

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!



The dairy can be seen just to the right and down a little from the cow's left ear, alongside Clark Road, c. 1942.

The Richmond Farm Creamery:

El Sobrante's Oldest Commercial Enterprise

Donald Bastin

The Richmond Farm Creamery, also known as the Skow Family Dairy, operated in El Sobrante from at least 1899 to 1955. In an area that never attracted large businesses, the Dairy was not only the oldest business around, but also one of the largest. The history of this operation is deeply intertwined with the history of the town of El Sobrante, and family members are still active in the community.

The founder of the creamery was Soren Pedersen Skow, who was born in Denmark in 1869. At the age of 14, he, like many adventurous young men before him, left home for a life at sea. He spent the next four years as a sailor, only leaving that life when he landed in San Francisco in 1887. He spent the next

two years in San Francisco, working as a horse-drawn street car driver and a carpenter.

In 1889, Soren moved to Contra Costa County, leasing land along San Pablo Creek, from a German immigrant, Auguste Warnecke. There he began to raise cattle and horses. The actual date of the beginning of the dairy operation is uncertain, but family history generally settles on a date of 1899 (though clearly, Soren was building up his business before then).

In 1892, Soren married Anna Rasmussen, also a native of Denmark. The Rasmussen family was living in Oakland at the time that they met. In time they would have seven children, six of whom would survive to adulthood. The four boys were named Harold, Ellis, Lester, and

Wilbur. The two girls were named Eda and Erma (Anna had a fondness for girl's names that begin with "E").



Anna and Soren Skow, in their Model T Ford touring car, alongside their original home by the SP Reservoir, leased from August Warnecke, c. 1915

In 1916 construction began on the San Pablo Reservoir. The Skow operation was close to the dam, and it was clear that they would have to move. So, in 1921, the family moved to a new site along Clark Road, just off the San Pablo Dam Road (previously San Pablo Creek Road). They used lumber from the old Warnecke home to build their new house. Here the Skow Dairy would continue to operate until it ceased operation in 1955.

For most of the time that it existed, the dairy was known as the "Richmond Farm Creamery," a name which referred, not to the location of the dairy, but to the market that it served. Throughout its life, the dairy would be the principal source of fresh milk for the growing town of Richmond.

Shortly after the move to Clark Road, the Skow family suffered two severe blows, one personal and the other business-related. Anna Skow passed away unexpectedly in 1923, leaving family and friends to mourn her loss. Then, in the spring of 1924, the entire herd of 367 cattle was wiped out in a devastating attack of hoof and mouth disease. Displaying the determination and resilience typical of America's immigrant population, Soren and his family immediately began to rebuild the herd, and by 1926 had accumulated at least 150 head of good stock. The cattle ranged over an area of around 900 acres, some of it owned outright, but much of it leased. During the Depression,

some land was sold off to meet expenses, including some small lots along the Dam Road east of Clark Road, and a much larger section in the area now covered by the Carriage Hills developments.

The Skow Dairy was primarily a family operation, with Soren's sons and daughters and their families all helping out. There were some regular employees, but most of the paid help worked seasonally, during hay-harvesting time, or cattle round-ups. Speaking of hay, Donald Skow, Lester's son, has the following memories:

We grew some hay, but not nearly enough for all the stock. That which we grew came from the hills around El Sobrante. I can't remember specific locations except one small field where the Dam Road Catholic Church now stands. I remember that one because one day the guy driving the mowing machine (the one that comes before the hay rake) let the horses get away from him. They tore down the Dam road and ran right over a Chrysler convertible. Both horses (Tom and Jerry) as well as the vehicle were in really bad shape. The horses did survive-I'm not sure about the car.

We purchased hay from various local farmers, but most of it was trucked in from the alfalfa fields in the Byron/Brentwood area. The hay was baled for transport. In the late summer the east side of Clark Road was lined with great stacks of baled hay. Made for great play areas for little ranch kids. Also doubled for a lover's lane for older ones (after dark, of course).



Two-horse hay rake, mid-1930s. The two boys are Dugan Skow (l) and Melvin Lehmkuhl. Dugan was Harold's son and Melvin was

the son of George Lehmkuhl, who married Eda Skow. The cowboy is probably Dick Anderson.

After serving the pleasure seekers, the hay was ground up and stored in a large barn next to the milking barn. While being milked the cows enjoyed ground hay mixed with other feed that came from other sources. Grinding the hay was a nasty summer job. Hot weather, breaking open the bales and forking the hay into the grinder--which always spit some of the finely divided particles back at you and down your shirt collar--was not a favorite chore.

