



BULLETIN

FALL 2012

We're Moving!

As part of its current policy of downsizing and cost-cutting, Contra Costa County is no longer in the business of renting space in other people's buildings.



Since 2000 the County has rented space in our current location on Main Street in Martinez for your historical society and for another county operation. As of July 31 of this year, that arrangement has ended. As of August 1, the CCCHS board must find suitable lodging and arrange its own rental agreements. This is something new for us, and we are on a steep learning curve.

All is not bleak. The County Board of

Supervisors has generously allocated a modest sum to cover our rent for the next five years. This is vitally important, as we do not generate nearly enough income to pay rent for the space that we need.



As you are no doubt aware, our archive is very large, and we need at minimum 5000 square feet of space (and ideally, much more) to house our collection.

Unfortunately, our current landlord is charging us about \$1000 more than the county has allocated for us. And we also are now responsible for our own utilities, which run us an additional \$500 (or so) per month. At this rate, we will exhaust our reserves in a short time. Therefore—we have to move, and soon.

We have been looking, and we have a few possible sites in mind. But the future is still unclear. So we are asking for your help. If you are aware of any suitable space, anywhere in the county, that might be available at a modest sum, or might even be available as a donated space, we would be grateful for that information.

For 61 years, the Contra Costa County Historical Society has been the repository of our county's most valuable historical documents. Our collection is, without doubt, one of the largest and best organized of its kind in the state. Help us to preserve that legacy for future generations.

They Saw the Elephant, and Bob Chandler



On Saturday, June 30, local historian Bob Chandler was the speaker at our second membership meeting for the year. An expert on California Gold Rush history, Bob kept the small but attentive audience captivated with his colorful stories of life in the gold fields, and tied in his narrative with the history of Contra Costa County. Bob's talk took place in the Veterans Hall in Martinez. Bob, who is also a collector of California artifacts, brought in a sample of his collection to enrich the experience. After his presentation, Bob happily answered



the many questions that were thrown at him. Here we see him engaged in ardent conversation with board member Traci Parent. Traci, who is also an historian and author, recently retired from 35 years with the East Bay Regional Park District. Hopefully, the district's loss will be our gain.



Gold Fever!

The exhibit currently on display at the History Center enlightens visitors



about California's Gold Rush and its impact on Contra Costa County. It will close November 17.

Contra Costa played a role as the departure point for Argonauts on their way to the Sierras from the Bay Area. Martinez bloomed and developed as miners took the San Jose to Martinez road and were ferried across the Strait to Benicia. Two other points were used as well: Marsh's Landing (later Brentwood) and New York Landing (later Pittsburg).

Featured in the exhibit: John Marsh as the first American settler in the County, Rancheros Jose Maria Amador and Vincente Martinez who took advantage of the Gold Rush, Chinese miners who came to "Gold Mountain," and a varied display of mining equipment and information.

Underwriters are: The Leshner Foundation, Chevron Federal Credit Union.

On the third Saturday of each month docents and historians will talk with visitors about the Gold Rush and Contra Costa County.



Orinda Historical Society

The History of the Orinda Historical Society

Lucy Hupp Williams

The Orinda Historical Society had its first meeting in November of 1969 in a member's home. The charter, constitution and bylaws were approved in the following year. Board meetings and committee meetings took place in members' homes, over the years, as the Society had no building space.

Artifacts, papers photos, collections, books, etc. were kept in garages attics and homes and protected as well as members could under the circumstances.

When the Orinda Union School closed and the building became the Orinda Community Center a kindergarten room became available for storage of files, map cases and collections and to have a work space. Still much continued to be stored in members homes.



When the decision to build the new library next to the community Center was

made, Historical Society members requested a space for their use. All of the items in the Community Center were packed up and placed in Bekins Storage for several years during the construction of the library.

When the Orinda Library was completed, the Orinda Historical Society finally had a home!



