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Pastime Hardware got its start as a tavern

By Dave Weinstein

Hardworking they were, the Pryde Boys, Dick and Buster. Dick, a plumber, and Buster, an electrician, found well paying jobs while still teenagers during the dark days of the Depression working for Pullman Co., which manufactured railway sleeping cars in Richmond.

But it wasn't enough. Within a few years, for a time with partner Lloyd Christiansen, the brothers were running a business named Pastime.

Nearing a century later, Pastime is still prospering as a family-owned firm. It is, after Sunset View Cemetery, probably El Cerrito's oldest business. Pastime has undergone remarkable changes, but it has remained true to its original goal: to support the family both financially and as a family.

Why did Donald H. Pryde (known as "Dick," 1907-2003) and Norman G. Pryde (known as "Buster," 1906-1994) start Pastime?

"Well, they wanted to be their own boss, for one thing," says David Pryde, 84, Buster's son., "and they wanted to get ahead. And when you work for somebody else, it's hard, you know?"

David, who sat with the El Cerrito Historical Society for an interview, has been Pastime's CEO since the late 1980s.



David Pryde stands in front of Pastime Hardware circa 1950. He'd been working there since age 8. Photo courtesy of David Pryde.

Pastime did not begin as a place that sold saws, lawnmowers, garden furniture, and dish drainers.

Instead, the original Pastime opened as a café and then a bar, much in the spirit of El Cerrito in the '30s, a wide open town drenched in neon, with gambling joints, bordellos, jazz halls, and prize fights. Some forms of gambling were legal, many were not. Both took place, facing regular police raids and regular police payoffs.

The site was historic even then. It is on or very close to the site where Wilhelm Rust opened a hardware business and forge before the turn of

the 20th century, one of the original businesses in the area. It had a post office, so the southern portion of what would later become El Cerrito was called "Rust."

Pastime was a simple place, no tuxedos, no doorman, no illuminated stage.

"This wasn't a big operation. The Kona Club, and then there was one across the street, Sally Rand's, I think it was. Those were the wild places, you know," David says.



Robert Pryde arranges stock in Pastime's sporting goods section, mid 1950s. Photo courtesy of David Pryde.

About Pastime he says, "Well, they had a tavern, they had food and they had gambling. They didn't have many customers back then," he says. "They might get 20 or 30 customers a day, because there weren't many people around in those days, you know?"

A February 1934 ad in the El Cerrito Journal for Pastime Lunch and Billiard Parlor proclaimed it a place "where good fellows get together for lunch and pleasure."

Just a year later, following a remodeling that doubled its size, the Journal was filled with ads congratulating Pastime. Fighter Max Baer, a friend of Lloyd's was at the grand reopening "with his little brother, Buddy."

"It made a living," David says of the tavern. "But what made the money were the slot machines at the end."

David says his uncle Dick needed money for expansion and the banks said no. So, a regular customer, Walter Baxter Sr., who ran Sunset View, said "Here's \$5,000. Pay me back when you can."

"You know, he paid them back in two years just from those four slot machines. That's the only thing that really gave him any volume."

El Cerrito was a small town then and people knew each other, which helped in many ways, including avoiding periodic raids that often hauled away slots and craps tables — before returning them. "Dick Pryde's

father-in-law was a sheriff in town," David says, "so he warned them every time anything was coming out during the early '40s, late '30s."

From near the start Pastime was a blended business. It began with Dick and Lloyd opening a café and bar (located at the front of the current Pastime store, near the cash registers). Buster came in a few years thereafter to open a sporting good shop, and later added hardware.

Dick and Buster Pryde became sole owners in 1956 when Lloyd died.

The name 'Pastime' was not uncommon at the time, David says. "I mean, there were others, you know. You could go up to Truckee, there's a Pastime club there."

The brothers did other work too. Buster "worked for El Cerrito Electric in the late '30s" as a foreman, and "was an electrician at the racetrack." (El Cerrito Kennel Club, a greyhound track).

Dick and Buster, who had grown up with their family in Oakland's Fruitvale district, had learned their trades at night school



A liquor store, hotel and another commercial structure are seen alongside Pastime in the late 1950s. Some were demolished, others incorporated into Pastime as the business expanded. Some were demolished to make way for an extension of Fairmount Avenue, which at the time did not go through to Carlson Boulevard. Photo courtesy of David Pryde.



Dick Pryde shows a group of visiting European retailers how Pastime functions. Photo courtesy of David Pryde.

During World War II, David says, “They worked the (Kaiser) shipyards, and they had the business going at the same time. So they were working a lot of hours.”

