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El Cerrito Barber Shops Provide a Timeless Experience

By Jon Bashor

When Charlie Murray opened the El Cerrito Plaza barber shop in 1959, it joined a handful of similar shops stretching along San Pablo Avenue and at the eastern end of Fairmount Avenue. And while the shops were ostensibly there just for haircuts, they also served as informal gathering places for the men and boys in the neighborhood.

Back then, many guys got their hair cut every two weeks and appointments were largely the province of beauty salons, so traffic was steady. Customers walked into the barber shop, took a seat and waited until the next chair opened up. What set the Plaza shop apart from the others was that it boasted eight chairs and eight barbers to tend to tonsorial tasks, not to mention a stuffed polar bear and stuffed brown bear in glass display cases.

"There were a lot of barber shops on San Pablo Avenue – one on every block practically," recalls Phil Playle, who owns Phil's Barber Shop at the top of Fairmount Avenue.

According to a list of city businesses compiled by the El Cerrito Historical Society, they included the Modern Barber Shop, Chuck's Barber Shop, the Vogue Barbershop (from 1934), the Sanitary Barber Shop with the slogan "A smooth shave, a new man", which also dated to 1934 but



The late Bert Playle cuts a young boy's hair in his Three Sportsmen Barber Shop near the top of Fairmount Avenue (courtesy Phil Playle).

was renamed Sharkey's Barber Shop in 1937 (and was located on San Pablo Avenue near Potrero Avenue next door to Sharkey's Club), and Angelo Bertoli's Barber Shop.

Playle also recalls Bert's Barbershop on San Pablo Avenue, which moved a ways down the street and was renamed Hollywood Barber Shop. Owner Frandio "Bert" Botolotti also got a new nickname, Hollywood Bert. "Clipper Dick" cut hair at a shop next to where Pastime Hardware now stands. Wally Violet, a 1957 graduate of El Cerrito High, owned Wally's Barber Shop next to the post office.

The Grand Barber Shop, down Fairmount and around the corner on San Pablo, had four chairs, while Bert Playle's barber shop at the top of Fairmount was more compact, with three chairs, and was known as The Three Sportsmen Barber Shop. Leon's Haircutters, at San Pablo and Moeser Lane, wouldn't open until 1965. Today, the three barber shops are all that remain in town. In many ways, they haven't changed much, but in others they have kept up with the times, for better or worse.

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Learn the History Behind Golden Gate Mortuary During Aug. 18 Tour

The EC Historical Society is sponsoring a special free tour of the Golden Gate Mortuary above the Sunset View Cemetery from 3:30 – 5 p.m. Friday, Aug. 18.

The Italian Renaissance Revival mortuary is made from rare marble to memorialize the final resting place of Civil War veterans and local notables, and is a repository of decorative art.

The former Sunset Mausoleum was built in 1927 and is one of the oldest businesses and grandest buildings in the area. The mortuary was founded and designed by an architect and premier west-coast importer of stone.

Mausoleum manager Ken Garkow and ECHS President Dave Weinstein will lead the tour. To reach the mortuary, enter the cemetery at 101 Colusa Ave. and drive up the hill to the building. Questions? Write to davidswinstein@yahoo.com.

Oct. 21 Walk to Sniff Out the History of Point Isabel

Today Point Isabel is a favorite off-leash park for dogs, but it's also been home to the Ohlone, a dock for Victor Castro's rancho, a commercial ferry stop, illegal prizefighting arena, dynamite factory, frog farm, dump for toxic trash, and more.

Join Mary Barnsdale of Point Isabel Dog Owners as she highlights stories she has dug up as she writes a history of the point.

The free guided walk starts at 11 a.m. Saturday, Oct. 21 – park in regional shoreline's bayside parking lot at the end of Central Avenue / Isabel Street and meet by the Sit and Stay Café.

History Is Where You Find It – Got Some to Share?

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, memoirs, scrapbooks, diaries, records of local businesses, records from local organizations, clubs and 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.

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 us know what you find at echistorical@gmail.com.

Would you prefer to keep the material? That's fine, too. Lend it to us so we can document it.

Not a member of the historical society? Membership is \$30 a year. Be a sponsor for \$75 or get a life memberships for \$400. We accept donations of any amount. Find our membership form at <http://elcerritohistoricalsociety.org/howtojoin.html>

The Forge. Edited by Jon Bashor 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, a monthly online newsletter.

