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THE LEFTOVERS

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September 9, 2020: A Sign of the Times

Editor



Trail along north side of the San Pablo Reservoir, just outside of Kennedy Grove, September 9, 2020, about noon

I have lived for over three-quarters of a century, and I don't recall a day like this. Twilight all day. Still and eerie. Apocalyptic is an over-used word, but it seems appropriate to describe that day; the red, somber sky was chilling and just plain scary. My wife, Clementina, and I took a walk from our house on Hillside Drive and wandered through Kennedy Grove, looking at the so-familiar landscape that now seemed so unfamiliar. It was smoky, of course, and we shouldn't have been out and about, but the sheer strangeness of it all drew us outside, for just a little while.

By the time that you read this, the fires that caused this atmospheric anomaly may still be blazing. It seems that our fall season is also now our fire season, something we can expect. It wasn't always so,

of course. Yet, El Sobrante is no stranger to fires, especially grass fires. The early all-volunteer fire department was very busy in the summertime, responding to grass fires that could easily be seen from almost anywhere in the town. Visible smoke was usually the first sign of a fire, and whoever was available would jump into the only fire engine, housed at the Skow Dairy, and race to the fire. Other volunteers would often show up in their own vehicles. In 1942, the growing department had 3 small engines, and the department had its own building on Appian Way.

While grass fires were considered normal in the El Sobrante of the 1940s, they were fundamentally the result of the profound changes in the natural environment caused by the European (Spanish, Mexican, and Anglo) settlement of the area. The native perennial grasses were completely out-competed by the annual grasses imported to feed the enormous herds of cattle owned by the rancheros. While the Native Americans did practice controlled burns to encourage the growth of grain-bearing grasses and other useful plants, the introduction of the non-native grasses forever changed the ecology of the area, and led, inevitably, to more frequent and uncontrolled burns of vast stretches of our hillsides. Population growth complicated the lives of the fire-fighters even further.



Way (opening in 1949, across the street from the old station) with new engines, and, for the first time, a paid Fire Chief (Charlie Matteson, right).

The growing population not only added to the housing in the area, but also to the vegetation. This is true wherever people plant themselves; they like greenery around them. So they plant trees and bushes and ground cover, and before you know it, what was a fairly open and somewhat barren landscape has become a garden, home to many, mostly non-native species, which provide even more fuel for a fire to feed on. Take a look at the photo at the top of the next page, taken along Santa Rita Road in 1955.

Fighting a grass fire was a hot and uncomfortable business, but it was not fundamentally dangerous. It was mainly hard work. But a structure fire is a different matter, and the simple tools of the rural fire department were inadequate. People could die in a house fire, and more sophisticated equipment was needed, as was training. In answer to this need, the community got together and raised the money for a much improved station on Appian



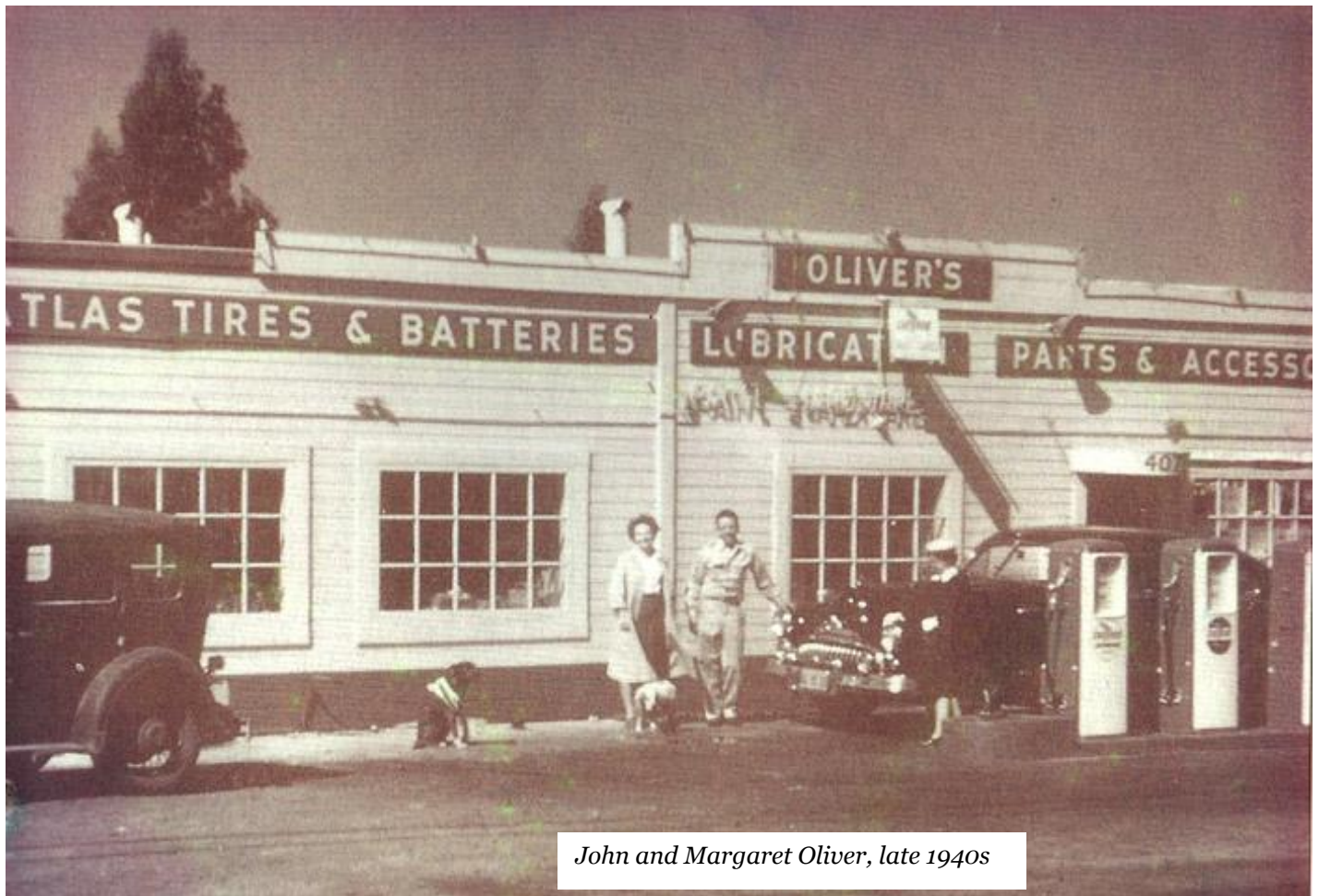
In the distance we can see the curved roofline of the brand-new De Anza High School; besides the school and the houses, there is little to draw the attention.

