

THE LEFTOVERS

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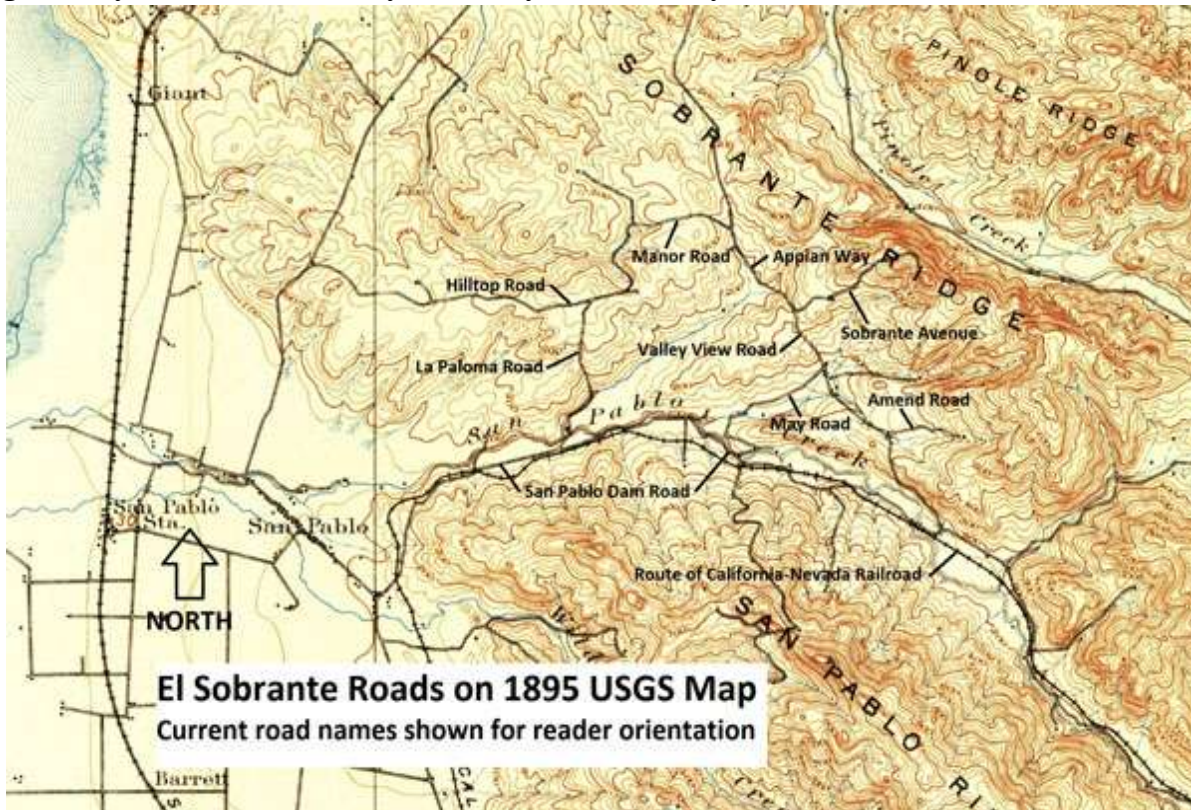
Origin of Roadway Locations and Names in El Sobrante

Maurice Abraham

Ever been curious about the roads you live and drive on? Ever ask why they were located where they are and how they got their name? Well, let's look back on some of our El Sobrante Valley roads.

Early El Sobrante roadways likely began as horse and wagon trails across private ranches, most originating in the last half of the 1800s. These trails generally followed natural topographic features like ridges, valleys and creeks, features not too steep and easily accessible by horse-drawn wagons. They also tended to coincide with early property boundaries that often followed these same natural features.

