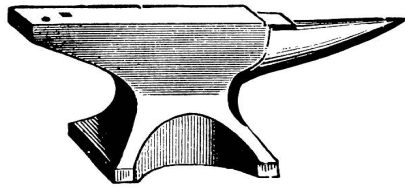

Idaho Motel gets new life as apartments

*Former San Pablo Avenue
motor court reborn as housing
-- see story on back page*



The Forge

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'Flat Top' Smith

*El Cerrito builder
made modern magic
in post-war era*

By Dave Weinstein

By the mid 1950s Earl W. 'Flat Top' Smith was one of the most famous homebuilders in America – with a reputation that went far beyond our shores.

Life magazine in 1953 praised Smith for building the “best buy in low-cost development houses” in the country. A year later the Saturday Evening Post published “He Builds Bargains to Live In,” a six-page profile.

“Because (Smith) gave the public what no one else knew it was waiting for – the combination of modern design and just about the lowest price in the country – he has started a trend and hit the jackpot,” the magazine wrote.



Earl Smith, shown here with neighborhood leaders at Parchester Village in Richmond, opened doors for the underserved Black community by building unrestricted, affordable housing.

The El Cerrito Historical Society had planned a program about Earl Smith for July 20, to feature his two sons, Duncan and Geof-

frey Smith, and daughter, Noel Schuurman. Once health and safety conditions allow, we will present that program.

"Smith was the first to use flat roofs either for tract building or low-cost jobs, but today you can see copies all over the country," a federal housing official told the Post.

A year after that, the magazine House and Home reported that Smith was America's fourth largest homebuilder. "He took a chance on modern architecture's direct approach," the magazine wrote, "and decided he wanted a new type of house with a flat roof."

In 1955 he won national fame as president of the National Association of Home Builders and was known for his oratory skills, hard work and bonhomie. A series of Shop Talk chats for the association won him fans nationwide.

The next year he visited the Soviet Union as part of a business delegation, to promote efficiencies in homebuilding – and was photographed in a group smiling below a bigger-than-life photo of Stalin.

When Smith was honored at a dinner of the National Association of Home Builders in 1956, attendees wore gaily decorated flat-topped hats.

And Smith's son Geoffrey remembered that his dad owned "a pen and ink drawing of two walrus looking at an igloo with a flat roof. 'It looks like Smith's been here,' one of the walrus tells the other. And it was signed 'Walt Disney.'"

The amazing story of Earl 'Flat Top' Smith, the builder of what his ads called "economy homes in a modern motif," got its start in El Cerrito, where Smith was based for most of his career. He and his family lived in a charming, Mediterranean style home with a courtyard in Kensington, just a few blocks above Colusa Circle.

Smith's office was attached to the Griffin Lumber Co., at 1344 San Pablo Avenue (later renumbered 10944), near the current police and fire safety building. Griffin supplied his lumber. It was also in El Cerrito that Smith's superhero-like origin story took place.

Smith (1908-2000) grew up in Oakland. His great grandfather and grandfather had been builders, as was his father. Earl never went to high school, starting work for his dad at age 14 as a carpenter's apprentice.

He worked for many years as a union carpenter and eventually began building a few homes on the side. In 1939 Earl built five charm-

ing, two-story stucco homes on Lynn Street at Ashbury Avenue in El Cerrito. They appear historically intact today.

They look nothing like the homes that would soon win him fame – though they do suggest the home he'd built for himself and his family in Kensington the year before.

During World War II, according to a profile of the builder in a 1955 House and Home article, Smith built housing for war workers.

And in an unusual move for a builder during a time of deep housing segregation, when local realty boards fought fiercely against attempts to build anything but temporary housing for the South-

We need you!

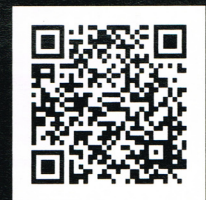
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Photos from the Earl W. Smith Collection, El Cerrito Historical Society. Donated by Duncan Smith

A Smith house: Exteriors of early Smith homes were simple yet stylish, often with trellises.

ern Blacks who were flocking to the area to work in war industries, Smith partnered in 1941 with Mrs. Laura Clarke, “an educated Negro with 2 degrees from Columbia,” whose husband was a Pullman porter, according to the magazine. Over the next three years they built about 30 houses.

But Earl didn’t add “Flat Top” to his name, nor win fame or fortune, until 1947. Here’s Flat Top’s origin story, as recounted in the *Saturday Evening Post*.

