

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!



ESHS Makes History Presentation at local Waldorf School

ESHS founding members Donald Bastin and Steve James made an appearance at the Waldorf School in El Sobrante (at the end of Clark Road) on Friday, October 10. We were asked to

make a presentation by Elliot Anderson, a parent of one of the students and a teaching assistant. The class, shown here, is Jeff Loubet's (Jeff is standing) group of 4th graders. While our society has long made presentations to local groups, this was the first time that an El Sobrante school has asked for our help in explaining local history. We were glad to do it, as we see this as part of our primary mission.

The students were very polite and mannered, and seemed to enjoy the slide-show, which, at 45 minutes, was a strain on their 9 and 10-year old attention spans. Personally, this was the first time that we had addressed such a young group, and it was a learning experience for us also. We covered over 400 years of Bay Area history, from the founding of the Spanish Empire, the discovery of San Francisco Bay, the Ohlone Indians, the Gold Rush, World War II, and a bit about the Skow Dairy (which at one time operated on the land that the school now occupies). We will consider our work a success if only a fraction of what we threw at them is retained.

Duke, the Fire Dog



For hundreds of years, the dog known as the Dalmatian has been identified with horses. Early on, it was noticed that the breed had a singular

calming effect on horses. They became known in England as “coach dogs” and were frequently seen running alongside a coach to keep the high-spirited horses from becoming alarmed. Some upper-class people had even had two or more dogs running alongside their coaches, as a mark of rank and wealth.



It was in the 19th century, however, that the Dalmatian became identified with fire fighting. Horses are skittish animals, and are naturally afraid of fire, and the tumult that surrounds it. The Dalmatian proved invaluable in keeping the horses from bolting. And once at the scene of the fire, the dog also took on the duties of a guard dog, discouraging theft, which was quite common.

By the twentieth century, the need for the Dalmatian was no longer apparent, but many fire departments kept them on, as mascots, and also to act as a guard dog for the trucks. There are also reports of dogs rescuing residents or fire fighters from burning buildings. Some departments still carry on the tradition and have their own fire dog.

The El Sobrante Fire Department had its own fire dog, in the early 1950s. His name was Duke, and he was typical of the breed—patiently waiting for the fire call and responding with eagerness when it came. According to Harold Huffman (a lieutenant at the time and who later became Asst. Fire Chief), Duke was great at his job and was much beloved by the men. He loved riding on the truck and was always the first to respond to the siren, running out of the station, barking loudly to clear the area of cars or people. He had his own badge and was a full member of the local firemen’s association. He also was a winner in many dog shows, taking several ribbons and cups. His enthusiasm was such that it led to his untimely demise “in the line of duty.” According to Chief Huffman, he was hit by a car and severely injured. Sadly, he had to be put down.

The El Sobrante Fire Department was, for the most part, a volunteer organization, and community support was always very high. So when Duke passed away, the El Sobrante Merchants decided to replace him with his first cousin, a dog originally named Orchid Rambler, but who naturally came to be known as Duke II. As a close relative of the original Duke, much was expected of the newcomer. Alas, it was not to be.

According to Chief Huffman (in driver’s seat), Duke II never displayed the enthusiasm for the job that



characterized his cousin. He apparently did not like riding in the truck, and had to be coaxed into going to a fire. It just wasn’t the same dog, and the decision was made to retire him as a pet. Duke II may have been the last Dalmatian fire dog in Contra Costa County.

Tranquil El Sobrante Valley

... Steve James

I've lived in El Sobrante since 1952. One of those baby boomers whose parents ended up here after WWII. It was a rural community. There were a few housing tracts, but mostly larger home lots that could and did accommodate live stock. It had that country feel. I remember playing ball games against schools from East Bay cities and the other players would call us farmers, as an insult. To them El Sobrante was out in the sticks.

Over the years El Sobrante grew into a bedroom community with more housing developments, adding to its present-day look. Many changes have taken place and will continue, but some things have not changed since my childhood.

I currently live near Kennedy Grove Park and at night or early morning I can still hear the train whistles blowing. I think, "Damn, the nearest tracks are in San Pablo on the other side of Rumrill Blvd and 13th St., and that sound travels all the way out this valley". With all the day-time noises and traffic we don't hear it or we're just are too busy to notice. Then my obsession with history kicks in. I start to think what was it like when the Kaiser Shipyards were in full production; could you hear it out here? What about the Chevron Refinery? Then I think, "What was it like when the California &



Picnic train stopped just west of old Sheldon School (in distance) Nevada RR came out the El Sobrante Valley going to Orinda"? That steam engine and whistle must have echoed throughout the

valley. Who was here to experience that? Not many-- it was in the 1890s. The residents of Oakland and Berkeley would ride the train as a weekend getaway picnic. Why?-Because the El Sobrante Valley and the country-side was a great place to spend leisure time.

There have been many changes since the 1890s, but one thing still remains the same.

El Sobrante is a great place to live and spend your leisure time.

Remembering . . .

