

principal and a full time secretary. There were no longer farm lands and empty space surrounding the school; instead there were homes and businesses. San Pablo Avenue was a busy State Highway. Crossing guards and traffic boys protected the busy crosswalks. Fairmont was unique in that it had both crossing guards to protect children crossing the local streets and also crossing



*The crossing guards pose in front of the second Fairmont School*

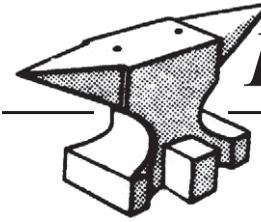
guards to protect children crossing the busy Santa Fe Railroad tracks! (BART now runs where the Santa Fe once did.)

In the early fifties earthquake-proofing became mandatory for all schools and Fairmont School did not meet the earthquake standards. Luckily, at this time the Del Mar School had just been completed, which decreased the enrollment at Fairmont by almost a half. A select committee of Fairmont teachers researched modern building improvements and helped in planning the new classrooms and facilities. As part of the old Fairmont was renovated and the “new” building started to take shape, the faculty continued to hold classes in the auditorium and in the rooms which were not under construction.

When the project was done, gone were the porches, the old slate blackboards, the “fastened-down desks” and the separate play yards. The children and teachers all moved in over Easter vacation. Nostalgic regrets had to be overcome by appreciation for earthquake safety and the beautiful new school. The faculty, who had also played a part in choosing drapes, tile, and fixtures, were motivated to present a fine educational environment. One of the most interesting projects carried out was the creation of a mosaic mural (see the July, 2006 Forge, Vol. 22 No. 3), which still graces an outside wall opposite the office. The students designed the mosaic, then bought and scrounged the necessary materials. The faculty made sure that every child who attended Fairmont during the almost three years it took to complete the mosaic placed some tiles in it. The mosaic itself portrays many, and in some cases forgotten, episodes in the history of El Cerrito.

After the The El Cerrito Public Library was completed in 1949, the Library was used for class visits and for staff meetings. The librarians often pulled reference books for classes with special projects. Fairmont was the first school in the district to implement the district’s “Continuous Growth” program, which sought to meet the needs of students who did not learn and progress at the normal rates. Fairmont was also the first school in the district to host student teachers from UC Berkeley and San Francisco State. Owing to its status, Fairmont was the first school in the area where the Salk polio vaccine was administered to children. In 1965 the city manager decided that the street and school should both be spelled with a “u”. The staff at the school, led by the long-time principal Elodie Smith, fought hard against the change, to no apparent avail citywide. However, the city fathers eventually made the concession that while the street would be referred to as “Fairmount”, the school would remain “Fairmont”.

- This article was based on the story about Fairmont School written by Helen Pence and Elodie Smith for the July 2002 *Mirror*, the official publication of the Richmond Museum Association.



# El Cerrito Historical Society

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## The Forge

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**OUR NEXT MEETING: THE SUMMER PICNIC  
 12 NOON SATURDAY, JULY 21ST, AT HUBER PARK**

### President’s Message

Our next meeting, at Noon on Saturday, July 21st in Huber Park, will be our annual potluck picnic. I will have the barbecue fired up and be cooking hot dogs (vegi-dogs will also be available). This event is mostly devoted to enjoying the company of other Historical Society members in one of our most picturesque parks. We hold the picnic in the lower part of the park, near the clubhouse, which means that it is wheelchair accessible. We hope you can attend and if you do, please try to bring a salad, main dish, or dessert. But even if you can’t bring something, please join us. There is no significant business on the agenda as of this writing, but after dessert we do plan to put out some old pictures to see if anyone can help us identify people and events.

As is customary, the Society will have a booth at the City’s 4th of July celebration. If any of you could spend an hour or two in booth, please give me a call at 526-7507.

Verne and Joyce Odlin are now official residents of Placerville and we all wish them well. Verne had held the position of Director at Large, but with his departure that position on the Board of Directors became vacant. We are very fortunate to have now filled that position. Rich Bartke, a founding member of our Society and part of a select group of El Cerrito households in which both spouses have been on the City Council, has agreed to take Verne’s place on the Board. I am thrilled that he has accepted this position and I am looking forward to being the recipient of his excellent advice and suggestions.

Have you been to the Richmond Museum of History see the TEPCO exhibit yet? Everyone who has seen it has been dazzled. It is worth a visit. Even though I saw it more than once as it was being put together, I was stunned by the final product. We are very fortunate to have this exhibit available to us. It runs through July 22. ~ Tom Panas

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

# Fairmont School - El Cerrito's Oldest

Fairmont School is El Cerrito's oldest school (see below regarding when Fairmont was built). But even though it is the oldest, it was not the first school in town. Our first school was Castro school, a small building originally located on the grounds of the Castro Adobe. Before 1900 it was moved north to where St. Johns Church is today. An 1896 tract map of Schmidt Village shows it as "Schmidt Village School". But when the School District opened Stege School (at the same location as today's Stege School) in 1900, this original Castro School was closed. The building was later sold to the Catholic Church, for whom it became a mission operated out of St. Ambrose Church in Berkeley.

