

Sparks April 2022



The Rodini house today is under restoration, having been moved to the rear of the lot. Photo by Dave Weinstein

One of the city's oldest houses is being restored as part of a condo project. The Rodini house, circa 1897, originally home to Ambrose and Virginia Rodoni (the spelling of the name was variable), is having its exterior restored to exacting federal historical standards, as part of the Elm Street Condominiums project.

The Historical Society will work with others in the city as we seek to ensure public access to this building, which was part of the agreement the city reached with the [developer back in 2015](#). What sort of access remains unclear. City staff say a committee will be formed to determine this. The city has a 99-year lease on the house for total rent of \$1.

Exhibits? Meeting rooms? A museum? Art studios? These have all been discussed. The building is at 1715 Elm Street, across from another historic building, the former [Chung Mei Home](#), now a charter school.

The developer was required to set aside \$4,000 to pay for historical signage about the Rodini family and the city's early Italian community. The society plans to provide this historical material.



Back in 2018 the Rodini house was looking sad, open to the elements in places, as it waited for redevelopment. Photo by Dave Weinstein

We are looking forward to working with other parties to make this house an historical and social amenity for all residents.

In a 2013 historic evaluation, Chris VerPlanck portrayed the Rodini property as a bit of our city’s settlement days continuing on into today:

“This property, comprising nearly half an acre, was sufficient to create a compact ‘weekend ranch’ capable of supporting their growing family with homegrown produce, fruit, wine, and possibly livestock,” VerPlanck wrote.

“Water from a well and the unnamed creek that transects the property was used to irrigate the crops and to provide drinking water, until the property was hooked up to municipal water in the 1940s.

“Until World War II, 1715 Elm Street was surrounded by similar semi-rural properties. Though the surrounding neighborhood suburbanized after the war, 1715 Elm Street remained a rural enclave – mainly because it stayed in the same family, whose members continued to cultivate the land until 2002. Although the property has been untended for a decade, it continues to embody the characteristics of a compact ‘ranch’ dating to the pioneer era of El Cerrito’s settlement.”

Attend historical events at the Hillside Festival. Several events devoted to El Cerrito history, and two related to our area’s geological history, will take part during the May 14 and May 15 festival, which is presented by El Cerrito Trail Trekkers and the city’s Environmental Quality Committee. All events are free.

In addition to the historic events, the festival features walks and hikes on such topics as birds, insects, native plants, trees and more. Check out the [schedule and map](#) to the events.

On Saturday, May 14, consider these events:

Noon to 1:30 p.m. Family-Friendly Geology Stroll. Geologist Gary Prost will introduce young people to the wonders of rocks and the earth beneath their feet. The first climb is steep. People of any age are welcome! Gary is a retired geologist who spent 40 years working for the U.S. Geological Survey, mining companies, and oil companies. He is a member of the [Northern California Geological Society](#). **Location Five, Schmidt Lane Trailhead.**

Starting at Noon, in conjunction with the above mentioned stroll, to 3:30 p.m. Geology Walk. This hike is a continuation of the geology stroll, for those with strong interest and stamina. Co-sponsored by the **Northern California Geological Society**. Leaders are Mark Petrofsky, former teacher, and Bill Motzer, a semi-retired geologist/geochemist. Learn in-depth about the geological setting of El Cerrito, rocks, faults and landslides. This moderate to strenuous walk has steep sections. **Location Five, Schmidt Lane Trailhead.**



Alan Siegel, shown leading a recent Trail Trekker hike, will discuss how Ohlone people in the El Cerrito area used plants for food, medicine and other purposes, as part of his lively event at the Hillside Festival. Photo by Dave Weinstein

2:00 to 3:30 p.m. Edible and Medicinal Plant Walk. Learn about ethnobotany — how native plants have been used over the centuries for food, medicine, and crafts with Alan Siegel, a docent at East Bay Regional Park District’s Tilden Botanic Garden. Family-friendly uphill walk. Download the free iNaturalist app to help identify and document what you learn. **Location Five, Schmidt Lane Trailhead.**

5:45 p.m. to 6:45 p.m. Early evening history walk. Learn about the motorcycle hill climbs that in the 1920s attracted thousands of spectator to town, about the origins of the Hillside Natural Area, and about El Cerrito’s raucous past as a gambling mecca as we gaze out on our town from on high. Dave Weinstein leads on behalf of the [El Cerrito Historical Society](#). **Location one, Motorcycle Hill.**