Buster and his wife Frances (1911-2001) were raising two boys, David, born 1938, and Donald (1933-2013) in a small home on Santa Clara Avenue, in Richmond Annex, a few minutes’ walk to the tavern, and young David would go there often.

“We had a pool hall. I used to sleep on the table,” David recalls. “My dad, I know, they slept overnight sometimes. With their card games here, they would go for three and four days. And my dad and uncle would sleep there for three or four hours. One would be the dealer while the other one was sleeping. So my dad and uncle spent a lot of time here in the building.”

“I started working here in ‘46,” David says. “I was eight years old. And I cleaned spittoons, did the bathrooms. All types of dirty work, mopped the floors and all that stuff. So that’s how we got started (learning to work hard), the right way, you know?”

Four years later, the family’s hard work was clearly paying off. They

moved from Santa Clara to an impressive Storybook-style house with a swooping roof at 522 Carmel Avenue in Albany, across from Albany High.

“My dad and uncle could drink anybody under the table, but they

weren’t raucous or anything. My dad was a good person,” David says. “They were both tough guys. I mean, they’ve had their problems, threw drunks out of the place and stuff like that.

“But my dad and uncle were just nice people. My uncle would always, if a guy had trouble, give him money. You know, it was the Depression. And never even ask for it back.”

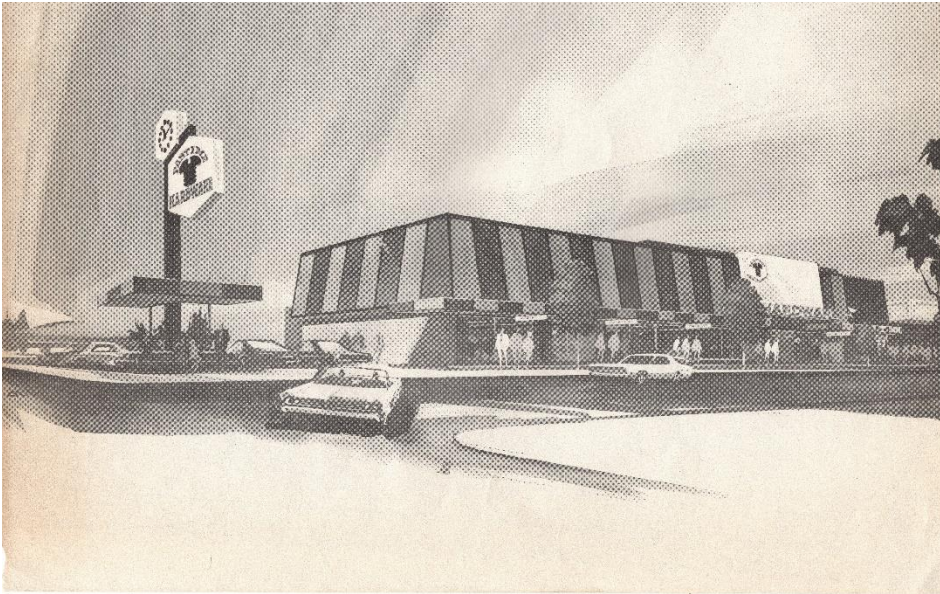
A staph infection plagued Buster for much of his life, David says.

“My dad had 15 operations on one leg between the teens, up till to ‘46,” when penicillin treatment finally succeeded, David says. “My dad lived to 88 ... He was a tough bird.”

There were two other Pryde brothers alongside Dick and Buster. For a time Jack Pryde (1910-1978) was partners with Walt Gatto in the It Club across the street from Pastime, a popular entertainment venue that hosted top acts. “But my uncle was a type, he was a real estate guy who didn’t want to sit in a bar all the time,” David says. For years Jack ran a real estate office in town.



Pastime as it appeared in 1968, before the major remodeling. Photo courtesy of David Pryde.



A rendering by architect Leonard Rimov & Associates shows Pastime as it would be remodeled in 1970. Photo courtesy of David Pryde.

Jack briefly ran a gas station (which can still be seen, boarded up, on San Pablo Avenue at Lincoln Avenue). George Pryde (1916-2013) took over the station when he returned from college and ran it until 1995.

Back at Pastime, David recalls, the sporting goods side of the business was proving disappointing.

"We had sporting goods, we had fishing tackle and all types of hunting weapons, you know, pistols, shotguns, rifles and everything like that. But that only went for so many years because hunting season is a very limited amount of time, and a guy comes in and buys a hundred dollar gun, which would be two or three thousand now.

