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THE LEFTOVERS

Issue #48

Fall 2023

Sunday, September 17th--Annual Stroll: One of the Best *Donald Bastin*



Everything seemed to come together. In contrast to most years, when the weather is typically hot and windy, and last year, which was crazy with both rain and wind, this year was mild and pleasant. The weather encouraged a healthy turnout and an inclination to simply, well, **stroll**.

There were a lot of booths. But it was the upbeat spirit of the crowd of strollers that was most noticeable. That spirit was captured by the exuberant joy of the lad at left, flying off the huge soft mattress positioned near the Pedaler bike shop.

Of course we were there, advertising the presence of our historical society and our History Center. In past



years, the number of visitors to our booth was modest, and we had ample time to sit, get a little lunch from the California Thai restaurant, behind us, and generally take in the passing scene. But this year was different; the three of us who manned the booth, myself, my wife Clementina, and board member Emil Munkres, found ourselves engaged in almost constant conversation. Of course there were



questions about local history, but also many concerning local homes. The youngish new homeowners were eager to learn about the history of their property, along with the history of the community of which they were now a part. And they were clearly proud to be a part of this community.

Naturally, many locals live within the city limits of Richmond, but for these folks the attitude is always the same: that their residence within the Richmond boundary is a mere “technicality.” Sales of our book on the history of El Sobrante were satisfyingly brisk. The parade was the usual

eclectic collection of groups, including schools, marching bands and rally girls, scouting, our own Green Team, the Sikh community (above), cars with local notables, and, of course, the horses. Our

community has a long tradition of caring for, displaying, and



just plain riding horses to get from one place to another. The steeds in the parade were beautiful, well-trained, and expertly handled.



One of the things that particularly stands out in our signature annual event is the healthy diversity of our population and the easy and comfortable interaction between people of all ethnicities. The apparently unconscious non-recognition of differences is a credit to our community, and goes a long way in explaining the

pride which our citizens take in being a part of El Sobrante.

All in all, it was a great Stroll.

HOMES PERILED:

Slides Caused by Heavy Rains Endanger Three Sobrante Homes



Mudslides in El Sobrante were fairly common in the past, and can still be a concern today. The problem, as we all know, is that much of the local soil consists of a fairly thin layer of loose soil over a thick layer of dense clay. When the rains are heavy, the topsoil has a tendency to give way, and slide off the compact clay underneath. In a previous issue of the *Leftovers*, we looked at the extensive rain damage that destroyed or damaged the homes in the Montara tract, along Hillcrest Road, in February 1958, as

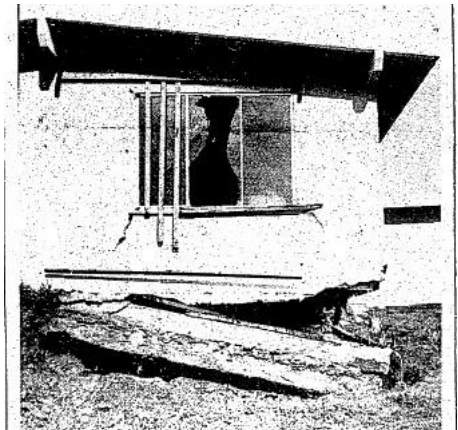
noted in the local *El Sobrante Herald*. Lesser known is the damage that also occurred during the same time period, along Pebble Drive, in what was known as the Carmel Highland tract. This event was brought to our attention by one of our readers, who lived in one of the damaged homes. Her home survived for a few years, but was ultimately determined to be structurally unsafe, and the family moved away. The following is a letter sent to us by that former resident, Theresa La Treille Norman:

I was four years old in 1958 when my family moved to El Sobrante, CA. Our house was cramped, with seven children and my parents on 613 Pebble Drive. The house was a flat-roofed 3-bedroom, 2-bath home. The LaTreille home was only a few blocks from El Sobrante Elementary School and Chan Manor Market, run by Gene and Martha. As I got older, I'd buy candy from the friendly shop owners with my brothers and sister. Our home on the side of a hill was under an active groundwater spring discovered by a Contra Costa County Geological Survey years later. Rain would raise the groundwater, weakening our house's foundation.