And on Sunday, May 15, this one:

4 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. Early California Indian Life in the El Cerrito area. Berkeley’s well known historian and author and publisher of [RSB books](#) **Richard Schwartz** will discuss life in El Cerrito before the arrival of Spanish colonists, and

about rancho life of the Californios. Meet at the “crossroads,” a spot with breathtaking views. This is an open-air talk, not a walk. **Location Three, Regency Court Gateway** From Regency, walk down the Ridge trail for about 1,000 feet to its intersection with the Ridge Trail and meet Richard there.



Jerry and his soon-to-be bride Leona Delcombre enjoyed visiting Fisherman’s Wharf on a date in 1949, a year before they married. Courtesy of Gerald Martin

Read about a leader of El Cerrito’s Black community. Gerald Martin, one of the founding members of the El Cerrito branch of the NAACP and its former president, has lived an amazing life.

Jerry grew up in Berkeley when Black people could only live in one part of town, and was mentored by William Byron Rumford, the pharmacist who would go on to join the state Assembly and author laws banning racial discrimination.

Jerry served in the Merchant Marine during World War II, in the Army during the Korean War, and throughout his career in the National Guard. He went on to hold top administrative positions in the federal government, with FEMA, the VA, and other agencies.

In El Cerrito he confronted racial animus and discrimination when trying to build the family home where he still lives. A lover of jazz and MG cars and art, Jerry remains a presence within our community.

The El Cerrito Historical Society is proud that our first ever [oral history is devoted to the life and career of Jerry Martin](#). Read it online, or read an article based on this history in the new copy of the Forge.



Mario Gonzalez, center, a longtime worker and manager at the Recycling Center, led a tour for the historical society back in 2010. He'll be at the 50th anniversary. Photo by Dave Weinstein

The city celebrates the 50th anniversary of its Recycling Center. On August 5, 50 years to the day when El Cerrito's then-volunteer run recycling center first accepted donations of cans and bottles, our beloved center will be celebrated with historical discussions, art, music performed on instruments made of recycled materials, a brief tour, and refreshments.

On Friday, August 5, at 5:30, we hope to see you at the event, sponsored by our society and the city of El Cerrito's Environmental Quality Committee. Speakers will include one of the founders, Gregg Cook; the man who built the original glass crusher in 1972, Allan Gardiner, former center manager, Becky Dowdakin, longtime operations manager Mario Gonzalez, maybe others. [Steve Zwetsch](#), the center's artist in residence, will perform on handmade instruments. Other family friendly events will take place.

In addition, the city will honor the late Joel Witherell, who oversaw the center from 1972 till he retired 20 years later and did more than anyone to ensure its sustained growth.

The Society thanks new and renewing members and donors.

Recent donors:

Marvin Collins	Linda Shehabi
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Please attend board meetings of the Historical Society. The board meets on the second Thursday of each month. Meetings last up to 90 minutes, often less. These days they are via Zoom, though we hope to move towards live and virtual hybrid meetings soon. Soon we will return to live meetings. Members are welcome to attend; so are people from the general public. Find out what we are up to; make a suggestion or two; consider if you would like to become more involved. Contact our president for more information or to get an agenda, davidsweinstein@yahoo.com.

Help us document and reserve the city’s history by becoming a member of the El Cerrito Historical Society. Membership, a bargain at \$30 a year, is open to everyone and includes this newsletter, our email updates and meeting notices. More importantly, it assists our mission to locate, preserve and educate people about local history. A membership form is online under “How you can help” at www.elcerritohistoricalsociety.org . We also offer memberships at the sponsor level for \$75 and life memberships for \$400. We accept donations of any amount.

The El Cerrito Historical Society produces two publications, the Forge, which is a print publication, which we aim to produce four times a year, and Sparks (from the Anvil), an email publication which we aim to produce monthly. Both hark back to one of El Cerrito’s original settlers, William Rust, a blacksmith who worked at his anvil producing, among other things, sparks.

The Forge is sent to all members of the society. Not a member? Join! Anyone can read the [Forge for free online](#).