Robert Letford

Robert (Bob) Letford passed away on the 30th of August of this year. He was 94 years old and was one of the last remaining "founding fathers" of El Sobrante. He and his family moved to El Sobrante in 1948, and in 1957 he opened the El Sobrante Schwinn Bicycle Shop. Originally located next to El Sobrante Wheel & Brake (now operated by Lyle and David Miller), the shop later moved to its present location on El Portal Drive. A WW II veteran, Bob was very active in the local Veterans Club and loved to participate in the annual shows that were



put on at La Honda Bowl. Here we see Bob in a 1951 production at the Bowl. The El Sobrante Historical Society is indebted to Bob for allowing us to digitally copy his collection of photos, many of which centered on events at La Honda Bowl. Other than these images, we

have very little that relates to this once-popular site.



Bob was something of a showman. Here we see him in 1948, cradling a trophy, having recently won a “beard” contest.

Bob was proud of starting his bicycle business with only \$500 in cash. Even in retirement, he often went to the shop to schmooze with the

customers and staff. His son Gary now carries on the business.

Mary Anne Nelson

Mary Anne passed away unexpectedly on October 5, at the age of 76. She and her husband Stephen have been long-term El Sobrante residents, with a home on Heide Court, just off Hillside Drive. She was a science teacher at Juan Crespi Junior High School, retiring in 1998. Our Hillside Drive community is fairly small (about 80 households) and Mary Anne was known to about everyone as a lively, friendly, and sociable neighbor. She will be missed.

The 21st El Sobrante Stroll

Some Observations

(The ESHS did not have a booth this year at the Stroll. The following are submitted by participants and visitors. Thanks!)

From Lyle Miller:

Yes I did attend the Stroll, It was the same ol' yada-yada for the most part. The highlight seemed to be the inflatable arch that the chamber paid approx. 700 bucks for & spent \$2.59 for the anchors. Every year the breeze

knocks it over & nearly KO's an unsuspecting "stroller". I had asked Mark Croda on the Saturday before the stroll if they had a better way to secure it & he said YES, Richard Oliver had donated 4- 5gallon buckets filled with concrete & a eye bolt in each one. I laughed and asked if he thought we should tie it off to the light pole just in case. He said "nah, it ain't going nowhere with them buckets-o-cement tied to it..."



Garrison Travers, on the ground

I counted 3 times it was on its side before noon on Sunday. It had to be moved a couple times so the fire engine could get through before and after the parade.

The car show was well attended this year, lots of nice rods and customs and the bicycle show in the parking lot was there again this year gleaming in the sun. Lots of bands played with a heavy concentration near the Rancho bar/ Mechanics bank.

I would guess the stroll brought about the same crowd as usual with maybe a few less dogs than last year. I walked from end to end and saw many people I knew, some I had not seen since last year or before and that makes it nice, lot's of hugs & handshakes !

Speaking of

Cars . . . From
Holger Berthelsen

I bought the car in 1968, from a former high school friend in Berkeley. Actually, it was only



about 80% of a car, it was all in pieces. I was in the Air Force at the time, and stored it in my parents' basement for a short time, then put it together in their driveway. I had it running and on the road in 1971. The first paint job was by "rattle can" - just hand spray painted from cans. Over the years I have rebuilt the engine a couple of times, most recently in 2012. I have restored it to its original stock condition, with two exceptions: I upgraded the ignition system with an accessory system that was available in the 1920s. Also I painted it red, just because I like the color - Model "T"s only came in black



from about 1914 - 1924. It is a driving car, not primarily a show car. I have enjoyed taking it on many tours

over the years with the Model T Ford Club. Last September we did a three week tour of Northern California, covering about 900 miles.



Editor's Note: Holger displayed his car in this year's Stroll, and was awarded a plaque in the "Best Sedan" category. Both Holger and wife Martha are long-term El Sobrante residents.

From the SPAWNERS Booth

Martha Berthelsen

The 2014 Sobrante Stroll was a fun, well-organized event, with a great turnout. As

always, it was a great opportunity to meet neighbors, take time to chat with folks you haven't seen in a while, and promote your organization or cause. SPAWNERS (San Pablo



Watershed Neighbors Restoration and Education Society) hosted a booth with their intricate watershed

diorama, a model landscape with a flowing creek. A wonderful crew of De Anza High School students helped out in the booth, enthusiastically sharing what they have been learning while working with SPAWNERS. They used the diorama to demonstrate the difference between storm-water runoff from streets and landscapes, which flows to the creeks untreated, and the sanitary sewer system. They also explained that our sewer treatment system doesn't eliminate all potential pollutants before discharging water to the bay. By mid-way through the stroll, the mock "pollutants" in the urban runoff were visible in the "bay", and the miniature fishermen on the pier were faced with contaminated fish. Another highlight of the diorama is running the sprinklers in the park, which show that reclaimed water can be used to irrigate public landscapes. Afterwards the students said it was very rewarding to hear people say they hadn't previously understood our waste water systems, but the diorama and explanation made it clear.

SPAWNERS also provided information on drought tolerant landscaping, water saving tips, and how to get involved with our restoration and educational projects. But the diorama and energetic student helpers were definitely stars of the stroll.

