

Sparks February 2023

Learn about the ‘Ouija mania’ that swept our young city a century ago. It began with a personal tragedy and soon swept up several people who were members of the city’s large Italian American community, family and neighbors of each other – and their young children. “They haven’t eaten for days, they haven’t slept for days,” historian Chris Sterba told attendees at the society’s annual meeting, as he brought to life an event that involved ritualistic behavior to ward off evil spirits, all done under the “direction” of the Ouija board.



Victims of the Ouija Board are seen in a newspaper clipping. The dramatic tale can be viewed through a recording of Chris Sterba's talk. Courtesy of Chris Sterba

Soon the police arrive, he recounted, and the adults “are arrested on the spot.” “The next day it makes headlines across the county,” with the entire city of El Cerrito accused of going mad.

Chris, a professor of history at San Francisco State, tied the Ouija incident into wider issues, including the growth of El Cerrito and the traumas left over from the recently ended Great War and the influenza epidemic of 1918 and 1919.

Watch “[Ouija Mania](#)” on the society’s YouTube channel.

Tour Sunset View Cemetery. Sunset View Cemetery, founded in 1908 and one of the oldest businesses in town, is one of the most fascinating places in El Cerrito or Kensington, which it straddles. Learn the history of this cemetery, admire the cemetery’s waterfall, and find out where the bodies are buried.



The last time Tom Panas led a tour of Sunset View was 2019. Here he discusses the Castro family at the family gravesite. The Castros were the owners of the immense rancho that was later subdivided to create today's urban-scape of El Cerrito and environs. Photo by Dave Weinstein

10:30 a.m. to noon. Saturday, March 18, 2023. The event is free. Attendance is limited. RSVP is required by e-mail to echistorical@gmail.com The meeting place will be e-mailed to those who RSVP.

The historical society inaugurates its 2023 board of directors. At our annual membership meeting in January, the society elected a new member to our board, Jon Bashor, as vice president. The membership also confirmed a board member who had been earlier appointed to the board, Michael K. Martin.

Please meet and welcome them to leadership roles in the historical society.

Jon Bashor was born in Los Angeles, spent his teens in Bakersfield and moved to the Bay Area in 1980 to attend the Graduate School of Journalism at UC Berkeley, where he was a classmate of Dave Weinstein. Jon was a daily newspaper reporter for the Berkeley Gazette, Richmond Independent and the Contra Costa Times. He recently retired after 30 years as a writer and communications manager at the Lawrence Livermore and Lawrence Berkley national laboratories.

He has a penchant for volunteering in the community and has served on the El Cerrito Parks and Recreation Commission, the Friends of the El Cerrito Library board (with Tom Panas) and is former co-president of the Berkeley Clinic Auxiliary, which operates the Turnabout Thrift Store in El Cerrito. He has also contributed a handful of articles to the Forge newsletter.

Michael Martin, member at large, Born in Berkeley, Michael Kerry Martin moved to El Cerrito as a boy, in 1958. By 1972, he was a graduate of, in succession: the El Cerrito Cooperative Preschool, Del Mar Elementary, Portola Jr. High, and El Cerrito High schools. Martin then left for New Haven, Connecticut for his undergraduate degree at Yale, where he

was a record-breaking pole vaulter and among the first Black members of the world-famous Whiffenpoofs. He returned to the East Bay for his law degree, which he earned at Berkeley Law in 1981. Martin then left for Washington D.C. where he spent the next 30 years working as an attorney for the Department of Justice and other federal agencies.

Now back in El Cerrito, Martin operates a solo legal practice, an advocate of public employees. He writes and lectures on social and political matters. He is the divorced father of a daughter and son in their 30s. His passions include music (guitar), long-distance running, and the written word.

The board roster is Dave Weinstein - president, Jon Bashor - vice president, Dianne Brenner - Secretary, Tom Panas - Treasurer, and members at large John Falconer (webmaster), Patricia Durham, and Michael Martin.co

The historical society took part in the Martin Luther King Jr. celebration. This annual celebration is historic in itself, one of the longest running in the Bay Area, a true community-based event. We thank St. Peter C.M.E. Church and the El Cerrito branch of the NAACP for this wonderful event. Joining in the parade (a car parade in recent years) is a highlight of our year.



