

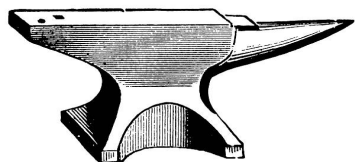
Historic florist shop wins state award

It is one of the most distinctive buildings on San Pablo Avenue, if one of the smallest. It is also a “storybook” building in two senses of the term. Architecturally, with its four steep gables that suggest a house from a fairytale, and historically – telling a true tale both of betrayal and friendship.

The former Contra Costa Florist Building, 10848 San Pablo Ave., next to City Hall and now part of the Hana Gardens senior housing complex, was the flower shop of the Mabuchi family from 1935. It had been built in the 1920s to serve as the shop of the Valley of the Moon Quarry, from Sonoma.

The Mabuchi family was part of a community of Japanese Americans in El Cerrito and Richmond who made the area one of the most important cut flower growing regions around. The entire community was locked in

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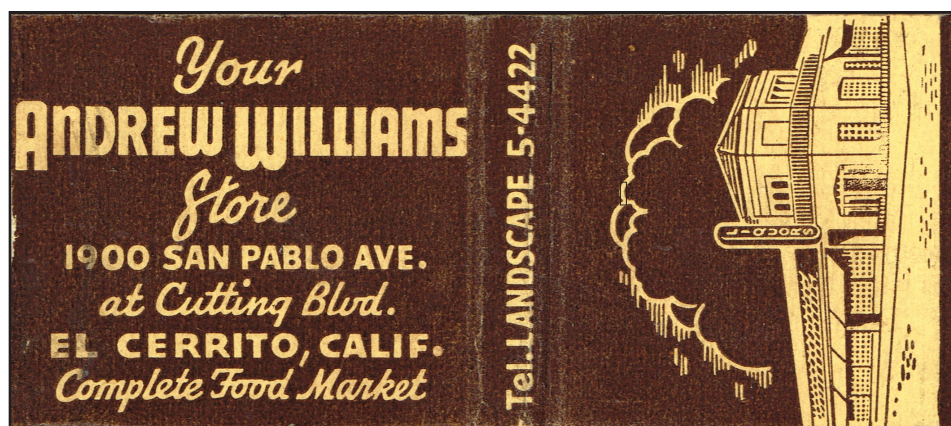
The Mayfair block

*Long-forlorn
site once had a
significant role
in Bay Area
grocery history*

By Chris Treadway

The Mayfair site in El Cerrito is finally being developed after being vacant for almost 50 years. The transit-oriented project there includes two buildings with a combined total of 223 residential units. And architectural drawings show the Mayfair name on one of the buildings, even though developers have not officially named the development.

Old-timers may know why the block in front of the Del Norte BART station carries the Mayfair name, but it's a good bet most do not. And even fewer



A 1930s matchbook promotes the Andrew Williams Store in El Cerrito.

will know the original name of the business at that location or its role in Bay Area grocery history as a scaled-down prototype of the region's first supermarket.

The block on San Pablo Avenue between Cutting Boulevard and Knott Avenue was the site of an Andrew Williams Store, a different kind of grocery option that opened here on Aug. 10, 1934, when the Great Depression was in full swing. The self-service grocery was one of the first three opened by the new Andrew Williams Store chain,

along with Burlingame (the first, in 1933) and Pittsburg.

Most groceries at the time, even among chain stores, were small and neighborhood-focused, meant to serve people in the immediate area. The new El Cerrito store, by contrast, was opened with a focus on serving a much larger and regional base of shoppers. Newspapers described the Williams stores as “cavernous.” The El Cerrito location was 19,000 square feet, much larger than the typical neighborhood store, and offered parking for more

than 100 cars at a time when most grocery stores had little or none. Andrew Williams Stores boasted “20,000 food commodities” under one roof, including features that would allow shoppers to fill their needs in one stop, such as its own bakery, deli, and liquor department. The stores in El Cerrito and Pittsburg, where fishing was immensely popular, even had bait shops that were promoted by awarding a case of Grace Bros. beer to the customer who caught the biggest fish each week using the store’s bait.

“Save time! One stop is all that is necessary at Andrew Williams for bait, food and drink,” was the appeal in a 1935 ad.

The El Cerrito store at 1900 San Pablo Ave. (later 11600 San Pablo) had a distinctive two-story tower with arched windows at the corner entry. Williams Stores were located on busy thoroughfares, with the El Cerrito location strategically set on the business highway leading to Richmond and near the terminus of the Eastshore Highway that was under construction and would open in 1937.