Orinda Historical Museum Mission Statement

The Orinda Historical society is a membership based non-profit organization whose mission is to:

- Preserve the history of the Orinda area.
- Protect, preserve and display artifacts, documents and images in our museum.
- Educate our members and the general public about the Orinda area history to enhance the quality of life within our community.
- Represent Orinda historical interests to local government.

Editor's Note: The Orinda Historical Society is in need of volunteers to continue its work. Volunteers are needed to staff the facility, edit the newsletter and the website, organize the collection, and general support. If you can help out, please contact the museum at: 925-254-1353. Or contact president Lucy Hupp Williams directly, at: 650-349-3382. Her e-mail address is: rolfegolf@earthlink.net. The Orinda Historical Society is located in the library building, Room 106, 24 Orinda Way.

Can't Get Enough Train Stuff?



A new history booklet on electric trains in Contra Costa is available for \$5 at the History Center. Titled Before BART: Electric Railroads Link Contra Costa County and written by Beverly Lane,

this booklet provides a short history of the early twentieth century electric interurban railroads. This unique publication with plenty of photographs is proving popular as a gift for train buffs.

El Sobrante's Canyon Park and Rancho Vista Neighborhoods – The “Flat-top” Smith Legacy

Maurice Abraham

Earl Smith, one of the Bay Area's largest post-war home builders, was an early influence on two nationally acclaimed builders, California's Joseph Eichler and Kansas City Builder, Donald Drummond. Eichler and Drummond homes from the '50s and '60s today have a dedicated, cult-like following of owners -- many artists, designers, architects, and realtors among them -- who appreciate their open plans, post-and-beam structure, and expansive glass.

In the early 1950s, Earl Smith's homes stood out; he employed flat roofs on his houses, a choice that earned him the nickname "Flat Top" Smith. It was those Earl Smith home designs that initially inspired Eichler and Drummond to start building unconventionally modern tract homes. And those milestone Smith designs can be seen locally in El Sobrante's Canyon Park and Rancho Vista subdivisions. Canyon Park, a relatively secluded early 1950's neighborhood of modest flat-roofed homes, is situated just southwest of the San Pablo Dam Road and Clark Road intersection. Rancho Vista was built a few years earlier, in the late 1940s, and is situated just west of the intersection of the Dam Road and El Portal.

Joseph Eichler studied the construction techniques of Earl Smith, especially the poured concrete floors and flat roofs Smith had used in constructing defense worker's housing in Richmond. He would go on to use the Smith flat-roof design for his earliest housing development, 104-unit Sunnyvale Manor, in the South Bay's Sunnyvale community. For Donald Drummond, it would be his wife that would first see a Smith flat-top and introduce the design to him.

During a 1951 visit to San Francisco, Francie Drummond met “Flat-top” Smith and toured his East Bay houses. She was quite impressed, particularly by the way his new house plan functioned, and returned

home to Kansas City with copies of Smith's flat-top plans. Don liked what he saw and began building flat-top homes from Smith's design.

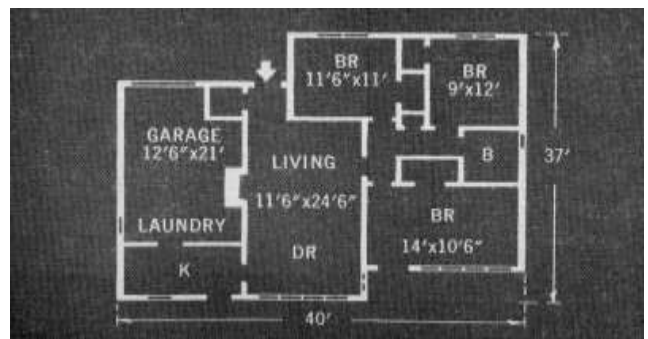


Earl Smith

Front view of a '50s Earl Smith home



Rear view of a '50s Earl Smith home



An Earl Smith home floor plan

However, Kansas City's harsher weather demanded changes in materials and structure, but the overall Smith design was not compromised. The vintage photos shown here are a Smith model and floor plan of that era.