The cowboys and other temporary workers would be put up in the bunkhouse. That little building itself has an interesting history, as it had served as the Sheldon Elementary School, located on old Castro Road (now Olinda Road). In 1932, a new school building was constructed, and the old structure was sold to the Skow family and trucked to the farm.



The bunkhouse is the building in the background, with the tan roof

In the 1940s, as new housing developments began to encroach on the dairy, the bunkhouse was moved to the east side of Clark Road, where it would serve out its days as the Canyon Park Market.



Before World War II, El Sobrante hardly existed as a recognizable community. The population in 1937 was estimated at no more than 100 people. But the war years caused a dramatic rise in population, and, of course, in housing. In response to this growth, the Fire Protection District was formed in 1944. Before this time, most of the fires were grass fires. The lone fire truck, which Donald Skow describes as a Model A Ford, was located on the dairy property. In case of fire, local residents would phone the dairy, “someone would hit the siren, whoever was around jumped on, and that was it.”

Around 1945, the dairy cows were sold off and for the next ten years or so, the Richmond Farm Creamery processed milk brought in from other areas—primarily Sonoma, but also

some small operations in San Pablo. Beef cattle continued to be raised on the property, however. The reason for this change is not entirely clear, but nearby housing development was no doubt a factor. According to Donald Skow, the land on which the Canyon Park housing was built was sold at about this time. In addition, Soren Skow had died in 1938. He had been the driving force in the business, and his passing was deeply felt. He was, as Donald explains, “very patriarchal.” Donald remembers that, as long as the old man was alive, nothing interfered with the family Sunday dinner. With the old man gone, there seemed to be “too many cooks” in the kitchen. In any case, according to Donald, the dairy operation was never a sophisticated business operation. It was just a simple family business, with all the good and bad that that implies.

The Richmond Farm Creamery ceased its operations in El Sobrante in March of 1955, when it concluded an arrangement with a much larger firm, Golden State. While the announcement made it seem like it was just a move, in reality it was the end of the line for the Skow Dairy. Lester Skow noted that residential growth in El Sobrante was a primary factor in the decision.

The photos in this article come primarily from the Oliver Family collection. Bill Oliver, who took over the operation of Oliver’s Hardware in 1948, married Patsy Skow, daughter of Soren’s son Harold, so the ties to the Skow family are deep. Bill and Patsy had two sons, John and Richard; John now owns Rancho Liquors and Richard is in charge of the venerable Oliver’s Hardware store.

Today, no physical structures remind us of the dairy that largely defined what El Sobrante was for over 50 years. But just to the northeast of the San Pablo Dam, there is a canyon named after the Danish immigrant that began to build his own American Dream in the 1890s. Commonly misspelled “Scow Canyon,” the site is not far from the original Richmond Farm Creamery.

Another Successful Stroll!

2012 was the 19th year for the El Sobrante Stroll, and the second year that the ESHS participated in this annual event.



From left: Steve James, Donald Bastin, and Maury Abraham



The Richmond Farm Creamery published calendars every year, as a give-away to its customers. This is the cover image for the 1951 calendar. The El Sobrante Historical Society has taken great pains to reproduce this calendar, updated to 2013.

U.S.S. FOUR CUPS OF MILK A PERSON DAILY

FOR GROWING CHILDREN

PROPER FOOD AND GOOD MILK AND FRESH AIR, WILL MAKE A STRONG CHILD.

Don't Forget, Mothers!

January 2013

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
		1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30	31		

Each month contains dates of important events in the history of El Sobrante. All of the original recipes and nutritional advice remain unchanged. A unique Christmas gift. If you would like one sent to you, please send a check for \$5 +\$2 for mailing (total of \$7) to : ESHS, 6191 Hillside Drive, El Sobrante, CA 94803. Learn some tidbits of local history while adding more milk, eggs, butter and cream to your diet!

We put up exhibits and photographs, which drew in many curious passers-by. We sold books and a few calendars, and, most importantly, signed up more members. Maury put together a wonderful 3-page self-directed walking tour of historic downtown El Sobrante, which was given away for free. This tour is available as a download on our website, ESHIST.ORG. On the home page, just look at the navigation bar



at the left; under "Historic Sites" you will see the bar for "Walking Tour." Just click on this bar and open up, print out, or download the tour. The Stroll itself

seemed busier than ever, and the cars, as usual, were the star attraction. The El Sobrante Stroll has become the signature event for our community.

Looking forward to the 20th!

Girl with boa constrictor. Mike Frith looking on.



Remembering Dave Arrington



Steven James

David Andrew Arrington passed away on August 12 of this year. A 1966 graduate of De Anza High School, Dave was a gifted athlete and still holds several records at De Anza High. In 1967 he signed a professional contract with the Pittsburg Pirates. He played pro ball for nine years, ending his career

with the Chicago Cubs. Steve James and David grew up together in El Sobrante, and both played on the De Anza varsity team. Ed.

