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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!

REMEMBERING BILL OLIVER

Donald Bastin

El Sobrante lost another of its pioneers with the recent passing of Bill Oliver. Since 1943, Bill and the Oliver family have been an integral part of the fabric of our town. While I did not know Bill personally, my wife, Clementina, and I were able to get together with Bill late in 2012, and record his thoughts and reminiscences on his life in El Sobrante. This article is, in part, a summary of that interview, which took place, appropriately enough, in the Rancho Bar, which has been in the Oliver family for years.

According to Bill, his father, John Oliver, purchased a little hardware store in El Sobrante in October of 1943. As with many things in life, this was something of a chance thing. John was in construction, which he was good at, but he was having problems with his boss. So, on a whim, he and his wife, Margaret, bought the little country business along the San Pablo Dam Road. Bill was in the service at the time, in the Army Air Corps (the name was not changed to Air Force till 1948). He was able to get



John and Margaret Oliver in front of their hardware store, late 1940s.

home in December of 1943, and after looking over the business, thought that his parents had “lost their minds.” He could not remember if the original business even had a name, but, in any case, dad seemed to think the place had promise. There were two gas pumps at the site, and room to work on cars. John was a natural mechanic and enjoyed this work. And, El Sobrante was growing.

Although John liked the mechanical work, he did not like the details of running a business, and clearly would have liked to have his son as a helpmate. But that would have to wait awhile, as there was a war going on.

Bill was originally assigned to be trained as a fighter pilot. But instructors were needed, and he ended up teaching others to fly. But not fighters. He learned to fly the B-17 Bomber, and trained others to pilot this “flying fortress.” He liked the plane, as it was forgiving and tough, though, at a cruising altitude of 30,000 feet, it was miserably cold and it was necessary to breathe oxygen through a mask. Finally, in the spring of 1945, he was assigned to go to Europe to fly actual combat missions. The date of the transfer was May 10. On May 8, Germany surrendered, and the war in Europe was over. Bill was then transferred to the Pacific Theatre, and received training in the new B-29 bomber. This was a much bigger, faster, and more comfortable airplane. Just before he was about to be transferred to Guam, to participate in the planned invasion of Japan, the atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the war was over once again, and for good. While he had wanted to participate in the action, this was not to be.

Bill was discharged in December of 1945 and immediately went to work with his dad. While he had dreams of taking advantage of the GI Bill and going to college, this was put off again and again. In the meantime, he began to learn the business and genuinely enjoyed interacting with his customers. He found himself to be a “people person,” which he had not known before. “People would pay if they had the money,” reports Bill. Otherwise they would put the purchase on their tab. He was also good with business, but admits that, as the town was growing very fast, it was natural that business would increase.

Bill’s future wife, Patsy Skow, was a customer at the hardware store. Patsy was part of the Skow family that operated the Richmond Farm Creamery, which was then located along Clark Road. Patsy was the daughter of Harold Skow, one of the sons of the



business’s founder, Soren Skow. In this photo, taken in the late 1940s, we see Patsy seated to Bill’s left, by Bill’s brother, Jack. The other couple are John and Margaret Oliver, Bill’s parents. Bill and Patsy were married in 1948, and were married for 51 years.

With the town's growth, a new fire station was needed, which was formally opened on July 10, 1949.



As president of the local Lion's Club, Bill acted as a host for the festivities at the opening of the new station. Here we see him with Patsy Lee Ortega, a popular singer at the time and a long-time friend of the family. As of the date of this interview (2012), Bill reported that Patsy was still living in the area.

In 1952, the hardware store was extensively remodeled, and in 1954, a completely new service station

complex was put in, expanding the number of pumps and providing extensive repair and maintenance facilities. Business continued to expand. For three years running, from 1953 through 1955, the



Oliver station sold more gasoline than any Chevron station in the East Bay. As there were 433



stations in this area, this was no mean accomplishment. For the first year, Bill received an all-expense paid trip to New York. But by 1955, the company scaled back the award, and Bill had to be content with a brand new wrist-watch. Here we see the watch being presented by Standard Oil Company representative, A.C. Macdonald.