In the early '50s Bay Area, Earl “Flat-top” Smith had achieved remarkable volume with his modestly-priced houses; he built 2700 new homes in 1953 in over fourteen different Bay Area cities. Smith's 1953

houses ranged in price from \$7000 to just over \$8,000, while Eichler's Bay Area models during that year cost between \$14,000 and \$20,000. In time, both Eichler and Drummond dropped the original Smith design in favor of a more modern and pricier architect-designed product. The Eichler firm built over 11,000 homes in both Northern and Southern California; the Drummond firm, building in a smaller more conservative market, constructed 1,100 homes. Both builders clearly left a lasting legacy.



*A mid-'50s
South Bay
Eichler Home*

There is yet another fascinating, albeit

indirect, connection to Earl Smith and his Canyon Park and Rancho Vista homes. His unusual flat-top homes appear to have been inspired in part by the work of architectural-great Frank Lloyd Wright. Earl Smith's use of the flat-roof with wide overhangs, large windows that visually brought outdoors in and concrete slab-on-grade floor with radiant heating were all characteristic of Wright's "Usonian Homes".

The "Usonian Homes" were a group of approximately sixty middle-income family homes designed by Wright beginning in 1936 with the Jacobs House in

Madison, Wisconsin and widely dispersed throughout the United States. The



"Usonian Homes" were typically small, single-story dwellings without a garage or much storage, L-shaped to fit around a garden terrace on odd (and cheap) lots, with native materials, flat roofs and large cantilevered overhangs for passive solar heating and natural cooling, natural lighting with clerestory windows, and radiant-floor heating.

A strong visual connection between the interior and exterior spaces is an important characteristic of all "Usonian Homes". Variants of the Jacobs House design are still in existence today and do not look overly dated. The Usonian design is considered among the aesthetic origins of the popular "ranch" tract home popular in the American west of the 1950s.

There is also documented evidence of Wright's influence on Joseph Eichler and his homes. In 1943, Eichler moved his family into a rented Wright-designed home (the 1939 Bazett House) in Hillsborough, California. About living in that Wright house, Eichler once said, "I admired Wright's rich design, with its wooden walls and beamed ceiling, and I asked myself if such houses could be built for ordinary people".

However, neither Smith's nor Eichler's early homes could approach the overall design, character and quality of Wright's homes. After all, they were mass producing homes for the average post-war buyer, not for the more financially well-off market that eagerly sought out Wright's talent. What Smith and Eichler clearly did do was borrow certain design elements (flat roofs, wide overhangs, large glass areas) and construction details (slab floors with radiant heat, open beam ceilings) that could be cost-effectively incorporated into a mass-market product.

Knowing the origin of El Sobrante's Canyon Park and Rancho Vista neighborhoods casts these homes in a new light. While many of the flat-tops have been extensively altered, including pitched roofs and in some instances second stories added. Some well preserved and maintained examples still exist, and owners of the remaining flat-top homes may gain a new appreciation for the heritage of their home and their neighborhood. That appreciation may inspire continued preservation and restoration of these homes. And those home buyers inclined toward mid-century modern design might find the El Sobrante homes an attractive, affordable choice.

History Center~Business as Usual



Mailing Party for our Summer Appeal, left to right: Barbara Middleton, Nancy Colchico, Mark Heinlein, Becky Rolfs, Steve James, Henry Counden, Rita Gott, Jennifer Apkarian and Mike Walford, background.



The Cook family visiting the History Center to do genealogical research, is pictured with Tom Panas of the El Cerrito Historical Society on the left, and Dean McLeod, a professional genealogist who volunteers at the HC on Wednesdays, on the right. Between them, from left, are Sharilyn Cook, Michelle Cook Wagner, Michael Cook, and Joanne Rubio.



Leila Rock and Bill Sharkey. Leila is a DVC intern helping to update our Historic Resources file. Lately, she has been preparing a

donation by the Sharkey family for use in our collection. Bill is one of our honorary board members.