The advertisement for Minuteman Press features a green and orange color scheme. At the top left is the Minuteman Press logo with the tagline "WE DESIGN, PRINT & PROMOTE... YOUR!". To the right, it says "PRINTING IN BERKELEY SINCE 1972" and includes a "GREEN BUSINESS" logo. The central graphic shows a bar chart with an upward-pointing arrow and the text "SIMPLE BUSINESS BUILDERS". Below this, it states "Simple, Affordable Products to Grow Your Business". A QR code is positioned on the right side. The bottom section contains a promotional message: "This offering of our Best Selling Marketing Products at Exceptional Prices addresses the key pieces in marketing your business. As your Marketing Partner we can expand well beyond this core offering to help you create a marketing plan that exceeds your goals." The footer provides the address "1101 FIFTH STREET, BERKELEY", the phone number "510.540.7113", and the website "www.e-minutemanpress.com".

African Dance Led to Self-Understanding

By Mina Wilson

Dance found me in kindergarten. It was 1966. The Civil Rights Movement was boiling like a thick, richly seasoned stew pot during a frigidly cold winter. Images of southern tyranny branded minds.

The complacency of fair-weather legislators, covetously holding transformative power, frustrated committed and hopeful souls of every race as they pressed for justice individually and collectively. A new consciousness was sprouting.

My parents, Lucy and Charles Wilson, intersected with one of those consciously sprouting souls. Rabbi Axelrod, a religious leader devoted to the movement, owned a home in El Cerrito. As he planned to move from the segregated community, he was committed to the radical act of selling his property to an African American family.

Their conversations led to a transfer of property and a new home for our family.

Although a worthy goal, integration, for those of us living it, was socially, emotionally and relationally traumatic. There is no way to legislate relationships.

Critical, skeptical and belittling looks as you navigate the grocery store or local streets are not stopped by the law. Nor was the ignorance spoken by a gingham plaid apron-clad, middle-aged white woman who approached my fair-skinned mother to ask her where she found the “cute little pickaninnies.”

My mother gasped, squashed her desire to curse, and told her, “These are not pickaninnies, these are my children!!”

“Can I go?” I asked each morning as I watched my siblings go to school. I craved the “going to school” experience, longingly watching as my siblings left for the grand place.



Mina Wilson (courtesy Mina Wilson)

My imagination was filled with wandering and imagery. My mind pictured imagined experiences and my heart warmed as I thought of fun with my future classmates who would become friends. I longed for the day when the “school place” would be part of my reality.

When my first school day finally arrived, I led the march, like a little soldier leading all the new kindergarteners up the hill as we walked together. I was so happy that day.

Within the week, the energy shifted. The children at school hadn’t had up close and personal relationships with anyone who looked like me. Until that day, I’d never perceived that I was different than any other person in the world.

Initially, their curiosity was endearing. Over the course of the week, endearing curiosity turned to insulting inquiries, insulting inquiries turned to criticism and criticism to bullying. This was my introduction to white bias and aggressions.

This sentiment would continue to pollute the air in institutional environments throughout my life, like an invisible smoke seeking to choke, stifle, limit and create boundaries to

Black people’s quests to have safe spaces to be our authentic selves in the world.

A girl named Cecily catalyzed the relational energy shift. She began making ugly faces at me in class. On the playground, the nastiness continued. Surrounded by a horseshoe of less bold souls, she ranted about my big lips, the knottiness of my hair. Her taunts targeted everything about my appearance that was different from her own, which was everything.

Day by day, her horseshoe grew in numbers and boldness. For weeks, I tolerated her; my parent’s Christian values echoed in my head. “Turn the other cheek” and “be the bigger and better person.”

One day, their words fell on the hard ground of five-year old emotions. The rants began to suffocate me, like having to walk through dense southern humidity. It was hard to breathe. One insult too many, I saw red, my reaction guttural.

When my mind re-emerged, I sat straddling her flailing body with one small fist clenching her collar and the other gripping her hair, my appendages rhythmically smashing her face into the gritty dust of the sandbox.

A firm grip jerked my collar, choking the air from my fury. “Let me go,” I screamed as my arms swung with anger. I was whisked to the principal’s office. My mother was instructed to come immediately and collect me. I was suspended from school for three days.

Momma was livid. Her southern African Methodist Episcopal upbringing spewed out with indignation.

“How could you go to the school and act like such a heathen? Exactly what they expect of us? You KKKKNNNOOOOWWWW better!”