Dave Arrington lived on Allview Ave, in El Sobrante, just around the corner from me on Idlewood Circle. We were the same age and were friends. We played in the street or on the vacant lot next to my house. At an early age, when boys become competitive, I remember Dave could always throw or kick the ball farther, jump higher, or just do anything sports related better than any of us other kids. I would think, "Damn how can he do that?"

These superior athletic skills really stood out when we started playing organized baseball. Before there was an El Sobrante Boys Club, there were DAD's league teams. These Teams held try-outs, with the best players making the team. Those not making the team just found other activities. It's wasn't like today where everyone plays. We played other teams from Richmond, San Pablo, El Cerrito, and Pinole.

There was a core group of players that played baseball from age eight right through De Anza High School. We were all good ball players, but Dave's talents just stood out in the crowd. By the time we were seniors at De Anza, there were professional scouts at all our games. It was 1966 and I must say all of us boys were in awe of the scouts and the dream of becoming a



Major League baseball player. Of course, they were only there to watch Dave.

Steve James, left, De Anza High Varsity Baseball Team, 1966



Dave finished his senior year being the ACAL batting champ, leader in home runs, runs batted in, hits and batting average. To top that off, he had the most wins by a pitcher. In other words he was all everything. Dave signed a Pro contract in 1967 with the Pittsburg Pirates and ended his nine year career with the Chicago Cubs.

Dave Arrington, De Anza High Varsity Baseball Team, 1966

There's one story I like to tell, that demonstrates Dave's great athletic ability. At the end of our senior year in 1966 our baseball team was practicing for the final games of the year. Also, the track team was preparing for the final ACAL league track meet. On De Anza's Team was a young man (sorry I can't remember his name) who was one of the best in the league in the pole vault. When baseball practice ended all of us ball players ran down to the track, just goofing off. Dave grabbed the pole, saying "I want to give this a try." The bar was set high. I'm guessing about a foot below the competition height. The Track coach, Mr. Hall, was watching. Dave ran down the lane,

stuck the pole in the hole and muscled himself into the air. He just tucked his legs up, like in a squat position and over the bar he went. No form, the first time he had ever tried it. I swear he was at least 2 to 3 feet over where the bar was set. Mr. Hall about went crazy seeing him clear the bar by such a distance. The coach tried talking to Dave about learning some form and doing it in a meet. Dave said "no I just wanted to try it once". Once again I thought, "Damn how can he do that?"

Dave passed away August 12, 2012 and although we had not seen or talked to each other in over 30 years he was still my friend, with so many great memories. El Sobrante lost a great athlete.

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**De Anza High School Reunion,  
August 18, 2012**

*Donald Bastin*

As many of you know, the old De Anza High School building will soon be demolished and its place taken by a brand new building which is in the last stages of construction. In recognition of this momentous event, a multi-year reunion and picnic was held on the new baseball field. Part of the plan was to tour the new buildings, but fears of potential accidents in the unfinished structures pulled the rug from under that idea. Funnily enough, the old buildings were left open for the old graduates to wander through and revive old memories. The ESHS was there, with a table full of information and books. And we took some pictures.



*Don Cook, Class of '60*

Taking a trip down memory lane, we strolled through the old school hallway, by the office, and through the library. Aside from the computers, not really much had seemed to

change in 51 years since I last attended De Anza High.



*Office,  
De Anza High School*

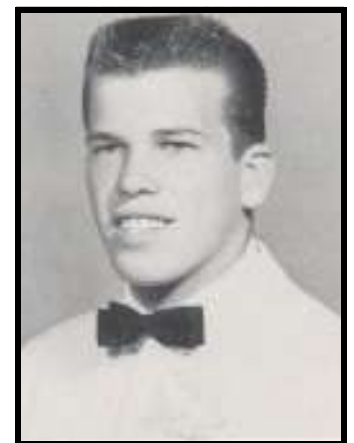
On the same day, a reunion/barbecue was held at Kennedy Grove, hosted by local resident and De Anza graduate, Garrison Travers. As my wife and I live on Hillside Drive, just a short walk to the park, we managed to join the group for a short time.



*From left: Scott Harriman and Walter Wheat, class of '68. Scott's father was coach Neal Harriman. Walter is a member of the pioneer African*

*American family in El Sobrante.*

One man we talked to was Bob Weiss, class of '62. While Bob did complain a bit about some medical problems, he seemed well enough and clearly happy to be at the reunion. It was therefore quite a shock to learn that he died just five days later. This is Bob's graduation picture in the 1962 De Anza Yearbook.