The stores were heavily promoted and regularly offered entertainment and other attractions in the parking lot to draw customers, particularly at the El Cerrito store, where Williams, who lived in Oakland, had his headquarters until 1937. The store would offer giveaways and price items below cost -- a practice that prompted a restraining order in 1936 from the Contra Costa District Attorney under the state’s Unfair Trade Practices Act.

Such aggressive marketing tactics were already creating considerable competition for the chain and mom-and-pop stores of the era, but Andrew Williams had another, perhaps even bigger attraction -- it was open 24/7 at a time when shoppers otherwise had to schedule their trips around the hours of the store. Limited hours had even been codified by 1937 under a contract between independent and chain groceries and the retail clerks union that required a uniform closing time of



Above, a corner view of the El Cerrito store in its heyday as a regional destination. Below, a 1935 bait department ad offers a case of beer for the biggest fish.

no later than 8 p.m. each day and a full closure on Sundays and holidays. In Oakland, the operating restriction was incorporated into a city ordinance.

That led to a showdown in July of 1937. Williams, a fierce competitor, threatened to close all his stores unless the restriction was eased. Some other chains, hoping to expand their hours as the Williams stores had, joined the chorus. San Leandro-based Lucky Stores predicted it might have to follow suit by closing 50 or 60 of its stores and the Hagstrom chain began its own exploratory talks with the clerks union. (Oakland-based Safeway declined comment, newspapers reported at the time.)

News accounts quoted Lucky Stores President Charles Crouch as saying that the Bay Area grocery industry was losing between \$7 million and \$8 million annually and estimating that “500 persons now walking the street could be given employment” if the rules were relaxed.

The union, locally representing workers at half a dozen chains and 250 independent grocers, stood its ground for a time, but the prospect of creating more unemployment did not play well with the public or elected officials.

“I’m not going broke for anybody, and that’s the situation we’ll be facing unless something is done,” Williams

Fishermen's Luck!!!

Pete Kerber, 1690 Chanslor Avenue, Richmond
Caught 11-lb., 1 ounce bass at the San Pablo pipe line with bait from the

**ANDREW WILLIAMS
BAIT DEPARTMENT**

so he wins the
**FREE CASE OF
GRACE BROS.' BEER**

Given each week for the biggest fish caught with our bait. Try your luck this week with our lucky bait.

Save time! One stop is all that is necessary at Andrew Williams for BAIT, FOOD and DRINK

Andrew Williams Stores, Inc.
A FOOD DEPARTMENT STORE
Over 5000 Commodities on Display
**1900 San Pablo Ave.
El Cerrito**
Corner of Cutting Boulevard
WE NEVER CLOSE

said.

He estimated that some 200 employees at his three East Bay stores would be idled.

Andrew Williams (full name William Andrew Williams) at the time was a 21-year veteran of the grocery business starting at the founding of Piggly Wiggly stores in 1916 in Memphis, Tenn. He had come to Oakland in 1918 and established the West Coast division of Piggly Wiggly, expanding it to more than 100 stores in California and Hawaii by 1928, when it was pur-

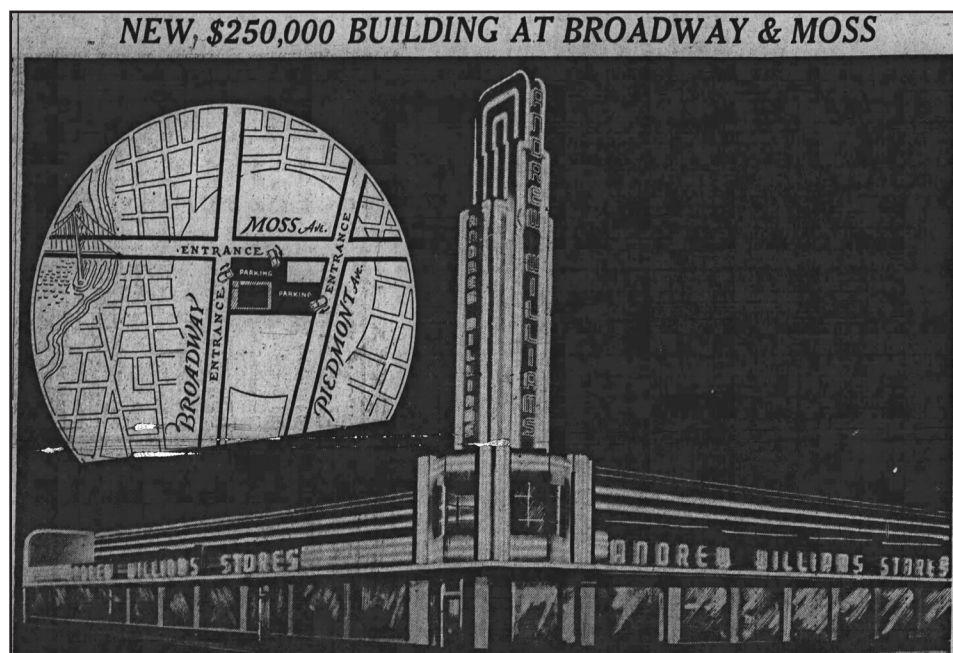
chased by the Safeway chain. He then retired from the industry until opening his Andrew Williams Stores in 1933. Williams' primary partner in the venture was his wife, Doris (Perry), who had also learned the ropes at Piggly Wiggly in Memphis before coming to California with Williams. Williams had left his first wife and children in Memphis to start anew with Doris as his personal secretary. Once his divorce was final, Andrew and Doris married in Berkeley in 1920.