Several of El Sobrante's primary arterials, San Pablo Dam Road (formerly San Pablo Creek Road), Appian Way (formerly Maloney Road), Valley View Road, May Road and Castro Ranch Road along with some collector roads including Amend Road, La Paloma Road, Hilltop Drive, Manor Road and Sobrante Avenue, all came into being as unpaved trails. This is evident on the 1895 USGS Topographic Map 'San Francisco' (see map below) where these roads are clearly depicted and are generally located where they are today. These early roads formed the backbone from which



El Sobrante's entire network of roads has since evolved. The secondary roads that sprouted from these arterials have largely resulted from land subdivisions, where roadways were required to provide access. In some instances, secondary

roads may have started as private roads to serve large ranch-size parcels, and then evolved into public roads as the larger parcels were further divided. Examples of pre-WWII secondary roads in El Sobrante include Santa Rita Road (old portion), Rincon Road, Rancho Road, Clark Road and Hillcrest Road.

The precise alignment of early roadways have likely changed over time. Although fundamentally following their original alignment, they have been paved, widened and provided curvatures and other improvements that accommodate the needs of today's vehicles. And, where in early years creeks had to be forded, bridges and culverts have since been added.

El Sobrante's earliest roads were usually named for a natural feature (San Pablo Creek Road and Hilltop Road) or for a local landowner (Maloney Road, Castro Ranch Road and Amend Road). When these roads became public roads, they were initially identified numerically. Among these were Road No. 7 (San Pablo Dam Road), Road No. 19 (Appian Way & Valley View Road, Pinole to Dam Road), Road No. 24 (Hilltop and Manor Roads), Road No. 15 (Amend Road) and Road No. 20 (El Portal Drive).

In more urban parts of the Valley, characterized by large tracts of homes built since the late 1940s, street names became more random in origin. In these neighborhoods names were often generated by the land developer or his engineer/land planner. In these housing tracts, street names may reflect the name of the developer or even members of his family. They might also reflect some physical characteristics of the location such as Hillside Drive, Oak Knoll Road and La Crescenta Road. A name might also have been derived from a contrived theme as done in the English Tudor inspired Sherwood Forest neighborhood. There we find the street names Robin Hood Drive, Nottingham Drive and

Sherwood Forest Drive. In the De Anza Vista subdivision, Utah Drive was named after the project developer Utah Construction Company, Sheldon Drive after the adjacent Sheldon School and Nelson Drive after the former landowner. In all instances street names must be approved by the local governing jurisdiction to avoid duplication and confusion.

So, history buffs...here's our challenge to you. Help us with the name origins of other EL Sobrante Valley roads. What do you know about the name origin of the street you live on or any other local streets? Share what you know with us by email at eshistory@gmail.com. What we learn will fill in some blank spaces in El Sobrante's history and may lead to an update of this article.



Cigarette Survey

Donald Bastin

As we all know, the litigation that surrounded the establishment and subsequent history of the El Sobrante grant (and most other Mexican-California land grants, for that matter) dragged on for decades, only coming to something of a final resolution around 1909. Considering that the controversy began around the time of the end of the Mexican-American War (1848) we are looking at a legal case grinding along for around 60 years. The reasons for these mind-numbing suits, counter-suits, petitions, and appeals, are numerous and complex. Certainly, chicanery and double-dealing, particularly on the part of Yankee lawyers and simple swindlers played a part; but openings for these opportunists occurred because of the way in which the original grants were surveyed, and subsequent portions were sold off.

We have all heard that grant lines were often indefinitely laid out, with a creek bank, a large rock or a copse of trees as a landmark. These facts are borne out in an article in the San Francisco Chronicle, dated July 9, 1902, located and submitted to us by Society member, Emil Munkres: “In those early days boundaries were indefinite and uncertain, frequently designated by some hill, creek, corral, cluster of trees, and the document always referred to these uncertain boundaries as ‘a certain ridge of hills,’ ‘a certain creek,’ ‘certain cluster of trees,’ though there may have been many such creeks, hills, and trees within the same boundaries.” The occasion for the news article was the recent granting by the California Supreme Court of a re-hearing of the “famous Sobrante litigation.” The article goes on to say that the court decision “has brought joy to the homes of many settlers in Contra Costa County whose titles hang in the balance.”

