

# Sparks from the Anvil

January 14, 2020



The former Contra Costa Florist shop, which had been owned by the Mabuchi family, was restored and provided with historical signage by Eden Housing. Photo by Dave Weinstein

**Former flower shop wins a Governor’s Historic Preservation Award.** One of the more charming little buildings on El Cerrito’s commercial strip has won an important award. The former Contra Costa Florist, which today is part of the Hana Gardens senior residence alongside City Hall, is one of five projects statewide to win the 1919 honor.

“This award is the only official preservation award presented by the State of California to worthy recipients in recognition of exceptional achievements in the field of historic preservation,” Julianne Polanco, the State Historic Preservation Officer, wrote in announcing the award.

The state will host a presentation ceremony next Wednesday, January 22, 2020, at the historic Stanley Mosk Library and Courts Building, Sacramento, from 1 to 4 p.m.

Paul Fadelli, El Cerrito’s mayor pro tem, will attend, as will some historical society members and others who have been involved in the restoration of this building and the creation of informative historical displays on the site.

The award brings welcome attention to an important aspect of the city's history and to an important community.

Others who are interested in attending are welcome.

The event will be live streamed on the [Historic Office's Facebook page](#).

Tom Panas of the Historic Society led the charge to preserve this building, which had been endangered, working with the Japanese American Citizens League and other members of the Japanese-American Community. Eden Housing, developer of Hana Gardens, and city officials are to be commended for the care that was taken both in the building's restoration and in the historical display.

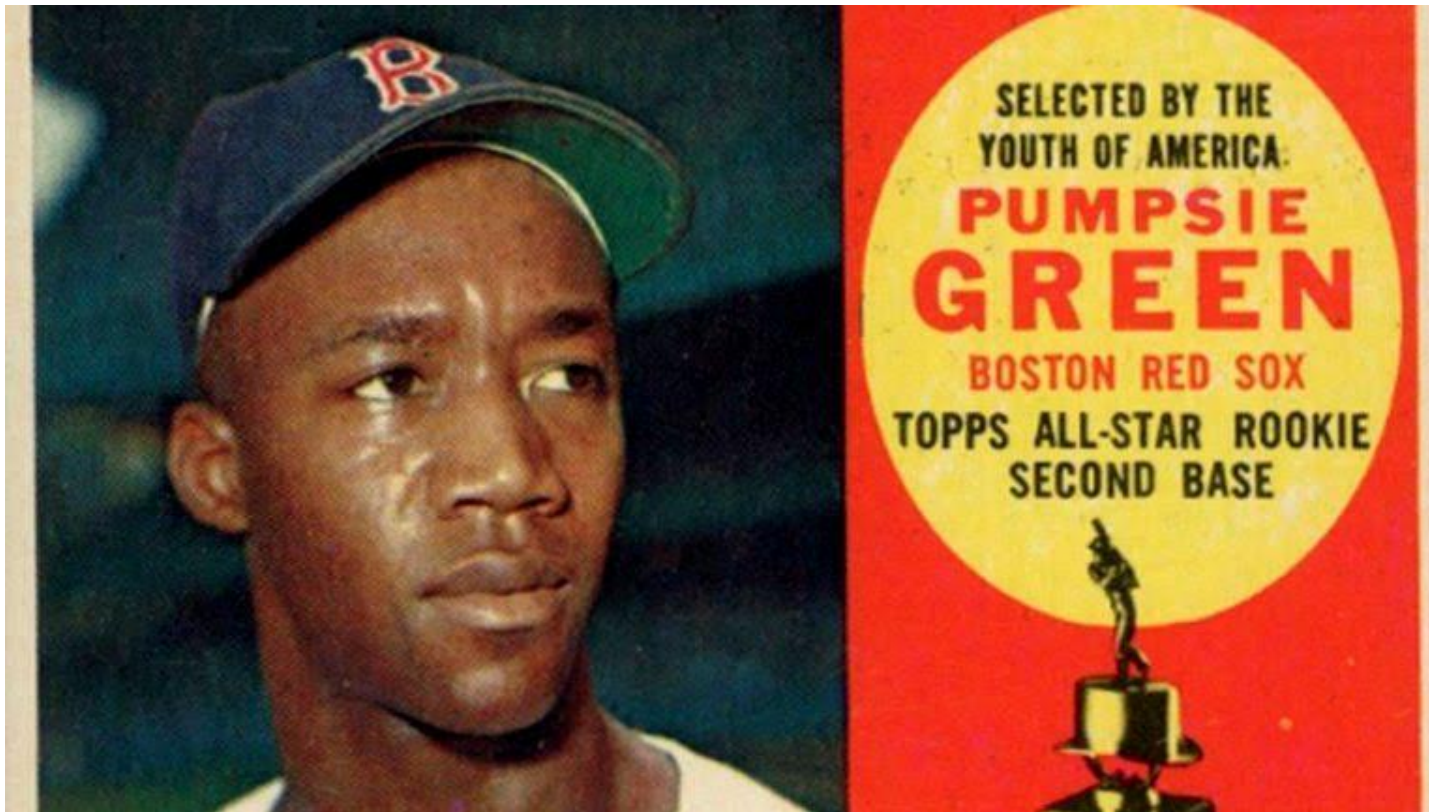
Dianne Brenner prepared the nomination for the award,, which is excerpted below:

“The Contra Costa Florist building is a rare remnant of the ‘well-documented community of Japanese American nursery owners and others associated with the ... flower industry in western Contra Costa County during the first half of the twentieth century.’ (Knapp and VerPlanck Historic Resource Evaluation report, page 67). Almost all of the original buildings associated with the industry, both locally and state-wide, have been destroyed.”