Mechanics Bank to be Sold

Donald Bastin

The Mechanics Bank, owned locally by the Downer family for nearly 100 years, announced recently that it will be sold to a firm in Texas. According to the article in the West County Times, the deal is part of a “roll-up” strategy in which local and regional banks are bought and then sold “as a package for a profit.” While this is heralded as good news for shareholders, many locals (including yours truly), find the news disturbing.

Mechanics Bank has a long history in El Sobrante, opening its first outlet in 1956.



That building now houses The Pedaler bicycle shop. 20 years later it moved to its present location just a little to the west of the old building.



As the holder of an account with our local

Mechanics Bank, we received a letter outlining the move, with an assurance that “... we will continue to actively participate and support community events and activities.” We hope this proves to be the case, and will withhold our judgment. However, the loss of a locally-owned institution, intimately bound up with our local history, cannot be seen as something to celebrate.

New Acquisitions

DAHS Photos:

Courtesy of Tom Mason, we now have 5 original photos of De Anza High School. While they are not dated, they appear to be images taken soon after the school was completed, in 1955, and perhaps before the school opened for classes.



This image shows the original De Anza High School sign, which was removed some time in the school's history. The trees appear to be newly planted.

For comparison, this photo was taken in July, 2013. No sign and the trees are mature.

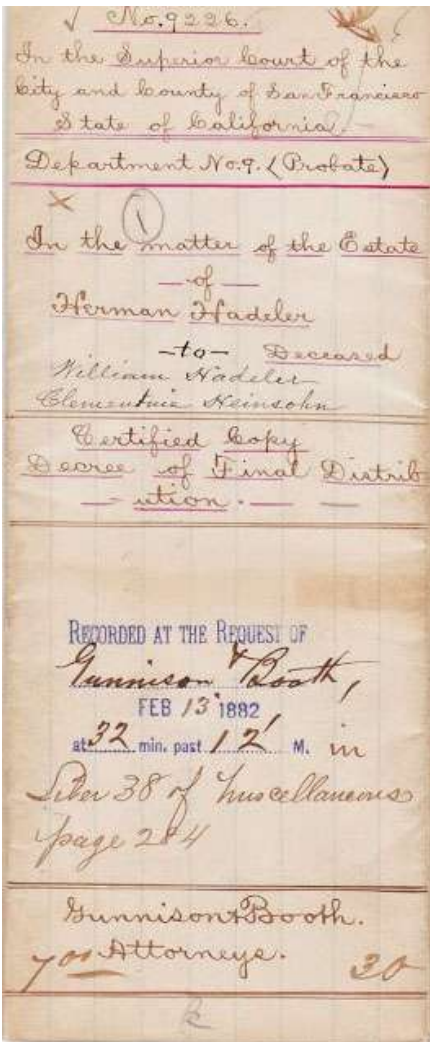


The hills in the background in their undeveloped state, c. 1955



This pristine classroom would have been familiar only to the students who attended DAHS in the early years.

19th Century Land Documents



We are indebted to John Hadel, of San Francisco, for allowing us access to his file of land documents concerning the Warnecke Tract, one of the ranches created out of the old Castro El Sobrante grant. As far as we knew, August Warnecke acquired this property (435 acres along the upper San Pablo Creek)

from the Castro family. Apparently, however, the property was owned by a German immigrant by the name of Herman Hadel (John's ancestor), who came to California to mine for gold. While in California, Herman

acquired the tract of land in question and after his death, his niece, Sophie, married August Warnecke, another German immigrant. Without such documents, the details of these land transactions are always murky. We are grateful to John for sharing them with us and for taking an interest in his family's history.

More De Anza Photos



These football rally pictures, taken in 1968, are part of a collection sent to us by Julie Minear



Jones, whose dad, Lloyd Minear, worked at De Anza as a counselor, from 1967 to 1968. Julie



graduated from De Anza in 1976 and now lives in Dallas, Texas.

Thanks, Julie!

Historic Sidewalk Markers Arrive!



On Thursday, September 18, Lyle Miller (shown here) and Donald Bastin received the shipment of 12 historic markers that will be placed in selected locations between El Portal Drive and Appian Way. The concrete markers, each 2 ft square and 2 inches thick, were constructed by Quick Crete Products Corp., who also supplied similar plaques to the El Cerrito Historical Society for placement on sidewalks in El Cerrito (see below).



A cursory examination of the markers showed no visible damage and final

payment for the goods was made. The markers are now resting in the parking area beside Lyle's business (ES Wheel & Brake), waiting for construction of the new sidewalks, by contractors working for the County, to begin. Construction was slated to begin late in September, but as yet, no work has begun. Our task now is to monitor the sidewalk construction and make sure that the markers are installed in the right places. Hopefully they will be in place by our next issue, in January.

*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.***

We're On Facebook!

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:
sites.google.com/site/elsobrantehistoricalsociety/
Questions, Comments, and
other communication? Send to:
ESHISTORY@GMAIL.COM

The El Sobrante Historical Society is always looking for objects and photographs that help tell the story of our town. If you have any photographs of early El Sobrante, remember that it is not necessary to donate the original. All we need is your permission to scan your image and make it part of our archive. Your original photo stays with you.

It's a Win-Win!