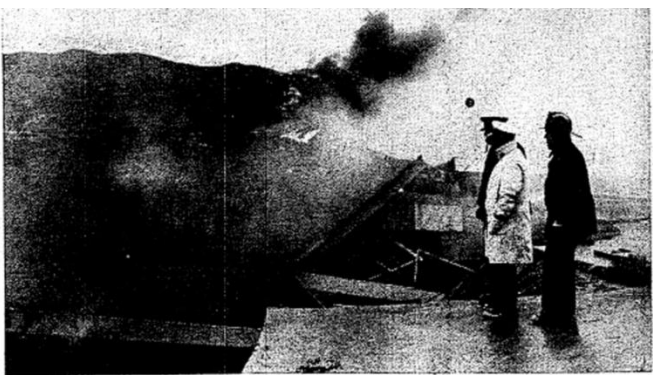
The surrounding hillside was a slip-and-slide consisting of rock, mud, and water. The weight of such mud would be too much for anything in its way, let alone a house. After a storm, a thick, slow-moving river of mud would pile up against our house. The firefighters worked in a frenzy, using powerful water hoses to move the flow out of the path of a home. Over the next few days, my dad worked tirelessly after a long day of work and with the help of neighbors to build a concrete retaining wall. The hope was to keep the creeping mud river out of the track of our homes and divert it further down the hill. Sadly, other homes in worse spots than ours on the hillside began to slide. Our house sustained so much damage from a terrible storm that it became uninhabitable. We had to leave it and move to the Rolling Hills neighborhood in San Pablo, then to another rental on Appian Way, and eventually relocated further south to Fremont, CA.

I'll never forget the mighty river of mud as chunks of the hillside flowed into our garage in El Sobrante, and for us, that memory was all that remains.

The photo of the damaged home at the top of this article is that of Robert Rhea, 659 Pebble drive (we do not have a picture of the LaTreille home). This home was identified as the one in our color image (donated by member Earl Combs, who has been taking pictures of the local area all of his long life) by comparing it to the image at right taken from the *Herald*.



WHAT'S LEFT of what just a month ago was the beautiful \$15,000 home of Mr. and Mrs. Robert W. Rhea at 659 Pebble Drive. Heavy rains in the past three weeks have caused the Rhea home and two others in El Sobrante to be abandoned and unless the weather takes a turn for the better, several other homes in the area are in danger of a similar fate. Photo by Castillo.



HOMES FIRED—With the approval of the home owners and the county, the El Sobrante Fire Department Thursday, put the torch to two of the three homes on Pebble Drive which have been wrecked by recent landslides. The two homes destroyed belonged to Arthur L. Hale and Robert W. Rhea. Shown above supervising the burning are, left to right, are Dave Chandler, Fire Chief Charlie Matteson and Russell Clayton. Photo by Castillo.

Eventually, at least 2 homes were completely destroyed and were burned down by the El Sobrante Fire Department. This was not an unusual practice at the time; it provided an opportunity to train the men in proper fire suppression in a structure.

At right is a photo of Theresa

and her family. Terri originally contacted us some months back, as she would be traveling through our area on her way to her out-of-state home. She wondered if we had any photos of the slide; we do, of course, compliments of Mr. Combs. Seeing the images brought back many memories of her early life in El Sobrante. Unfortunately, she was unable to identify her home among our photos.

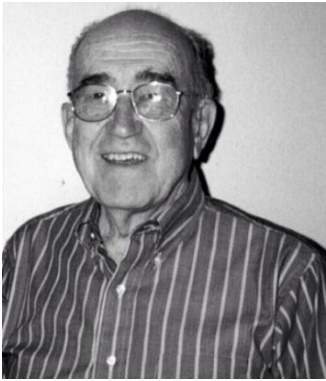
To Terri's right is her daughter, Ashley. Behind her are her husband, Steve, and her son-in-law, Courtney Smith. Board member and treasurer, Steve James, stands to the left of the group.



Donald Bastin

Remembering "Bicycle Bob" Letford

Roxanne Miravalle



Robert Joseph "Bob" Letford was born in Beltrami County, Minnesota in 1920 to Kasota Letford and Eva Marie Durand. His family roots on his father's side are from Scotland who came to the US in 1840, settling in the village of Lamberton, Minnesota c1855 in a place named after their hometown in the UK.

Bob served six years in the US Army as a Sergeant, enlisting in 1941 with Battery "B" in the 257th AAA AW Battalion and records show he was living in Riverside, California. During this time he married Floradele Gauthier in 1942. By 1944, he settled in Richmond, California and worked as an electrician at the Standard Oil Refinery. He moved his family to El Sobrante in 1948 where he was active in the Veterans of El Sobrante and played catcher on their baseball team.