Like Dave Arrington and Steve James, Bob loved sports, and was a member of the De Anza High School Varsity Baseball team. Our thoughts go out to his family at this sad time.

## Dam Jack

Lyle Miller

*Ed: Jack Lewis owned and operated Dam Cycles at 4036 San Pablo Dam Road for over 30 years, selling motorcycles, parts, and accessories. He was a true El Sobrante original, and made a strong impression on all who met him.*



I first met Jack Lewis about 1974, he owned the motorcycle shop next to my Dad's brake & alignment shop in El Sobrante. I used to enjoy going over to Dam Cycles & visit with ol' Jack, listen to his stories thru his

gravelly voice & see first-hand how a "biker" conducts business.

Jack, born in Iowa and raised in Richmond, California, was tough as any 1%er outlaw biker. One day he stopped by my shop, got out of his car, grabbed his crutches & hobbled in to my office, he asked if I wanted to see something cool? I answered, "yeah, sure." I helped him to a chair, where he pulled down his sweatpants and started un-wrapping the gauze bandages covering BOTH legs. He had just come home from the hospital after having both knees replaced. As he described how the doctor had cut off the leg bones above and below his knee (this is when I had to sit down). I said, "Jack, should you be driving a car so soon?" He replied, "Hell, my-boy, I'll be racing my enduro motorcycle in the next race..." And he did !

He co-founded the Richmond Ramblers and raced moto-cross professionally, earning several top three finishes and numerous trophies in his younger days.

At one time, many years ago, Jack was a sales rep for a major tobacco company, left that job and opened his motorcycle shop in the 1960s. I think it was in the late '90s he decided to open a cigarette shop next to his Cycle shop to supplement his income (and get his own personal supply at a wholesale price.) One day, while I was visiting Jack, a car pulled up out front, a large woman got out and came into the cigarette shop; she asked Jack for something on the lower shelf and as he knelt down to get it, she grabbed an armload of cartons and ran out. Jack came over the counter and grabbed her by her hair and wrestled her back into the store, then asked me to block the door and keep her inside while he called the sheriff. As I stood in the doorway, Jack dialing the police, the woman casually inched closer to me and before I knew it, shoved me backward and took off for the waiting car. As she dove into the backseat, Jack, hot on her heels, jumped onto the open door frame of the now accelerating car. The woman held on to the inside door handle and was pulling it closed with Jack's arm caught inside; he was now trapped as long as she held the handle, so he started punching her in the face until she finally let go. That's when the door fully opened and Jack tumbled into the street almost a block away from where this started. With the toes of his shoes ground off from being dragged down the street and his arm starting to swell up and turn purple, he gathered all the cartons of smokes, tossed them back into the store, locked up and left to go find this hoodlum who tried to steal from him. He came back the next day and told me how he saw the car abandoned on the street with one back door that was so bent it would never close again.

Jack Lewis was a victim of homicide in his home, on September 21, 2006. He was a character who will be missed by many.

Rest in peace Dam Jack !

## Contra Costa County Library System Turns 100!

Contra Costa County Library will be celebrating its 100th Birthday throughout 2013. In addition to events at your local library, there will be an all-county Birthday celebration on Sunday, **July 21, 2013**. Please mark your calendars now and be sure to save the date. In preparation for the big event, there will be a series of kick-off events held in January and February. Please be sure to check at your library to get the full list of planned events and join in the celebration. Let's make 2013 a truly great celebration of the library!

*Barbara Flynn*  
County Librarian, Contra Costa County Library

### Recent Acquisitions



Maurice Abraham has made many contributions to our historical society, including the recent donation that you see here. Joel Beck was an important and well known underground comic book artist of the 1960s and 1970s. This

publication contains selections from all his major creations, including Marching Marvin, Lenny of Laredo, and The Profit. His works are now collector's items. Joel attended De Anza High School and was a senior in 1961 (though he did not graduate).

In addition to this comic book, Maury also donated some local World War II items (ration stamps, tokens, and books), a 1950s manual for the Nike-Hercules missile, magazines and newspapers related to the assassinations of President Kennedy, Bobby Kennedy, and the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., and other items of interest.

Lyle Miller donated a set of glasses and a plaque related to an El Sobrante golf tournament that took place in 1963. These items were given to Lyle by Richard Oliver.

*If anyone out there knows anything about this event, please let us know. Can't find anything in the local newspaper.*



***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).***

### **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.

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Questions, Comments, and  
other communication? Send to:  
[ESHISTORY@GMAIL.COM](mailto:ESHISTORY@GMAIL.COM)