It was 1947 and Smith was offering a home he had built for \$9,200. There was pent-up demand for housing in the post-World War II era, but many buyers couldn’t afford much. “Knock off a couple thousand more and I could buy,” a would-be customer told him.

Smith got to thinking – how much does a roof cost? How much a standard foundation with crawl space? What if I could build a house with neither?

Flat roofs at the time were not



Open interior. Open plan interiors were a mark of modernism, and this Smith interior was more open than most, with no wall between kitchen and living areas. Open beam ceiling also characterized the modern style.



The Smith family at home in Kensington. Dee, Geoffrey, Duncan, Noel and Earl.

unknown — if you were hiring an architect like Richard Neutra or others who were part of the Modern Movement to design a custom house. But houses for working stiff of the sorts who were living in the flatlands of El Cerrito, Richmond or El Sobrante?

“No one had tried it before on the assumption that only the \$50,000 buyer would be interested in a modern,” the Post wrote.

On Sept. 23, 1947 Smith was standing in front of a house he’d just put up on Lexington Avenue in El Cerrito. It was built on a concrete slab, not a standard foundation, and had a flat roof. Banks wouldn’t finance it and the FHA wouldn’t insure it, the Post said.

“He got a building permit, over the objection of the city engineer

of El Cerrito, only by insisting, ‘As long as it meets code requirements, it’s my house, and what it looks like is between God and me,’” the Post said.

The real estate broker he was talking to wouldn’t list it. “The appearance, especially the flat roof, was too unusual to sell, and the price was too low to make it worthwhile,” the Post reported.

Then, “the conversation was interrupted by the screech of brakes. A red convertible pulled to a stop, and the young woman driving called out: ‘That house is darling! If it’s for sale I want to buy it.’ Earl’s reply: “Miss it is, you can, and those are the sweetest words I’ve ever heard.”

It wasn’t only real estate men who

thought little of that first flat top. “When Dad built that first house on Lexington the neighbors were all up in arms,” Geoffrey said. “Dad said, ‘If you don’t like it when it’s done, I’ll tear it down.’ The neighbors even had a petition against it.

“The house in El Cerrito was his prototype,” Geoffrey said. Smith built four more just like it on that block.

Smith’s other son, Duncan Smith, said those original flat top homes are gone — demolished at the start of the 1970s to make way for the El Cerrito del Norte BART station.

Smith was in business, first working from his Kensington home. But he soon slapped his “Earl W. Smith Organization: Homes in California” sign in front of his new offices at

Griffin Lumber, where he would remain till the lumber yard sold the property where Earl had his office in the late 1970s, Duncan said.

The Post described the arrangement with Griffin as one of Smith's canny cost-saving measures:

"Earl designed the cutting operations and delivery schedules, but it actually belongs to the Griffin Building Materials Company of El Cerrito, which supplies Smith with all his materials on a cost-plus basis. Earl figures this way he's got his own lumber yard without the attendant headaches of maintaining a corps of buyers and expeditors, or having to borrow and tie up large amounts of his own capital."

It was very much a family firm. Earl worked with his twin brothers Henry and Rae Smith. Smith's wife, Dee, worked for the firm when it was young. Both of his sons worked with him as they became teens. There was an architect on staff too, one well known in the profession for his advocacy of low-cost modern housing – but Smith claimed to design the homes himself.

Smith motored to his office from his home in his 1947 Ford Woody Wagon.

His first subdivision was in El Sobrante in 1948, along San Pablo Dam Road near El Portal Drive, his son Duncan says.

In 1950 Smith sponsored a talent contest for young people on local TV, through the Catacomb Club of El Cerrito's St. John's Church. He and his brother Henry appeared on the show, speaking about Parchester Village, a sprawling community of flat top homes they were building along San Pablo Bay in unincorporated Richmond.

The development of several thousand homes was aimed at African



Effie at Shore Acres: Smith was a showman. When he opened the Shore Acres tract and shopping center in 1956-57, he brought Effie the elephant, the star attraction of the Oakland Zoo at the time, to entertain.

Americans, who had very little opportunity to buy homes or obtain financing due to red lining and federal rules that denied mortgage guarantees.

Pasted into Smith's scrapbook about Parchester is a news article about the city of Richmond demolishing 1,200 housing units that had been built for war workers. It quoted the housing authority saying that 70 percent of Richmond residents lived in such units. Many were Black people who had few options to buy. Smith clearly saw a market for his homes at Parchester.

The project was built in partnership with Fred Parr, a Richmond industrialist who owned the land. Members of Richmond's Black community were deeply involved, spearheaded by Rev. Guthrie John Williams, who fought for housing for Black people. House and Home magazine called these two- and three-bedroom homes, which Smith

said were of "California contemporary design," "minority houses."

