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# THE LEFTOVERS

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## Happy 100<sup>th</sup> Birthday—San Pablo Dam

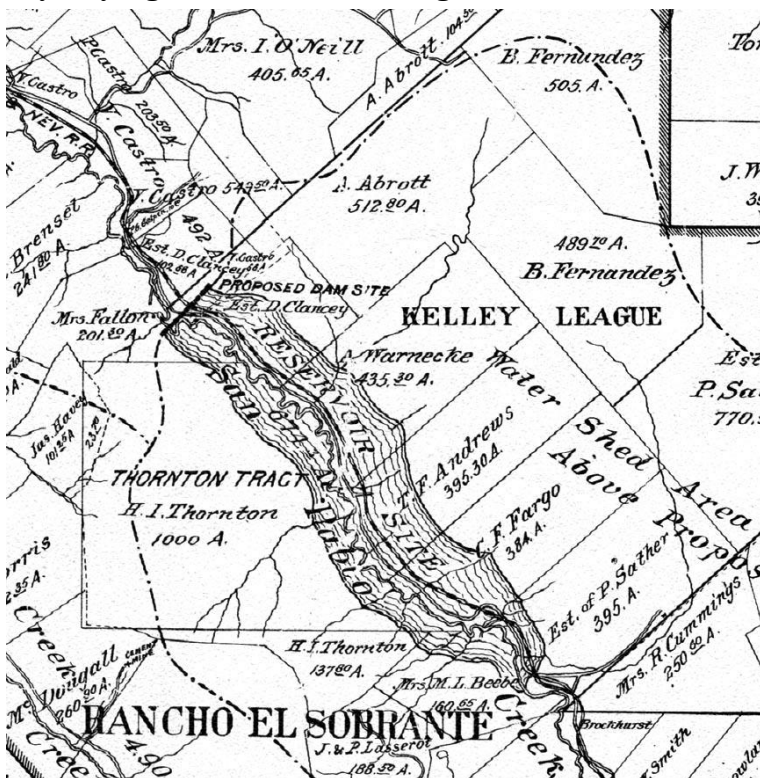
Donald Bastin and Roxy Miravalle

The construction of the San Pablo dam was completed in November, 1921 at a cost of 3 million dollars (the initial estimate was 2 million). This milestone event in the history and evolution of the surrounding communities, including El Sobrante, was a long time in coming. This article will trace the major events in that history.

The need for a reliable source of water was identified as early as the 1850s. The growth of population following the war with Mexico (1846-'48), the Gold Rush, and California statehood (1850), naturally led to a demand for water that could only be partially met by relying on creeks or sinking wells. In 1858, the state legislature passed a law allowing a water



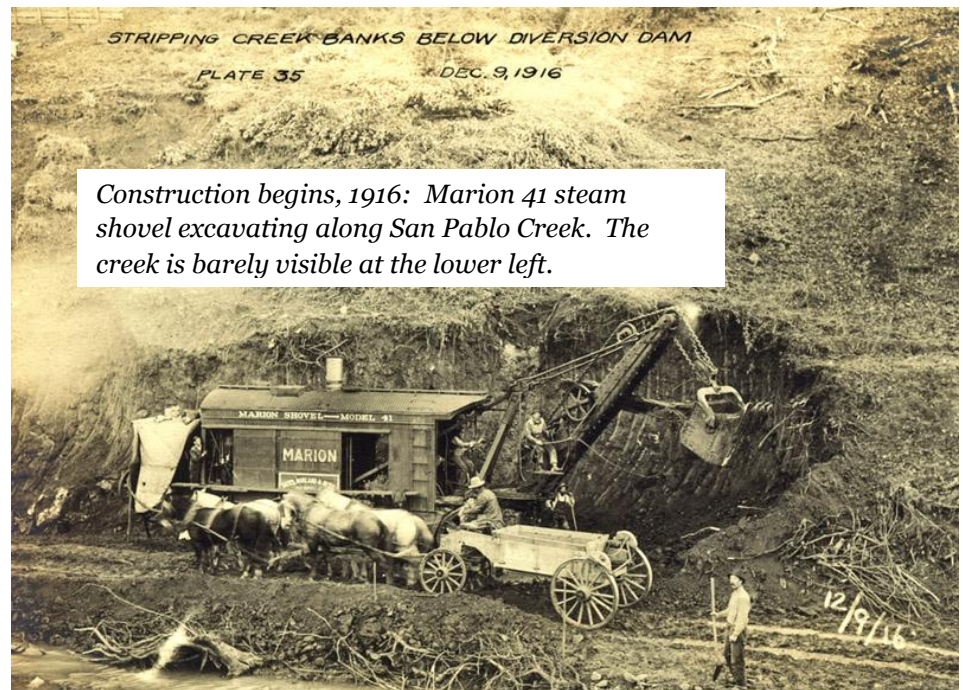
company incorporated with the intent to supply a surrounding community with potable water the right to purchase, or appropriate, land for that purpose. As a result, many water companies sprang up. Locally, the Contra Costa Water Company was created in 1868 by a French-Canadian immigrant by the name of Anthony Chabot. The Chabot Dam and lake were completed in 1875, but even before this, Chabot was aware that this water supply would not be sufficient for the growing demand in the area, and, in 1869, acquired the rights to the water of the San Pablo Creek watershed. Thus was born the idea of the San Pablo Dam.



