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The Forge

March 2022

The official publication of the
El Cerrito Historical Society

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Vol. 38 No. 1

The El Cerrito Historical Society, P.O. Box 304, El Cerrito, CA 94530
echistoricalociety@gmail.com, www.elcerritohistoricalsociety.org

'How Did I End Up Here?'

Gerald Martin and family helped integrate El Cerrito

By Dave Weinstein

Since his South Berkeley boyhood in the '30s and '40s, Gerald Martin has been mentored by the man who would go on to author California's historic Fair Housing Act, sailed with the Merchant Marine during World War II, and served for years in the National Guard,

He administered a federally funded training program for emergency personnel, and ultimately held top administrative roles in Washington, D.C. with such agencies as FEMA, the Selective Service, and the VA.

And Jerry and his family were among a wave of Black people who established lives in El Cerrito, often despite opposition from neighbors and discouragement from financial institutions. Martin and his wife went on to become community leaders.

Yet Martin never completed a college degree. At times he would sit in his office in the nation's capitol, think back to his boyhood in Berkeley's largely poor and largely Black South Berkeley, a mile from a university he never dreamed of attending, and wonder: "How did I end up here?"

Jerry Martin's story says a lot about Black lives during the 20th and



Jerry Martin at his desk, in his spacious home in the El Cerrito Hills. Jazz plays in the background much of the time. Photo by Dave Weinstein

21st century, both in the United States and in El Cerrito.

And, as Martin, 94, a respected elder in El Cerrito's proud Black community, revealed during a series of oral historical interviews for the El Cerrito Historical Society, some of the most trying episodes of racial discrimination he and his family ever faced occurred right here in our city.

The way in which Jerry, his late wife Leona, and their three children, dealt with what life threw them, and the way Jerry rose to prominence, both in the federal bureaucracy and in El Cerrito, as a founding member and later leader of the El Cerrito branch of the NAACP, show the strength that is needed in a society where rules, customs and attitudes often conspire against Black people.

As Martin describes his childhood, growing up in Berkeley's one Black neighborhood, "between Shattuck Avenue and the Bay, and University Avenue," housing discrimination was so rampant it was easy to accept as, well, just the way things are.

Sailing the Pacific with the Merchant Marines, which he joined at age 16, he understood the restrictions against Blacks.

"The cook and stewards (union) were open to Black (people). You could go into the engine department, and that was it," Martin said. The other trades were closed to Black people, and he never sailed on a ship with a Black officer. He resented this discrimination, he said, "slightly."

"I guess if you are discriminated against long enough you get accustomed to accepting, you know. 'You can't do that.' OK. And it's not like you're going to revolt, or go to some agency and tell them you're being discriminated against. You just accepted it."

It was a few years later, 1952, that the reality of discrimination really hit home. Jerry and Leona, known as "Doll," were looking to rent in Berkeley.

"The woman told us, 'Much as I'd like to, I can't rent to you, because you're Negroes.' It was really my first exposure to housing discrimination."

"It was the start of me recognizing."

The Martins went on to own several houses in Berkeley, but as the family grew they needed something larger. So, as many families were doing in the late 1950s, they looked to El Cerrito, whose once empty hills were sprouting ranch-style and mid-century modern homes.

"Knowing we couldn't buy in Berkeley we decided, let's build something and let's move north," Martin recalled.

This was several years before passage of the Rumford Fair Housing Act, authored by Assemblyman William Byron Rumford, who had been Martin's longtime boss at

Rumford's Pharmacy, where Martin worked from an early age.

"We had a realtor, and she was white," Martin said, meaning Arlene Slaughter, "but she was married to a Black man. She had the technique of going and finding properties in El Cerrito, bypassing Albany naturally because it was too difficult. She found this lot up here. In those days you could buy a lot up here for 35 hundred dollars, which we did."

But that wasn't the end of it.

