobrante Stroll, 2015

Review by Lyle Miller

As usual, it was good to see so many people out strolling this year. I didn't spend too much time manning the ESHS booth as in the past, We had good coverage with Don & Maury, So it freed me to Stroll & visit with friends.

Perfect weather was the main attraction this year, With just a hint of a breeze, the Stroll Arch did NOT blow over this year !

Did it seem like the parade was over before it started ? Seemed like we waited & waited for the parade to get rolling & I heard a few folks asking "Is that IT ?!"

Our newest business in town looked like it did

well selling cold drinks & snacks. Yes, the DollarTree store on Dam rd. was air conditioned cool inside & fully stocked with bargain goods. The place looks clean too !

Plenty of entertainment around the Pedaler bike shop as the kids did their aerial stunts on bicycles while the bands played nearby. I walked by the bike shop & peeked in to see Mark Biedermann & his band "Blind Illusion" busy blasting metal tunes & WHO DID I SEE PLAYING THE ELECTRIC BASS GUITAR ? That's right, Jeff Jerge, owner of the Pedaler Bike Shop sitting-in on bass ! He rocks & ROLLS like that...

CAR SHOW: It was a good turnout this year for

the classic cars & hot rods. A few new ones I had not seen before & they were judged well I understand.

Lots of dogs out strolling on a leash as usual. I think there needs to be a reminder to people that the street surface gets very hot mid day & can be painful on the paws.

Special thanks to Bob Fowler for being the "fixit" guy. When I arrived, I was stopped by the orange vest guys @ Appian way & told I could not enter except on foot, I showed my vendor pass & he said "not til after 2pm..." So I walked in, Helped Bob inflate & tie off the stroll arch & asked if I could bring my motorcycle in & park in my shop lot. He took me down to Appian & told orange vest guy to let me "ride-in". I saw Bob several times in his golf cart, shuttling people here-n-there along the stroll route all day & he told me how he was probably gonna be responsible for taking it all down & clean-up after. Thanks Bob, you're awesome !

Lyle

Editor's Comments: All in all, it was a good day for the historical society. We sold a few books and added about 30 new folks to our membership base. The parade was a little chaotic, as usual, but the kids were enthusiastic, and the dancing horses are always a treat.



It was warm. The lack of the usual afternoon windstorm was a mixed blessing: No stuff blowing around, but no cooling breeze either.

Maury and I spent most of our time explaining the 12 new historic markers that we had

installed in the rebuilt downtown sidewalks; Maury made up a beautiful little guide that we handed out to anyone who even slowed down. As the trees grow (they do make a difference, don't they?), hopefully, pedestrians will stroll a little more slowly and notice the markers beneath their feet, and take a moment to read the text. Our town does have a history, and a rich and interesting one at that.

For the first time this year, Maury displayed his 1956 Chevrolet Bel Air Coupe in the auto show.



Maury has been working on his baby for years, and it shows. And Clean!

But I have always favored the cars of the 1930s. This little Chevrolet Coupe speaks to me.



If you didn't make the Stroll this year, plan on joining us for the next. This quintessentially El Sobrante event is now part of our culture and history.

Acquisitions:



Saddle, once owned by Claude Pitt and his daughter, Claudia.

We were very fortunate to acquire this saddle, which was used in equestrian events at Pitt Arena (where the Mechanics Bank is today) by owners Claude and Claudia Pitt. Claude, along with his wife, Babe, and daughter, were very active in the El Sobrante Jr. Wranglers and other local horse groups. We are indebted to Claudia's son, Julian Gomez, for the donation.

Look for the historic marker in the sidewalk in front of the Mechanics Bank, which honors the Pitts and the history of horse culture in our town. Pitt Way was named after the Pitt family.

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.

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