However, he is best remembered as "Bob the Bicycle Man." Prior to opening his bike shop, his wife died leaving him a widower with three young children – Roberta, 12; Gary, 9; and Donna, 5. In 1957 with \$500, he started the El Sobrante Schwinn Bicycle Shop which was originally located at 4040 San Pablo Dam Road next to the Dean Brothers Garage and across from Oliver's Hardware. All the while, Bob was involved with many local community organizations. In



Letford's Bicycle Shop 1958



February 1966, he married Marie Harrison.

Sometime in the early 1960s, the shop was relocated to its current location on El Portal Drive (formerly Road 20) that was previously McFarland's Sheet Metal and Heating firm. After

30 years in business and service to the community he retired. His son Gary continued his father's legacy as "the second-generation bicycle man" and as its owner and operator. Bob passed away August 30, 2014, at the age of 94 in El Sobrante.

Bob celebrated 20 years in business, and it was mentioned in this February 1977 article in the Richmond Independent.

Also, in the Spring of 1977, ever concerned for the safety of his patrons, Bob ran several ads for the El Sobrante Schwinn Cyclery Shop which was

ES Cyclery 20th year for bike business

EL SOBRANTE — Bob Letford, owner of the El Sobrante Schwinn Cyclery, currently is in his 20th year of business at 5057 El Portal Drive.

Letford is fresh from another big year during which his firm sold some 1,000 cycles along with a big volume of parts and accessories.

Although last year falls way short of his biggest year in history — 1969 when 2,200 cycles were sold — it still compares to many other shops of the same size, represents heavy business.

And the Schwinn Motor cross, the one-speed, 20-inch dirt bike, selling at about \$125 apiece, remains the most popular.

When Letford started the business, his son, Gary, then 11, worked with him. It had been planned that the youth would eventually take over the business.

But instead, when he was about 22, he left for an



BIKE SHOP OWNER B. LETFORD, ASSISTANT I. WATTS AMIDST DISPLAY

executive post in the bike industry. He now is district manager for the Wilson Bicycle Co. distributorship in Southern California.

However, the owner still has hopes that the business will be passed down to family members. For, a grandson Alan King now is a fulltime employee and the younger Jeff King, a part-time worker.

Other employees are Ian Watts and Eddie Galli. Among the firm's customers are representatives of three generations of families who have been satisfied with the repair work and other facets of the business over the years.

Some 500 bikes are on display at the shop. Included are three wheelers, tandems, unicycles, exercisers and solo bikes.

Skateboards are also sold there.

Accessories include seats, handlebars, chain locks, fenders, paint made by

Swinn to match its bikes, reflective tape, headlights, horns, tire pumps, baskets, knapsacks, repair tools and "kiddie carriers."

Letford, a cyclist himself, also runs a second shop in

Clear Lake.

The El Sobrante store is open six days a week from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Mondays through Fridays and until 5 p.m. on Saturdays.

Customers come from as

SCHWINN BICYCLES

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SALES & SERVICE
Quality Bicycles at Sensible Prices

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- ✓ UNICYCLES
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PARTS & ACCESSORIES
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223-3440

EL SOBRANTE SCHWINN CYCLERY
5057 EL PORTAL DRIVE
El Sobrante

BOB LETFORD

BICYCLE BOB SAYS...
The state law requires reflectors on both front and rear fenders and wheels.

accompanied with some bike advice with the tag line "Bicycle Bob says..." as seen here in this March 1977 ad from the Berkeley Gazette. Another ad advised, "Tight spokes prevent punctured tubes, worn tires, and bent rims."

The mere mention of El Sobrante Schwinn on social media brings a flood of comments and memories from those who remember getting their first bike from Bob's Bike Shop. His daughter, Donna Letford Salvador, also chimed in providing some very interesting history on

her father's life and his shop. Bob was laid to rest in a private interment ceremony at the Golden Gate National Cemetery in San Bruno.

UNCOVERING WHITECLIFF

Emil Munkres

In the mid 1950s, May Valley was a prime location for real estate development opportunities. People wanted to buy homes and live in rural El Sobrante – in the country, with the rolling hills and warmer weather. Early post WWII developments like Rancho Vista, La Colina Hill, Earl "Flat-Top" Smith's "Canyon Park" and Sherwood Forest had all proved to be successful and highly profitable.

In 1954 and 55, the Utah construction company built over 300 homes along May Rd and on the hillsides behind Sheldon School, including the new streets of Sheldon, Nelson, Stephen and Utah Drives. These 2- and 3-bedroom, 1-bath houses were affordable, with flat roofs and single-car open carports. Two-storey homes were also available. All of these new Utah Company homes were incorporated and annexed into the newly expanded and quickly spreading city limits of Richmond. This was an issue that was strongly contested and opposed by many in the existing El Sobrante community. Many longtime residents saw the City of Richmond's encroachment into the area as a

threat to the rural nature and lifestyle of El Sobrante. Others saw this as a definite improvement. Along with being subject to city taxes, these new Richmond neighborhoods would receive city services, infrastructure and maintenance, including sidewalks, sewers, police and street lighting. And the existence of the brand new Sheldon Elementary and De Anza High schools are probably a main reason that many people chose to buy homes here.



