

Sparks June 2021

From Back Streets to Major Civic Event The Story of El Cerrito's Martin Luther King Jr. Celebration



The Martin Luther King Celebration in 2021. The Martin Luther King Jr. celebration during the pandemic year featured a car caravan rather than a march, and entertainment at El Cerrito Plaza BART.

Photo by Dave Weinstein

Patricia Durham, a founder of the 32-year old El Cerrito Martin Luther King Jr. Parade and Rally, will discuss how this event came to be. "Back then Martin Luther King Day was not a holiday in El Cerrito. Back then, we were only allowed to walk the back streets of the city," she recalls. Founders of the event, which was originally not sanctioned by the city, came from St. Peter Christian Methodist Episcopal Church and the El Cerrito branch of the NAACP. Today, Durham, adds: "Not only is Dr. King and the Dream recognized as a holiday in El Cerrito, we now walk/drive down San Pablo Avenue." Durham is a historical society board member.

4 p.m., Saturday August 21, via Zoom

El Cerrito Historical Society is inviting you to a scheduled Zoom meeting.

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/88900253478?pwd=TE05eitjV0N5akFwZDINZHdiV0trZz09>

Meeting ID: 889 0025 3478 Passcode: 143031

+1 669 900 6833 US (San Jose)

+1 253 215 8782 US (Tacoma)

For information, Dave Weinstein, 510-524-1737, davidsweinstein@yahoo.com

Connecting with people motivates Joanne Rubio

It was serendipity that brought Joanne Rubio to the board of the Historical Society in 2013. Joanne, a teacher at Windrush School, which occupied the historic Chung Mei Chinese Home, needed the society's help for her second grade local history curriculum.

And Tom Panas, the society's top researcher, needed to gain access to the former orphanage, which he was nominating for a spot on the National Register. The two hit it off because of their shared passion for researching local history.

Joanne, who joined the society in 2010 and joined the board in January 2013 and served for a time as secretary, has resigned because she has retired from teaching and is moving out of the area. Her contributions to the society have been immense, and it is notable that they relate to an interest of Joanne's that exceeds even her interest in history:

“Connecting with people, bringing people together,” is how she puts it. Among her accomplishments while on the board, Joanne spearheaded a ‘Pioneer Day’ at City Hall in 2014, which pulled in about 40 people and honored elder ‘pioneers’ who were longtime residents.

A year later Joanne was lead organizer for the society's Big Band Era Tea Dance & History Exhibit, co-sponsored by the senior center, which attracted old-timers and included a display of items from the Big Band era.



Joanne Rubio's work for the Historic Society had led to many get-togethers and friendships. Members of the Castro family and friends gather in 2015 at City Hall to socialize and admire the new model of the Castro Adobe.
Photo by Dave Weinstein

In studying the family of [Victor Castro](#), El Cerrito's earliest non-native settler, Joanne did more than investigate people from our past. She and Tom got to know the Castros and related families of the present, reaching out to descendants and bring about a reunion of the Castro family that coincided with the society's completion of a scale model of the old Castro Adobe.

It was Joanne who pushed for the society to create this model (done by Charles Moran and kept in the Shadi history room in city hall), and she and Tom worked hard to make sure everything about it was accurate and to scale.

“I enlarged the 1907 map/drawing (of the adobe),” she wrote to the board back in 2015, “and saw that there was one window near the most westerly door on the chapel. I'd like to add that if possible.” It got added.

Joanne's research took her to such institutions as the Richmond Museum, Contra Costa County History Center, and UC Berkeley's Bancroft Library.

Joanne, an expert in archival research and genealogy, has written several articles for our publication *The Forge*, on the Castro Adobe, early African American families in El Cerrito, the first stagecoach stop in town, and more.

She has also provided information on their families to many descendants of early El Cerrito residents.

One of Joanne's earlier accomplishments for the society relates to her understanding of children. As Tom noted to the board shortly after helping man our booth during the July 4 festival:

"In my mind the biggest news was the popularity of the historical coloring book that Joanne made. It made many, many more people (and an entirely different demographic) stop at the booth than have ever stopped before. We printed 200 and most of those were gone by the time I left. Joanne also attracted some attention to the booth with the games she put together."

Joanne has a deep interest in local Native American people, and her game that day came from that tradition -- a 'stick tossing' table game.

The upshot of Joanne and Tom's getting together was productive in many ways. Besides leading to Joanne's involvement with the society, it helped Tom succeed in having the former Chung Mei orphanage deemed eligible for the National Register.

Working with the National Park Service, Joanne and Tom had banners hung along San Pablo Avenue recognizing the Anza expedition.

And it got Joanne deeply interested in El Cerrito history. Tom gave her a copy of a historic photo of Fairmont School showing students, their names written on the back. For a history day with her class, Joanne says, "I started researching those family names to find out more about each family. My students took the role of those 1909 students to have a living history day."

Tom says, "We would still be just barely scratching the surface regarding the Anza expedition, the Castro Adobe, and the Castro family if it hadn't been for Joanne's extraordinary efforts leading the research on these subjects and collaborating with many interested parties to further the work."

Joanne, who taught at Windrush for 23 years and at other schools including Madera, will be missed. She has, however, renewed her membership in the society, and says she can still help out "if anybody needs any research done."

Christmas in July

For half a century starting in 1949 Sundar Shadi put out an incredible holiday display alongside his home on Arlington Boulevard in El Cerrito. The tradition continues along Moeser Lane during the Christmas season, thanks to volunteers of the [Sundar Shadi Holiday Display](#).

They do a great job. But somehow it is not quite the same. Society board member Dianne Brenner recently donated to the society a 4-minute film she created in 1995 showing the display in its original location. [Enjoy!](#)

Join the County Historical Society at a discount

The El Cerrito Historical Society is passing on this offer from our friends with the Contra Costa County Historical Society. It applies to people who are members of the El Cerrito Historical Society, and is thus a partnership that could benefit both societies:

"The Contra Costa County Historical Society is turning 70 this year, and in celebration we are partnering with your local historical society and extending a very special offer to join our society. Take advantage of our unique collection of documents, maps, and photographs that form our large and growing archive. During this year only, you can join our society for a year-long membership, for only \$10! (Usual rate is \$40). After one year, as long as you maintain your membership in your local Society, your dues will be one-half the usual rate, or \$20."

Being a member provides free use of the society's vast archive and other benefits.

The county society says: "We are located at 724 Escobar Street in Martinez, and are open Tues –Thurs, 9 AM to 4 PM, and the 1st and 3rd Saturday of each month, 10 AM to 2 PM. Phone: 925-229-1042. Visit us at: www.cocohistory.org."



This sign, spotted mid June at Jenny K. Gifts on Stockton Aveue, suggests the pandemic is nearing an end in these parts. Since March 2020 the historical society has been documenting with photos and other means the course of Covid in the El Cerrito area.
Photos by Dave Weinstein

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.

