

INSIDE: ✦ Tavern will continue its El Cerrito history – page 3
✦ When El Cerrito went “insane” over Ouija – page 6



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The Social Experiment That Worked

By Michael K. Martin

I imagine becoming a seventh-grader was a big step for every sixth-grader in every school that fed into Portola Junior High in September, 1967. For me, it was both exciting and ominous.

The prospect of meeting new people by the dozens fascinated the socially curious lad I had become by the age of 12. One of the first extra-curricular activities in which I engaged was a run for president of the seventh grade class. I was beaten handily by Rob Williams, an immensely popular kid from Madera school, up the hill from Del Mar where I had cut my elementary-school teeth.

But my appetite for activities and popularity was indelibly whetted, and the nature of my secondary-school journey formed.

In 1967, after no small degree of controversy on what was then the Richmond Unified School Board, a decision was made on the issue then labeled “bussing.” It was a nationwide movement that in some school districts was called “forced bussing.” At any rate, its goal was greater racial integration in public school systems, which is why it was controversial.

In the Richmond school district, at Portola, this meant that in addition to

the mostly white El Cerrito elementary schools -- Castro, Madera, Del Mar and others -- that had previously sent their students to Portola, students from mostly Black Richmond elementary schools -- Stege, Cortez, and Balboa and others -- would also be coming to Portola, and eventually El Cerrito High.

According to students I’ve since talked to from both groups, conflict was anticipated.

In 1958, my family became the first Black family on the 900 block of Sea View Drive. That went for the 800 block of Sea View, and all the rest of Sea View, for that matter.

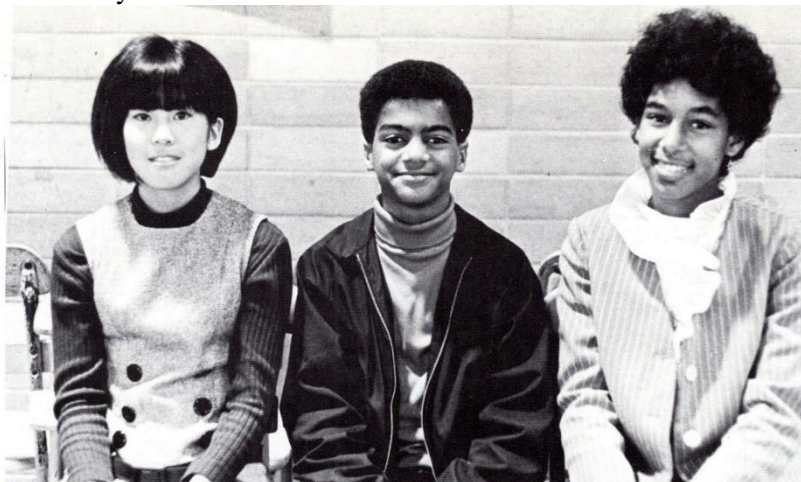
When I started at Del Mar, I was one of four Black students in a school of about 300. My older brother was

one of the others. There was more than a little racial hostility.

But by second grade, as I recall, I had become part of what would now be termed a “posse.” I had a close group of seven or eight friends, all white except Ken Yamaoka and Doug Chin. We were in scouts together, went to summer camp together, played little league ball together.

This group served as kind of protective cocoon for me in those early days. As the Sixties progressed, more Black families moved to El Cerrito and I was joined by Ken and Carl Brown, Quinn and Pierre Reddrick, Janet Fowler, and maybe half-dozen other Black students at Del Mar.

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Shelley Yamane (Secretary), Michael Martin (President), and Maureen Haley (Vice President) – Portola Student Government Officers - 1969. Photo from *El Toro* 68-69..



Atweena Matlock dancing at El Cerrito High School in 1962. Photo from El Camino 72.

The numbers of Black students from other El Cerrito schools advancing to Portola were similarly small. Where would I fit at Portola? I remember wondering, personally anticipating this anticipated conflict.

As noted above, I dived right in. It was 1967, a heady time worldwide, and a great time to be forging a persona. We in the Class of '72 all started at Portola right after Haight-Ashbury's Summer of Love, and two years after the formation of the Black Panther Party in Oakland.

The following year brought us the Tet Offensive, the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy, the horrors of the Chicago Democratic Party Convention on live TV, and the election of Richard Nixon.