The most unusual method of survey involved the acquisition of a parcel of land by a man named Franklin:

“The Castros, in trying to apportion a part of their land . . . attempted and actually did survey it by means of cigarettes—the only known cigarette survey on record. And this was their mode of procedure, as learned at the investigation: Upon starting on their survey they lighted a cigarette on starting from the corral of Joaquin Castro, rode northward until the cigarette was exhausted, stopped, lighted another cigarette, rode to the east, until that one had been smoked; stopped, lighted a third cigarette and rode south until that one was finished, then turned west and rode back to the starting point.”

As the newspaper points out, “land was plentiful,” and such surveys as cited above may have been unusual, but probably did not cause undue concern in the mid-1800s. But by the time that United States law became heavily involved, such practices only made matters worse. And it is hard to imagine a more

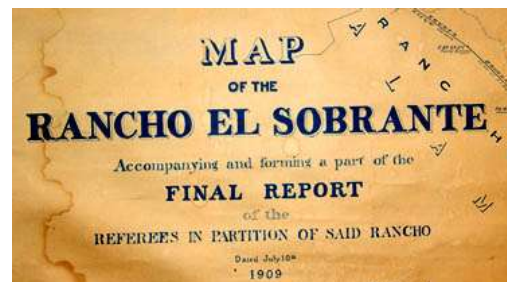
EARLY SURVEYS MEASURED BY
LENGTH OF CIGARETTE
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complex and confusing series of legal hassles

that enveloped the El Sobrante grant that began in earnest around 1852.

It was in 1852 that the Castros submitted their request for a confirmation of their grant, which was duly confirmed by the U.S. Land Commission in 1855. But this decision was appealed. In 1857, this appeal was dismissed, and the original grant request was confirmed. However, this apparently opened the door to an exhaustive survey of the Rancho’s boundaries, which were constrained by surrounding, older, grants, all of which had indefinite boundaries. The rival claims were not resolved until 1882, when the Secretary of the Interior allotted a plot of land encompassing just under 20,000 acres. This, according to the newspaper account, was about one-fifth of the acreage that had been claimed by the Castro family.

But even at this point, the legal wrangling was far from over. Various litigants claimed that they had purchased plots of various sizes, some for money, some for legal or other assistance. Some litigants even paid for their land more than once, only to have their ownership revoked in the endless series of appeals.



In 1909, a “Final Report” and map were issued,

apparently bringing to an end a legal nightmare that, like Dickens’ *Great Expectations*, in most cases left the hopeful litigants with little more than empty dreams, empty pockets, and, at most, a little parcel of land, that could be encompassed with two or three puffs of a cigarette.

Rock Wall Mystery

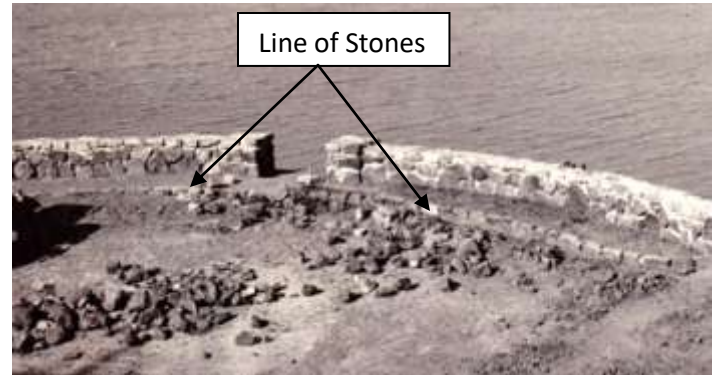
Donald Bastin

As you know, the ESHS has been working for several years on stabilizing and restoring an old rock wall and stairway that was built in 1935 by the boys of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). The wall is located on EBMUD land, next to the reservoir. Several months ago, we essentially completed work on stabilizing the stairway (which lies just beyond the opening in the wall) and began to clear away over 70 years of soil buildup that had buried approximately half of the wall. It was during this clearing work that we uncovered a line of stones approximately 5 feet in front of the wall and the stairway entrance.



Like the stairway, the existence of this line of stones was a surprise. The original photos that showed the construction of the wall did not reveal the existence of the stairway. We assumed that the photos would not reveal the existence of the line of stones, at least, we had never noticed them in any of the photos that we have. At the time, then, we made the assumption that the stones were added at some later time, for some unknown reason.