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She would leave my discipline to my father. Lying in my room, tears ran down my face, the traumas playing over and over in my head, waiting. Ashamed. What was wrong with me? I fell asleep.

A knock awoke me. Beams of daylight had become evening shadows. "Mina?" my father's voice called. "Come to my office please?" "OK," I whispered.

His echoing footsteps faded on the hallway floor as he walked that way. My head began pounding. Fear froze me. My mind ordered, "Get up and walk". No response: I was paralyzed. A few deep breaths moved energy back into my body. My feet began to move.

As I walked in, he had papers fanned out on the desk, working. "Have a seat," he instructed. I sat on the wooden church pew-like bench parallel to his desk. I felt like a mourner. The silence was thick and deafening as I stared at the back of his head. My eyes found a patch where hair was thinner than everywhere else. I wanted to touch it. Fear commanded my hands to be still.

I closed my eyes to quiet my mind. I felt a gentle breeze and opened my eyes to meet his deep, probing gaze. Its intensity made my eyes tear. He grasped his hands together and slowly settled them in his lap. "What happened?" His eyes locked mine.

My voice trembled as I spoke. My words quivered as I shared my story. He listened patiently, present in his listening, holding me in his gaze. It was a soul connection. I saw sorrow in his eyes and felt the compassion grow and embrace me. I wiped my tears and nose on my sleeve and arm.

He looked up to the ceiling as if seeking guidance. "I am not going to punish you." The heaviness of my heart began to lift.

"What you experienced was not right," he said. "When people treat you wrongly, you have every right to defend yourself." He continued,



Mina Wilson, age 19, with her mother, Lucy Wilson (courtesy Mina Wilson).

"Those girls need discipline," then he paused, "I will discuss this with your principal.

"Always know that you have no obligation to play with people who don't treat you well. You have toys of your own. You can always play by yourself." He looked deeply into my eyes.

"What you must know is that YOU," he pointed his finger in my face, "cannot go through life fighting with THESE" he held his fists in my face. "YOU," he pointed to me again, "must learn how to fight with THIS," he pointed his finger to his temple, indicating the mind. "If you learn how to fight with this, well, you will eventually win."

Those words were my first lesson on how to survive as an outsider in a racist society. It was the first of many. We never spoke about it again.

When I returned to school, Mrs. Evelyn Murry, a Black woman from the community who was a minister's wife and mother, had been hired as a classroom aide and yard duty teacher at the school. I had no more problems at school or on the playground.

Escaping punishment from my father soothed my soul but didn't quiet the dark thoughts of my mind. My psyche was haunted by the demeaning words and abusive behavior, especially in the three days I

had spent at home during my suspension from school.

First, I considered and somehow came to believe that somewhere, somehow, I must be defective. It had to be true, especially if so many people hated me. Fantasizing, I began to wonder what my life would be like if I was a little white girl. I cried that night. My mind was not a friend; so much pain and confusion.

The days were long during my suspension. I played record albums. A song came on, "The Dolly with the Long Blonde Hair." The word mingled with my pain and confusion. My soul clung to the song.

Fantasizing about being a little white girl, I danced around the room and my imagination soared. I saw my image in a mirror on the wall, my brown skin, big lips, and knotty hair. Hmm, what could I do about that?

I pulled a yellow towel from the linen closet. I rummaged through my mom's knitting basket, found yellow yarn to tie the towel to my head. I performed, swinging the yellow towel from shoulder to shoulder as if it were my hair. I twirled, picturing pale skin, blue eyes and long, flowing blonde hair.

Suddenly, the music stopped. I opened my eyes to see my mom, staring at me with pain in her eyes and the record player arm in her hand.

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Carrying on the family business

On the magazine rack in Phil's Barber Shop near the top of Fairmount Avenue rests a copy of "Fortunate Son," John Fogerty's autobiography. The Fogerty family lived nearby, just a block and a half down Ramona Avenue.

Yes, Phil Playle says, he cut John's hair, and that of his four brothers, rattling off their names – Jimmy, Tom, Danny and Bobby – like they were still among his customers. Although the family has long since moved away, Phil's Barber Shop still looks much the same as it has since Playle's father first opened it for business in 1936.

Along the counter behind the chairs are two vintage hot lather machines and a manual cash register, the keys holding a batch of mail. Above it hangs Playle's barber license, below it a metal tray where he hangs his tools of the trade; three electric clippers and a large handheld vibrator for giving shoulder massages. On the walls behind and in front of the row of chairs are large round mirrors. Barely dressed women peer out at the room from calendar pages.