Things were similarly roiling at Portola Junior High, but more specifically about issues of dress codes, student press freedom, and racism. I found myself most active in student government, the human relations club, and the school paper.

In a school that was not racially polarized, but certainly organized socially along racial lines, I became part of a multi-racial, harmony-

seeking crowd. We certainly thought ourselves to be socially aware.

On the day after Dr. King's assassination, the tension in the air at Portola was palpable. During my second-period math class, the teacher, Mrs. Johnston, locked the door and announced that anyone who walked out of her class in protest would receive an F for the day, and an F for every subsequent day that they would miss while awaiting her permission to be readmitted.

I looked at the other two Black students in the class. What was to be made of this? Shortly thereafter, in reaction to the beginnings of some sort of protest, the administration simply called school off for the day. Everyone was officially let go.

A significant group of self-appointed, self-aware students -- racially integrated and largely from the Human Relations club -- stayed on campus for impromptu discussions of the moment. We were cool. We were college-bound. We were socially aware. If the term had existed in those days, we would have been "woke."

Upon rising to 9th grade, which Portola included in those days, I became student body president. I discovered girls, or rather, girls finally, finally discovered me. It was officially the first year of high school and everything seemed very nice.

Real high school awaited down the street a few blocks, however, and September found me at El Cerrito High, a mighty Gauchito. Over the course of one short summer I was transformed from a Big Man on Campus into just a short guy without a car. High school was a big deal, and I was small potatoes.

The El Cerrito High School of the early Seventies was a fascinating place. Existing in the shadow of Cal's campus amid some of the nation's most significant social changes, El Cerrito High had a strong anti-establishment counter-culture. We were angry Black militants. We were

angry anti-war protesters. We were hippies. We were druggies.

But we were also a high school. Pep rallies were a regular and popular occurrence on campus. Jocks and pom-pom girls held social power.

The Class of '72 remains proud that our homecoming float won the competition every year. We had souped-up cars, and various spots on and off campus where various cliques gathered and nurtured themselves.

At the same time, change abounded. My parents became presidents of the first Parent Teacher Student Association. The office of ombudsman was created as a liaison between students, teachers, and the administration. What was then known as affirmative action meant that Black students would have chances at college like never before.



Atweena Matlock, Alonzo Turner, and Linda Valley dancing at El Cerrito High School in 1962. Photo from El Camino 72.

But being a Mighty Gauchito and holding the green and white high was still exceedingly hip. The El Cerrito/Berkeley football games continued to be held on Friday afternoons instead of Friday nights because the fierceness of school spirit often erupted into violence after dark.

Prior to our 40th reunion, the Class of '72 put up a Facebook page. At the time, I thought Facebook, then in its halcyon days, would kill reunions. I mean, why would anyone fly in from wherever to catch up on a classmate, when on Facebook they could find out what that classmate had for dinner that night?



Michelle Jones – Homecoming Queen, crowned by ECHS Principal Frank Granucci, Ph.D. Photo from El Camino 72.

I was wrong. The Facebook page grew and grew. The reunion fed off of it and was a smashing success. It was during that reunion that I heard a classmate describe our class as a social experiment that really, really worked.

That the experiment worked was most immediately apparent by the reaction to the creation of the page itself. Within days, the Class of '72 Facebook page was occupied by the same group of Gauchos who had pushed for change while building homecoming floats, who had attended peace rallies as well as pep rallies, who had experienced social interaction that sometimes roiled social discord, but who had loved one another nonetheless.

The success of that reunion was presaged by the success of the Facebook page.

The Class of '72 Facebook page played an even larger role this year, that of the 50th. In numbers exceeding 170, the Class of '72 just celebrated that one at the end of September. The experiment appears to still be working.

Michael K. Martin is an attorney and a board member of the El Cerrito Historical Society. His father Jerry Martin was profiled in the March 2022 issue of the Forge.

Tavern will continue to make history in El Cerrito

By Laura Lent

Do you have a favorite small business in El Cerrito? It may not feel like history yet, but by preserving memories of it today, we can ensure that future generations – or our own future selves - are able to look back and get a sense of how it looked, who spent time there, what they did, and how it fit into the fabric of our community.