"To say we had difficulties is minimizing the statement," Martin said. "There were people on the block who were very much against Blacks buying. Before we could even get a Cal Vet loan and get the house started we got two offers from people trying to buy us out before we could start building."

Martin could qualify for a Cal Vet loan – but the banks would not cooperate. "Getting through that process as an African American was difficult enough, because you would always run into someone who was throwing a barrier of sorts," Martin said.

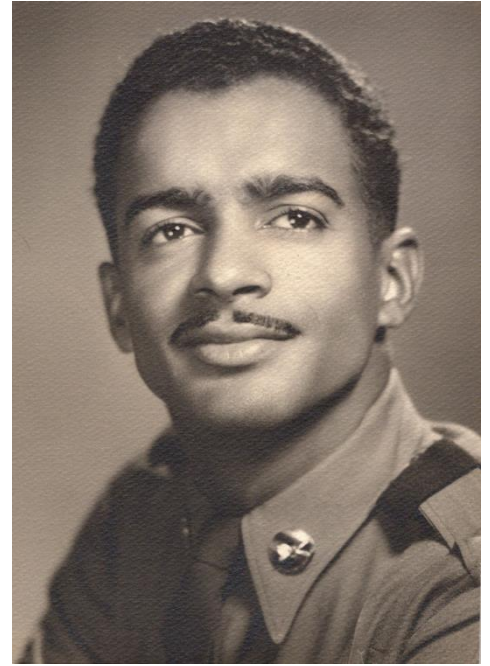
Some of the Martins' new neighbors were welcoming, but not all.

"We couldn't even break ground here before the lady next door came out and subjected us to, 'show me the building permits,' and etcetera and so forth. There were a lot of little innuendos and incidents like that," Martin said.

Years later, one of the neighbors who'd tried to keep the Martins from moving in tried to befriend Jerry while they were engaged in a PTA fundraiser. But the former foe never outright apologized.

"Not directly," Martin said. "We had some conversations later on when he kind of said, well you know I really didn't mean it. You know. But I could tell by his presentation and his tone that he was trying to say, 'I did it but I'm sorry.' But he wouldn't say that, you know."

Jerry and Doll raised three children, a daughter from Jerry's first,



Gerald Martin in uniform, ca. 1950. El Cerrito Historical Society/courtesy of Gerald Martin

brief, marriage, and two sons. The children too faced racism. Michael Martin, who took part in one of the Gerald Martin interviews, described being beaten up by a boy who called Michael "Blackie." Michael said his mother complained to the school, to some effect.

Both Jerry and Leona got involved with the schools, including serving as co-presidents of El Cerrito High's PTA in the early 1970s. Jerry, who said Leona was more involved in day-to-day school issues than he was, said, "We had a board that was just super people, getting involved in a lot of things, racially and otherwise. They developed some preliminary classes for kids to take the SATs, stuff like that."

In 1967 Jerry and Leona became original members of El Cerrito's NAACP branch. Martin is the only surviving original member.

"The guy who was the ramrod in that, who did all of the work, he knocked on doors of all the African-Americans and the whites also, to form, to join, his name was A.J. Radford," Martin said. He added about Alfred Radford: "He was a teacher over in South City, South San



Leona and Jerry Martin – Oakland Military Institute – 2001-2003. . El Cerrito Historical Society/courtesy of Gerald Martin

Francisco. He lived in El Cerrito. He was a real go-getter.”

“We joined of course, the NAACP, and we weren’t very active. We were young, (with) two kids, three kids,” Martin said.

“I didn’t really become active until we came home in the late ‘70s, or ‘80s. They called me up and said they were having a meeting and wanted to make sure I was there. They wanted to recruit a president. They asked me.”

Martin started as treasurer and worked his way up to the top slot, which he held for several terms in the early 1990s, and again in recent years. The local chapter functions as a branch of the national NAACP, Martin said, and took on local issues

as they arose, sometimes issues dealing with the schools.

It was during Martin’s tenure on the board that St. Peter’s C.M.E Church, our city’s only primarily Black church, and the NAACP founded the city’s Martin Luther King Jr. Parade. The City Council at the time refused to honor King, so the Black community took it on.