Born in Oakland, Playle grew up in the rooms behind the shop. Before heading to school at Harding Elementary, his chores were to fill the hot lather machines and wind up the red, white and blue barber pole in front of the shop so customers would see it turning and know the shop was open. After school, he'd empty the ashtrays. By the time he graduated from El Cerrito High, Playle had become a bodybuilder and a standout football player.

One day in 1957 as he was heading to the gym, his father Bert asked him "What about a trade?" Phil replied "What's that?"

"A job," the senior Playle told him. "Why don't you go to barber college?" Figuring that sounded better than his high school job of chipping mortar off used bricks from demolished buildings, Phil took \$400



Phil Playle cuts a customer's hair, working in the same shop as his father. Playle grew up in an apartment behind the shop (photo by Jon Bashor).

from his bank account and enrolled in Moler Barber College in Oakland, where he put in the required 1,248 hours of training. After finishing in 1960 he began his barbering career working at Ed Remitz' shop on Stockton Avenue, while also earning his associate's degree in fine arts at Contra Costa College.

But his father wanted him to be a veterinarian, so he transferred to Fresno State College on a football scholarship, where he majored in animal husbandry and played on the varsity team. During that time he also spent three years raising hogs before returning to El Cerrito.

After working in his dad's barber shop for a week, Playle quit and went to work in Leon Rankin's shop. Ironically, Rankin learned his trade working in Playle senior's shop, where he "hooked up" his tools in 1951. Playle took over the shop in 1976 when his father retired.

One of the changes Playle made was replacing the hand-cranked barber pole with an electrified one that turned by a motor and was illuminated. It was bolted to the sidewalk until 1992, when someone stole it in the middle of the night. These days he unfurls another red, white and blue symbol – the U.S. flag – to show when he's open.

On a Sunday afternoon in June, Jeff Nelson dropped by to get his haircut. He's been coming to the shop for more than 10 years and ran into a fellow graduate of Albany High School. Along with Playle, they passed the time trading stories about who knows who, where they are now and who's passed on. They reminisce about the Ortman's

donut shop that used to be next door. Jan, who used to run the cleaners at the other end of the building, is in the area and pops in to say hello.

A bit later, Joe DeVille of Kensington stops in. He doesn't need a haircut, but wants to look up some folks in Playle's archive of El Cerrito High yearbooks, which goes back to 1941 and tapers off in the '70s.

"I've been doing hair since 1960, 62 years of standing behind the iron chair," said Playle, now 81. While he used to take care of 20 customers a day when younger, these days he says he cuts 10 heads of hair on a good day. The best part of the job, he says, is the people. And while he knew John Fogerty before he became the long-haired leader of Creedence Clearwater Revival, Playle has cut the hair of baseball slugger Reggie Jackson, UC Berkeley Professor and Dean of the College of Chemistry Joel Hildebrand and former Oakland Raider George Atkinson.

"I'm a people person and I don't have anything I'd rather do," Playle said. "I can't spell camaraderie, but I have a lot of friends who come by."

Some get a haircut and some don't. You don't need to get a haircut to come in here."

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‘Ok, you’re a barber’

Like Phil Playle, Jerry Sandlin also grew up in the living area behind his dad’s barber shop, in Pomona, Calif. Sandlin was unsure of his career path until he was inducted into the U.S. Marine Corps in 1948. He was asked what he wanted to do and said “I don’t know.”

The response was, “What’s your dad do?” “He’s a barber,” Sandlin replied.

“Ok, you’re a barber,” was the order.