“From the mid-1930s to the mid-1960s, Contra Costa Florist was run by Hikojiro and Tomi Mabuchi. By 1942, when people of Japanese ancestry living near the West Coast were forced into incarceration camps, abruptly leaving their homes and businesses, there were 20 families that owned nurseries in Richmond and El Cerrito. There were additional Japanese Americans who worked in the nurseries. Descendants of these nursery families still live in the area.

“While the Mabuchis endured several years in the Topaz camp, their property was preserved for them by the Fred Conwill family, owners of Tradeway Furniture, a neighboring business. Thanks to the Conwill's efforts, the Mabuchis were able to resume their business at the original location upon their release from the internment camp in 1945.

“The appearance of the building is connected to an even earlier era of El Cerrito history – the quarrying industry. It was originally built in the 1920s to house the sales office of the Valley of the Moon quarry in Sonoma. That company chose El Cerrito for their sales office ‘to be close to its primary Bay Area markets’ (Knapp & VerPlanck report, page 36) and to be near the two quarries that were operating in El Cerrito at that time.”



**Please attend our annual meeting to vote for officers, hear news about the society, and enjoy an enlightening program, Pumpsie Green: The Man Who Integrated the Boston Red Sox.** The program will be a tribute to Pumpsie Green, featuring speaker Pete Elman, along with Arif Khatib, and Nat Bates.

Join the society at its annual business meeting as we focus on the great baseball player Pumpsie Green, who was the first African American to play with the Red Sox, in 1959 – 12 years after major league baseball first integrated. Mr. Green, who died in 2019, attended El Cerrito High and later lived in El Cerrito.

Elman is a Bay Area lecturer and writer who knew Mr. Green. Khatib, founder of the Multi-Ethnic Sports Hall of Fame, and Bates, a longtime Richmond councilman and former mayor, were also Green's friends. Bates also played on El Cerrito High's baseball team.

The talk will start after a brief business meeting and election of officers.

The meeting starts at 3 p.m. Sunday, January 26, with the talk starting around 3:20, at the El Cerrito Community Center, [7007 Moeser Lane](#). For information, Dave Weinstein, 510-524-1737, [davidsweinstein@yahoo.com](mailto:davidsweinstein@yahoo.com).

**Let's appreciate our "endearingly retro suburb."** As Bay Area cities go, El Cerrito is not spectacular – despite its hills, despite its views. But as anyone who has walked much about town, through the residential neighborhoods, past some of the smaller shopping districts, there is a look about the place.

Plain Jane houses from the 1940s that exert an honest appeal. Low slung ranch houses as you head up the hills. Clusters of much earlier bungalows from the 'teens and '20s. (The 1920s, we mean!)

It's hard to define the look we all know so well. Sometimes it takes an outsider to do it.

In this case we have Glen Helfand, a well known writer and curator besides, who resides in Oakland. Helfand enjoyed an intriguing exhibit by ceramic artist Woody De Othello at the San Jose Museum of Art.

Helfand visited the artist. "He currently works out of a one-story stucco building in El Cerrito, an endearingly retro suburb just north of Berkeley," [Helfand wrote](#).

Thanks, Mr. Helfand!

[De Othello's exhibit](#) is small but excellent and remains up to April 5.

**Pioneer Reception Planned for Spring of 2020 in El Cerrito.** The El Cerrito Historical Society is planning a celebration of our Pioneers: those who were born in, or very near, El Cerrito before 1940.

These Pioneers grew up here and their families were part of the early days in El Cerrito.

Our first Pioneer Reception was held at City Hall in 2014. We interviewed the Pioneers and wrote a short biography of their life story. We would like to do the same for this event for inclusion in the El Cerrito Historical Society's archives.

If you, or someone you know, qualifies as part of this group of Pioneers please contact Tom Panas via email at [tmpanas@yahoo.com](mailto:tmpanas@yahoo.com). You may also print out and mail this form to:

El Cerrito Historical Society

P.O. Box 304

El Cerrito, CA 94530

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Person submitting this form: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

E-Mail \_\_\_\_\_

I have asked this "Pioneer" for permission to suggest his/her name.

Name of Pioneer: \_\_\_\_\_

Contact (list at least one)

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

E-Mail \_\_\_\_\_

*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.*