Keys In Hand

On December 31, 2015, Ted Helmick unlocked his new bar with the keys he had just received. Six years later to the day, beloved community watering hole Little Hill Lounge closed its doors for the last time. Since its grand opening on June 17, 2016, Little Hill Lounge had become an anchor member of the San Pablo Avenue bar community that includes the Hotsy-Totsy Club, the Ivy Room and Club Mallard in Albany; Mel-O-Dee Cocktails, McBears Social Club, Elevation 66, and the 514 Lounge in El Cerrito; and more recently the Factory in Richmond.

Helmick describes the vibe between the various establishments along San Pablo as “cooperative, not predatory.” Serving a variety of local beers from its 10 taps and its signature drink, the fresh-squeezed Greyhound, Little Hill said yes to a vibrant array of community programming initiatives.

Ted, who grew up in the Midwest, had worked as a bartender since the early '90s, most recently for a dozen years at the Hemlock Tavern on Polk Street in San Francisco.

He and then-wife Kate Gorman moved across the Bay to El Cerrito

in 2013. A friend interested in commercial real estate investment financed the purchase of the building at 10753 San Pablo Avenue after asking Ted if he would be game to rent the bar.

Little Hill has an El Cerrito postal address and sidewalk (much utilized for safer drinking during the Covid pandemic), while the building and business license are within the city of Richmond.

Ted wanted to honor the area in choosing a name, and for inspiration consulted The El Cerrito Historical Society's Images of America El Cerrito book. He was interested in naming his new establishment after the Peek-a-Boo, the ambitious complex at San Pablo Avenue and Blake Street that included a trailer park, cabins, a gas station, a sandwich shop, a restaurant featuring chicken dinners, and a dance hall.

But Kate pointed out that the name sounded very much like a strip club, so he pivoted to “Little Hill Lounge.”



Little Hill Lounge Sign. Photo courtesy of Ted Helmick.

Constructed as a post-war tiki bar in late 1940s, Little Hill's immediate predecessor was a Black-owned bar called Gregory's Lounge, which was licensed to Eddie L. Ayers and several



The crew of the Little Hill Tavern.

Photo by Laura Lent

of his family members in various configurations from 1992-2016.

Ayers, who retired well before the building was sold and passed away in 2021 at age 88, had also owned several other local establishments.

He served fresh OJ, added a back room, and featured barbecue and jazz and soul music. One earlier iteration of the building had been a cocktail lounge called Phil's Hut, which operated from at least 1959 to 1973 and probably longer.

Let us know if you know anything about the original bar!

Décor

Ted took out a small loan to open, and operated the bar on a shoestring budget. Kate and her father Patrick Gorman joined him in redecorating before the grand opening, adding wood paneling and tile.

In a 2019 San Francisco Chronicle story about the historic Hotsy-Totsy Club in Albany, Little Hill was described as a "shot-and-a-beer situation with retro vibes."

Those vibes became ever more retro with each passing year as Ted gradually acquired, via Craigslist, a distinctive collection of vintage

backlit beer signs and video games such as Ms. Pacman.

On the street, passers-by saw the brightly lit Little Hill Lounge sign with a neon cocktail glass and neon "OPEN" sign over the door, as well as the cultured rock exterior.

Inside, the rectangular island bar nurtured conviviality among patrons and bartenders. Branded T-shirts and sweatshirts hung on the walls and chalkboards listed 10 local craft beers and ciders on tap along with specials.

A "Leave a Drink" board listed the fortunate patrons whose friends and admirers had left contributions for their drinking funds.

Music and Happenings

Music and happenings closely followed the opening. After Bill Zindel asked about DJing and brought in his own equipment a few times, Ted set up a DJ system and it was game on for weekly DJ nights, often co-hosted by Bill along with Ted's roommate, John Everett.

Bill and John spun '60s and '70s soul and rock music, including a lot of interesting B-sides. Tommy Guerrero, skateboard legend and musician, also DJ'd from time to time.

Soon Mike Levella was spearheading monthly gatherings of Now Playing Live, a Facebook group of fanatical record collectors who would come from all over to play tracks from their LPs and 45s.

While Ted rarely had amplified music out of respect for the neighbors, occasional acoustic and amplified shows included singer/songwriter David Dondero, Little Hill bartender Alex Hallowell's band Paper Dolls, and Ted drumming and vocalizing with his bands Squishers and Evil Livin', which featured Ted and another bandmate from the band This Bike is a Pipe Bomb.

