

## OTHER SOCIETY NOTES

**Quarry-Mabuchi** - Our interest has not waned in preserving the building most recently occupied by the Chamber of Commerce: 10848 San Pablo Avenue. It was built as a quarry office, then used for about thirty years as a retail flower shop, interrupted by the forced relocation of the Mabuchi family during WWII (1942-1945.) El Cerrito residents continue to tell us they want to preserve this site, not only for its cultural history but because it is one of the few unique buildings on the Avenue.

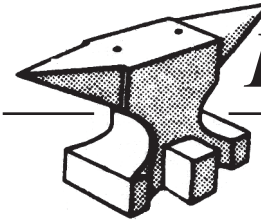
Eden Housing now has an agreement with the City to develop the former Trade-way property (including the Quarry-Mabuchi site) as retail space and housing. Two of the Society's officers were invited to a sit-down with representatives from Eden Housing and from the City. The purpose was to discuss the project and to help the City better understand the Society's priorities. Clearly we want the building preserved, "in situ", as a stand-alone structure, with the exterior unchanged. On a related front, the Society recently completed a very nice treatise on this building, including old and new photos, and submitted it to the "Endangered Historic Places" program sponsored by the American Institute of Architects.

**Shadi History Room** - Our crew of volunteers continues to work on arranging and cataloguing our records and artifacts in the Shadi Room at City Hall. A new member has joined the Wednesday group, Roberta Montgomery. Roberta is helping input the data for each object in our collection. Board member Kathleen McKinley has worked on the computer support.

We have been contacted by the El Cerrito Police Department because they would like to see, and perhaps borrow for exhibition, some of our artifacts. We have, for example, the uniform and badge of former Chief Bob Whitaker (1970s and 1980s.) We also have a badge from nearly eighty years ago.

**Programs** - David Weinstein has arranged some great programs and tours in the past 15 months, including Camp Herms, Contra Costa Civic Theater, the Recycling Center, Sunset View Cemetery, and El Cerrito High.

What programs would you like to see in the future? Let us know, and if it fits our history mission, we'll give it a try.



# El Cerrito Historical Society

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## **OUR NEXT MEETING: 7:00 PM WEDNESDAY, MAY 4 WINDRUSH SCHOOL - THE OLD CHUNG MEI HOME**

**Programs** - We have a great program planned for May 4th. In cooperation with Windrush School, we will be learning about the first use of the Windrush site, which was once the Chung Mei Home for orphaned Chinese boys. We will get a tour of the site and also hear the comments of a few men who lived there as young boys. Then, on Sunday, June 5 we are planning a special program featuring TEPCO. For for many years this local company was the largest industry in El Cerrito. Sandi Genser-Maack and her husband Lynn, renown collectors of TEPCO, will share some of their collection and their knowledge with us. This meeting will be in the Senior Center at 1:30.

**Spring Fling** - The City of El Cerrito is planning a "San Pablo Avenue Spring Fling" for Saturday, May 14. The main focus of the activities will be the various improvements along San Pablo Avenue. Of particular note to Society members will be the special attention to be given to the Historic and Cultural Pavers we helped create and which are being placed along the length of San Pablo Avenue. You can read more about this free community event, including a complete list of the pavers and their themes, at <http://www.el-cerrito.org/springfling.html>.

The El Cerrito Historical Society is a volunteer, non-political, non-profit corporation that has as its purpose the preservation and appreciation of the history of El Cerrito. It does this by providing educational and research opportunities; by the collection of historic photographs, documents, artifacts and cultural objects; by advocating the preservation of historic resources in the city; and by encouraging others to help further these aims. Anyone may join; dues are \$20 (Household member), \$50 (Sponsoring member), and \$250 (Life member).

# The Chung Mei Home for Chinese Boys

by Dave Weinstein

Few buildings in El Cerrito tell their tale as eloquently as the former Chung Mei Home for Chinese Boys. Many people know nothing of its remarkable history although the striking building, made of white concrete with a green-tiled roof, sits on a prominent hillside and is a local landmark. To discover that history, all one has to do is visit.

Although the former orphanage is now a private school, Windrush School, which has owned the property since 1987, has done a remarkable job of preserving its historic elements. That's even though the school went through a major expansion a few years ago. Chinese-style art, ranging from a mural to woodwork, stucco carvings, original architectural details, and the original bathtubs used by the residents all remain in place. It is possible to walk through the school and visualize what it must have been like for the

eight hundred boys who lived there at some point from 1935 to 1954, when the home closed.

On May 4, the El Cerrito Historical Society is hosting a tour of the site, led by Jean Witzke, a school administrator who is also an architectural historian and artist. The event will also feature a talk

by three of the former Chung Mei "boys," Phil Chan, Richard Mar and Wing Soohoo. Co-sponsoring the event are Windrush School and the city of El Cerrito's Human Relations Commission. The Home, built in 1935 and designed by architect Donald Powers Smith, evokes China with its tile roof and upturned eaves. That's even though many upturned eaves were removed on orders of City building inspectors for seismic safety, according to Witzke. Look for the eaves when the tour winds around the rear of the main building.



*Some of the ornate design that is part of the school. Photo by the author.*

The gym, too, once had a tile roof and Chinese-style ridge beam. Chinese characteristics are seen right at the orphanage's main door, with wind dragons overhead, bat-shaped emblems at the base of the columns (bats provide good luck), and curved walls to confuse evil spirits and prevent them from entering. Panels of sculpted stucco that appear to represent dancers really show "flying tigers," Witzke says. These are protective spirits who can fly so quickly they appear as if from thin air, much like fighters you may have seen in a martial arts movie. When entering the building visitors see a Chinese-style mural in the lobby painted by an artist known only as "Dupont."

Other Chinese design elements are found throughout the several buildings on campus, including round windows that provide good luck to those fortunate enough to pass through. Even the new building has a Chinese dragon; Windrush brought in El Cerrito artist Arlin Robins to craft it in mosaic. But it's more than Chinese art that tells the story of the home - it's also the evidence of the life that took place inside. Paired bath tubs in the boys' former quarters suggest how older boys watched over the younger boys, making sure they washed. Phil Chan recalls how older boys acted as "baby sitters" for the younger ones.

The western door, with its Chinese roof, was the "parents' door." This door was used by parents, who were often divorced and poor, when they visited the children they could not support. The downstairs "morning room" still has its warming fireplace and the kitchen, miraculously enough, still has its original stone. When Windrush called in architects to design an updated campus, they sought to preserve as much of the historical fabric as they could. When it came time to fix rear steps that originally didn't have a safety wall, the wall the school installed was given a cloud-shaped Chinese pattern to match the original walls.

LSA Associates, the company that prepared the Historic Resources Report on the site, found that the campus appeared to be eligible for listing as a state historic district. "The Chinese architectural elements of each building link them to each other, giving a sense of unity to the district," the consultant wrote. The wider community owes Windrush much for its loving preservation of this remarkable part of our heritage.

The tour of The Chung Mei Home is Wednesday, May 4, 2011 at 7 PM.

This event is free to the public and refreshments will be served.

Windrush School, 1800 Elm Street, El Cerrito.

Meet in the Main Building of the home, near Elm Street.

The site is three blocks from the El Cerrito Del Norte BART station.

A parking lot is located below the school, and there is also parking on Elm Street.