"And he put it on time. but when hunting season was over, he wouldn't pay. So my dad said, Let's go into hardware. And that's when, the late '40s they drifted into hardware, even though they kept the bar." They also kept selling sporting goods for a time.

1946, about the time David began working at Pastime, was a turning point in the history of El Cerrito. Reformers calling themselves the Good Government League recalled city council members who had made draw poker legal and turned their eyes away from illegal slots.

The new good government council banned poker and cracked

down on other forms of gambling and vice.

Pastime tavern was now Pastime Hardware, with a small tavern that was more of a sideshow. "We kept to sporting goods for a while, but we went to hardware at the same time, so we kicked out all the card tables," David says.

"I don't know why they kept the bar," he says, "but it was a testament to my uncle because that's how he started (the business)."

"I tried to get them to close it," David recalls. "I was in college in '60 and I tried to get them to close it down then. They didn't listen to me. It didn't make any money. It was just breaking even, that's all." The bar finally closed in 1972.

As the first generation of Pryde brothers aged, the sons played a larger role in Pastime, eventually taking over. Where once there had been two Prydes in charge, now there were four: David and Donald, sons of Buster, and Robert and Richard, sons of Dick.

Shoppers at Pastime today may notice that floors of different sections are at different levels, walls are sometimes angled. That's because Pastime, with about 40,000 square feet of selling and storage space downstairs and about 10,000 square feet of storage and office upstairs, is a conglomeration of several buildings that were pasted together over time,



Dick Pryde, El Cerrito builder Marvin Collins, and architect Leonard Rimov place a time capsule in the ground during a ceremony at the newly remodeled store. Photo courtesy of David Pryde.



The current Pastime management includes Dan Pryde, Susan Estrada, daughter of Richard Pryde, Jeffrey Pryde and David Pryde. Photo by Dave Weinstein

some older existing structures, some built fresh., starting in the late 1940s.

“So we started to go into hardware and then that’s when we started thinking, Well, we need more room,” David says. Pastime acquired nearby buildings and other sites for expansion.

“There’s probably about four or five pieces of property here, because Villa’s market used to be here,” he says.

“If you go into the opening of the store, if you go to the left, there’s a hallway that goes upstairs, about 30 steps up there. The union for Richmond’s Ford assembly plant used to rent that and have their union meetings there for years.” David says that section, built in 1927, is the oldest structure in the complex. He adds: “It was McDermott’s meat market grocery store for years.”

The late Richard Pryde (1943-2014), David’s cousin and the son of Dick Pryde, gave a private tour of the store in 2010, revealing an upstairs room with early 20th century style moldings that had served as a meeting and dancehall. There was a dental office in an adjacent upstairs building, Richard said, and a dry cleaners downstairs.

In 1970 the Prydes brought in Berkeley architect Leon Rimov &

Associates to remodel the store. The result is the Pastime we see today, with walls of glass on the first story and a mansard-like roof obscuring the second story, hiding any evidence of the sometimes historic buildings that make up the structure.

In 1998 the section to the north, that had once been a grocery and later Travallini’s Furniture, was incorporated into Pastime as well.

David attributes Pastime’s growth over the years and its success to hard work (he’s a big one on hard work), and to being “more progressive. We joined a co-operative for buying.”

This was Ace hardware, a Midwest cooperative that had yet to move to the West Coast. “So my cousin (Robert Pryde) and I flew back to Chicago,” David says. “We had a group of 30 (from other California hardware stores), and we flew back there saying that we wanted to have them come out this way.”

What was the benefit of allying with Ace?

“Well, you get to buy much cheaper. We eliminated the middleman. We used to buy from wholesalers, maybe 10 or 15 wholesalers, where they’ve had 10 or 15 percent of their margin. Well, now, we get that margin. So that made it profitable for us, and if we didn’t have

that, we wouldn’t make it,” David says.

And bear in mind, Ace is not a chain. Ace does not own Pastime. “No, we own it,” David says. Ace is owned by its member stores.

Shoppers at Pastime, wondering where to find a particular item, or with questions on how to use it, grab a number and wait for assistance. It’s a feature most people seem to like, and “the numbers system,” as David calls it, was devised in the 1960s by his cousin Richard Pryde.

“The youngest one, he came up with the best idea,” David says.

Pastime has always focused on homeowners, handymen and small contractors, not large builders.

“We didn’t do the big contracts,” David says. “You know what happens? They want to put it on the cuff. They want you to buy this and that, and you get stuck with this. You get stuck with that.”

Nor did the Prydes ever open other stores.

“We have enough right here to handle ourselves. We didn’t want to expand to more stores and everything. We wanted just enough for the four of us.