CLEAR Pub Science, a group of UC Berkeley grad students, held science-for-the-people lectures on such topics as Valley Fever, astronomy, earthquakes and "Are Bilinguals Smarter?" Bartender Robin hosted monthly "Drink 'n Draw" evenings, which were exactly that.

Craft fairs of local artists' wares coincided with holiday seasons. Wednesday nights featured "Pizza on the Fly," individually prepared pizzas cooked on a portable oven on the back patio.



Tobin Biles and Ted Helmick. Photo courtesy of Bill Zindel.



Councilmember Tessa Rudnick mixed with constituents at Little Hill. Photo courtesy of Tessa Rudnick.

There were Gyoza Pop-Ups and Llama en Llamas Chilean street food. Bartenders brought crocks of home-cooked beans and stews to serve on weekend afternoons.

PTA groups met there, El Cerrito City Council member Tessa Rudnick held a meet and greet for her constituents at sidewalk tables, and birthday parties and special events took place frequently.

For those who just wanted to chill in a comfortable space, captioned old movies and TV shows played silently on the only screen in the main barroom.

Here Came the Regulars

Perhaps the most notable local to grace Little Hill Lounge was Ramona Anania, who strolled down the hill several times a week to sip a single glass of red wine from a large chalice kept behind the bar for her exclusive use.

In August 2021 the still-going-strong artist celebrated her 93rd birthday party at the bar. The acerbic Ramona's signature hand gesture was a friendly yet defiant giving of the bird, and a photo of her in action graced her birthday invite flyer.

The quiet but striking presence of former El Pasoan Abraham Zamora and the witty ripostes of the twosome

Jim and Chris were also an essential part of the mix. Staff turnover was minimal at Little Hill. Helmick hired his long-time friend Alex Hallowell as the primary bartender. Some of the others who held it down included Robin Biles, aka Foodlady on Instagram, known for her homegrown and homemade drink botanicals and fresh food offerings, and Siena Arellanes, Maya Messoriano, and Stacy Danielson.

What's Next

Helmick did everything he could to keep the bar going during the pandemic, selling beer and cider as well as delightfully strong mixed drinks in Mason jars, and opening for sidewalk service as soon as it was feasible. But operating costs were rising while attendance never fully returned to its former level, and the waves of Covid variants took a toll.

In December 2021 the building and the business were purchased by Christ Aivaliotis and Matt Reagan, the deeper-pocketed ownership of downtown Oakland's Kon-Tiki Lounge and Palmetto Restaurant.

Helmick moved on to greater financial stability with a full-time position at Climax Foods, a local developer of plant-based prototypes. He posted on Instagram: "Little Hill Lounge will soon have new capable operators that will carry on what this community started."

And it has come to pass. After nine months of renovation, Little Hill reopened on October 6, with a grand reopening party a week later featuring Nashville Honeymoon.

Little Hill's personable new general manager Julio Palacios says, "I hold many titles here. I'm the janitor, the bar back, the handyman."

Palacios clearly has energy to burn, bicycle commuting to El Cerrito daily from his home in Oakland's Adams Point. As the bar starts swinging, he promises more live music, more events, and more new cocktails.

Soon after the sale, new co-owner Aivaliotis promised, "We love the wood paneled 70s vibe of the place and are leaning even further into that, and we're styling out the back room and turning it into a lounge that will have lots of intimate seating."

The updated décor indeed brings Ted's original vision into greater focus, with plush carpet, small tables and a raised performance area in the back room, a DJ booth, and red fabric curtains and beautiful lighting throughout the bar.

Alex Hallowell and Robin Biles are both back behind the bar. The sale included Ted's entire vintage sign collection, including the Little Hill Lounge sign ("I'm not a man-cave kind of guy," Helmick explained) and thus the spirit of Little Hill Lounge lives on in both name and sign.

Laura Lent spent 26 years with the San Francisco Public Library, retiring in 2017 after seven years as Chief of Collections & Technical Services. Prior to her librarian career she worked as administrative coordinator for the Center for Investigative Reporting. Laura moved across the Bay to El Cerrito in 2016 and currently volunteers with the El Cerrito Trail Trekkers.

What Was Our Town's First Tavern?

The Seven Mile House from the late 1800s. John Davis opened the tavern across the street from Wilhelm Rust's blacksmith shop.