CCCHS MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

___ New ___ Renew ___ Gift

Date: _____

Name(s) _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____

Zip _____ Phone _____

E-Mail _____

___ Please check here if you would prefer to receive your newsletter by e-mail—saves money and trees

DUES:

___ Individual \$30 ___ Couple \$50 ___ Sponsor \$75

___ Patron \$150 ___ Corporate \$500

___ Benefactor \$1000 ___ Student \$15

Your membership renewal date can be determined by checking the address label on this newsletter. If you receive your newsletter via e-mail please call the History Center at: [925-229-1042](tel:925-229-1042)

CCCHS Members Visit Bancroft Library

On Thursday, September 27, from 1:00 to 4:00 PM, 30 eager historians will meet in Berkeley at The Bancroft Library for a personal tour of the treasures of this world-famous repository of California history and so much more.

We will learn about preservation of manuscripts and photographs and will visit numerous divisions of the Library including the Regional Oral History Office, the Mark Twain Papers, the Center for the Tebtunis Papyri and the Magnes Collection of Jewish Art and Life. Registration must be limited to 30. A flyer will appear in your mailbox containing full details including cost, a registration form and where to park the car if you do not come by Bart.

Direct questions to **925-254-2295**

From The Executive Director:



As Summer turns to Fall, and the challenges of a new quarter begin, I want once again to thank all of our members for their contributions to the growth and health of the Society. As you will have read in other parts of our *Bulletin*, we are faced with more decisions about our future location. The Society is lucky

to have an active and dedicated board and advisory board who are working on our behalf most likely to find a new place for the Archives to exist.

After almost 13 years at 610 Main Street and 30 years in existence as of 2013, the History Center may be moving. It accomplished such a move once before when it moved from one room in a school building in Pleasant Hill to the approximately 5,000 square feet with our wonderful display windows in what was Hilson's Department Store in Martinez. As soon as a definite decision is made, we will let you know. A move, if it is made, will be expensive. Moreover, though the County Supervisors continue to support the Society, they decided this Spring to change the way in which the rent payments were funded. So, while the good news is that the County is still providing approximately \$3500 per month toward rent, the bad news is that the rent has been raised to \$4600 per month and we will now be responsible for utilities that the County has always paid. We will definitely be asking for your support, both financial and physical, as we face this shortfall in rent or decide to move to another space.

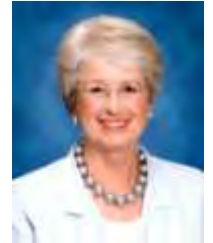
Meanwhile, our Society continues to grow and flourish. Our new exhibit, *Gold Fever!*, is bringing in many visitors. We have published a new booklet based on our *Before BART* exhibit. Our dedicated volunteers continue to put more and more information into our archival database and onto the website. Our website has a lot of depth and is continually updated. Check it out. Also please like us on Facebook, our new venture. As always, we can really use your help to move our many archival

projects forward. I am also looking for an administrative assistant to help with filing and special projects. This is a wonderful opportunity to improve your office skills. Please call us to become an active member of our volunteer force.

Sincerely, *Priscilla*

From The President:

As you can see from other articles in this *Bulletin*, our focus in the past months has been a future History Center location. The archives have been open to the public and physically located in only two locations since 1984: the closed school buildings in Pleasant Hill and our current site at 610 Main Street in Martinez. Contra Costa County has supported us from the beginning and continues to support us, I am pleased to say. However, we are currently renting the Main Street space on a month-to-month basis at a cost which is stretching our resources.



Many thanks to the hard-working CCCHS ad hoc search committee: John Burgh, Steve James, Webb Johnson, plus Executive Director Priscilla Couden and Board members Andrea Blachman and Harriett Burt.

And thank you to the many volunteers who provide help to our steady stream of researchers. Please join them by calling 229-1042.

Beverly Lane



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