

Published by the El Sobrante Historical Society

THE LEFTOVERS

Issue #27

Summer 2018

The Pete's Club Fire and the Battling DeGeorgis'

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On Monday, December 3rd, 1956, a fourth fire in as many months finally completed the destruction of Pete's Club, a popular tavern located next to Oliver's Hardware. The saga of the club, and the owners, husband and wife Pete and Jean DeGeorgis, covered just four years, but in that time the couple had

become well known in the community, and not in a good way.

Pete and Jean DeGeorgis acquired the existing building around 1950. The building, which was called **Tom's**, had originally been owned (according to Bill Oliver) by Bill LaBelle, and was operated by his daughter, Minerva Ogle, and son-in-law, Pete. Minerva and Pete, as near as we can tell, had run the business for around 7 years, which means that it probably existed at that location since at least 1943.



Upon Bill's death, the building itself was left to his second wife Elizabeth. The business went to his daughter, Minerva, which led to hard feelings and lawsuits.

This picture dates to around 1948. Tom's Tavern is across the street from Oliver's Union station and just next to Oliver's Hardware. The name "Tom's" can just be made out behind the telephone pole.

Upon resolution of the conflict, Minerva, and her husband bought a parcel across the street, and, in August of 1950, opened a new bar and delicatessen, and named it, you guessed it, **Tom's**. This bar later changed hands and acquired the name by which it is known today, Rancho Liquors. In the photo at right we see the familiar "ranchhouse" structure, with the red tile overhang (which was removed recently). The inside still retains its original "wild west atmosphere," which is described in the El Sobrante Herald of August 3, 1950.



So who was Tom? No one seems to know. According to Bill Oliver, Tom's was originally the bar that was bought by Ed Banducci around 1938, and was re-named Ed's. But as to the identity of Tom, Bill had no clue.

In any case, around the time that Minerva and Pete Ogle were constructing a new "Tom's" across the



street from the old place, Pete and Jean DeGeorgis acquired the original Tom's Tavern and re-named it Pete's Club. The photo at left was taken in 1953.

Pete and Jean had a very stormy relationship. In one incident, vividly described by both Bill Oliver and pioneer Ed Campbell, Jean was chasing Pete in her Kaiser-Frazier automobile (the car is visible in this photo, just under the word "Club.") Pete just managed to run

inside the club when Jean's car hit the telephone pole parking barrier and flew up into the air, hitting the front of the building. Both Bill and Ed were nearby that day and actually witnessed the event. But all the old-timers were aware of the story. Ed related that Jean tried to buy a shotgun from Bill's hardware store, though he didn't know whether she actually was sold the gun. He was afraid that she would kill Pete. On another occasion, Bill remembered walking into Pete's place and finding Pete behind the bar with a big bandage on his eye. He asked if he and "Jeannie" had had a fight, to which Pete responded "Oh yeah, but you oughta see Jeannie."

On Wednesday, August 15, 1956, a fire broke out in Pete's Club and severely damaged the building, which was described as "gutted," (though not a total loss). Arson was immediately suspected. Just two days prior, two separate fires were discovered and extinguished by the local fire department. The Sheriff's Department, the Fire Department, and an investigator from the National Board of Fire Underwriters launched an investigation. Two weeks later, charges were brought against both Pete and Jean, who remained at liberty on posting of \$1000.00 bail each. A hearing, before local Justice of the Peace Wilson Locke was scheduled in September.

At the hearing in September, Judge Locke dismissed the case against Pete DeGeorgis for lack of evidence. However, he found that the evidence against his wife was compelling, and bound her over to trial in the Superior Court. It was while Jean DeGeorgis was awaiting trial that the last fire took place.

The fire in early December completed the destruction of the club building. El Sobrante chief Charlie Matteson declared that the structure was now "beyond repair." Again, the circumstances of the blaze were very suspicious, as the building had been unoccupied for months and electrical service



had been turned off. Chief Matteson again offered his opinion that the fire was of "incendiary origin," and, again, Sheriff's investigators were called in to probe the cause of this latest blaze. In the meantime, Jean DeGeorgis remained at liberty, awaiting her trial regarding the three fires that had occurred in August. It remained unclear whether a fourth arson charge would be added to the case.

