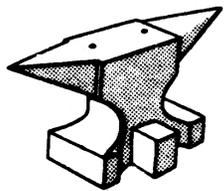


# El Cerrito Centennial Timeline

*As El Cerrito celebrates the 100th anniversary of its incorporation, let's look back at some important dates in our history.*



El Cerrito's name comes from "Serrito de San Antonio" (Little hill of St. Anthony.) 1861 Carlton Watkins photo, LL Stein collection.



**El Cerrito  
Historical  
Society**

*Circa 3,000 B.C.* Native American settlements tracing back perhaps 12,000 years can be found in El Cerrito and nearby areas.

*1772* Captain Pedro Fages, the military governor of Alta California, and Father Juan Crespi explore the area.

*1776* Lt. Col. Juan Bautista de Anza and Father Pedro Font bring settlers to Monterey and explore the East Bay.

*1839* The first non-native settlers, Victor Ramon Castro and his wife Luisa Martinez, settle on "Rancho el Cerrito," at the south end of Rancho San Pablo. They built an adobe at what is today the site of El Cerrito Plaza. The family ranches cattle, establishes a wharf at Point Isabel, and leases land to tenant farmers and other businesses.

*Circa 1868* El Cerrito area gets its first school, Castro School. Victor Castro approved construction on his land near the Adobe.

*1876* The California & Nevada Railway is built through what will become El Cerrito. In 1902 the route is purchased by the Santa Fe Railway and much later by BART.

*1879* El Cerrito gets its first tavern and dance hall, the Seven Mile House, at the southern end of town on what is today the site of Mechanics Bank. Owner John H. Davis leases the site on San Pablo Ave. from Victor Castro.

*1880s* The first of several powder works operates in the area. The Vigorite Powder Works plant is built on Point Isabel, with Chinese workers living along Albany Hill.

*1888* William Rust, a German immigrant, leases land from Victor Castro and opens a blacksmith shop close to the Seven Mile House, at today's site of Pastime Hardware. In 1909 Mr. Rust opens the "Rust" post office on the site and the hamlet takes on that name.

*1894* The court case Emeric v. Alvarado resolves land titles in West Contra Costa County. This makes it possible for people to buy land, which fosters development.

*1894* The residential subdivisions that would fill El Cerrito with homes into the 1960s get underway when Berkeley real estate man George Schmidt creates lots for "Schmidt Village," around today's Schmidt Lane. Other subdivisions follow.

*1904* The first streetcar line arrives in the area. The East Shore and Suburban's electric line connects Oakland

and Richmond via San Pablo Avenue. The stops include "County Line," San Pablo Avenue near Fairmount, and Stege Junction (at San Pablo and Potrero Avenues.)

*1906* The San Francisco Earthquake sends residents moving to the East Bay – including the Rust, Schmidville, and Stege Junction areas.

*1907* A volunteer fire department is created, first with a hand-drawn hose cart, then in the 1920s with two Model-T trucks.

*1908* Sunset View Cemetery opens just up the hill from the Seven Mile House in what is today Kensington. A horse-drawn carriage greets visitors at the streetcar stop and conveys them to the cemetery.

*1913* Community leaders create Stege Sanitary District to install sewers that will provide for residential growth. This requires support from the 285 voters who lived in Rust, Stege Junction, Schmidville, and the surrounding area. The first sewers are installed in 1914.



Footbridge on Richmond St. over the north fork of Cerrito Creek. ECHS collection, courtesy of the Colford-Smith family.

*1913* The El Cerrito area gets a public library and Fairmont School teacher Fay Breneman becomes our first librarian. Fay was the daughter of Dr. Joseph Breneman. About Fairmont, which opened about 1900, she said it had "four teachers, two good rooms and two shacks."

*1917* El Cerrito incorporates, following a close vote of 158 to 131. In order to win, backers of the new city had carefully counted noses and decided to leave out areas dominated by "dairymen" and "saloon keepers," who likely would have voted no – Kensington plus the area west of San Pablo Avenue and south of San Jose Avenue.

*1920.* El Cerrito gains a reputation as a "wide open town" as speakeasies flourish after the Volstead Act bans

the sale of liquor. Gambling and nightclubs had been popular in town at least since the mid 1910s. Along with speakeasies come prostitution and other vice.

**1927** Our city gets a real police department, replacing a “marshal.” Chief Forrest Wright has three officers. El Cerrito got its first jail, on Fairmount Avenue, in 1924.

**1932** El Cerrito gambling goes big time with the opening of mobster Black Jack Jerome’s El Cerrito Kennel Club. It was a greyhound racetrack near the Castro Adobe, which at the time was the used as the el Rancho San Pablo club.

**1935** The Chung Mei Home, a safe place for Chinese boys whose parents were unable to care for them, outgrows its home in Berkeley and moves to El Cerrito. It didn’t close until 1954. In 2013 it was determined eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places.