Rust enjoyed dancing and smoked several cigars a day, his son Herman once recalled, but he didn't drink. But Rust was no prohibitionist.

"To relax after a big forge job," Herman said, "he would call across the street to John Davis at the Seven Mile House and tell him to start drawing the steam beer for his helpers." – Dave Weinstein

When El Cerrito Went "Insane:" The Ouija-Mania Incident of 1920

By Chris Sterba

(At this year's annual meeting of the El Cerrito Historical Society, Chris Sterba will give a presentation on one of the strangest events in the history of El Cerrito, and one of the few that have brought our small city national attention.)

On the night of March 3, 1920, police broke down the door of a San Pablo Avenue house and arrested seven people on charges of insanity and being a threat to themselves and others.



Artists' sketch of Adeline Battini, 35-year old leader in spirit seances at El Cerrito, California, and some of the hysterical practices to which she and her relatives confessed after protracted sessions with the ouija board.

Sketches re El Cerrito's "Ouija Insanity" from the Buffalo, NY Times 3/14/1920

The home's inhabitants had been conducting all-night séances for many weeks, using a Ouija board to communicate with the dead. Led by a woman who lost her daughter in a hit-and-run accident, the group initially sought to find out the identity of the girl's killer. But their meetings soon turned more ominous.

The group feared they had unleashed evil spirits, which were causing their children to go into trances. They felt the spirits could

OUIJA BOARD DRIVES FOUR WOMEN INSANE

WHOLE TOWN CRIPPLED BY OCCULTISM EPIDEMIC

EL CERRITO, Cal, March 13.—Ouija-mania, a peculiar madness resulting from overindulgence in the little board credited by many with occult instrumentality, has descended heavily upon this little community.

What California Lunacy Commission Says About the Ouija Board

"We have had many commitments to State Asylums during the past few months on account of the Ouija board. These persons who have been adjudged insane by the commission might have shown insanity by other means, but the ouija board at present occupies a prime place in demonstrating insanity.

"It is a fact that since the war the people generally have gone into spiritualistic things and certain individuals have become demented on this account.

"There are other fads that have surpassed the ouija board in producing insanity. The latter, however, hold front place today. It attracts a certain mold of mind, and unfortunately many mental upsets are the result. I am surprised at this El Cerrito affair. Before we get through probably we will have many more, though less marked."

The Ouija board is a little manufactured device sold commercially, and is used today by hundreds of thousands of Americans in an effort to get "messages" from the beyond. It consists of two parts; a board containing the alphabet, and a little triangle on wooden pegs which the manipulator moves over the alphabet in spelling out "communications."

Newspaper article on El Cerrito's "Ouija Insanity" from the Buffalo, NY Times 3/14/1920

only be stopped by performing a series of increasingly bizarre rituals.

The police raid and insanity charges immediately became a national news story. Among the many sensationalized accounts was the claim that the entire city of El Cerrito suffered from "mass hysteria" and that all of its 2,000 residents needed psychiatric evaluation.

An array of lawmakers, religious leaders, and medical experts also weighed in, calling for a ban on the popular Ouija board game, which they felt threatened the country's morality and public health.

(Historian Chris Sterba will describe these events and the sensation they caused. He will discuss how El Cerrito's "Ouija-mania" incident reflected important changes in American life after World War I and the deadly influenza epidemic of 1918.

Chris Sterba is a professor of American Studies at San Francisco State University and a longtime El Cerrito resident and member of the society. His research focuses on twentieth-century American social history and popular culture, and his writing has appeared in many publications, including the Journal of American History, the Pacific Historical Review, and California History.)

Attend our annual meeting to hear about Ouija mania

The society's annual meeting will be Sunday, January 29, from 4 to 5:30 p.m. in the Garden Room of the El Cerrito Community Center, 7007 Moeser Lane. The meeting is free and will also be available to watch on Zoom:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/82016218895?pwd=K3pxanBuVk41L0doSHB3U3pnNHBwZz09>

Meeting ID: 820 1621 8895
Passcode: 002811.
+16699006833,,82016218895#,,,,*002811# US (San Jose)

Before Sterba's presentation, a brief business meeting will include elections of officers, financial and operational reports, and the opportunity for public comment and questions.

A RSVP to echistorical@gmail.com is required for the in-person event due to space limitations.

Light refreshments will be served.

