

and all the testimony that was reported in the press, it was all my account of the caper. I saw that the lead-in to the story was "Robert D. Shaner a student at the University of California" and then it said "who resides at 1610 10th Street in Berkeley." The paper giving my new residence number in Berkeley did make me a bit nervous. The court found Henry Molino guilty as charged.

About three years later as a Superior Court Probation Officer Investigator for Alameda County Adult Probation, I was delivering a court report to the Alameda County Superior Court at the County Court House by Lake Merritt in Oakland. Going up in the Courthouse elevator, which then had elevator operators, I noticed this young woman also riding up in the elevator. I said to her, "I think I know you from somewhere." From the way she answered, I knew she was not truthful when she answered, "No, I don't think so." When I got off the elevator, it dawned on me that she was the operator of that high-low game who I had arrested that night in the Kona Club. From the look on her face it was apparent that she had recognized me. As the elevator operators knew everyone and everything, I inquired and found out that she was a private investigator of sorts. Her job was to check out the people who might end up on juries, getting the information for certain criminal defense attorneys to help them in jury selection.

The Kona Club building, which was located on the northwest corner of the intersection where Carlson Blvd. connects with San Pablo Avenue, has been torn down and the Payless Shoe Source store is now located there. It is three buildings south of the "fortress" that "Big Bill" Pechart, the reputed boss of gambling interests at that time, had built at 9951 San Pablo Avenue. The upstairs of this old "fortress" is now the home of the "Dance Easy" Dance Studio.

The It Club closed its doors some years ago and that building now houses professional offices on the northeast corner of San Pablo and Central Avenues. A few years ago a new It Club sprang to life at the Bay end of Gilman Street in Berkeley, very close to the south entry to Golden Gate Fields Race Track. As it was at the end of the Gilman Street exit off I-80 they gave it a very clever name, "The Gilman Ex-IT Club".

The famed Wagon Wheel Club building still stands and now is the home of the Eagles Lodge, located on the bay side of Carlson Avenue just south of Central Avenue.

The rock-faced gun store that is still in operation on the south side of Carlson, very close to San Pablo Avenue, has been there for a long time and while I'm not sure if it had a "colorful" past, I was led to believe that it did. If it didn't, it sure looks like it should have.

Edna Gatto, "It Club" co-owner, widow of Walter, was interviewed by James Carter of The Journal a few months back and recalled her years helping her husband operate the It Club. She admitted to having slot machines and trying to avoid being shut down when the new city council was elected on an anti-gambling platform. She was quoted as saying, "We cheated but got caught only once." When asked how they cheated, she described how they had somebody who would know when the raid was to occur. That person would tell them in advance, so when the police arrived to close them down, all the gambling machines and "evidence" had been removed or hidden.

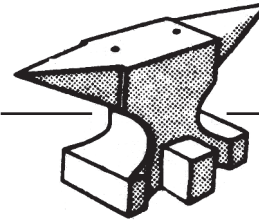
With "Big Bill" Pechart's fortress (with 18" walls, massive doors, peep holes, etc. and 200 telephone lines servicing it) reportedly being built in 1948, it sounds as if mischief was still going on after the city fathers decreed an end to it.

While not "the rest of the story" by any means, the above account could give those interested in the history of El Cerrito another glimpse into the 1947 transformation that brought great changes to or at least changed the "Wide Open" image of the City of El Cerrito.

3/26/10

Robert Shaner, Kensington

~ We are very fortunate that member Bob Shaner was willing to share one of the adventures of his youth with us.



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***The History of Camp Herms - A talk and tour by George Fosselius***  
***This event is free to the public and refreshments will be served.***

George Fosselius, a retired teacher and perpetual Boy Scout, will delve into the history of this wonderful Boy Scout Camp.

This rugged, 80-year-old camp, which sits high in the El Cerrito Hills, is home to a recently restored historic lodge, other buildings, stone walls built by the WPA and a historic swimming pool that is a marvel to see. Its trails offer views into Wildcat Canyon.

"The Camp was a distinct Berkeley phenomenon, both town and gown," George says, "and is still has its share of controversy."

The talk will include a brief, level walk in the former Bates and Borland Quarry, which was turned into Camp Herms in 1930. After the talk, the public is invited to take the rim hike and visit the lower field. This walk will be just under a mile and will involve 210 feet of elevation change.

Bring your walking shoes or just come for the talk! 2 p.m. Sunday, May 16, 2010 at the Lodge at Camp Herms, 1100 James Place, El Cerrito. Camp Herms is just uphill from Arlington Park. Take Thors Bay Road uphill from Arlington Boulevard one block to James Place. The Lodge and plentiful parking is right at the entry.

The El Cerrito Historical Society is a volunteer, non-political, non-profit organization with one agenda: to locate and preserve our local history. Anyone may join; dues are \$20 (Household member), \$50 (Sponsoring member), and \$250 (Life member).

# How Shaner Helped Clean up El Cerrito

Bob Shaner notes: in reading a brief history of the City of El Cerrito several years ago, I saw that gambling and perhaps other activities were going on in the city until a new city council, elected on a reform ticket in 1947, apparently said, “enough is enough”. With the help of Earl Warren, the newly elected California Attorney General who was committed to snuffing out gambling and other sorts of organized crime, big changes were in store for this quaint little city. According to the account, all this gambling and such came to a halt in 1947.

The article brought to mind that while a I was a student at U.C. Berkeley, the rumor was that El Cerrito was a wide open city with fancy night clubs, racy floor shows and of course, gambling. The city of El Cerrito and the adjacent “No Man’s Land”, a strip of unincorporated county land between the cities of El Cerrito and Richmond, had clubs called the Wagon Wheel, Kona Club, It Club and others, which were where the action was. The presence of the dog track in El Cerrito added to this rather wild image.