“There were four sons, two on each side. We both worked. We had four weeks. Every fourth week, I’d get a week off, every fourth week, my brother would get a week and my two cousins. So we worked it so we didn’t overwork ourselves, but we still could make a good living.”

“And we didn’t want to open other stores because then we’d have to work harder and harder and harder. And we have enough here, if we stuck to it, and we have stuff for our kids to do if they want to work. We made a good living here and we had time for a family. We weren’t like trying to be millionaires”

Is it hard to run a business with family, David?

“It wasn’t anything major, but it was abrasive at times. But when you have four different personalities and four different wives, you’re going to have that, you know?”

Today David Pryde remains CEO of Pastime, serving alongside several third generation Prydes. David's son Jeffrey is manager, as are Dan Pryde, the son of Donald Pryde, and Susan Estrada, the daughter of Richard Pryde.

David, who studied "accounting, and girls," at UC Berkeley, played basketball on the Bears team that, the very next year won an NCAA national championship. "And I couldn't play," he says with a laugh. "I mean, I could make the team, but that was it."

He's been a sportsman, hunting and fishing since childhood, fishing at Point Isabel (before it was reshaped by grading and expanded with bay fill), and learned to make arrows from his uncle George, who "had a hunting club up in the mountains. We used to go there every summer and hunt."

David's never been much of a gambler. His dad had advised against it.

When asked what makes him proud, both answers revolve around family and the family business.

"That we did it, that we held on here," he answers. "How many businesses can last as long? It's been in business almost 100 years."

"I'm proud of our parents. They started this. I'm getting teary eyed," he says, near the end of our interview.

"They had foresight, but they weren't stupid about it. They wanted you to have a good time and still make a good living and don't kill yourself. But still you've got to work, you know? And that's the main thing, we've all of us stayed together. We butted heads. We don't think alike, but we've gotten along."

Note: A shorter version of this history has run in the El Cerrito Chamber of Commerce's Byline publication.

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

Lori Dair led the early effort to preserve the Cerrito Theater

By Dave Weinstein

Over the past decade and a half, the Cerrito Theater – operated at Rialto Cinemas Cerrito – has become both a landmark and something both a bit more and a bit less: an accepted fact of life.

It's a place to catch a movie while enjoying pizza, salad and a brew. It's the anchor on what city officials call "the theater block," where, economic planners have said, its presence led to new restaurants and a brew pub.

It's easy to forget that 20 years ago the 1937, Art Deco theater was nothing but a defunct furniture warehouse and the likelihood of it ever becoming a theater again seemed remote.

It didn't even seem likely to me, when I went cap in hand to Art Schroeder, president of the El Cerrito Historical Society, to ask if the group

would support me in efforts to preserve the historic 1937 building.

The answer was yes, but the going was slow in the last months of 2001, as I tried to make a case with city officials and the building's new owner. At one point the owner of the theater said he was about to demolish the interior.

Did I think the historic Anthony Heinsbergen studio murals and art glass were worth saving? Come and get them, he said.

The Chamber of Commerce strongly opposed plans to save the theater. So did some nearby businesses.

Then I got a call from Lori Dair.

Lori, who passed away June 25 of ALS, played an important role in city affairs in the '90s and early 2000s, first with Sustainable El Cerrito, a group that hoped the ailing El Cerrito Plaza could be rebuilt following New Urbanist principles, and then as one of three founders of Friends of the Cerrito Theater.

Although Lori's leadership of Friends lasted only a couple of years, it came at a crucial time – would the city commit money to save a former movie theater?



Lori Dair beamed during the 75th anniversary of the theater celebration in 2012. Photo by Dave Weinstein

And by becoming involved, Lori immediately turned what was essentially a one-person quest into an organized non-profit group. To a large extent, the membership of Sustainable El Cerrito became the membership of Friends of the Cerrito Theater, although many others joined as well.

Lori's call came on February 15, 2002. Let's meet, she said. She immediately disabused me about city council dynamics. A council member I'd thought we could count on she said "doesn't follow through."

In a February 20 message to everybody Lori knew – a lot of people – she urged them to contact the council asking that the building be restored as a theater under city ownership."Tell them how important this is to you," Lori wrote.

Two days later Lori herself appeared before the council asking the group "to affirm its commitment to the Cerrito Theater."

Even if Speakeasy pulled out, Lori said, the council should proceed with plans for a theater. Friends

chambers; folks were massed outside. Almost everyone stood when they asked who was in favor of preserving the theater."

"Wow it was a great night," Lori wrote to Friends the next day. "The council voted unanimously to keep the theater alive for at least the next 2-3 months."

