

# Sparks September 2020

## Attend our next program: Albany: A Small Town with a Big Past

An illustrated online talk on Zoom by author Karen Sorensen

Albany's history is filled with interesting stories, many related to larger issues of the early 20th century, from notorious dynamite factory explosions to an early 1900s plague scare.

Explore these stories with Karen Sorensen, author of the new book, Albany – Stories from the Village by the Bay. The book includes little known details about Charles MacGregor, the man who built many Albany and East Bay homes; the history of Albany Hill – El Cerrito it was called! -- and how extensive electric train systems linked residents to the rest of the Bay Area.

Karen, an Albany writer, historian, and fifth-generation Californian, wrote the book, Images of America, Albany, and has authored numerous articles on Albany history.

7 p.m. Thursday October 22, 2020. [Click Here](#) to join the Zoom meeting.



New seating is being installed in the main theater in Rialto Cinemas Cerrito, as well as in the upstairs theater. Photo by Dave Weinstein

## The society supports a [GoFundMe](#) campaign for Rialto Cinemas Cerrito.

One of the most historic businesses in town in one of the most historic buildings is asking the public for help to cover costs during this time of pandemic.

The Historical Society, which prides itself on using its funds wisely, is donating to this campaign and we suggest that others consider doing the same.

The Cerrito Theater opened in 1937, closed in the 1970s, and was reborn as a theater in 2006 following a lively community-based campaign led by Friends of the Cerrito Theater.

Designed by famed cinema architect William David and decorated by the leading Los Angeles-firm Heinsbergen studios, the theater has retained its Art Deco look, complete with murals, art glass, lighting and Streamline décor.

It is operated by Rialto Cinemas, which also operates theaters in Berkeley and Sebastopol. The current GoFundMe campaign applies to both the Cerrito and the Elmwood in Berkeley, also a historic theater.

It is notable that Rialto is investing funds in the theater right now, using the hiatus since mid-March to replace the much-loved sofas (that had seen better days) and other seating with all new seating.

The theater is getting new hallways lights, an exterior paint job, and other improvements. Clearly this is a theater that hopes to welcome back patrons as soon as that is possible.

Rialto Cinemas Cerrito is more than a business. It is an integral part of the community, its rebirth due to community initiative and volunteer work, its screenings including Cerrito Classics put on with Friends of the Cerrito Theater, its venue used for community events, its Scene wine bar a popular gathering place.

## Creedence was not El Cerrito's first swamp boogie band

Creedence Clearwater Revival rocketed to the top of the charts at the end of 1968 with 'Proud Mary,' and followed with a remarkable series of chart topping songs that sounded like John and Tom Fogerty, Stu Cook and Doug Clifford came from the bayous of Louisiana and not from suburban El Cerrito.

Does anyone recall an earlier swamp sound band based in El Cerrito? No, the Louisiana Swamp Trainers never won international fame like Creedence – but they did make it to page 1 of **El Caballero**, the newspaper of El Cerrito High.

Over the past few weeks the Historical Society has received several donations of historic newspapers, including a bound collection of El Caballero from September 1947 to January 1950. The papers reveal fascinating tidbits about life of high schoolers at the time.

“Piano banger March; hot lips Hodge; sweet and soothing Bill Dimick; off key Grisham and drummer boy George Dimick will compose the Louisiana Swamp Trainers hot, cold, melloroonic or just plain music band,” the paper reported in its March 19, 1948 issue.

The band was to play at the Man Hunt Dance.

We thank Doug Dempsey, who attended the school back then, for the donation. Dempster also donated 39 issues of **Hilltop News** from 1937-1946, the publication of Kensington School (now Kensington Hilltop Elementary School).