By the mid-1950s El Sobrante was booming, and there was talk, and at least two studies, regarding the possible incorporation of the town. Bill said that he was not really a part of this effort, which, according to him, never really got off the ground. By the time that it could have had some chance of success, too much of the area had been annexed by the city of Richmond. Nonetheless, Bill saw the rapid growth as a good thing, and was solidly in favor of development. With proper growth, he saw that El Sobrante “. . . could become . . . a kind of mini-Lafayette.” But as the years went by, resistance to development increased, which he felt was detrimental, in the long run, to the town’s future.

In the natural course of things, there were children. Sons John and Richard were born and gradually began to be of greater help in the running of the family business. By the 1980s, Richard, in particular, had virtually taken over the running of the hardware store, and Bill began to think about retirement.

Our conversation with Bill Oliver lasted almost an hour and a half. We deeply appreciated Bill’s taking the time to talk with us and sharing his memories of our town. It was clear that he had very fond memories of El Sobrante. It was also clear that he felt a certain disappointment that the town had not developed as he had hoped, and that he had been unable to exert a greater influence on that development. Still, aside from his experience in the military, his greatest accomplishments and life experiences are associated with the town of El Sobrante. As one of the town’s most important pioneers, his influence will be felt for years to come.





Native American Exhibit Returns

Editor

Thanks to El Sobrante Library's new head librarian, Thomas Schween (left) and Assistant Librarian Ken Blue (in the not-blue shirt), the ESHS has been able to display its collection of Native-American artifacts in the lobby display case. As some of you may recall, we originally displayed these items in 2012, at which time the collection was on loan to us for a limited time. Since then, as we have noted, the bulk of the collection has been donated to our historical society and is now part of its permanent collection.

Originally collected by members of the Philippi family, the stone artifacts were all collected on Philippi land, which extended from Santa Rita Road down to San Pablo Creek. The main site, in fact, was just across Appian Way from the present site of the library. The objects were collected in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The site was also extensively excavated by a team of archeological students from U.C. Berkeley, in 1950, headed by Professor Robert Heizer.

While many local historical societies may have some Native American artifacts in their possession, seldom is it known just where the items were originally found. We are fortunate in knowing exactly where our objects were found and when. We also were fortunate in being able to have the collection examined by the late Professor George Coles, who was able to furnish us with much detailed information.

We only have the display case available to us for a limited time, so be sure and see the exhibit while you can!

Mark Biedermann bio *Lyle Miller*



I had the pleasure of meeting Mark for a sandwich the other night to hear his story. Mark was born at

Richmond hospital in 1963.

Best known for his musical talent, Mark is also trained in martial arts, He started with Judo & then Kung Fu at about 8-10 years of age.

Growing up listening to great guitarists like Carlos Santana & Eric Clapton, In about the 6th grade Mark was inspired to take up playing guitar. He met with Hugh Lawton, manager of Eucalyptus records & got started learning on a Winston electric guitar.

A couple of Marks best friends since 2nd grade (Hillview elem.), David Godfrey & Alvin Petty got the notion to put a band together. With Petty on guitar & Godfrey on drums, Biedermann was told he could be the singer if he could play bass guitar.

So Mark stripped off the original strings & re-strung his Winston with a set of bass strings.

A year or so later, Mark switched to a 6 string guitar & took lessons from Lenny Gurule', guitar instructor at Eucalyptus Records.

At the talent show on the last day of school at Juan Crespi, Mark, Brett Hern & Alvin gave a 1 hour performance featuring covers from The **Stones** and **Kiss** plus several original tunes.

In about 1978, the 9th graders became "Blind Illusion" with Alvin Petty leaving to pursue a

different art form, painting. Alvin wanted to do both music & paint but couldn't be at band practice & gave up his seat to Les Claypool (born September 29, 1963 is an American musician, singer, songwriter, composer, author and actor best known as the bassist and lead vocalist of the band **Primus**. Claypool's playing style on the electric bass mixes tapping, flamenco-like strumming, whammy bar bends, and slapping. wikipedia).