The couple were shrewd business people and promoters, with a populist flair, and were something of mavericks in the grocery business. Employees were offered a chance to have a financial interest in the chain and in 1934 common stock in the Andrew Williams Stores was offered direct to the public for a limited time via weekly sales ads that appeared in local newspapers, with the stated objective of further expansion. In July of 1936 work was started on a new store at a major intersection in Oakland that would become what many have called the first supermarket on the West Coast. The market, which opened in March 1937 at Broadway and Moss Avenue (Moss was later to become a portion of MacArthur Boulevard), was covered with neon and had a 60-foot-tall tower that made an eye-catching sight to motorists through the busy intersection and a primary pre-freeway route to and from the new Bay Bridge. It was far larger than the El Cerrito prototype and not only had groceries ("20,000 commodities") and the other features offered at the Williams stores, but also jewelry and perfume departments, a coffee shop and a pharmacy. Elmer Freethy of El Cerrito was one of the contractors hired to build the center.

The chain was a substantial Oakland employer at that point of the Depression and there was a lot of concern when Williams actually followed up on his threat on July 10, 1938 by closing his stores in response to the union restrictions. He told the Oakland city manager, who had asked him to keep



Above, the reopening of the El Cerrito store under employee management made national news, including this wire photo. Below, the Oakland store that opened in 1937 and was considered the first West Coast supermarket.



his stores open until the expiration of the union contract in August, that his only options were "close or go broke."

News accounts claimed that the closure put 250 people out of work and there were ramifications as well for workers of outside firms that provided supplies and services.

Williams made headlines again days later when it was announced on Aug. 4, 1938 that the El Cerrito store had been leased to employees (Wil-

liams wisely retained the butcher and liquor store portions, the most profitable parts of the business). Accounts described the reopened store as an employee-run co-operative venture and wire services distributed the story nationally. The new management were all upper level veterans of the Williams operation who had been unsuccessful finding other positions during the shutdown and worked out an agreement to reopen the store. Wil-

liams agreed to the lease for a nominal good faith payment. They divided and leased the store's different departments among themselves, each operating the one that best fit his background.

El Cerrito workers were back on the job at union scale wages, even though it was with fewer hours than before as the store adhered to the union restrictions. Nine days later, the union backed down during contract talks. Union leaders recommended repeal of the hour restrictions, the stalemate ended and all the stores reopened.

Andrew and Doris Williams at that point had built a formidable business and gotten well ahead of the competition in reacting to consumer trends, particularly with the new supermarket in Oakland. Juxtaposed with their business success was the failure of their marriage. The couple, who had four children, separated in October of 1937 -- less than eight months after the megastore opening -- and Doris filed for divorce in December, leaving their palatial home in Oakland and moving to Piedmont.

Both remained on the board of directors, but Andrew withdrew from the day-to-day business and Doris was named president of the Andrew Williams Store in 1941.

The stores, still operating on a 24-hour schedule when few competitors were, continued to prosper. A 1945 profile about Doris implied that she was a large part of the couple's business success.

The Williams chain, including the El Cerrito location, carried on until 1951, when it was purchased by Southern California-based Mayfair Markets, owned by the Arden Dairy company. Edmond Herscherr, an attorney and longtime executive with the Williams stores, became chairman of the Mayfair Markets board. The local stores were rebranded as Mayfair's Andrew Williams Stores through 1953, then the Williams name was dropped.

Mayfair stores, like the Williams stores, were noted for operating 24 hours. But the chain saw a decline in



the 1970s and locations began to close. Three of the Oakland locations were sold to Consumers Cooperative of Berkeley. By then the El Cerrito store, originally the pride-and-joy of the chain, was the oldest of the group. It had been expanded and remodeled by Mayfair, but was otherwise a victim of neglected maintenance. The store was cited for a long and costly list of safety, health, and building code violations in 1965 and again in 1971, when Mayfair decided to close the store and sell the property.