Fairmont quickly became more than just a school. Although early pictures show that it was surrounded by farms and fields and very few houses, it was a beacon and a social center for the farmers and settlers of the area. It served the children and farm land community for miles around. Students attended from areas that in later days, and with the application of a few artificial lines drawn on a map, would be called El Cerrito, Kensington, and Richmond. These "naive" young students considered themselves to all be part of the same community. The original Fair-



Looking east from San Pablo Ave. at the original Fairmont School accommodate a growing population. The first meeting of the El Cerrito Trustees (City Council) was held at Fairmont School.

In 1924 an arsonist set the school on fire. Fireman arriving at the blaze realized that the closest fire hydrant was on Fairmont Avenue, more than half a mile away. By the time the hose was laid the fire was out of control and the school burned to

the ground. But the students of Fairmont School were not to be denied an education; some of the children went to Stege School while others were taught in a makeshift portable. (One of these students, Theresa Parella, later taught at Fairmont School. She still recalls viewing the fire from near her house. As she puts it: "We had a very clear view of the fire since there were only a few buildings between our house (which was up the hill on Richmond Street, between Stockton and Waldo) and the school.") A larger, more modern school quickly replaced the burned-out remains of the original school. The new school had a large auditorium, special kindergarten facilities, ample closets and "fastened down" desks. All of the rooms opened onto long covered porches. There was a special room and kitchen for the PTA.

Fairmont, in fact, had the first PTA in the Richmond Union School District. The Fairmont PTA was organized in 1917 and has been very active ever since. Every year on Founders' Day, many of the school district administrative personnel would come to Fairmont's luncheon and program, saying they were going to "The Fairmont" for lunch. During World War II Fairmont continued to be a hub of the community. Although geographi-

## ***When WAS Fairmont School founded?***

There is some disagreement about when Fairmont School originally opened. Mervin Belfils, one of the best authorities on our history, wrote that Fairmont School was built in 1903. Lee Fridell, in *The Story of Richmond*, published by the Richmond Union High School District in 1954, said a two-room wooden building was erected in 1903. Edward Standiford, who wrote *El Cerrito - Historical Evolution* in 1976, said that Fairmont School was built in 1905. An article from the 10/29/1965 Richmond Independent quotes the El Cerrito City Manager as saying Fairmont School was built about 1903. The Richmond Museum *Mirror* article on which this story is based says Fairmont School was built in 1903. A story about the fire in the 10/20/1924 Richmond Independent says the original 2-room structure was built "about 23 years ago". An article called "Know Your Schools" (Richmond Independent 11/8/1945, apparently one of a series), says that the original structure, a 2-room school, was built in 1903.

So the only significant opinion that disagrees with 1903 is Cal's Professor Standiford, who in fact did very careful research for his book and has things right in his book that other people got wrong or missed. One thing that is clear in looking back at old newspaper articles is that many of the articles seem to have somewhat misleading titles (at least when reviewed by someone 60 or 80 years after the fact), such as "New School Opens" when in fact an additional classroom structure or other building was opening at an existing school. Perhaps something such as this tripped up Prof. Standiford.

cally distant from the center of El Cerrito, from a population perspective Fairmont was close to the center. City Hall, even in those days at Manila and San Pablo, was somewhat north of the population center of El Cerrito.

For this reason, a number of very important war-related services operated out of Fairmont School. Ration books for meat, sugar, gasoline, coffee, and so on were



A Streetcar rolls north past the original Fairmont School

distributed from the school. The PTA organized a well-baby health clinic that was held at the school with a volunteer doctor. The PTA also sold war bonds in the classrooms.

In 1947 Fairmont School was a pioneer in the practice of holding "Parent Teacher Conferences", a procedure that is of course now used throughout the district. In the late forties Fairmont School was selected to have a cafeteria. The cafeteria was built on the other (east) side of Lexington Avenue, in the building that now houses the Senior Center. On the cafeteria's opening day Dr. Miner, the Superintendent, was present. However, enrollments were growing at such a rate due to the post-war boom that the cafeteria didn't last long. The building was needed for classrooms. So the cafeteria was converted to classrooms and two portables were also brought in. Since there were now four classrooms across Lexington Avenue, the street was closed permanently to traffic between Stockton and Eureka Avenues.

New schools had to be built during and after World War II as enrollment swelled enormously. For a year in the mid-forties, Fairmont housed three schools. While Alvarado and Castro were under construction, their principals and staffs used Fairmont in the afternoon and Fairmont students were on "double session" in the morning. Eventually Fairmont went back to its all day schedule. (The situation was much worse in Richmond, where the influx of shipyard workers caused the population to go from 24,000 to 98,000 between 1940 and 1945. At Stege School they were on quadruple session for a time.)

At Fairmont there was a staff of 30 teachers, an assistant