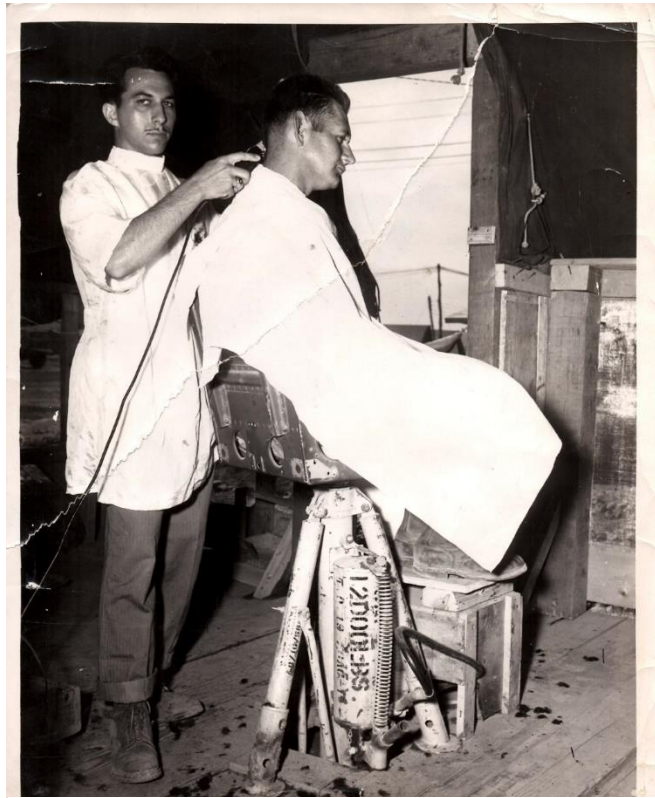
Sent to Korea, Sandlin’s first barber chair was a makeshift seat mounted on an aircraft wing jack, with a capacity of 12,000 pounds. The footrest was a wooden box. Sandlin christened his Pohang, South Korea space the “Rice Paddie Palace Barber Shop.” A photo of the setup, which ran in the base newspaper, hangs above Sandlin’s chair.

Now 93, Sandlin started cutting hair at age 19. After his stint in the Marines, he attended barber college to broaden his skills. In 1959, his family, including his parents and grandparents, moved from Southern California to the Bay Area, settling in Concord. That year he secured a chair and hung up his tools in an Albany barber shop.

In 1970, when Tony Riggio and his brothers put the Grand Barber Shop on San Pablo Avenue up for sale, Sandlin bought it and launched his own shop. Through the years, he’s seen the long and short of the business.

“In the 1950s, haircuts were short, in the ‘60s they got long and business slowed down, but I did pretty good,” Sandlin said. “It seems like the styles go long, short, long, short. I like short because to me it looks neater.”

In addition to Sandlin, his daughter-in-law Laura Sandlin also works at the shop, but now only two days a week as she approaches her 39th year as a barber. Other haircutters are Rosa and Tom, who helps out on weekends.



Then USMC corporal Jerry Sandlin gives an officer a haircut in a makeshift barber chair on a military base in South Korea in 1951 (courtesy Jerry Sandlin).

The biggest change Laura’s seen is due to the pandemic – the shop now mainly sees customers by appointment to reduce the number of people inside.

“Before that, people around the neighborhood would come, sit around and talk,” Laura said. “They became friends and it’s definitely a community. I miss the camaraderie – I definitely miss that part.”

The Grand Barber Shop is also a gathering place for memories. In one corner hangs a framed (in an old fruit crate) set of barbering tools – scissors, a hand-operated clipper and a long-bladed pair of scissors from the Philippines. “Those are my tools from my time in Korea,” Sandlin says.

The many shelves and display areas are packed with vintage shaving mugs, photos and cars, lots of cars – die-cast models, Avon bottles, toys and more. “I’m a car buff,” Sandlin admits. At his home in Concord is his life-size collection, 1988 and ‘89 Corvettes, a 2012 Mercedes and a 2016 Cadillac, his favorite.

Another collection on the wall began when someone gave Sandlin a saber from India. Then a long World War I bayonet joined it, followed by a sword from Mexico.

One tradition Laura Sandlin likes to keep going is a child’s first haircut. In the old days, a bolster seat was placed across the arms of a barber chair for toddlers. But it wasn’t always a pleasant experience for the tiny customer, his parents or the barber. So Laura invested in child-sized plastic Adirondack-style chairs and sits on the floor while she

gives the ceremonial first cut.

“I’ve been good with kids for years,

but this way is more comfortable and works out better,” she said. “I’ve seen a lot of young men who got their first cut from me come back to get their hair cut for high school graduation.”

To accommodate his customers of various ages, Sandlin takes a tiered approach. On a rattan etagere near the back of the store, books and toys for the kids are kept on the lower shelves. Hidden on the topmost shelf are reading materials for older guys, though many are more interested in the photos than the articles. As closing time (6 p.m.) approaches on a late May afternoon, Laura Sandlin starts to restock the towels at each chair and Joe Wen of El Cerrito walks in. Jerry Sandlin motions him to his chair.

