

I-80 Corridor Study

Frequently your Society gets inquiries from other agencies about historic assets in town. A recent one was from CalTrans. Tom Panas submitted a reply letter, and a list of sites that ought to be checked for historicity, (in the absence of a city-wide survey).

Historical Room at City Hall.

El Cerrito's new City Hall, 10890 San Pablo Avenue, was furthered by gifts of over \$250,000 to the City by our late Society member, Sundar Shadi and his wife Dorothy. These gifts were on the condition that they be used for a new city hall with a room "which is devoted to El Cerrito history". The city hall is completed, but the "history" room is vacant. The City Council has appropriated money, and the staff has ordered furniture, which is expected to be installed within a couple of weeks.

It is expected that the room will be a place to display a few of our photos and artifacts, hold small meetings, and be a safe repository for our historic documents and artifacts. At this time, access is limited, but it is hoped that Society members may use the room once the City's security system is working properly.

Historic Resource Survey

We are told that the City Council included seed money in the City's budget for a historic resources survey of the city. City Staff is to meet with the State Historic Preservation Office, and Society members, and a request for proposals has been drafted.

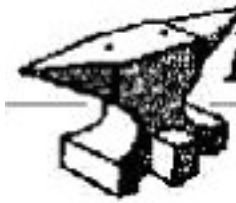
Ideally, the first step is an "historic context statement", followed by a detailed field survey of every property in town. Most properties will be found to have no historic values, and so the city could issue permits for them without an Environmental Impact Statement on historicity.

Naming El Cerrito Creeks

Our committee to research the possibility of naming additional creeks in El Cerrito has been meeting and researching. The committee consists of Chairman Chris Conner, Helmi Waits, Joann Steck-Bayat, Gene Erickson, Mae Ritz, and Rich Bartke, ex officio. They are planning a table at Earth Day.

Pioneer Women Politicians

A countywide committee is documenting Contra Costa's pioneer female political leaders. The Society has submitted three monographs, on El Cerrito's first Councilwoman, Laura McNeil (appointed 1941), on our first elected Councilwoman, Doris Hormel (1956-60, Mayor 1958-59), and on our first elected woman, City Clerk Grace Castner (elected 1917 & 1918).



El Cerrito Historical Society

P O Box 304, El Cerrito, CA 94530
elcerritohistoricalsociety@yahoo.com

Vol. 25 No. 2

The Forge

Spring 2009

The Official Publication of the El Cerrito Historical Society, Copyright © 2007

NEXT MEMBERSHIP MEETING: Sunday, April 19, 2009 at 1:00 PM

At the Senior Center, behind the Library on Stockton Ave
Cookies, Coffee and tea will be provided.

PROGRAM:

"JOHN MARSH HOME & PARK"

John Marsh, the first Harvard graduate to work on the American frontier, arrived in Alta California in 1836, and settled in an adobe in what is now Contra Costa County. Here he hosted the first overland emigrants in 1841, and famous people such as John Bidwell, John Sutter, John Fremont and Kit Carson. His stone manor house was the first built in California, and has been designated an American Treasure. Marsh was murdered near Martinez in 1856. The Marsh adobe site and stone house are now part of a new State Park, at 3,900 acres, the state's largest.

Our program will be presented by Gene Metz, architect, who for many years has worked to preserve the Marsh home. He is President of the Board of the Marsh Historic Trust, and is most knowledgeable about Marsh and Rancho Los Meganos.

HISTORICAL NEWS, FROM THE CITY OF VIEWS:

Elections

At our annual meeting in January, the membership elected five members to the Society Board of Directors. They are:

Rich Bartke, President
Grace McNeill, Vice President
Lucille Irish, Secretary
Ruth Kibby, Treasurer
David Weinstein, Chief of Research

Much of the work of the Board involves discussions with the City and other agencies, care for our archives, and communications with our members and other community groups.

(the news is continued on the back page)

EL CERRITO'S POLITICAL WATERSHED - THE ELECTION OF 1946

There have been a number of noteworthy elections in El Cerrito's history, including its first, in 1917, when the locals voted to incorporate. The list might also include the elections of 1956 when the first councilwoman was elected, and the 1960 recount in which the two incumbents lost by six votes.

Topping them all, for vigor and for vitriol, were the elections of spring 1946. It was these elections which are now seen as a watershed between historic El Cerrito and the city as we know it today.

In 1946, World War II had been over for about six months, when these election campaigns began. El Cerrito's population had mushroomed during this decade, including a few thousand who were reported living in a government trailer camp at the dog racetrack (which had already closed.). For years, El Cerrito had been and was the second largest city in Contra Costa County.