Left: 1894 Rancho map, showing San Pablo Creek reservoir site



By 1905, other than acquiring the Clancy property (where the dam stands today) the Contra Costa Water Company did little to pursue the idea of building a dam and in 1906, the People's Water Company was incorporated, taking over the operations of Chabot's company. But the task proved too demanding for the new company, and in 1916, this company was itself taken over by the East Bay Water Company, which began construction of the dam on September 11 of that year, as noted in the SF Chronicle.



Construction begins, 1916: Marion 41 steam shovel excavating along San Pablo Creek. The creek is barely visible at the lower left.

## Work on \$2,000,000 San Pablo Dam Starts

OAKLAND, September 23.—Work on the San Pablo dam, which is being constructed for the People's Water Company, six miles north of San Pablo, at a cost of \$2,000,000, has just been begun. The dam, when completed, will be one of the largest engineering projects of its kind in the West.

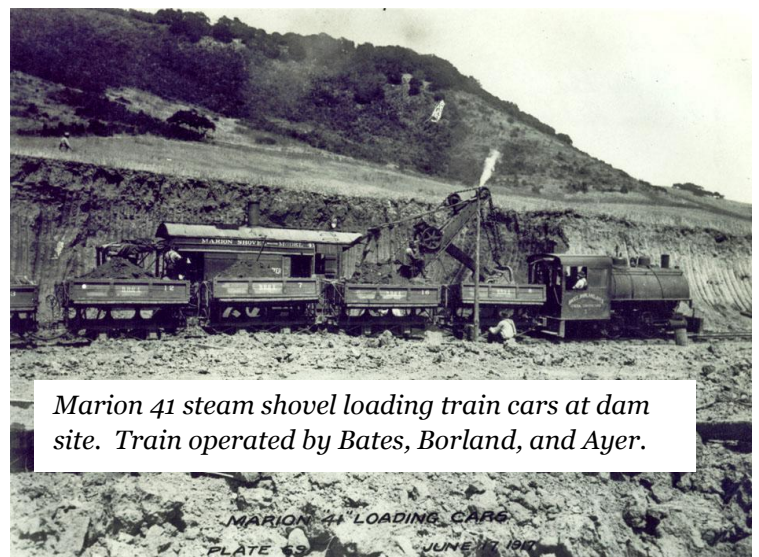
It is estimated that two years will be necessary to finish the work, which involves 1,800,000 cubic yards of earth fill. The dam will be 160 feet in height, with a crest 1250 feet in length.

It will have a concrete core and will permit the flooding of 800 acres of land from a reservoir holding 12,750,000 gallons of water.

In our Fall 2020 edition of *the Leftovers*, our VP and local historian, Roxy Miráville, recounted the problems that beset the East Bay Water Company almost as soon as construction began. Initially estimated to take two years to complete, the project would take five years, and in the end the water company would, like its predecessors, hand off the dam, reservoir, and land to a new entity, the East Bay Municipal Utility District which today remains in charge.