*The Chung Mei Home as it appeared when it opened in 1935. EC Hist. Soc. Collection, courtesy of the Warynick family.*

**1938** Residents rise up against the dog track, seeking to close it as public nuisance, citing noise, rats and fleas, and attracting a “bad element” to town. A year later California Attorney General Earl Warren orders the place shut.

**1942** Fear grips El Cerrito as World War II starts. “Sand is the best method of combating incendiary bombs,” Richmond’s fire chief advised. The Japanese flower growers and their families who occupied parts of El Cerrito and Richmond are interned. Many young men from El Cerrito join the battle overseas and a number are killed.

**1944** Boom times during World War II. The city gains 10,000 people during the war. Some left afterwards, but a number stayed and many more came.

**1946** A recall vote led by the Good Government League sweeps out corrupt city leaders by a margin of two-and-a-half to one. It removes three councilmen and weeks later

voters replace them with members of the League.

**1949** Sundar Shadi begins El Cerrito’s beloved holiday tradition when he inaugurates his holiday display on Arlington Boulevard with a single star. It evolved over the years into an elaborate display featuring handmade sheep, shepherds, and other figures relating to the Nativity. People come from a wide area to view the display, which continues today thanks to volunteers.

**1955** The unincorporated “Bay-view” area (south of San Jose Avenue and west of Carlson Boulevard) is annexed by El Cerrito after a vote by its residents. This action brings the city to its present borders. The last gambling saloon, the Wagon Wheel, is soon shuttered.

**1956** The city’s oldest building, the Castro Adobe (California Landmark #356), is destroyed by an arson fire.

**1958.** El Cerrito Plaza, one of the Bay Area’s first modern shopping malls, opens for business on the former site of the Castro Adobe and of the Kennel Club.

**1959.** Contra Costa Civic Theatre, a community theater company, is founded by Louis and Bettianne Flynn.

**1964** The “Pennies for Parks” bond issue to create more parks in the city wins at the ballot. Over the next few years many of today’s most popular parks are created.

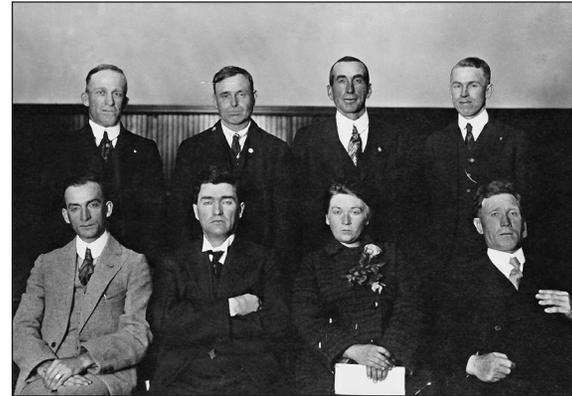
**1966** Young El Cerritan Maria Remenyi wins the Miss USA crown at the Miss Universe pageant in Miami.

**1967.** The El Cerrito Branch of the NAACP is formed, thanks to A.J. Radford. He serves as its first president.

**1968** Creedence Clearwater Revival emerges from El Cerrito and becomes one of the most popular rock bands in the nation.

**1972** Concern about over-development crystallizes around plans to build housing on the former site of the Chung Mei Home. This led to a voter revolt against what many saw as uncontrolled growth. The city’s population topped out in the late 1960s at about 25,500.

**1972** Two BART stations are built in town, displacing a number of homes and businesses but enabling a mass transit system that is critical to El Cerrito today.



*El Cerrito’s first Treasurer, Attorney, City Clerk, and City Council. El Cerrito Historical Society collection.*

**1972** Volunteers create a recycling center that remains one of the City’s most loved institutions. The El Cerrito Recycling Center is one of the first and longest-lasting municipal recycling centers in the nation.

**1984** The It Club, the last nightclub from the city’s heyday, closes. The building is remodelled into a medical office.

**1996** Friends of Five Creeks takes on the task of caring for Cerrito Creek, one of its namesake five waterways. Volunteers with Five Creeks have daylighted parts of the creek, helped install paths and interpretive signs, and worked to preserve habitat.

**1999** The first WorldOne Festival takes place on July 4. Founded by El Cerrito High teacher Corey Mason, the festival has built on the July 4 event hosted for years by El Cerrito Rotary. It features world music performers, events for kids, community groups, and more. Over the years it has become the city’s largest social gathering.

**2006.** After going dark in the 1960s, the Cerrito Theater cinema reopens thanks to a groundswell of support from the community, as well as from the City - which purchases the building and leases it to an operator.

**2009** El Cerrito finally gets a real city hall, with completion of a “green building” that has large windows for natural light, recycled and sustainably harvested wood, and rain gardens. For years city offices were in trailers, and before that city offices were in a converted garage.

**2017** El Cerrito projects major population growth, perhaps the greatest since World War II, as multi-unit projects are planned or being built. The City projects 780 dwelling units between current and proposed projects.

**2017** El Cerrito marks its Centennial with dozens of tours, talks, parties, a gala, a parade, a time capsule and more.