

LUCILLE IRISH – El Cerrito’s “Go To Gal”.

By Rich Bartke

Rich Bartke, a founder of the Historical Society and former councilman and mayor, recalls Lucille Irish, who passed away in February at age 89.

There was a time when if you wanted something done in El Cerrito, or information about the community, you contacted Lucille Irish. Lucille served in the City Clerk’s office for 40 years, the last 20 as City Clerk. She was the “go-to” person in the community for many of those years. It didn’t matter who was Mayor or who was City Manager, Lucille was the keystone, the axis around which everything turned.

Lucille also served the community as President of the Historical Society, of which she was a founding member. Her terms were in 1976 and 1985, and she was on the Society Board for 36 years, 1974 to 2010. One of her personal accomplishments was to get the boundary plaque re-installed on San Pablo Avenue where the Castro land grant met the Peralta land grant to the south. She also served on the Board and as President of the County Historical Society.

Lucille twice served the Soroptimist Club as its President and was on its Board for many years. Her involvement in El Cerrito was despite the fact that she did not live in this city during the last 6 decades of her life, but was a resident of Walnut Creek.

Lucille was born in El Cerrito in 1928, second oldest of 8 Lewis siblings, none of whom survived her. She married the late Donald Irish when she was 18 or 19 and they had 3 daughters, two of whom survive her.

A year before her marriage, when she was just 17 and a recent graduate of El Cerrito High, she accepted employment with the City of El Cerrito. She worked for City Clerk Maryellen Foley and then became City Clerk herself in 1966 when Maryellen retired.

It was Lucille who “modernized” the record-keeping of City documents. During these latter years Lucille was an officer in both the county and in the League of California Cities associations for City Clerks. After 40 years in the employ of El Cerrito she was hired away by the City of Orinda, where she was the City Clerk for 5 years until finally retiring in 1991.

As Lucille was such a force in the community of course there were stories about her. One is that the members of the sitting City Council could tell whether she favored or opposed a matter on the Agenda when it came up for vote. Of course she would not say anything as that would not be proper, and Lucille was always “proper”. But her body language gave her away.

The recommendation could be from one of the citizen commissions or boards or from the city staff itself, but Lucille had her own opinions, which Council members learned to trust and rely on. When informed by a Councilman in the 1970’s that Councils were “reading” her, she was

very embarrassed and tried to keep her opinions more secret. But it didn't work, and Council members continued to interpret her body language. There was another time in the 1970's when an issue came up that the Council knew was important to Lucille, so Mayor Bartke announced from the podium: "Lucille, you can't vote on this." That got a huge laugh from the audience.

Later former Mayor Howard Abelson commented that the City might be better off if it "abolished the City Council and named Lucille as city dictator."

The former Council members of the 1970's later presented her with a Resolution that said she was "The best damn City Clerk ever", and the Historical Society in 2010 gave her a Resolution saying she was, among other accolades, "The Sweetheart of El Cerrito".

Lucille was a sweetheart. She was always available, gave sterling advice, and was unfailingly friendly and polite. She had no enemies. She was bright and clever, knowledgeable and reliable, held strong opinions but was always positive and said no negative things about anyone. No wonder she was our "Go To Gal."

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Tom Panas, a longtime board member of the Historical Society, adds, "The fact that Lucille acquired the same reputation in Orinda as she had in El Cerrito was, to me, one of the most telling things about Lucille."

Dave Weinstein, the Historical Society's current president, adds, "Back in 1984, as reporter new to the West County Times, I was assigned to cover El Cerrito government. That was a new beat for the paper, so we had no institutional knowledge. The council at the time was divided into two factions and there was much ferment. Lucille managed to get along with everyone and she provided me with much good advice, background knowledge, and good cheer, and steadied my spirit when things got difficult.