“Actually when I was president, maybe the school, a school administrator or one of the officials at school, you would have a problem, we would meet with him and try to resolve that. There wasn’t a lot of that.”

“Generally I would say we resolved a lot of problems that could have become bigger problems, major problems,” Martin said. Martin has

continued to be involved with the NAACP, serving on the board as recently as two years ago.

Jerry and his two sisters were raised in a series of family homes. His mother, who worked as a domestic once Jerry was older, and his father, an accomplished dry cleaner with his own business, divorced when their son was 3. His mom remarried and Jerry’s stepfather was a cook on the Southern Pacific.

“I can remember, the Depression, being hungry,” Jerry said. “We lived on Russell. I can remember walking with my stepfather to pick up relief food, and how hungry I was, and how tired I was, walking all that way. And they gave you fruit, staple stuff. It got us through.”

Jerry started as a bike delivery boy at what would later become Rumford’s Pharmacy when he was a young teen. It was owned by a white woman, and Rumford moonlighted nights at the pharmacy.

Once Rumford took over the pharmacy improved, Martin said. “I waited on people, the register. Helped stock the stuff and helped order it.”

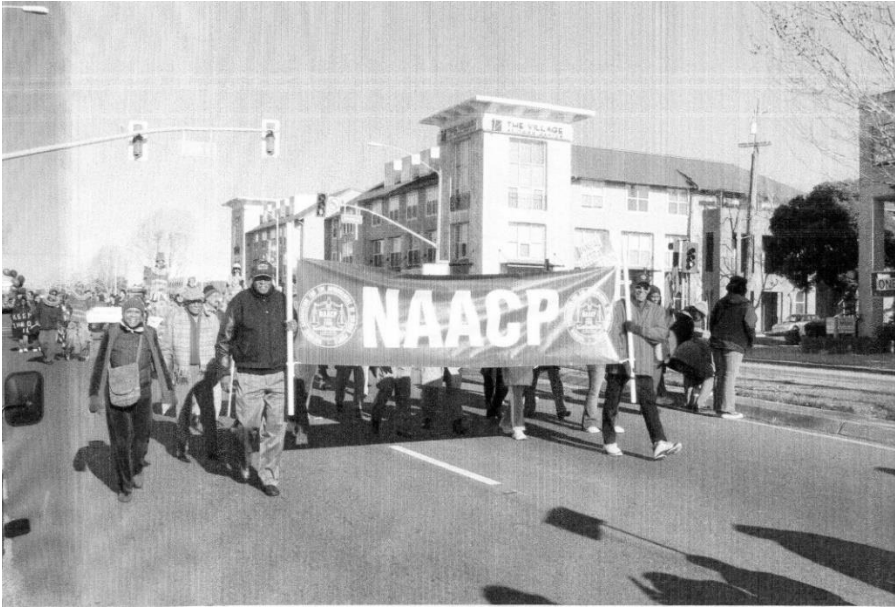
Rumford (1908-1986), who would be elected to the state assembly in 1948, turned the pharmacy into a gathering spot for civil rights leaders and future civil rights leaders and politicians.

“I was too young for that, but he had a group that came down. The group was headed up by a guy named D.G. Gibson, a pillar in the community. He was always dressed in a suit,” Martin recalled.

Even during his early adulthood, after serving at sea, then in Army uniform during the Korean War, when he served at Fort Lewis, Washington, Jerry continued to work as needed for Rumford. For a time Jerry considered a career in pharmacy.

“I was inspired by not so much the work he was doing, but the person. He was like a father,” Martin said.

To make a buck as a boy Jerry also sold newspapers on Sundays, on a corner not far from the pharmacy. As a teen and older, he also worked at



An El Cerrito Martin Luther King Jr. march. Jerry is second from left. El Cerrito Historical Society/courtesy of Gerald Martin

his father's dry cleaning business. When Jerry hit 18 or so his dad helped him buy his first car, a 1940 Ford.