In late January, 1957, following a 2-day hearing, Superior Court Judge Homer Patterson dismissed the charges against Jean DeGeorgis (no fourth charge was added). While he offered his opinion that the August fires were "incendiary in nature," he declared that the prosecution had not shown that Mrs. DeGeorgeis "had the opportunity" to set them. Further, it was not shown that she had any motive, as she would not have profited from any insurance payment (the building was apparently leased). Nonetheless, the D.A. argued that Mrs. De Georgis was "the only person in a position to start the fires." Apparently, the "bad blood" between the DeGeorgis couple was not taken into account as a motive for the arson. In any case, with the destruction of Pete's Club and the resolution of the trial, we hear no more of Pete and Jean DeGeorgis in the history of El Sobrante.

Most locals (including Chief Matteson) believed that Jean was guilty of setting the fires that destroyed her club. She had certainly demonstrated that she was of a volatile

character and was erratic enough to act out of sheer spite. The attention that Jean brought on herself may have been a factor in the apparent lack of interest in any other suspect.

While the prosecution had argued that Mrs. De Georgis “was the only person in a position to start the fires,” this may not have been entirely true. Recall that, according to Bill Oliver, the owner of the building had been Elizabeth LaBelle, wife of the original owner, Bill LaBelle, and stepmother to Bill’s daughter, Minerva. According (again) to Bill Oliver, the animosity between Elizabeth and her stepdaughter was pretty serious. Apparently, it was serious enough that Elizabeth had reported to the authorities that Minerva had engaged in some questionable business practices. Bill remembered that this had ended up costing Minerva \$20,000! This was “a ton of money” in those days, Bill added. So, if Minerva was still stewing about her loss in 1956, she was just across the street, in Tom’s bar.

In any case, while everyone suspected arson in the destruction of Pete’s Club, no one was ever convicted of the act. Just one of El Sobrante’s mysteries.

April 1, 1964—El Sobrante Marks a Milestone—Gets Own Postal Cancellation Mark



While a new post office opened in El Sobrante in 1957, it was not until 1964 that the community was granted “postal identity” with the award of its own postal cancellation mark.

The postmaster, Gust Allyn, singled out El Sobrante Herald editor, Ed Galli, “as having

been instrumental in paving the way for this new identifying postal service.” Raymond Germain, Assistant to the Director of the San Francisco Region U.S. Post Office Department, added that “The postal identity of any community marks its recognized autonomy, and El Sobrante is to be praised for wanting its own name to appear on all mail cancelled at this branch office.”

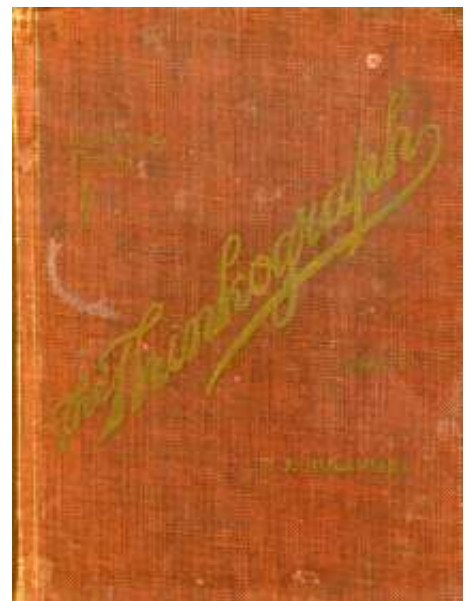
El Sobrante, it seems, was growing up. The Herald article covering this milestone noted that: “El Sobrante has been recognized as one of the East Bay communities which, through its rapid growth, demands postal recognition. . . . It also marks the geographic separation on the postal level, from any other community in California. From now on, all mail cancelled here will read on the stamp, EL SOBRANTE, CALIFORNIA.”