"F.H.A. and V.A. APPROVED," the ads declared. A "six-room deluxe," with three bedrooms, went for \$8,250, "\$300 down payment for veterans."

"Dad was very proud of the whole thing," Geoffrey remembered. "The advertising was 'Homes for all Americans,' and it literally was all Blacks."

Geoffrey said of his dad's political views, "He wasn't really liberal, but he was much more liberal than other people."

Duncan, who began working for his dad as a teenager, said Earl employed workers of all races. He said Parchester was his only tract aimed at African-Americans.

Smith built an amazing number of homes in an amazing number of places, often at the same time. He concentrated on smaller, often out-of-the-way cities, where working

class people needed homes. If he built in cities like San Jose, it was at the rural edge of those cities.

Flat Top homes sprouted from the earth in the East Bay in Montalvin Manor -- an unincorporated area near Pinole -- and in El Sobrante. He built the Fairmede subdivision at Richmond's Hilltop, long before the Mall arrived.

He built 1,500 homes in "Shore Acres" near Pittsburg. A showman, when he opened Shore Acres and a shopping center he built there, he brought in boxer Max Baer and a zoo elephant to entertain.

Several of his neighborhoods can be found in northern Vallejo, and Smith also built tracts in Milpitas and San Jose and Cupertino in the South Bay.

He went beyond the Bay Area, to Sacramento, Chico, Yuba City. Smith built many homes, both his classic flat tops and later homes with peaked roofs in Salinas.

Smith dropped the flat top toward the start of the 1960s, replacing it first with low-peaked roofs with exposed interior beams, then using an "engineered truss (roof) with metal gussets," Duncan said. "Dad crunched the numbers and determined it was a less expensive roof to put on with a pitch and cover it with tar and gravel."

A grouping of peaked roof Smith homes from the 1960s can be found on streets named for his sons, Duncan Road and Geoffrey Court, near I-80 and Appian Way in Pinole.

His homes got larger than their original 750- to 1,000-square-foot size. The popular Granada model was 1,300 square feet. Smith did build one grouping of five large flat top modern homes in the wealthy Contra Costa community of Diablo, Duncan said. Henry and Rae Smith each had one, as did other execu-



Models garden home: Models relax in this early to mid-1950s promo shot for Smith Construction.

tives of the Smith organization.

While most of Smith's homes were built in large tracts, he also built smaller groupings of four or five homes, or even single homes. He also sold his plans to "associated" builders who wanted to put up a few, so you may spot Flat Top Smith homes that were not built by Earl himself. Smith watched over their construction to make sure his standards were preserved.

"Dad built his last house in Salinas in 1976 and his last house in West Pittsburg in 1978," Duncan said. The firm remained in business into the 1990s managing apartments and a mobile home park it had developed.

His sons said Smith built about 25,000 homes throughout his career. About 11,000 of them were flat tops.

One builder who followed Smith's example of building flat top homes for the masses was Joseph Eichler. Just as Eichler was starting to build in the late 1940s,

he met with Smith to learn about flat roof and concrete slab construction.

But unlike Smith, Eichler hired well known architects and aimed his homes at middle class, not working class buyers. He built far fewer homes than Smith, 11,000 total, mostly in the Bay Area, but they were more upscale with more architectural interest. Today mid-century modern mavens love them, care for them and restore them.

Many of Smith's tracts remain working class today, and the homes have not fared as well as the Eichlers. Many have been altered beyond recognition -- and in many cases second story additions or peaks have replaced those fabled flat top roofs.

Dave Weinstein's article for CA Modern focused on Smith's entire career and focused on his homes' ties to modernism. This article for the Forge focuses on his work in El Cerrito and Contra Costa County.

Where can you see Smith's flat top homes?

El Cerrito: There are any number of flat top homes we believe may be by Smith, or built by associated builders using his plans. Here are ones we know are by Smith:

1854 Key Blvd., across from the del Norte BART station – and about a block from his original flat tops on Lexington. We know from real estate records that 1745 Arlington is by Smith, which strongly suggests that other homes on the 1700 block that resemble it are also by Smith. These include numbers 1741 and 1749.

Five pre-Flat Top homes by Smith from 1939 are grouped along Lynn Avenue near Ash-

bury Avenue: numbers 7309, 7311, 7315 and 7321 Lynn and 203 Pomona Ave.

Richmond, North Richmond, El Sobrante: Parchester Village is an enclave just south of Point Pinole Regional Shoreline, with Parchester Park, Phannor Drive, Griffin Drive, among the streets.