Jerry recalled some good times from his boyhood.

"We had a club and we called it the Hornets, and we rode our bikes. There was a place in Oakland at 15th and San Pablo that used to make these jackets, silk, satin, shiny stuff, nice line of athletic jackets, with the name, of your school. We had this club (shirt), it had a big H for Hornets and a little hornet in there. It cost 5, 6 bucks to do that."

It was as a young man that Jerry developed his love for jazz. "Cab Calloway, Count Basie, Lionel Hampton, they would come. During the war they'd come and play at Sweet's Ballroom in Oakland," he recalled. "They would play for the white people on Sunday and the Black people on Monday."

Martin's climb up the career path began with his military service, remaining with the National Guard after Korea. He took classes on the G.I. Bill at Contra Costa College, and later at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo. "I have about three years on a BA," he said.

But that didn't stop him. "Everything that I did, occupational wise, was because of someone I was

associated with who felt I had some talent, something to offer," he said. All his jobs were for the government.

If you spend time with Jerry you can imagine why he was successful. He's a man who talks in quiet tones, thoughtful, direct, easygoing; a modest man, but not too modest. "I guess my disposition has always been rather mild. I learned early on, don't get too excited about too many things. First place, don't try to get into any conflicts."

"I've never really been out of a job," he said. "I've always been offered a job, left a job to go to a better job. I guess I've just been able to meet the right people at the right time with the right attitude and have them say, that's who we need, let's go with him."

It was an officer who served above Martin with the National Guard who hired him to work in administration for Richmond's Manpower program in the mid 1960s, a Great Society jobs program.

Three years later another Guard connection encouraged Martin to apply to be chief administrator for the Guard's new California Specialized Training Institute in San Luis Obispo, which would train city, county officials and police, fire

administrators, in disaster training and controlling civil disturbances.

Martin got the job, which came with an appealing paycheck. "And I saw the applications after I got the job. People there were far exceeding me academically, my credentials."

"I could tell maybe having an African-American on staff at a specialized training institute would be a plus, as opposed to a minus, as we were dealing with law enforcement and federal government. Maybe that was it," Martin said. "I said, if that's it, that's OK with me."

Besides being administrator, Martin taught classes at the institute.

"You escalate to a huge building with all the ramifications of a functioning institute, with 18 or 20 employees," he recalled. "It was one of the great experiences of my life. I thought maybe that was the end of my escalation, you know, but no, that wasn't it."

Next up, the LA-area city of Compton. "I got a job offer from the city of Compton to come down as the assistant city manager. The city manager came to one of the courses and apparently was impressed with my presentation, or whatever," Martin said.

"I had oversight for two or three departments. I think the parks department, and two other departments. And it was a pretty good job. I mean, you get a car."

By this time Martin was contemplating a career in city administration, but Ed Meese intervened. Meese, who'd been Governor Ronald Reagan's chief of staff and was now helping new president Reagan staff up in D.C., wanted the head of the San Luis Obispo Institute to run FEMA –and wanted Martin to be FEMA's executive administrator.

"I had oversight for about six or seven smaller departments," Martin said.

"Well, I always ended up having oversight over the equal opportunity part, so I could have some say in selection, some say in policy, which I



In 2006 Jerry, wife Leona second from right, Cynthia Gray of El Cerrito, and Dick Gregory, at the NAACP convention in Washington. El Cerrito Historical Society/courtesy of Gerald Martin

felt needed to be changed, in a lot of things,” he said. “I don’t think I did anything major, but I made sure that minorities got a good slice of the pie and since I had oversight for the Equal Opportunity Office, I always made sure about what was going on, and the number of complaints they were getting or whatever.”

Martin and his wife, who were Democrats, managed to flourish in a world that was rock ribbed Republican. His boss at San Luis Obispo and FEMA, for example, won infamy for a paper he’d written suggesting locking up “20 million Negroes” to prevent race riots.

