

Sparks February 2021

A Co-op Nightclub? Lu Watters' Great Experiment.



Historian Chris Sterba delivered his talk about Hambone Kelly's by sitting in a virtual version of the club, thanks to a historic photo and digital chicanery.

Historian Chris Sterba presentation about this cooperative El Cerrito nightclub that made jazz history in the 1940s was the centerpiece of the society's annual meeting in January. During that meeting members re-elected officers and added Patricia Durham to the society board. Welcome Pat!

Please watch Chris's [presentation](#), on our YouTube channel, and while there, check out the [other historical videos](#) from the society.

Memoir recalls El Cerrito's earlier spurts of growth



Young Jack Freethy poses with his father, Elmer Freethy in El Cerrito. Courtesy of Jack Freethy

Drive around El Cerrito, Richmond, and other East Bay towns and you will see many structures built by the late Elmer Freethy: Richmond Civic Center, Mechanics bank at Hilltop, Nation's Giant Hamburgers headquarters in El Cerrito. As a younger man Freethy helped build the original El Cerrito High (well, you won't see that long gone structure) and Berkeley Country Club.

Freethy also built many of the more stunning homes that make the El Cerrito Hills so architecturally rewarding.

Freethy also owned El Cerrito Mill and Lumber which, among other things, was famed for its expertise in milling complicated and beautiful spindles and vergeboard and balusters for the restoration of ornate Victorian homes.

Elmer's lively tale is included in a new book by his son, longtime El Cerrito businessman and proud and leading Rotarian Jack Freethy. His well illustrated, 300-page hardback, 'Happy, Proud And So Many Memories,' may be aimed mainly at his family, but it is worth perusing if you have an interest in local history.

Elmer Freethy was a shrewd businessman, for certain, but he would take chances, Jack recounts. Jack goes into detail about how his dad would bid a job, working with four smart, in-house estimators.

“We would study the final bid sheet,” Jack writes, “analyze the subcontractors and risky factors and get a good gut call for the profit. But sometimes Dad would flip a coin, heads he would add \$50,000 to our project, tails he would subtract \$50,000 from the bid. Las Vegas was small potatoes compared to our bidding!”

Jack was in high school when he worked for his dad building a concrete water tank in El Cerrito, earning union scale, \$5.10 an hour. “That was great money in the early ‘50s,” Jack writes. “I made enough to buy a 1954 Ford coupe with an overhead valve V8 engine.” Read Jack’s book to learn what became of this Ford; it is not pretty.

Jack kindly donated this book, along with more material about Freethy Construction, and many photos – including El Cerrito High under construction in 1938, to the Historical Society. To get a copy of the book, visit [the publishing site Lulu](#).

Historical Society joins the King Day Celebration



Dancers kept socially distant as they enjoyed the Gumbo Band during the Martin Luther King Jr. Day celebration at the Plaza BART. Photo by Dave Weinstein

Our society took part in this year’s annual Martin Luther King celebration, with a vehicle carrying our banner parading down San Pablo Avenue. It was a wonderful event, and one of its organizers, Patricia Durham, is a new board member of the society. The celebration is the longest running such event in the Bay Area.

El Cerrito Filmmaker explores Spanish immigration

Another recent donation to the historical archive is a DVD from Eve A. Ma, a longtime El Cerrito filmmaker, music producer, flamenco dancer and more. 'Weaving with Spanish Threads: an Immigrant's Tale,' focuses on impoverished Spanish workers who shipped out to Hawaii as laborers in the early 20th century. Many of them later made it to the Bay Area. It is filled with fascinating characters and great stories, and can be [viewed online](#).

Eve writes: "If you're a local history buff from Hawai'i or California, or even farther afield, you'll appreciate the tales of baking bread in bee-hive ovens in the back yard in the Sacramento Delta, of your non-English-speaking mother letting the grocer know she wants some eggs by squatting down and cackling like a hen, of inviting yourself to a luau in Hawai'i and diving for coins ... there are lots and lots of great stories in this documentary!"

The East Bay loses an important history museum



The Alvarado Adobe Museum recreates the dwelling of colonial Governor Juan Alvarado, including this bedroom. Diners may one day enjoy the site instead. Photo by Dave Weinstein

The [Alvarado Adobe Museum](#) in our neighboring city of San Pablo will close and its collection of Native American and Spanish Colonial era furnishings will be dispersed, after the San Pablo City Council's unanimous decision to offer the building for sale.

The San Pablo Historical Society, which has operated the museum for decades, strongly opposed the sale. The El Cerrito Historical Society also weighed in against the move. The museum has been an important venue for school groups and others interested in local history.

The was home to colonial Governor Juan Alvarado and family from 1848 to 1882. The current building dates to the 1970s and is a replica of the original, on the same site. “It’s decorated like it was when Governor Alvarado was living there, and in rancho style,” says Janet Pottier, president of the San Pablo Society.

Pottier says the group will continue to operate the nearby Blume house from 1905 as a house museum, but has no room for the collection from the adobe. She does not know what will happen to it.

The society may ask the city to insist that the adobe retain its historic look, and may agree to display some historic objects there. City officials have envisioned a restaurant occupying the site.

Pieces of the collection could go to other historical societies, or to Native American groups, including some societies that have historic adobes of their own. “The collection without the adobe doesn’t make a lot of sense,” Pottier says, “except for the Native American collection.”

While some of the material in the museum, including the bed of Alvarado’s mother-in-law, Gabriela Castro, has been lovingly reconstructed, the collection also includes original furnishings from Alvarado’s home in Monterey. It also includes original photographs of the governor and his family, Pottier says.

Pottier suggests that people interested in preserving local historical resources email San Pablo officials. Email Mayor Elizabeth Pabon-Alvarado at ElizabethP@sanpablo.gov, and copy the city manager Matt Rodriguez, MattR@sanpabloca.gov.

Please join the El Cerrito Historical society

Help us document and reserve the city’s history by becoming a member of the El Cerrito Historical Society. Membership, a bargain at \$25 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.

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.