The first big problem revealed the need for a source of pure water: typhoid fever. In the fall and winter of 1916, the workers began to come down with this virulent

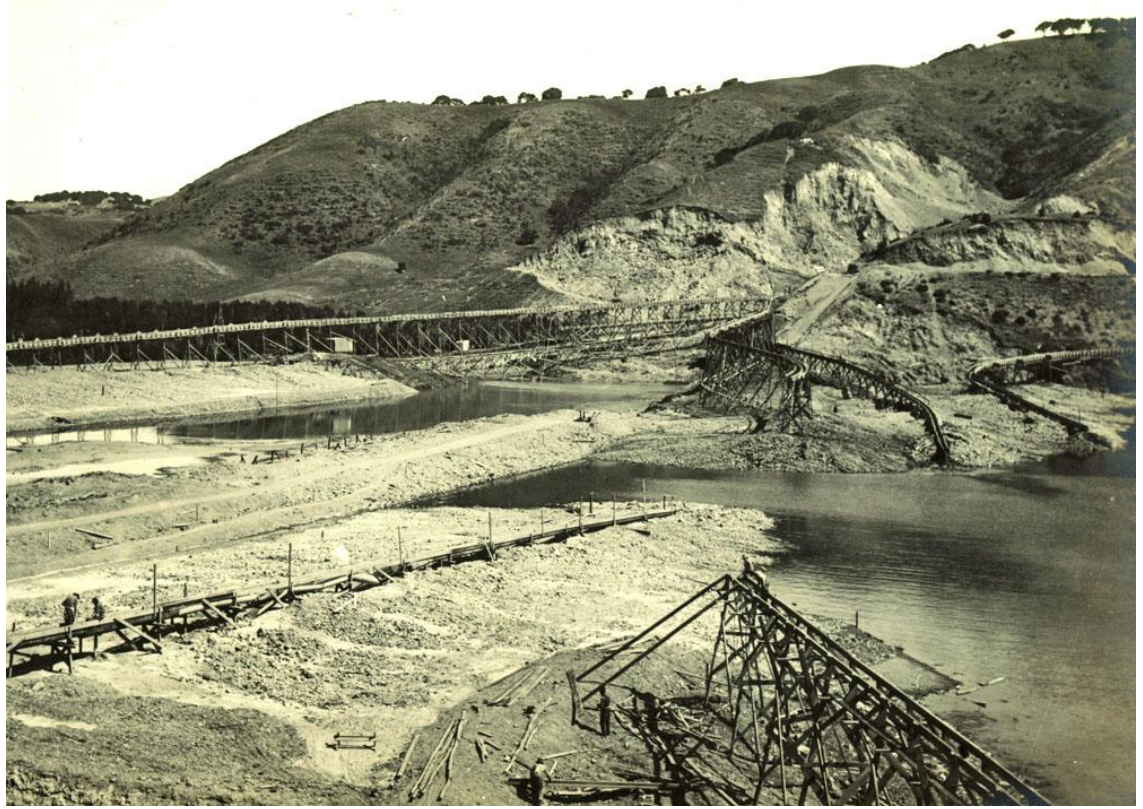
disease. The contractor, Bates, Borland, and Ayer of Oakland, which, according to Roxy, employed 300 men, originally relied on spring water, but when this proved insufficient, turned to the creek for drinking water, as well as water for bathing and other uses. It was estimated that around 52 men contracted typhoid fever and that the entire San Pablo Creek watershed was contaminated. Fortunately, no deaths were recorded and the water was chlorinated in December, 1916.