Wen asks for a high fade and the barber goes to work. As they chat, Wen sees the U.S. Marine Corps memorabilia in the shop and mentions he was also in the Marines.

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He went through ROTC and ended his four-year stint as a captain in the artillery.

“This place reminds me of places I used to go to growing up in Albany in upstate New York,” said Wen, who now lives in El Cerrito and works in the tech industry.

After cutting Wen’s hair, Sandlin gets a handful of hot foam from the lather machine, spreads it around the ears and back of Wen’s neck, and goes deftly to work with a straight razor. Once he’s cleaned off and uncaped, Wen stands up and reflects on the results in a mirror.

“It’s great,” he says. “Just like back home.”

The name’s the same, but...

Although Leon Rankins sold his shop near San Pablo Avenue and Moeser Lane in 1989, the current owner has kept the old name. After graduating from high school in 1951, Rankins began barbering in Bert Playle’s shop on Fairmount, then joined the service and was deployed in South Korea and Japan.

When he returned to El Cerrito, he worked at the then-new shop in El Cerrito Plaza until opening his own place in 1965 in the Jay Vee Center, where Phil Playle worked for 10 years before taking over his dad’s shop.



Jerry Sandlin applies the finishing touches to customer Joe Wen's high fade. Wen called the experience “just like back home.” (Photo by Jon Bashor)

“It was probably the busiest barber shop in the East Bay,” Playle said of Leon’s. “Leon was a great guy, though he was short -- no bigger than a minute.”

Playle remembers the day Rankins sold up shop and retired—May 2, 1989. He lived in El Sobrante until recently, when his daughter moved him down to Riverside where she could be closer to him.

Although Leon’s name is still on the front window as it has been for

more than 55 years, the scene inside reflects today’s reality. The chairs that used to be filled with guys chatting while they waited their turns are empty, while only one of the barber chairs now gets used.

Jon Bashor is a former reporter at several East Bay daily newspapers and a retired science writer-editor for Lawrence Livermore and Lawrence Berkeley national laboratories.

How an El Cerrito High School grad changed the face of cutting hair

Perhaps one of the reasons that there are fewer barber shops today is the rise of franchised haircutting places like Supercuts.

In fact, Supercuts traces its roots to El Cerrito.

At a high school reunion at the Blue Dolphin Restaurant at the San Leandro marina in 1965, Phil Playle, owner of Phil’s Barber Shop, recalls a conversation with Frank Emmett, who graduated from El Cerrito High in 1960.

“He told me he wanted to be the McDonald’s hamburgers of cutting hair,” Playle said. At the time Emmett owned the Paris Beauty Salon at the

top of Solano Avenue and the Esoteric salon near the Albany theater.

Ten years later, Emmett and Geoffrey Rappaport opened their first Supercuts in Albany. By 1978, they had six stores in California and decided to franchise their business model, a hybrid between the then-gendered model of barber shops for men and beauty salons for women. Men, women and kids were all welcome at Supercuts.

The idea was to get customers in and out in 20 minutes and to do this Emmett and Rappaport focused “on training their stylists in a proprietary technique that was streamlined and

repeatable. It got into details like how to segment hair, how to palm your shears,” according to a history of Supercuts written by Seth Stevenson and published July 13, 2021 on the Slate website.

By the mid-1980s, hundreds of new Supercuts franchises had opened in 39 states, all of them following the same model. In 1987, Emmet and Rappaport sold the company for \$21.4 million to a venture capital group. Their first store, at the corner of Solano and Santa Fe avenues, has remained in business since the start, though it recently moved two blocks west to the corner of Carmel Avenue.

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She sat down and looked into my eyes. "Do you really feel that way?" I nodded. Our pain met through our eyes.

I don't know if it was a week later or a month later, but Momma buckled my brother, Charles, and me into the back seat of our blue, wood-paneled station wagon. Our ritual was peering out of the windows to spy license plates to find and count the numbers from 000 to 999. Great competition.

We pulled up at the South Berkeley Community Center, a beautiful building with grassy lawns and adolescent trees. As we entered, Momma hugged a tall, strong, beautiful woman with eyes electrically bright and an ivory white smile, her face smooth and brown like chocolate. She wore vibrant yellow, orange and red clothes and her hair was wrapped.