The Gumbo Band featuring Deborah Nobel entertained as part of the Martin Luther King Jr celebration on January 16. Photo by Dave Weinstein



Janet Abelson, El Cerrito's longest serving city council member, who also has served as mayor, was honored at the King celebration. Janet, who died at age 76 ten days later, clearly enjoyed the event. She is seen with Reverend Willie McDaniel of St. Peter CME Church on the stage at El Cerrito High. With them is Patricia Durham, who has chaired the celebration for the past 25 of the event's 34 years. Pat is also a board member of the historical society. Photo by Dave Weinstein

Have you seen the latest Forge? Our hard copy newsletter the Forge has been delivered to our members, who receive it in the mail as part of their membership benefits. We also distribute it at city hall, the community center, and other spots, so if you are not a member, please look for it.

In the lead article, Michael K. Martin writes about 'The Social Experiment That Worked,' when bussing was used to integrate local schools, including Portola Junior High and El Cerrito High, which he attended, one of relatively few Black students from El Cerrito at the time.



The Forge

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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.

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The latest Forge features a memoir about changing times in the heady days of the early 1970s by society board member Michael K. Martin. Also in the Forge you can read the history of the tavern today called the Little Hill Lounge, and learn about some of El Cerrito's greatest mid-century modern dwellings.

(The Forge is dated December 2022; technical and other issues resulted in a publication delay.)

The society has revised its bylaws. The membership of the society supported the board proposal to revise the rules by which the society, which was founded in 1975, operates, at our January annual member.

The changes were made so the date of our annual meeting will be in February from now on, not in January. With that change, the meeting follows the close of our fiscal year, allowing for a complete annual treasurer's report. We also clarified how votes are taken and quorums are counted at board meetings and at membership meetings. Read our bylaws [here](#).

Among recent donations to our archives is a collection of photos and news clips related to one of El Cerrito's great builders from the 20th center, Marvin Collins. His son, Marvin Collins Jr., donated digital versions of hundreds of valuable images.

Collins was among the most prolific builders in the area, and was deeply involved with community affairs as well. As a member of the El Cerrito Rotary Club, he supervised such charitable construction projects as dugouts and a scoreboard at Cerrito Vista Park.

Among Collins Constructions local projects are the original El Cerrito Plaza, the Wildwood townhouses (designed by architect Don Hardison), the elegant Mechanics Bank on San Pablo Avenue in Albany, Mira Vista and Madera schools, and Sunset View Mortuary (architect William Corlett).



The mortuary at Sunset View Cemetery, built by Marvin Collins construction, looks as resplendent in this architectural rendering as it does today, commanding the view at the top of Fairmount Avenue. Courtesy of Marvin Collins

The collection also includes photos from Mr. Collins' boyhood, and photos of Marge Collins, his wife, who served on the El Cerrito City Council, and as mayor. Marvin Collins (1914-2013) is on the [El Cerrito Wall of Fame](#).

The Historical Society Board meets the second Thursday of the month at 5 p.m., these days via Zoom. Members are encouraged to attend. Meeting rarely take more than an hour. Occasionally we need to change the date of a meeting. We will publicize our meetings in Sparks. Our next meeting is March 9. Topics will include: upcoming programs; archiving; membership drive; and more.

El Cerrito Historical Society is inviting you to a scheduled Zoom meeting.

Topic: El Cerrito Historical Society's Zoom Meeting

Time: Mar 9, 2023 05:00 PM Pacific Time (US and Canada)

Join Zoom Meeting

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/85653726374?pwd=RmVWcC96WjhUY3M0eDZFNlY0d3pZdz09>

Meeting ID: 856 5372 6374

Passcode: 549274

One tap mobile

+16694449171,,85653726374#,,,549274# US

+16699006833,,85653726374#,,,549274# US (San Jose)

The El Cerrito Historical Society produces two publications, the Forge, which is a print publication, which we aim to produce four times a year, and Sparks (from the Anvil), an email publication which we aim to produce monthly. Both hark back to one of El Cerrito's original settlers, William Rust, a blacksmith who worked at his anvil producing, among other things, sparks.