While El Sobrante never managed to incorporate, still, it has developed its own unique identity as a vibrant community in Contra Costa County. Over 50 years ago, the U.S Post Office agreed.

Recent Acquisitions

This interesting little volume was donated by local resident, Joan Drees.

Published in 1914, in San Francisco, it is titled *The Thinkograph*, and is a collection of the first 5 monthly magazines of that name. Research reveals that there were apparently 4 such volumes published, through



1916, when the publication seems to have gone out of business.

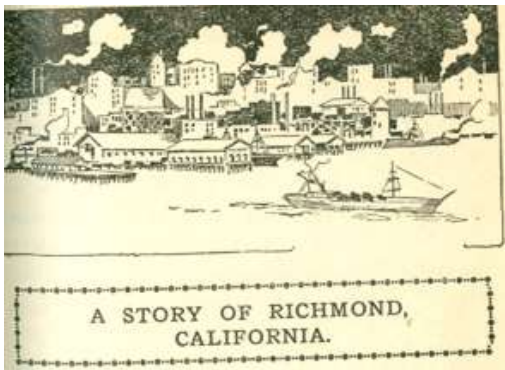
The editor is F. J. Hulaniski, who will be familiar to those of you who are true local history buffs. Hulaniski edited a popular history of Contra Costa County, which was published in 1917.

The publication is somewhat hard to describe, but is full of witticisms and humorous articles (humorous at least in the style of the time). Here are some examples:

“One fairly good argument in favor of prohibition is that all the bartenders, bums, and prostitutes are against it.”

“Banker Chas. W. Morse is an ungrateful man. He was pardoned out of the pen to die and then went off and got well.”

*“The suffragette she threw and threw
Her brickbats, but alas!
Although she stood eight feet away
She missed the window glass.”*



There are also several very favorable articles on the city of

Richmond, which was viewed as a rising star in the bay area.

In those days, it seems, a town full of smokestacks was seen as a positive sign of economic vitality.

All in all, this small book is a valuable addition to our collection, as it provides a peek into the attitudes and opinions of the local California male (I could find nothing written by a woman) of a hundred years ago.



This photograph is one of 4 that were donated by Joanne Dowell of Crockett, California. All the photos were taken in 1939 and show the buildings and vehicles associated with a business known as the “El Sobrante Dairy.” This operation was apparently located just off Argyle Road, which branches off Maloney Road (Appian Way) roughly across from where the Post Office stands today. This business was quite unknown to us, and it also represents one of the earliest uses of the name “El Sobrante” in the business name. According to Society member and local historian Roxy Miravalle, the residents of the address listed for the dairy were Grover and Stella Dean. Stella may have been the actual operator of the business, as she is listed, in the 1940 census, as a “farmerette,” while her husband has an unrelated occupation. The dairy consisted of one bull and 17 cows. The business is listed for sale in the 1941 edition of the Oakland Tribune. It is unknown whether someone else owned the dairy prior to or after the Deans.

Nice Work Roxy!



This copy of the El Sobrante Herald, dated April 2, 1964 was donated by Society member Emil

Munkres, and is the source of the article on the postal stamp in this issue. It is one of the very few actual hard copies that we have of our own local newspaper, which was published here for over 20 years.



Our final donation, also donated by Joanne Dowell, was this postcard of De Anza High School. The photo was probably taken shortly after the school opened in 1955. On the opposite side, the description reads:

DE ANZA HIGH SCHOOL – One of the most modern schools in the nation. De Anza won an international prize for architecture in 1955. This school of over 2300 students is set in a small valley in the growing community of El Sobrante, California.

Join us at the Silver Anniversary edition of the El Sobrante Stroll.



Date:
Sunday,
September
16, 2018

We will be
there, as
usual, in
our booth

next to the SPAWNERS (San Pablo Watershed Neighbors Education and Restoration Society). Come by for a chat and share your memories of El Sobrante.

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.

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