Fairmede has Smith homes on curving streets just south of Hilltop by the Bay (former Hilltop Mall). Streets include Fairmede Drive and Groom Drive.

In El Sobrante two Flat Top communities can be found on either side of San Pablo Dam Road. Rancho Vista, from the late 1940s, is a small tract just

west of El Portal Drive where it hits the Dam Road. Canyon Park, from the early 1950s, is south of the Dam Road near Clark Road.

Montalvin Manor is a large tract of flat top homes in an unincorporated area west of San Pablo Avenue and north of Atlas Road, near Richmond's Hilltop area. Streets include Montalvin and Heather drives.

Bay Point: Shore Acres, in Bay Point, is adjacent to the Concord Naval Weapons Station on such streets as Beach, Bay and Canal drives. Many homes and the former Shore Acres shopping center that Smith built are dilapidated.



Historical view of Solano Avenue. Courtesy of the Western Railway Museum Archives

Albany: A Small Town with a Big Past

An illustrated online talk on Zoom by author Karen Sorensen 7 p.m. Oct. 22 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. Zoom attendance information will be supplied closer to the date For information, Dave Weinstein, 510-524-1737, davidsweinstein@yahoo.com

The El Cerrito Historical Society produces two publications, the Forge, which is a print publication that we aim to produce four times a year, and Sparks (from the Anvil), an email publication that 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.

■ ■ ■

Do you like the new look of the Forge? Help keep it going by donating. The society has upgraded our Forge newsletter with more pages, color photos some issues, and better stock. This drives up our costs. Please consider a contribution of \$25, \$50, or any amount. Send a check to the El Cerrito Historical Society to El Cerrito Historical Society, P.O. Box 404, El Cerrito CA 94530.

'Mecca for the Motorist' renovated for today

Last month in our email newsletter "Sparks" we praised the recent renovation of the Idaho Apartments as a good example of re-using a historic building to meet modern needs while preserving valuable aspects of its past.

Since then we learned more about the history of this motel, and we have spoken to the project manager and to the communications manager for the developer. The apartments are at 10203 San Pablo Ave.

Society board member Chris Treadway dug up some old news clips. One of them refers to the newly expanded and renovated inn as a "Mecca of the Motorist!"

"\$50,000 Idaho Motel Unit Is Now Completed," the article read, inviting readers to an open house there. The Idaho was built in the 1940s, so an expansion at the start of the 1950s shows its success. The project added 10 units and renovated the existing 16. The article – which reads like it may have been written by a PR guy for the owners – includes this: "The word luxurious is used merely as a substitute for an adjective which is not available to describe this new motel development."

The photo shows a long lost neon Idaho Motel sign and makes clear that what is now the attractive courtyard of Idaho Apartments was originally the parking lot.

From talking to the owners of the renovated Idaho Apartments, we learned, among other things, that historic preservation of the Spanish-tinged 1940s motel was not the goal. Not surprising.

"Our main intent was to make it as modern as possible while also maintaining some of the historic features like the colors and details," says



Butterfly and flower murals by Jerarde Felipe Gutierrez adorn the courtyard walls the renovated Idaho Apartments. Above left, the site as it looked in the 1980s when it was the Idaho Motel. Mural photos courtesy Resources for Community Development.

Nicole Brown, project manager at Resources for Community Development, which has developed and built 60 housing projects for people with varied special needs. "It was not in our minds to hark back to the original motel."

Lauren Lyon, RCD's communications manager, said the nonprofit does do some explicit historic rehabs. It is currently converting a former single-room hotel in downtown Oakland to become affordable housing as Empyrean Towers.

Developing affordable housing is a complex financial challenge, Lyon said. "When it is feasible from the financial standpoint to retain historic elements we do."

In this case, while preservation was not the goal, it seems that the form of the buildings themselves – there are five buildings that make up the former Idaho Motel – ensured its general preservation.

"With motels," Lyon says, "the cost of rehabilitation is less expen-

sive than new construction so that goes towards housing as many people as possible."

The Idaho Apartments, which serve people with mental and other health challenges, has 29 apartments and 33 residents.

RCD, which continues to own and provides social and other services at all its projects, has converted other old motels into affordable housing. RCD provides housing for veterans, peoples with disability, frail seniors and others.

"I don't think the current trend in restoring motels is historic preservation," Lyon said. "The idea is to provide as much housing as possible. There are many motels that are past their prime."

Statewide, the new Homekey program is providing funds to localities to buy and turn old motels into supportive housing for homeless people.

-- Dave Weinstein