Next up, she promised, would be an open house at the theater to gauge how strongly people supported saving it, and to show off its murals, other art works and imposing spaces to all.

As I wrote a few years later:

"In May 2002, we had the Open House. The scene was dreamlike. For the first time we had bright floodlights hitting the murals – and for the first time I realized they were painted in silver leaf and glowed.

"Attendance far exceeded anything the fire department had warned us about – and helped convince the council that the theater could build community spirit. By the end of the month the council agreed to buy the theater for half a million dollars."

Lori Dair's involvement with Friends ended towards the end of 2003. She and her husband, Rob MacCoun, had two adopted baby girls, Madeline and Audrey, and Lori was committed to devoting her energies to raising them.

Friends of the Cerrito Theater, under co-chairs Ann Lehman and Dianne Brenner, continued to work hard, raising funds to restore historic elements of the theater, attending council meetings, and much more, as many issues arose.

Nobody involved in the early days of the effort to preserve the Cerrito Theater, which finally opened as a two-screen cinema in 2006, will ever forget Lori. Her memorial was held this August in the theater she loved.



Lori Dair, right, with friends Emily and Ken Duffy thoroughly enjoyed themselves on October 287, 2006 at the grand re-opening of the restored theater. Photo by Dave Weinstein

To build community support, Lori said, "we need an open house at the theater." Two days later with another Sustainable member, Pam Challinor, Friends was officially founded.

As I wrote in my journal then, "Lori will build a base of support using her email contacts and such. Her strength is politics and contacts."

The city was already talking about potentially returning the building to use as a cinema, and was talking to the married couple who were operating the Parkway Speakeasy Theater in Oakland. But the couple were not convinced that operating a theater in El Cerrito made sense for them.

managed to get almost two dozen supporters to that council meeting.

"I believe that within a matter of weeks," Lori told the city council, "we'll have 400 to 500 new 'Friends of the Cerrito Theater,' many of whom are willing to donate money, expertise, time, and energy to this project."

Did we ever get that many members? Maybe, maybe not. But we got a lot.

At a council meeting March 4, when the council was being asked to put up cash to lease the theater for three months to determine a theater operator, my journal records "Too many people to squeeze into

Tour Blake Garden on September 15

Led by Meghan Ray and Kendra Hauser of Blake Garden

Free. Attendance is limited.
Please RSVP!

Blake Garden took shape in the mid-1920s, when Kensington saw its first real development, as a 22-acre estate owned by brothers Anson and Edwin Blake, quarry owners and contractors.

Anson's mansion, Casa Adelante, is today the Blake House, owned by the University of California. The gardens are used by landscape architecture students and feature more than a thousand types of plants.

We will tour the 10.5-acre garden for about 90 minutes, view the mansion from outside, and enjoy light refreshments in the garden after the tour.

Meet at Blake Garden, 70 Rincon Road, Kensington. 2 p.m. Thursday, September 15, 2022

RSVP to Dave Weinstein,
510-524-1737,
davidswinstein@yahoo.com.

The Historical Society seeks real life mementoes

The El Cerrito Historical Society maintains an excellent archive of materials in our Shadi History Room in City Hall. Researchers and members of the general public can peruse this material by appointment, and we are gradually putting much of it online for easier research.

We are always looking for photos, home movies, scrapbooks, memoirs, diaries, records of local businesses, records from local organizations and clubs or churches, and the like, from El Cerrito, Kensington, and nearby neighborhoods.

Menus from restaurants, advertisements for stores, programs from church events, all are of value. And material doesn't have to be "old" to be historic; we are collecting material and photos from the COVID-19 pandemic, for example.

Among our recent acquisitions are: A Fairmont School photo album from 1964-65, donated by Joe Paulino; scrapbooks and a school scarf from the former Del Mar Elementary School, from Sue Duncan; and photo albums and scrapbooks from the Chung Mei Home, an

orphanage for Chinese-American boys, from 1923-1953.

Do you have family or other material that may be of historical interest? It doesn't have to focus on important figures. Everyday life is also important to historians and other researchers.

Recently for example we have had inquiries seeking material about young people in El Cerrito in the 1960s. One of the inquiries came from filmmakers doing a movie about Creedence Clearwater Revival, the band whose members grew up in town.

We had very little to provide.

So take a look through your closet, and let our president know what you find.

davidswinstein@yahoo.com.

Would you prefer to keep the material? That's fine, too. Lend it to us to be scanned.

Please join the Historical Society

Membership, a bargain at \$30 a year, is open to everyone and includes receipt of our printed newsletter, the Forge, 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.

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. monthly.

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