El Cerrito is Rich with Mid-Century Modern Dwellings

Photos and text by Dave Weinstein

Modern residential architecture came to the Bay Area in the mid-1930s, much later than in Southern California, which benefited from the arrival of several European modern architects in the 1920s.

World War II largely halted construction of residential modern architecture in the Bay Area. The houses that were built tended to be small and simple, aimed at war workers.

El Cerrito proved to be the perfect place to build modern homes shortly after the war ended for several reasons. There was land a'plenty; photos of the area shot in the 1940s show that the hills remained largely empty.

The East Bay was rich with potential clients, intellectuals, professors, small businesspeople with advanced taste in design. And the Bay Area was home to dozens of mostly young architects who had adopted the social and aesthetic mindset behind modern architecture: the idea that simple homes, designed for function and not show, would serve families well and advance social justice by allowing for low-cost replication.

Walking around El Cerrito today reveals many custom designed modern homes. Many of them are small, designed for buyers on a budget.

Many, and you'll notice this in the flatlands, were built on leftover, heretofore difficult to build sites – often alongside creeks.

The mass modern tract builder Joe Eichler never built in El Cerrito, but there are several small tracts of mid-century modern homes, spotted on

such streets as Julian Court, Potrero Avenue, and Moeser Lane.

Here are some of the more interesting homes in the mid-century modern mode; as you explore town, see how many more you can spot.



The **Atwell house**, which is on the private Atwell Road but can be seen from Arlington Boulevard at Devonshire Drive, is by Richard Neutra (1892-1970), one of the founders of the Modern Movement in architecture and one of the Europeans who came to L.A. in the 1920s.

It was built for El Cerrito pharmacist Bill Atwell in 1949 and is part of the Atwell tract, a private area that is filled with modern homes. Neutra is known today for some of his more palatial structures, but he focused throughout his career also on modest homes aimed at people with modest incomes.



The **Hardison house** is also in the Atwell tract, at 1415 Vista Road. Architect Don Hardison (1916-2012) designed the home in 1956 for his family. He was a well-known architect for decades, working with partners on such projects as the student union, dining commons and Zellerbach Hall complex at UC Berkeley, and Richmond's acclaimed (but now demolished) Easter Hill housing.

The Hardison home's use of rustic materials, wooden planks, and exterior and interior walls of farmhouse-like, board-and-batten,

show the lack of pretension and the interest in low-cost building that appealed to advanced architects of the time, who were influenced both by Frank Lloyd Wright and by European precedents.

In El Cerrito Hardison designed many of the park clubhouses, the Wildwood town houses, a church and commercial buildings, and other custom homes.

"I always felt that El Cerrito was a refreshing place," Hardison said in a 2010 interview. "They were open to anything new. They were quite receptive to modern architecture."



1465 Vista Road, also in the Atwell tract, is an amazing house that shows many of architect Henry Hill's theatrical touches including glass screens, gold-leafed walls, mosaic tilework, the use of mirrors to create a funhouse effect – and an indoor swimming pool complete with an outrigger canoe.

Hill (1913-1984), who grew up in Berkeley, showed the flamboyant side of modernism, for sure. But he was also focused on its social concern for sheltering people inexpensively in compact homes. One of his "peanut" designs, almost a one-room house but oh so stylish, can be viewed from below at **261 Amherst Avenue in Kensington**.





1244 Brewster Drive, from 1956, is by architect Roger Lee (1920-1981), who lived for many years in a home of his own design in Kensington and was one of the most prolific and successful Bay modernists at the time.

You can find many of his homes, modular in design and often built to allow expansion, throughout El Cerrito, Kensington and Berkeley. Many were built economically and, as in this home, some have a ranch-like appearance from the outside.

Inside they are open plan, light filled and, like many Bay region homes of the period, revel in warm wood and varied textures.



The home's exterior

Dave Weinstein, president of the Historical Society, writes about mid-century modern design and related topics for CA-Modern magazine, a publication of the Eichler Network. This is the first in an occasional series of articles exploring El Cerrito architecture to run in Forge and in our digital newsletter Sparks

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.

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 to be scanned.

Become a member of the El Cerrito Historical Society.

Membership is \$30 a year. We also offer memberships at the sponsor level for \$75 and life memberships for \$400. We accept donations of any amount. A membership form is at <http://elcerritohistoricalsociety.org/howtojoin.html>

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