Below is a photo taken from the same spot almost 60 years later. The change is dramatic, and it



is very common to see such a difference no matter where you happen to live in California. The hills and valleys that we see in photos taken a hundred or so years ago commonly look clear of lush vegetation, showing instead the native brush, oaks and bay following the ephemeral stream beds, with surrounding open spaces

As an historical society, it is our responsibility to note and mark the historic changes that take place around us, often without our noticing. Our local environment has undergone dramatic changes just within the last 60 years or so. So too has the wider environment undergone change, perhaps even more dramatic, and we have experienced that change just within the last few years. That orange sky on September 9 was sobering, and a challenge to us all to make changes that will benefit not only our local environment but the wider world.



John and Margaret Oliver, late 1940s

It has come to our attention that, as of September 1 of this year, Oliver's Hardware store has been sold. The details of the sale are sketchy, but it is our understanding that the new owner intends to continue to run the business as a hardware outlet, but not as part of the ACE chain.

Oliver's Hardware is, with the possible exception of Ed's Tavern, the longest-running business in our town, with ownership maintained by the same family. For 77 years, Oliver's has been an integral part of the downtown business community, the local go-to place for that odd nut or bolt that could not be found anywhere else. It will be difficult to imagine El Sobrante without this familiar presence.



The original operation, which was apparently a hardware store with two gas pumps, was bought by John Oliver (left) in October of 1943. John's son Bill was in the Army Air Corps (later the Air Force) at the time, and when he heard that his father had purchased this small business in a little nowhere community, he thought he had "lost his mind." When he was discharged at the end of the War he joined his father, somewhat reluctantly, in running the business, which, with the rapid increase in population, was doing fairly well. With a natural head for business and an outgoing, social personality, Bill was soon running the overall operation, while John kept himself occupied with the mechanical end of things, which he preferred.



By 1952, Bill had added three new gas pumps and generally expanded the operation.

In 1954 the business underwent an even more radical upgrade, with a complete

remodel of the store and the addition of a completely new Service island and repair facility.



In general, things were going great. But this does not mean that there were not hiccups along the way. For instance, since gasoline sales were going so well, Bill decided to open a completely new station across the street, at the corner of La Colina and the Dam Road. This was a Union 76 station, unlike the Standard Oil

(Chevron) station that he had started with. However, while business boomed at the original Chevron station, for some reason the Union station just across the street never made a profit. Bill could never quite figure out why that side of the street was unprofitable, but that's just the way it was.

Still, business was booming in the growing town. Sales at the Chevron station consistently beat out other local dealers, and in 1953 Bill was awarded an all-expense paid trip to New York. In 1955, after two more years of superior performance, the Company awarded Bill a wristwatch, which apparently was considered sufficient. The two men in the photo, looking like something out of a 1950s police series, are Chevron officials.



