

Sparks September 2021

Watch our program: From Back Streets to Major Civic Event: El Cerrito's Martin Luther King Jr. Celebration. This event is now on the society's YouTube channel. If you missed it live, via Zoom, you can [watch it now](#).

Society board member Pat Durham and Mina Wilson, founders of the King celebration, discussed its history in a film by Maceo Trotter Jr., with interviews conducted by Vicke Carr-Trotter. The film featured other members of our city's Black community, including Dorothy Williams, Barbara G. Davis, and Gerald Martin, along with Police Chief Paul Keith, County Supervisor Jon Gioia, and others.

Return to El Cerrito: Reflections from a woman who grew up here in '50s

By Karen Sheffield

In June, the Historical Society got a call from Karen Sheffield, a Floridian, seeking information about Harding School in preparation for a tour of our town she planned to take with her grandchildren. She had grown up in El Cerrito and attended Harding.

We supplied information and in turn asked Karen (pronounced, Danish style, Car-Rin', with the accent on syllable two) if she would write a bit about El Cerrito today and yesterday. We thank Karen for writing this mini-memoir and for contributing historical images to our archive.



The Sheffield family lived in this compact home at 537 Ashbury Avenue across from the high school. Currently it is part of Zion Presbyterian Church. Photos courtesy of Karen Sheffield.

My name is Karen Stanford Sheffield and I live in Tallahassee, Florida. I lived in El Cerrito from 1953 to 1957. It was a different place then. Starting in 1954 I attended Harding Elementary when it looked like this,



but it went through a renovation that year making it look more like this



I lived with my parents on Ashbury Avenue in a tiny house before they were in vogue. It was idyllic because it was next to a vacant lot with a creek behind it, making it the most wonderful play area. We were right across the street from the high school, where I learned to ride a bicycle on the ball field.



We attended Northminster Presbyterian Church, which at that time was located on the corner of Lynn and Colusa avenues. Back then there was a drive-in theater in town and no freeway.

When Dad got a teaching job in El Sobrante, my parents sold the little house to Northminster, because they were to build the new church in the vacant lot next door. Our house soon served several uses for the church. We moved to El Sobrante. This photo shows me in front of our El Cerrito house.



In 1963 I was back in El Cerrito, not to live, but back to attending Northminster because with the building of I-80 it was easier to get there from El Sobrante. I became an active member of the church high school group, being the only one who went to De Anza, not El Cerrito High. We held our meetings in my former home.

The drive-in theater was gone with the building of El Cerrito Plaza, and Capwells (department store) came to town. My dad “moonlighted” there and I started working there as soon as I turned 16 in 1964 and continued through the rest of high school and all through college.

By the early 1970s I had graduated college, gotten a fulltime job in Oakland, gotten married and moved to Florida.

Even as I came back to visit my parents, who lived out their lives in El Sobrante, there was little reason to come to El Cerrito. But in July of this year I brought my son and his teenage sons to the Bay Area to revisit the places where I’d grown up.

We had lunch at a restaurant on the edge of El Cerrito Plaza. But the Plaza looked so different I would have had difficulty finding where the Capwells store had been. Did you know that H.C. Capwell founded his company in 1889?

Harding Elementary has had an obvious remake.

My tiny house is in such disrepair I just couldn’t take a picture of it; too sad. By the sign on it, it appears to be the nursery of the church, which is still Presbyterian, but now “Zion” not “Northminster.” The church building looks the same as I remember, though. The original church building on Lynn is now a private home.



This house on Lynn at Colusa Avenue is the former Northminster Church.

The high school has been rebuilt and it is no longer possible to just walk across the street to get on the grounds.

I know that I-80, much of the time, is not the fastest way to get around anymore; it’s more like a parking lot than a freeway.

It was fun to visit several friends and all the places of my youth around the Bay Area.

The Society thanks new and renewing members and donors.

Meredith McGuire has joined the society as a life member.

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.

Please note that we have increased membership rates modestly, for the first time in many years.

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.