During the 1970s there were several proposals to revamp the building and use the site as a used car lot, but none came to fruition. But the only uses the property had during the decade were as a seasonal Christmas tree lot.

City officials first discussed the property as a possible redevelopment project in 1973, and in 1975 the owner suggested it as a site for a new city hall complex.

The building continued to deteriorate and a city inspection in 1980 found that intruders had made conditions worse, including part of the roof collapsing. The owner was ordered

to demolish the building as a public hazard in 1981, and it came down in August of 1981.

The El Cerrito Redevelopment Agency acquired the property in 1987, but the only uses of the site were for periodic BART parking and private sales of used cars. The floor tiles where shoppers once roamed remained in place and visible as the city awaited development proposals. A 1995 proposal for a 20-screen cinema complex was ultimately rejected by the City Council when it drew strong opposition from residents of the area, and a 2005 proposal for a mixed-use, high-density project on part of the property was never realized.

Postscript

Andrew Williams, "retired" several times from the rigors of the grocery business, initially in 1929 after his Piggly Wiggly interests were bought out by Safeway, and again after his divorce from Doris.

Each time he went to the ranch estate they had purchased nine miles west of Angels Camp in the Gold Country. The estate was said to cover an area of nine miles by two miles, featuring

a 22-room home “with a living room large enough for a baseball team to practice in,” according to one news account.

But the grocery business was too strong a part of Williams’ identity and he came out of retirement in 1942 as manager of a chain of stores in San Diego and also remarried and became the father of twins. Williams returned to the Bay Area in 1954 to open yet another Piggly Wiggly-branded store in San Mateo.

When he finally retired for good he moved to his native Mississippi, where he died in 1964 at age 80.

Doris Williams, who was known as Peggy to her friends but went by Mrs. Andrew Williams professionally, did not fare as well after the divorce, even though she was chief officer of a thriving business.

She remarried in 1941 and the newlyweds were on a honeymoon sailing cruise when their schooner became disabled near Alameda Naval Air Station. Her new husband fell overboard trying to toss a rope to rescuers and drowned.

On the rebound, Doris wed again in 1942 to a twice-divorced man, but had the marriage annulled after a few months. She married once more in 1945, this time to an unemployed songwriter who was made a vice president with the Andrew Williams concern. But her fourth marriage again ended in divorce after a few months.

Doris sold her interests in Andrew Williams Stores shortly after.

She went to the altar a final time in 1948, and again it ended tragically. Her new husband was a retired U.S. Air Force officer and the couple, married only four months, was said by friends to be “extremely happy.”

They were entering their home in the San Diego County town of Alpine through the garage when Doris “stumbled against a shelf and a shotgun fell to the floor, discharging,” the Oakland Tribune reported. “The charge hit her in the head, killing her instantly.”

She was 50 years old.



The El Cerrito store was remodeled after the Andrew Williams chain was bought by Mayfair Markets in 1951.

We need you!

Help us document and preserve 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.



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internment camps during World War II, a betrayal by their very own government. The Mabuchis' neighbor Fred Conwill, owner of the Tradeway furniture store, preserved the property for the family while they were interned, allowing them to reclaim it after the war.

Longtime member El Cerrito Historical Society Tom Panas, who has been studying the local Japanese-American community and befriending its members since 2002, led efforts to preserve this building and its important story when the city planned to demolish it to make way for senior housing.

The Japanese American Citizens League and other members of the community played an important role in this successful effort, which was recognized by the State of California on Jan. 22 with a plaque, during a ceremony at the Stanley Mosk Library in Sacramento. The restoration of the Contra Costa Florist Shop and the historical signage that has been installed as part of Hana Gardens was one of five winners of the 2019 Governor's Historic Preservation Awards.

Attending the ceremony were several historical society members, including Panas and Dianne Brenner, who prepared the award nomination. City Council members Paul Fadelli and Rochelle Pardue-Okimoto also attended, as did several members of the local Japanese-American community, including Flora Ninomiya, a member of a flower growing family. Flora was interned during the war as a young girl. The certificate will likely be displayed in the former flower shop, which we believe is to be used as an activity and events space.

If you have not visited the site recently it is well worth it. Panas wrote much of the historical panels. Both the text — which delves into the entire Japanese-American experience in this region, as well as flower growing and the internment years and beyond — and the way it is displayed, leading viewers from a public plaza to the old shop itself, is not only informative but deeply moving.



Tom Panas and Flora Ninomiya display the Governor's Preservation Award following a January ceremony in Sacramento. (Photo courtesy of California State Parks). Below, the restored shop. (El Cerrito Historical Society)