The "old guard" of city government was largely merchants, who did business in El Cerrito during the vigorous economy of the war years. Mayors during the war included Ira Scott, a painting contractor, Donald Moore, who owned a drug store, and Louis Davis, who owned a saloon. Others who served on the Council during WWII included Joseph Tully, Ex Linthicum, Natale Cisi, Edward Smith, and Edward P. McDonough.

There was no City Manger in those days. Each councilman had a "portfolio" of city departments which he oversaw, such as Finance, Streets & Parks, or Police & Fire. There also was a dearth of women on the Council, the only exception being Laura McNeil, who was appointed to her deceased husband's seat and served for seven months in 1941.

What were the issues which created such a contentious campaign in 1946?

Was it that the incumbents had not accomplished anything? During the campaign, the embattled "ins" boasted that they had obtained a new school, had an unprecedented expansion of playgrounds and parks (including at Huber and Poinsett, and the purchase of the 17 acre quarry company site that now is Cerrito Vista Park), a new fire station, new jail and new corporation yard, improved streets and street lighting, and doubled the manpower in the safety services.

These were done, they said, without increased taxes, the revenues coming from parking, two movie theatres, and ten poker clubs. And therein is the genesis of this watershed.

Beginning in 1945, citizen groups approached the Council, asking the city to close down vice, and to sponsor the kinds of civic improvements that would make the city attractive to homeowners. They felt that they were being rebuffed by the Council. The talk in town was strong that the Council favored merchants, specifically including gamblers, tavern owners and other "vice business" owners.

By November 1945, neighborhood groups had enough. Residents formed the Good Government League (hereafter "GGL"), under the leadership of Emmett Wiegmann, a machine shop owner.

In the municipal election calendared for April 9, 1946, two seats were available; one incumbent filed to run, Edward P. McDonough. Also filing candidacy papers for those two seats were three "independent" candidates, plus two sponsored by the GGL, Millard Bostock, a metal supply owner, and Mel Heinkel, an administrator for Standard Oil.

But the big happening of that time was a recall petition filed by the GGL against the other three incumbents, Mayor Louis E. Davis, and Councilmen Edward L. Smith and Natale Cisi. Voting on the recall was also set for April 9.

The campaign was loud and divisive, including "red scare" tactics. Mayor Davis allegedly called the GGL supporters "Commies", and at the Council meeting the day before the election, Councilman Moore asked about a communist party in El Cerrito. Actually the GGL had discovered a Communist on its roster, who was immediately booted out, but the Daily Worker endorsed the GGL slate.

The dirtiest trick, though, was a leaflet distributed the day before the election which appeared to be from the GGL candidates. It claimed they wanted to withdraw and not be against good, sane, honest American government. It backfired, as the GGL folks strapped bullhorns to their cars and cruised the streets with their rebuttal.

The "No On Recall" group listed endorsements by over 260 names, notably families which operated successful businesses here. Other endorsers of the incumbents were some city employees, and former Councilwoman Laura McNeil, (and this writer's grandfather!) The campaign largely pitted the business community against the residents.

When the 3,838 ballots were counted, it was not close. In the regular municipal election, Heinkel polled 1,598 and Bostock got 1,527. Their nearest challenger got only 889.

In the concurrent recall election, the three incumbents were recalled, and a special election to fill three seats was set for May 29. GGL put up a slate of Ward Crary, a scientific researcher, Albert Dietrich, a mechanic for the Santa Fe Railway, and Ed Valentino, a manager at Stauffer Chemical.

The three GGL candidates were victorious, for a clean sweep of all five seats by the GGL. Shortly thereafter, Ward Crary was replaced by another GGL sympathizer, Louis Keading of Standard Oil, (in whose former home our Society President now resides).

The GGL continued to dominate city politics in successive elections. But in 1960, its slate, of incumbents housewife Doris Hormel and painting contractor Henry Gillan, was defeated by W. R. Crowe, a roofing contractor, and DeWayne Boblitt, a doughnut shop owner, by two votes and six votes, after a controversial recount. By 1964, however, the GGL was resurgent, and swamped the 1960 winners. The GGL's energy then dissipated, but had vestiges of influence in city elections as late as 1970.

It is generally accepted that the GGL brought modern municipal governance to El Cerrito, as the Council hired a City Manager. The "Council-Manager" form of local government is ubiquitous in the Western United States; it takes politics and patronage out of city employment, and puts city jobs into the hands of trained professionals. Few cities have done away with the Council-Manager form, (Oakland, most recently), and are not considered by students of government as examples to emulate.

(Material for this article is taken from the "El Cerrito Journal"; from the "El Cerrito Review", a weekly newspaper owned by then-Mayor Davis; from "El Cerrito Historical Evolution" (1976) by Edward Staniford; and by the writer's own recollections. Thanks to Tom Panas for his assistance.)