When the Utah construction company suddenly went out of business in 1955, the development project was acquired by the Whitecliff Homes Company, an experienced and well known developer. They continued the project in 1956 and

1957, going further up May Rd toward Valley View and up the hillsides. Known as “Whitecliff Park” and sometimes “De Anza Vista”, these newer modern homes would be larger 3-4 bedroom, 2-bath designs, with pitched roofs and fully enclosed 2-car garages. By 1959, the Whitecliff company would build close to 500 homes in this first Whitecliff Park project.

By 1959-60, Whitecliff had crossed Valley View Rd to extend May Road further up the hillside. This next new development phase was promoted as “Whitecliff Park Knolls”. This construction would continue for years. Over the next 5 decades, many more new development projects would break ground, pushing many thousands of brand new Richmond homes even higher up and further back into the hills.



Bill Edwards lives just a few doors down from me on May Road. He’s a fixture. Bill is one of those people that make you feel like he’s always been there. I can remember him from the mid 1970s. I didn’t know him then but he’d always have antique and classic automobiles on display in his driveway and garage. Mostly Lincolns and Fords. We called him Lincoln Man.

Bill was born in 1929 and grew up in Berkeley and Albany. When he was a young man, he began working as a mechanic at various East Bay car dealerships, mostly Ford and Lincoln/Mercury. By the mid 1950s, Bill’s sister was living in the new Sherwood Forest and Bill was very impressed. He began thinking about buying his own home and started driving around, checking out all of the new building projects going on in El Sobrante. It would be like living in a park! Bill saw all the Utah homes and watched the Whitecliff Park project beginning in the summer of ‘56. Bill then made his decision.

On Sunday, Nov 11, Veteran’s Day, 1956, at the age of 27, Bill drove up May Road and selected the bare dirt lot that he wanted. The “best” lot. Then he had to choose a floor plan. The Whitecliff brochures offered 5 or 6 models to choose from: Crestwood, Fleetway, Ridgeview, Hearthside, Saratoga and Faircrest, with prices ranging from \$15,500 to \$17,500. Bill chose the Ridgeview (at right).

Exactly 110 days later, on March 1st, 1957, Bill and his wife moved into their just finished home. By the next day, every single box had been unpacked and every item put in its place. Bill negotiated a price of exactly \$15,000 and ended up with a mortgage of \$80 a month!

While Bill was relaying these stories a few months ago, he stepped inside for a moment and returned to show me his two original and pristine Whitecliff Park brochures in full color with pull-out color pages for each model of house plan offered. Wow!



“Whitecliff Park on the gentle rolling slopes of a great, lush green valley, between San Francisco Bay and Orinda. The setting is idyllic, the area exclusive, the view dramatic. And nearby, new Super Freeway No. 40 takes you quickly to the City.”

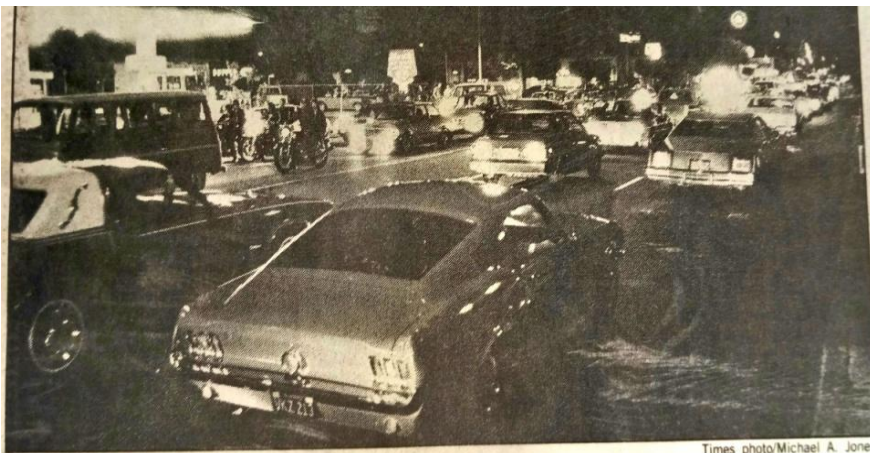
“An exclusive rural community.”