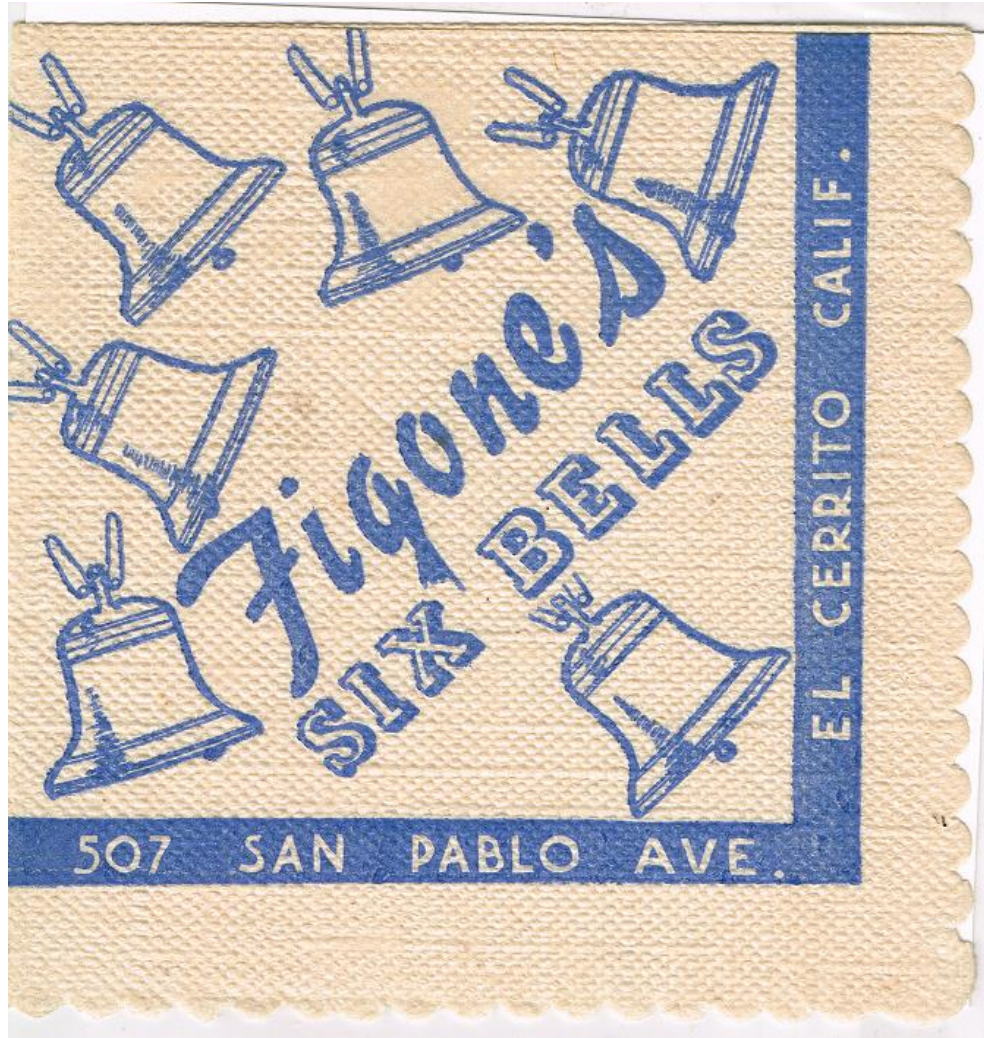
Another valued donation comes to us from Marvin Martin of Kensington, whose mother once edited the **Kensington Outlook**, which covers comings and goings, recreation, and even on occasion politics, in our neighboring community.

The run of donated papers stretches from 1947 to 1979, allowing interested parties to get a feel for changes in the community over time.

Martin's donation also included copies of **Ken-Vue**, the Kensington PTA publication, from the early 1950s, and copies of Hilltop News from 1947.

“It has been a quiet summer,” the Outlook reported in its September 1949 issue, quoting police chief Bowley, “no burglaries and not even the depredations of a wild animal.” The paper continued: “A patrol car has been acquired for use instead of private automobiles.”

One early editor of the Outlook was Kay Kerr, wife of UC Berkeley president Clark Kerr and later a founder of the group Save the Bay. Kerr and her husband later lived in El Cerrito.



The Six Bells was in business in El Cerrito by 1916. During the 1920s it sold what it called “soft drinks” during Prohibition. When it reopened after a closure in 1946, the El Cerrito Journal reported: “The neon display together with the sounding bells, welcomes all who are fortunate to be schooled in the art of good eating.” The report continued: “It is not a night club; it is not a tavern; but it is a homey combination of dining, dancing and dignified relaxation.” Courtesy of Chris Treadway

One promised donation is from our vice president, Chris Treadway who found a wonderful **historic napkin from one of El Cerrito’s legendary nightclubs, the Six Bells**. It was run by the Figone family, the same family that serves El Cerrito by operating East Bay Sanitary Co., our waste hauler.

The napkin is a reminder that from the 1910s to the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century El Cerrito was a center for nightlife, gambling, entertainment, and vice.

Have you been cleaning house recently? If you have collectable material relating to El Cerrito and environs please contact us. [davidsweinstein@yahoo.com](mailto:davidsweinstein@yahoo.com)

## Tepco Beach hits the news.

Many locals know that Tepco, the Technical Porcelain Company that manufactured tableware and more at a plant in El Cerrito, used to dump discarded ceramics at Point Isabel. At low tide you can walk on shards at the end of Central Avenue at “Tepco Beach.”

Now the world knows. San Francisco Chronicle columnist Vanessa Hua [recently visited](#), and so did [reporter Katrina Schwartz for KQED](#). The society provided research assistance for the KQED piece. Enjoy!

## Online exhibit offers fascinating look at Black life in North Richmond.

Our friends at the Richmond Museum of History and Culture have mounted a revealing online exhibit. There is much on the once lively entertainment scene, including from legendary figures as Minnie Lu Nichols, and on community leaders, sports, and much more.

Here is how the museum describes the exhibit.

“The [online exhibit](#) was developed from the award winning An Exploration of Our History documentary series produced to take an analytical look into the rich history of North Richmond, California. The four-part series has chronicled the African American experience in the unincorporated Contra Costa County community from a socio-economic perspective, and has been a valuable educational resource.

“Comprised of 74 archival photos and 15 video clips, the online exhibit is the final outcome of the decades long community history project produced by Doug Harris and teen crew members from the Digital Technology Academy media arts program, in partnership with Contra Costa County's Service Integration Program, City of Richmond, the California Endowment, and Athletes United for Peace.

“The exhibit menu above includes seven theme sections (community, business, people, entertainment, recreation, sports and academy), and is being presented in partnership with the Richmond Public Library and the Richmond Museum of History, and funded by the City of Richmond Arts & Culture Commission Neighborhood Public Art Grant.”

-- Dave Weinstein

*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.*