At this time I was in my last semester at Cal, enrolled in a class in criminal investigation that was being taught by School of Criminology Dean. O. W. Wilson. My classmates were mostly other military officers just released from active duty in WWII. My best friend at the time was also a released Navy Lieutenant (jg), who was working as a student typist for the Berkeley Police Department Vice Squad.

Dave Hayes, my vice squad student typist buddy, approached me one day and asked me if I wanted to earn \$70 as an undercover officer. He didn’t know anything about what was planned or when or where it was to take place, but only that he had been asked to get the names of a couple of student friends that he thought could be trusted. I agreed to participate, thinking, “Why not, this will sure be a new and different experience for me.” I told Dave to give the people my name and he told me a day or so later that I was approved and that someone would be in contact with me. (It became apparent later that all this secrecy was because the department that was planning this operation assumed that “moles” within the department would spill the beans, so to speak, and tip off the “target” of the planned police activity.)

This was in early November 1947. About a week later I received a telephone call at our apartment that was in the U.C. Veteran’s Village, a small unit of war housing apartments that had been moved to vacant U.C. land on Buchanan Street in Albany. The caller said, “Bob, save this date,” which was the Saturday a week later, “We’ll give you more instructions at that time,” still very top secret.

All day on that fateful day I sat by the phone and, as the time passed, I thought I must have the wrong day. Then at about 4 p.m. the phone rang, “Bob, be at this address at 7 o’clock and wear dressy slacks and a sport shirt.” The address was in the El Cerrito hills and as it turns out I think it was the home of Lt. H. A. Thulén, the El Cerrito officer who was the officer in charge of this caper. Dennis McCliese, the other student, who I had not met before, had arrived before me. After we were introduced, we both were sworn in as El Cerrito Special Police officers for that day and given a “Special Police Officer” badge. Armed only with our El Cerrito Special Police Officer badge, we were left with that, our good looks and quick wit to see us through the next few hours.

I was going to the Kona Club and Dennis was assigned to the It Club. We both were given \$70 dollars of marked money and Lt. Thulén showed me the markings which were his initials, very carefully lightly inked into the “artistic decorations” which adorned the bills.

I was told that when in the club, I should play the high-low game that would be set up in the rear area of the bar. They said there were slot machines in another room, but they didn’t know if I would be able get to this room to play them. They suggested that I should try to gain access to this area and play them if possible. I was told that at 11:30 p.m. sharp the raid would occur and that at that time I should be by the high-low table. The Lt. said that when the officers came in the door, the hatcheck lady would push a button that would sound

an alarm at the high-low table. Upon hearing this alarm, the operator would attempt to sweep all the money and chips off the table and try to put them in her purse so she could say later that this money and chips were her personal property.

This newly appointed “Sam Spade” was dropped off at the club. As I walked in, I tried to act “casual”, but I was sure everyone knew that I was up to no good. I sat at the bar, ordered a beer and was so nervous that I spilled it all over the bar. After a while I sauntered over to the high-low table and was taught how to play the game. Not doing well at it, I lost much of my marked money.

As it was apparent I was not doing well, I inquired if they had some other activity like a slot machine where a “poor country boy” might have a change of luck. I was directed to the back room slot machine area where I dutifully put money in each machine.

About 11:15 I was back at the high-low table and holding my own with about \$10 worth of chips left in my pocket. At about 11:25 p.m. I thought, “5 minutes from now these remaining chips are not going to be worth much,” so I cashed a few of them in. This took a few minutes because the operator told me that she wasn’t supposed to cash them in as this was supposed to be done at the hatcheck booth. I didn’t have time for that and against her better judgment, she cashed three or four of them in at the table.

At 11:30 p.m., on the button, the alarm went off at the table and the operator’s mouth opened in shock! When she recovered, she started grabbing the money and chips to put them in her purse. I reached across the table, grabbed her arm, flashed my El Cerrito Special Police badge and placed her under arrest. It was like a Roaring Twenties movie! Women were screaming and the whole club was in an uproar. As I stood there holding on to the arm of my “prisoner”, an El Cerrito police officer came up, took her into his custody, and told me to head to the Pastime Club. I quickly exited the club and headed north on San Pablo Avenue, crossing Fairmount Avenue to the Pastime Club.

The Pastime Club was a very narrow small bar and the old bar space is now in the middle of the Pastime Hardware Store. It was just north of the present checkout stand and I think the front part of it is now the store office area.

I arrived at the bar first and Dennis showed up a few minutes later. I think we were the only two patrons in the bar. As planned, an officer soon walked in and when he walked out we followed, got into his police car, and went up to what I think was the judge’s home. There Dennis and I signed the criminal complaints against the owners of the two clubs. I signed the complaint against Henry Molino, owner of the Kona Club and Dennis signed a complaint against Walter Gatto, owner of the It Club. Both were charged for unlawful gambling, but at the time I just signed a document that was put before me. I found out later that I was the one pressing charges.

In January I was called to testify in the trial of Henry Molino and on the stand I told my story as described above. Dennis was not called to testify as Walter Gatto indicated that he planned to enter a plea of guilty to the charges.

Molino had Leo Sullivan, a top criminal defense attorney at that time, scheduled to defend him, but as he was late arriving, the trial started without him. The prosecution then put on its case against Molino and I was the star witness. After I had given my testimony, Lt. Thulén escorted me out of the courtroom. After saying “Great testimony Bob,” he suggested that I not hang around. As he put it, Henry’s boys, or maybe it was “Lieutenants”, were all seated in the back of the courtroom. He suggested as he escorted me to my car that I stay out of El Cerrito for a while.

All of this foolishness was given wide press in the local newspapers and when I read about the big trial