Yet he and Martin were friends. “He was probably just the opposite of being a racist,” Martin said.

When this gentleman was canned from FEMA following a scandal (“Morality among the supply-siders.” one headline read. “More than 100 Reagan officials have faced allegations of questionable activities),” Martin moved on to top roles with the Selective Service and later the Veterans Administration

Martin said he and his wife sometimes felt like they were living “in the enemy’s camp.” Still, they got along well. Leona was a White House volunteer and Martin has photos of

the two of them at a White House lawn party with Nancy Reagan.

“So my work at FEMA and at VA was very meaningful, OK? I felt like I was making a contribution, particularly when I moved to the Veterans Administration, which I enjoyed,” he said.

“It’s a journey that I now find very interesting as I reflect on some of the things. How did I go from Sacramento (street) and Ashby (avenue, in Berkeley) to Washington D.C., to being the number three guy at a major agency in the federal government? And how did I get there? I often sat at my desk in D.C., ‘How in the hell did I end up here?’

“And then I look back on what a guy told me, one of my friends I worked for over the years. He said he was doing a background check on me. And the investigator said, you know I never really did a background on a guy that had so many plusses. He said, from your Aunt Bea, who would be my mother’s sister, who thought I walked on water, through all the people you worked for, I didn’t get one negative comment.

“Well, thank you.”

We thank Michael Martin for his editing and other contributions to this. The complete oral history with Gerald

Martin can be found on the historical society’s website.

Dave Weinstein is an East Bay journalist and president of the historical society

Artist Kyungmi Shin Taps Into El Cerrito History for New Del Norte BART Murals

By Jon Bashor

Although Kyungmi Shin lived in El Cerrito for several years in the 1990s, she spent most of her time in classes at UC Berkeley or in her Point Richmond studio as she worked to earn her master’s of fine arts in 1995. Living in a small duplex near the El Cerrito Plaza BART station was a convenient place to crash, she said.

More than 20 years later, she returned to El Cerrito and dug deep into the area’s history and culture after being commissioned to create two large murals for the renovated El Cerrito Del Norte BART Station. The murals, which present two perspectives of the city, were installed and unveiled last year.

Hanging in the large atrium connecting the fare gates at the ends of the station, each mural is eight feet tall and 28 feet long and consists of thousands of custom made ceramic tiles in shades of green, blue and gray and assembled as mosaics. On the east wall hangs “hillside,” while the opposite wall displays “bayside.” The murals were commissioned through BART’s Arts Program as part of the station modernization effort.



Kyungmi Shin's mural Bayside, depicts cityscapes in porcelain tiles. Image and photos courtesy of Kyungmi Shin of Shin Gray Studio

"When I do research for a project, I try to go deep into the history so I can get an understanding of the historical and current contexts," said Shin from her Los Angeles studio. "I also read some historical society newsletters and there were good in-depth articles in them."

there was a big tree blocking my view -- I almost risked my life for that!"

During her research, the artist consulted with leaders of the El Cerrito Historical Society and made use of the society's research collection and images.

Shin researched books and other

Shin also looked through archives of old photos of early houses and other structures, including the first known house built in what became the city and a number of current homes in the area around the station. "I'm hoping some people might recognize their own houses," she said.

For "bayside," she created a design with a large tree and bird nest framing the left side, the bay and beyond in the center, and a Native American hut and a wood-frame house on the right. In the foreground, as a fainter background is an abstract view of the city and shoreline.

"Hillside" features images of 31 structures laid across the hills of El Cerrito, with the sky above and another lighter map of the city's streets in the foreground. Shin said she went with the theme of houses to reflect El Cerrito's motto as the "City of Homes."

She chose the color palette to complement another mural in the station, a mosaic created years ago by artist Alfonso Pardiñas. "I wanted to reference his work and keep the pieces harmonious," she explained.