And nowhere in all of this literature is “El Sobrante” ever mentioned!

When Bill moved in, there were no houses yet across the street or up May Rd past Santa Rita. There was no telephone service on his block except for the single telephone attached to the pole on the corner. You could hear it ringing from his house. For several months, when that phone rang, Bill or his wife Joanne would have to walk out to the pole, take a message and go find whichever neighbor the message was for and deliver it.

Over the next few years, as more people moved in and traffic increased, the old narrow, wooden and wobbly May Road bridge over San Pablo Creek was replaced. But Bill Edwards is still there in the same place after 67 years, fit as a fiddle. He’s not going anywhere.

Some things never change . . . but it’s surprising how much you can find out just gabbing with your neighbors.



Cruising the Main in El Sobrante (?!) *Lyle Miller*

Remember the six hour long "Cruisin' the main" that took place on Dam road?

It was June 1985, According to the newspaper report (West County Times), Someone named "Big Ed" organized a Cruise night to take place in El Sobrante. Approximately 2,500

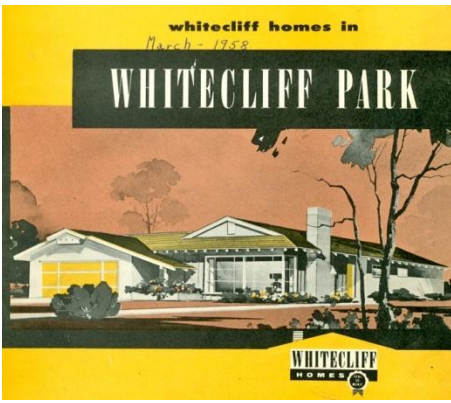
Low riders, high riders and other street machines fill San Pablo Dam Road in El Sobrante Saturday night.

people showed up with Hot Rods, Kustoms, Classics, Low Riders, Motorcycles, Trucks and even one horse!!

The event cruised through town from the I-80 to Appian Way. Police from Pinole, San Pablo, Richmond, the County Sheriff's office and State highway patrol were on hand to watch and keep the peace. Three people were arrested and several cited for drinking in public. At 10pm, Len Battaglia closed his Rancho Liquor store & bar 4 hours early, He said a couple of minor fights in his parking lot convinced him to avoid contributing to problems on the street. CHP patrol Sgt. Harry Larson said "It was a very peaceful group."

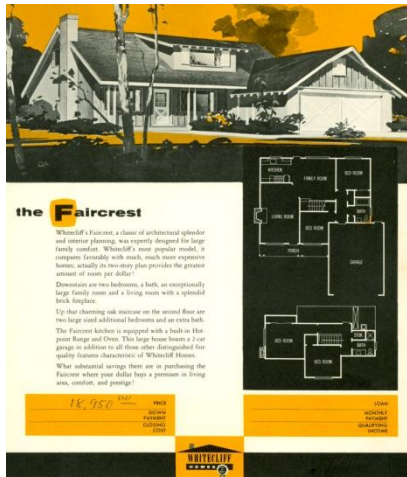
The CHP issued about 50 citations for noisy mufflers and other vehicle code infractions. No one was arrested for drunken driving. Approximately 1,500 pedestrians lined the sidewalks cheering on their friends in the passing cars. Older folks watched from parked cars, lawn chairs, local shops and offices.

New Acquisitions: Whitecliff Ephemera



We are indebted to Bill Edwards for sharing his collection of Whitecliff ephemera with us. We now have digitized

copies of the Whitecliff home brochures for 1957 and 1958. This collection includes images and information about all 6 home offerings (Crestwood, Faircrest, Fleetway, Hearthside, Ridgeview, and Saratoga).



The collection also includes a brochure on one of the offered amenities, an intercom system, which offered instant communication with the kids without having to leave one's chair! If you are interested in viewing the entire collection, please visit us any Saturday, 10-4, or by appointment.

Adding to our collection of housing ephemera, we would like to thank local Farmer's Insurance agent **Jim Cowan** for this ad for new homes in Sherwood Forest.



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 elsobrantehistoricalsociety.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.

ESHS Board of Directors

Donald Bastin: President; Historical Researcher and writer. Newsletter editor.

Roxanne Miravalle: Vice-President; Historian and Writer; Genealogist.

Steve James: Treasurer; Membership and Communication Secretary; Researcher/writer.

Lyle Miller: Secretary; Community Liaison; Researcher/writer.

Emil Munkres: Director; Historian.

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Questions, Comments, and other communication? Send to:
ESHISTORY@GMAIL.COM