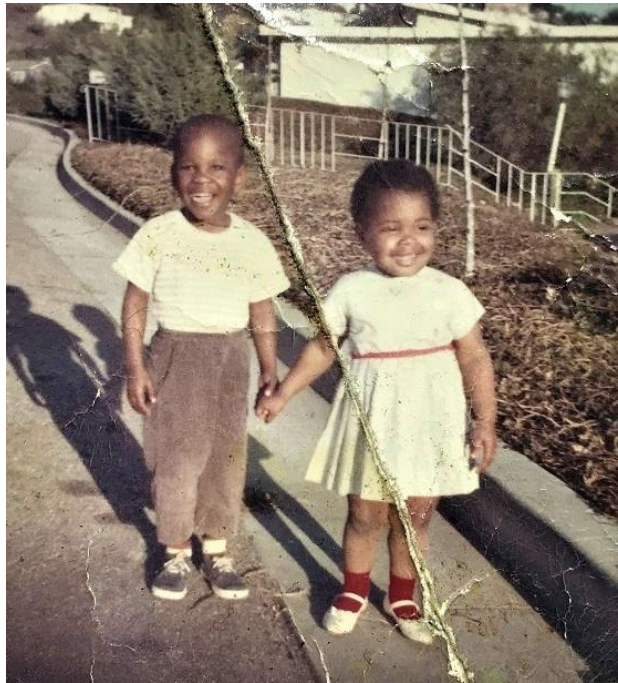
"This is Ms. Deborah Vaughan. She is the founder of Dimensions Dance Theatre. She is going to teach you African heritage through dance."

Ms. Deborah smelled like rain, talked about ancestors, traditions and the motherland. The rhythmic music touched my brother and me in deep places, creating the landscape that we moved our bodies on, as if prompted by genetic memory.

We learned of African ceremonies, their meanings and traditions, while finding ourselves in the rhythmic drums of Olatunji. Inspired by our passion and prowess, she choreographed a dance piece for us, and we were good!

The dance had a synchronized intro, broke into solo segments, and culminated with a vibrant drum outro. That spring, Mama made a bold move. She entered us in the school talent show and made our costumes with her own hands.

On show night, I felt confident. Charles and I both were excited. We peeked out from backstage to see Momma and Daddy seated front and center.



Charles and Mina Wilson (courtesy Mina Wilson)

As our drumming began, there was pregnant silence; this was not the normal Beethoven recital piece or tap dance solo. We entered from opposite sides of the stage in African regalia. I had to refrain from laughing at the shocked expressions. This fueled our passion and stoked our power.

We let our bodies get loose, becoming one with the drums. Charles stepped back as I moved in my solo. The cheers from the audience surprised me. I swayed back as he came forward and worked on his dance.

We moved back to center stage for our dynamic outro. As we did, I glanced in the audience and saw Cecily's jaw drop in shock. A rousing ovation filled our hearts with joy and pride. I thought I might explode.

After the last act, the participants moved to the stage for the announcement of winners. We fidgeted as third place was called. Anxiety grew as the second-place winner was called. Sorrow grew in my belly. I knew we would never be awarded first prize.

My heart dropped. I was frozen as they called us. We looked at each other in disbelief and gripped each other in a tight embrace.

Something happened inside of me. Scabs fell from emotional wounds revealing scarred, but healed places. My soul was redeemed, the cement of my self-worth set. A foundation of self-knowing and pride rooted within me. I was reborn.

I caught Momma's eye from the stage. She was brimming with pride and, like that first painful day on the steps of my "Dolly with the Long Blonde Hair" home stage, our eyes locked.

My mind flashed back to the days of my suspension, the yellow towel tied to my head and my passionate "wishing-to-be-white" dance.

My heart overflowed with love, gratitude and appreciation. I ran to Momma from the stage, grabbed her waist and squeezed. I didn't have words to thank her. Her courage had taught me how to hold my truth while turning adversity into a friend.

These experiences continue to live in my heart and soul and have defined my ethics for life. Dance became a way to integrate mind, body and spirit with my heritage, to connect with the passion and beauty of my culture and ancestry. Dance became a pathway to access deep places where my essence resides.

As the years progress, and I have grown in deeper understanding of myself, I've become comfortable being an outsider. I found power in the periphery, and value in the perspective that its vantage point allows on the world.

Mina Wilson's family moved to El Cerrito in 1963. The youngest of five children, she grew up in the city. Wilson is the Executive Director for Healthy Black Families, Inc. a community-based public health nonprofit organization based in Berkeley and is a member of the El Cerrito Human Rights Commission.