In 1956, the business just to the east of the hardware store, Pete's Club, suffered a series of suspicious fires, and had to be torn down. Arson was suspected, and the co-owner (along with her husband) Jeanne DeGeorgis, was brought to trial. However, the evidence was deemed insufficient and Jeanne was found not guilty. As a result of the destruction of the building, Bill Oliver was able to acquire the now vacant space, and expand both his business and the parking area.



Richard Oliver: picture taken at a Chamber of Commerce mixer some years ago. Behind him is a photo of the hardware store in the early 1950s.

learn, are simple: Richard is ready to retire and spend more time with the family, and the kids have not shown keen interest in carrying on the enterprise; this is a familiar scenario.

The Oliver's name will continue, as seen in this recent photo (the "ACE" name is still barely visible). In addition, the gas station and convenience mart will remain in the possession of the Oliver family (the business is currently leased out).

The El Sobrante Historical Society recognizes the unique and powerful connection between the Oliver business and family to the history and trajectory of the growth of our town. All things come to an end, and while we are saddened to hear of the transfer of this venerable business, we wish Richard and his family a happy and well-earned retirement.

El Sobrante continued to grow, as did Oliver's hardware and auto service business. By the 1980s, his son, Richard had begun to take over the running of the operation, and Bill began to think about retiring. By the 1990s, Bill had moved to the town of Palm Desert and Richard had made the business his own.

The reasons for selling the business, as far as we have been able to



Most everyone knows a dam and reservoir was built at San Pablo Creek in the early 1900s. Plans to build a dam in the area started as far back as the late 1890s. At the time, it was deemed one of the largest engineering projects in the history of the Bay region and the largest of its kind in the West, as well as one of the biggest construction projects ever undertaken by the Peoples Water Company. The construction was to begin on the property known as the Clancy ranch in El Sobrante. Arthur L. Adams, whose planning for the project was started in 1907, was the engineer in charge. Work on the dam began and ground was broken on 11 September 1916 with an initial work force of sixty workmen. It was estimated to be completed within two years. The San Pablo Dam Project was finally completed in early November 1921, but not without opposition, protests, and various court battles.

However, there may be some information about the history of its construction you have never known or heard about. The construction site was a harbinger of disease during the Fall and Winter of 1916, when the camp where the workers were housed became contaminated by typhoid. The contractor on the project was Bates, Borland and Ayer who employed 300 men, and many lived in the labor camp provided for them. It was intended that spring water be supplied for drinking purposes and for their personal use. However, the spring water was not always available, and the men would drink from the nearby creek which flowed through the camp. They also used water pumped from the creek and piped into a bunk house for use in the washrooms.



BB&A steam locomotive, SP Reservoir, June 1917

AWARDS MADE TO TWO VICTIMS OF AN EPIDEMIC

**Industrial Commission Finds Con-
struction Camp Water Con-
tained Typhoid Germs**

One of the first claims made against Bates, Borland and Ayer, the contractors on the dam project, was by William McLeod, a carpenter working for a Piedmont Contracting company. McLeod stated he contracted it while working on the “San Pablo Creek dam” when he was living in the company’s camp. Aside from Frank Price, another claim was made by Samuel Nelson. Typhoid fever was the latest issue brought before the State Accident Commission on this

project and was claimed to be an “industrial accident.” It was discovered that water taken from the creek was found to contain the typhoid bacillus and that the whole watershed was contaminated. A report about the water-borne outbreak of 52 cases had also appeared in the Journal of the American Medical Association of June 1917, and showed that typhoid cases peaked in late November, 1916. Fortunately, there were no fatalities and no new cases were reported after December 1916 when the water was chlorinated in cooperation with the Bureau of Sanitary Engineering of the California State Board of Health.

A New Sign for our History Center

Emil Munkres



The El Sobrante Historical Society, through the efforts of Lyle Miller, recently hired a local El Sobrante print shop to create a sign for our new History Center. Eric Datanagan, with "Print Em All", did a wonderful job from conception to delivery. The new sign is not only



simple, stylish and beautiful, it was completed and delivered within days of our ordering it. Print Em All has graciously declined to accept

payment for the job, insisting that ESHS welcome this sign as a generous donation! Thank you Eric for making this happen! We also want to give a big thank you to Dolan Lumber for providing the nice piece of birch that was used for framing the sign. Thanks!

Ed. Note: Emil was responsible for the installation. Thanks Emil!

The Leftovers is published quarterly. Articles for publication are encouraged, as are comments. See e-mail address below.

The El Sobrante Historical Society is a formal nonprofit organization, and donations may be tax-deductible. We are dedicated to the preservation and display of the history of the community of El Sobrante. We depend on our members and local residents for the information, artifacts, and photographs that make up the society's collection. Become a member and help out! It's free and simple. Just visit the website, at elsobranthehistoricalsociety.com.

Visit us on **Facebook**:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/ElSobranteHistoricalSociety/>

Mission Statement

To promote the awareness and appreciation of El Sobrante Valley history through preservation and education, and chronicling of the community's heritage for current and future generations.

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