Putting it all together

Once she received the commission to create the murals, she realized that given the scale of the work, she would likely need to hire a fabricator to assemble the panels, each four feet wide and eight feet tall. But with an outside consultant at the



Kyungmi Shin painting the individual porcelain tiles. Image and photos courtesy of Kyungmi Shin of Shin Gray Studio

She said it was nice to visit her old neighborhood, and as she drove around she discovered much more about the area than she knew as a student.

"This time I had the opportunity to really explore El Cerrito, the history, geography and landscape to get different perspectives," Shin said. "One of the books on El Cerrito history mentioned that there was a big rock in the hills with the best view. I climbed it and when I got to the top

materials from the library and people she met. Shin learned about the Native Americans, the Spanish, San Pablo Avenue as both a thoroughfare and a hotbed of nightlife, racing and a large community of Japanese florists.

"In the description by the early Spanish settlers, there was an abundance of nature, so many different kinds of birds and fish in the El Cerrito area," she said. "It was such a lush landscape."



Kyungmi Shin's mural Hillside, depicts cityscapes in porcelain tiles. Image and photos courtesy of Kyungmi Shin of Shin Gray Studio

beginning stage of the commissioning, at BART, there was some confusion when a consultant misunderstood the project budget and said that the BART guideline specified that the artist would fabricate the artwork, Shin said.

Although she had done some work in ceramics and had created some murals, Shin did not consider herself a ceramic artist and hadn't done a mural of this size. However, she decided that this was an opportunity to fabricate an artwork of this scale at her studio, and she made plans to assemble the panels at her studio, bringing in the necessary assistance to help with the complex project. Later she learned that the BART regulation indeed allowed hiring an outside fabricator, but decided to go ahead as planned.

"I decided to trust my abilities to figure things out and to make it work," Shin said. "It was exciting, intense and challenging and I learned so much about fabrication at this scale. Three years of my life were completely consumed by this project."

In looking at the "bayside" mural, San Francisco is small and in the distance. The Golden Gate Bridge, often prominent in images of the bay, is a small red-orange ornament low on the horizon in the center of the mural.

"This artwork is El Cerrito-centric, about living in El Cerrito," she said. "It's not about San Francisco, which is just part of the view. In this mural, the star is El Cerrito. I wanted to create an artwork with El Cerrito at the center."

Shin believes the enlarged Del Norte station is a fitting venue for the

murals, as it is now probably the largest civic structure in the city.

Not her first transit project

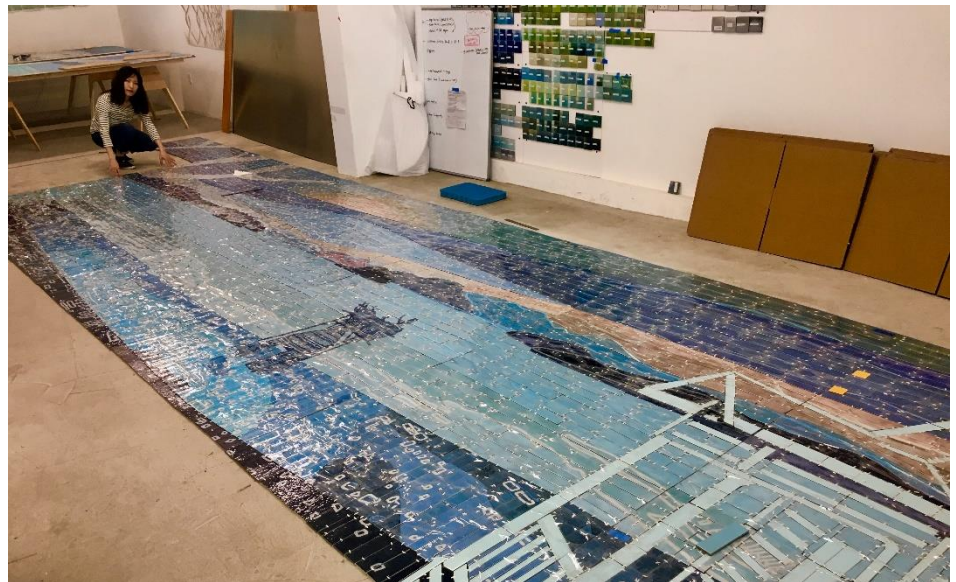
As a precursor to her El Cerrito work, Shin was commissioned to create a mural showing the Edgewater neighborhood around the Granville station on the Chicago Transit Authority's Red Line, which runs north-south through the city. In this piece, she created a collage of brightly colored buildings criss-crossed by arcing bands of color, representing both Chicago's architecture and nickname as "The Windy City."