We were naturally surprised that, upon reviewing our old photographs, to see the line of rocks in plain view! For some reason, they had simply never been noticed, or perhaps we just assumed that they were part of the pile of unused stones.



So one mystery was solved. The line of rocks was part of the original construction. But what purpose did they serve? This can't be answered for certain, but it seems probable that the rocks were placed to serve as a barrier to prevent cars from parking too close to the wall, and restricting access to the wall and to the flow of pedestrians along the wall and down the stairs. If this was the purpose, it was a thoughtful touch.

The rocks also give us a tool to gauge the original level of the parking area. They were buried about a foot or more beneath the current surface of the ground, and are roughly 5-6 inches in height. Thus we know that the soil has covered at least a foot and a half of the original wall, and this is the amount that should be removed to show what the wall looked like when originally created.

We don't exactly have the Pyramid of Giza or the Parthenon, but we do have our own unique "ancient" structures, which have their own story to tell and mysteries to unravel.

El Sobrante Recollections

Donna Naylor

Ed. Note: Donna Naylor grew up in El Sobrante and has shared some of her memories in this article. She now lives in Secret Town, east of Colfax, in California.

The ESHS would like to make clear that the writer's statements are her own and have not been verified or determined to be factual.

My parents are Perry & Charlene Allen. They grew up in El Sobrante and didn't move away until 1987, after my dad retired from 37 years at Chevron.

My mom, whose last name was Francis, grew up in the white house as a chicken ranch behind the Park Pharmacy. When the pharmacy was built the ranch became a house. My Mom then moved to La Paloma Rd with her parents until she married my dad in April of 1950.

Before meeting my mom, my Dad dated Peggy Tilden, sometime around 1946, or '47. This is a



photo from a date with my dad at Lake Anza with Peggy Tilden & her girlfriends in the background. Her Grandfather was very famous for cutting all the Redwoods on the San Francisco coast until he was stopped. He also ran a steam train company. Eventually Tilden Park would be named after him. When you ride the little steam train at Tilden Park, the tickets say Redwood Valley Trains. Peggy Tilden was also a member of the Western Riders, a very well-known horse club in El Sobrante.



My dad's best friend was Frank Reneau, who was also a well-known member of the Western Riders.



Above, Frank Reneau is in the center of this picture leading the Western Riders. This is an undated photo, but is very similar to the image, below, taken from the El Sobrante Herald, July, 1949. According to the article, "El Sobrante's Western Riders made a grand entry in the San Pablo Horsemen's Association show held at El Portal Park on July 4th" Ed. Note.



Eventually, Frank (left) had his own business on Appian Way to fix TVs back in the days of tubes. His sons and daughter graduated from De Anza.



The picture above is of my dad with his horse “Whiskers.” My dad was also a member and president at one time of the Western Riders. My family has deep roots in El Sobrante and I am proud to be from El Sobrante. My parents are still alive and kicking at 89 and 85 in Auburn.

Donna—Thanks for sharing. Editor

We’re Now Legit



Above is a photo of our first meeting as an official non-profit organization, held on September 6, 2017. Our first order of business was to elect board officers. From left to right they are: Maurice Abraham, Vice-President; Lyle Miller, Secretary; Donald Bastin, President; and Steve James, Treasurer. Society member Emil Munkres attended the meeting, and is standing between Donald and Steve. We plan to adhere to our policy of not charging any dues, but donations are accepted, and are now tax-deductible.

The Leftovers is published quarterly. Articles for publication are encouraged, as are comments. See e-mail address below.

The El Sobrante Historical Society is a formal nonprofit organization, and donations may be tax-deductible. We are dedicated 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 Board of Directors

Donald Bastin: President; Newsletter Editor; Historical Researcher and writer.

Maurice Abraham: Vice-President Administrator, Facebook Page; Historical Researcher and writer.

Steve James: Treasurer; Membership and Communication Secretary; Researcher/writer.

Lyle Miller: Secretary; Community Liaison; Researcher/writer.

Visit us on-line at: www.eshist.org
Questions, Comments, and other communication? Send to:
ESHISTORY@GMAIL.COM