The only class at De Anza Mark attended regularly was Mr. Bee's music class. Any local musician knows Mr. Bee's accomplishments.

*Another well-known local musician and student of Mr. Bee is Kirk Hammet. Born November 18, 1962 he is the lead guitarist and contributing songwriter for the heavy metal band **Metallica** and has been a member of the band since 1983. Kirk grew up in El Sobrante and is a close friend of Les Claypool. More on Kirk in a future issue of our newsletter.*

Mark Biedermann's guitar work can be heard on the album "Imaginos" by **Blue Oyster Cult**. The album features Mark on 4 tracks. 3 solos & 1 track featuring Mark and Robbie Krieger, guitarist for The **Doors** !!

Thrash metal guitarist Marc Biedermann, whose band **Blind Illusion** was recording at Hyde Street Studios, mixed the album *The Sane Asylum* at Pearlman's studio in exchange for his collaboration. Biedermann declared in a 2008 interview that he "played more lead guitar on that album than Buck Dharma".wikipedia)

Other notables Mark has performed with: Uli Roth of **The Scorpions**

Joe Perry of **Aerosmith**
David Grisman of **The**

Dead & J.G.B.

Metallica
Exodus

...and he once opened for

Montrose.

Beware The Ides of March *Editor*

Late on the evening of March 15th last, during a heavy and windy rainstorm, El Sobrante lost one of its oldest inhabitants. The stately Valley Oak that graced the Patra Drive entrance to Kennedy Grove loosed its hold on mother earth and crashed to the ground.



As can be clearly seen from this photograph, taken the day after the event, the root structure appears to be much less robust that would have been expected of a tree of this size and age. We are guessing that the tree was over 100 years old, and may have been a sapling when the original owner of the land, Daniel Clancy, bought the property in the mid-1800s. It can only be speculated that the tree had been weakened by several years of drought. The rains of this last season served only to loosen the soil at the tree's base, leading to its demise.

All the regular visitors to the park were well acquainted with the old oak, and were shocked to see it lying in such an unfamiliar, horizontal state. Indeed, it took a few minutes to adjust to the new reality. Strange how things that seem so strong and permanent can be gone in an instant.

We will miss this old El Sobrante pioneer.

We're Going Legit

ESHS SEEKS NON-PROFIT STATUS *Maurice Abraham*

Since its founding some five years ago, the El Sobrante Historical Society has operated as an informal community organization. Now, according to its Steering Committee, the time is right to take the next logical step in the organization's growth and development; that is to become a non-profit corporation. This move will make donations of cash and physical artifacts tax deductible and a financial benefit to the donor. It also postures the organization to pursue grants, either independently or with partner organizations.

The first steps, preparing Corporate Bylaws and Articles of Incorporation for the organization, have been completed and submitted for approval to the California Secretary of State who approves new corporation formations. Once incorporation is in place, a request for non-profit status will be submitted to the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). Following IRS approval, a request for nonprofit status will be submitted to the California Franchise Tax Board. With the FTB approval, the organization will officially become a nonprofit corporation.

An exact time frame to complete the process is difficult to predict. However, it is expected nonprofit status will be in place by year's end. The current Steering committee members will become the corporation's first Board of Directors. They're looking forward with enthusiasm to this new chapter in the Historical Society's life and to the opportunities it will open up for the organization, its members and the El Sobrante Valley community at large.

What is it?



If you have any idea what this is, please let us know. Actually, the owner, Steve James, knows what this is. It is his idea that we start something new in our newsletter by posting in each issue an image of some strange item and ask our readers to guess what it might have been used for. So if you think you know, send your guess along to our e-mail address, at: ESHISTORY@GMAIL.COM

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.

New Acquisition:

Editor



I don't remember where I got this coffee mug, and I haven't paid much attention to it and never considered it anything

special. But now that the Park Pharmacy is no more, this modest cup is now a bona-fide artifact. It has suddenly become an object of historical interest, and part of the history of El Sobrante.

What do you have in your cupboards?

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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