Up next for her is a show that

historical forces behind her father's history.

"I find that studying history deeply is illuminating in learning about the present conditions, and the historical connections that led to the present moment are often hidden," Shin said, "I am trying to make these visible by layering those connections on one another in my artwork."

Note: More information about the project and a photo timeline of the mural design and construction can be found at www.shingraystudio.com/el-cerrito-bart.



Mural in progress, laying out the porcelain tiles. Image and photos courtesy of Kyungmi Shin of Shin Gray Studio

opened Nov. 20 in Various Small Fires, an art gallery in Hollywood. It grew out of an earlier exhibition at the Orange County Museum for which Shin tapped her interest in history to examine and portray part of her own life story as part of a larger arc, the

Jon Bashor is a former newspaper reporter for several East Bay daily papers and a science writer-editor for Lawrence Livermore and Lawrence Berkeley national laboratories and UC Berkeley.

El Cerrito's Recycling Celebrates 50 Years

On August 5, 1972, recycling came alive in El Cerrito with the opening of the E.C.ology drop-off. Thirty-three people brought in bottles and cans on the first day of operation. The center was open the first and third Saturday mornings of the month.

El Cerrito's recycling center wasn't the first west of the Rockies, or the first in California. It wasn't even the first in El Cerrito. (El Cerrito's Berkeley Co-op grocery had a small center.)

But the El Cerrito Recycling Center, which opened in the former Brown & Hutchinson Quarry, where it still exists, made history as one of the longest lived and most innovative municipally owned recycling centers in the country.



Crushing cans – El Cerrito Historical Society

Throughout 2022 the Historical Society and the city's Environmental Quality Committee will acknowledge the center's historic importance, and its value to people today, with an event on the early evening of Friday, August 5, and in other ways.

The society and the EQC also hope to honor the late Joel Witherell, who did more to ensure the recycling center's continuance and growth than any other individual. He served as the city's community services director from 1973 to 1993.

Witherell helped establish a funding mechanism for the center, and helped make center a place that was responsive to its users, mostly residents of El Cerrito.

He helped develop a variety of programs ranging from the early days of buy back, when people sold



Joel Witherell – El Cerrito Historical Society/West County Times

materials to the center, to the development of curbside collection, expanding the range of materials that could be collected, and adding programs for re-use of materials and for education.

E.C.ology began as a program run by volunteers, who convinced the City Council to try out recycling – which was rare at the time – as a pilot program. The group couldn't afford a glass crusher – so one of the volunteers built one.

From the start, volunteers knew that for recycling to grow it needed to be run by the city. Volunteers would never be able to run a full-time

dropoff center, let alone a curbside collection.

When Witherell applied in 1972 to be the city's park and recreation director, recycling came up in the interview. "He really embraced the recycling center," his interviewer and former councilman Gregg Cook recalled.



Manhandling glass – El Cerrito Historical Society

-- Adapted from 'Where Recycling is a Pleasure,' a history of the recycling center by Dave Weinstein.

Read more:

<http://elcerritohistoricalsociety.org/whererecycling.pdf>



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The Forge. Edited by John Falconer and Dave Weinstein. Our goal is to publish the Forge quarterly. It is sent to all members of the society. It takes its name from the forge of blacksmith Wilhelm Rust, an early settler and one of the founders of our city. The society also publishes Sparks, an online newsletter. monthlv.