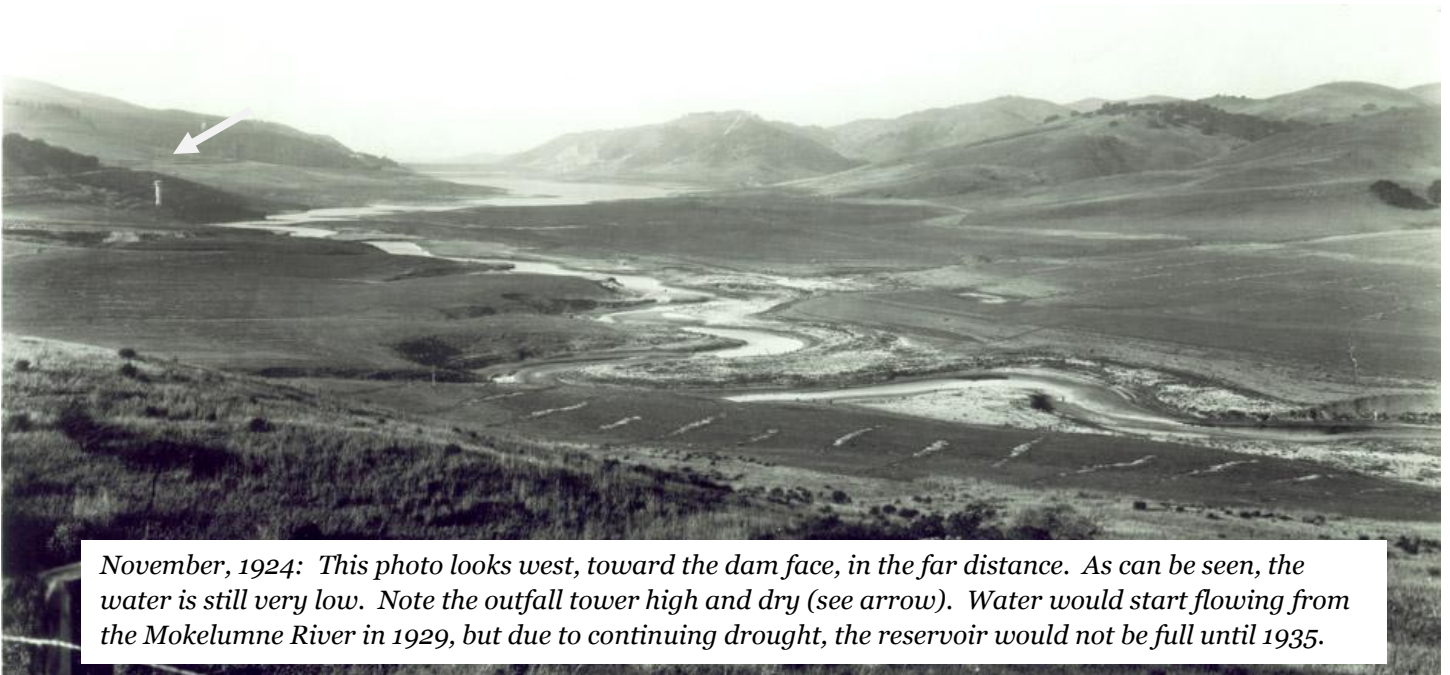
Marion 41 steam shovel loading train cars at dam site. Train operated by Bates, Borland, and Ayer.



By 1917, construction on the dam face had begun, as can be seen in this photo. The wooden trestles are flumes, designed to carry dirt washed from the hillsides. This was a technique derived from the hydraulic mining practices of the gold-mining era. The hills opposite the west end of the dam today still bear the scars of this destructive practice.



By 1918, while much work on the dam had been done, it was evident that the water flowing through the San Pablo Creek watershed would not be sufficient to meet the needs of the growing communities that would rely on the dam, and the reservoir might never be full. According to an EBMUD history written by Nancy August (which has provided much of the information for this article), the two prior years had been very dry and virtually no water had flowed in San Pablo Creek. The water company was urged to seek another source of water, but when the dam was completed in November, 1921, in spite of the fact that rainfall had continued to be sparse, no alternative source of water had been identified.



*November, 1924: This photo looks west, toward the dam face, in the far distance. As can be seen, the water is still very low. Note the outfall tower high and dry (see arrow). Water would start flowing from the Mokelumne River in 1929, but due to continuing drought, the reservoir would not be full until 1935.*

In 1921, the state legislature, recognizing the problems and failures of many private water companies, passed the Municipal Utility District Act. This act allowed voters to create a utility district at the ballot box. In 1923, the people of Contra Costa and Alameda Counties voted to create the East Bay Municipal Utility District, which appropriated the failing East Bay Water Company. One of its first acts was to enter into planning to divert water from the Mokelumne River. But water from that source did not flow until 1929, and in the interim, the reservoir had become little more than a series of muddy puddles. But the river water did eventually save the day, though it took until 1935 for the reservoir to fill completely.

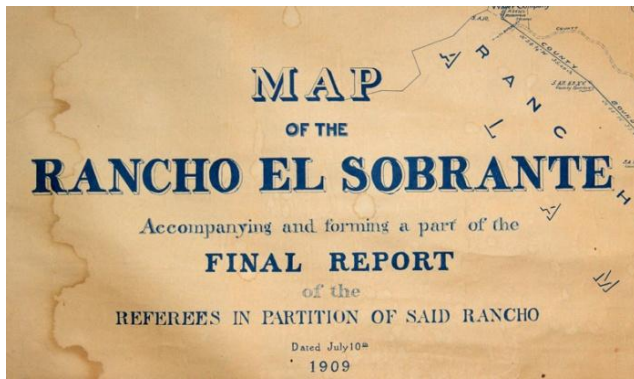


The construction of the San Pablo Dam naturally disrupted the lives of many families who had settled on land that would now be covered by the waters of the newly created lake. Homes, farms, and ranches that were too close to the creek would be covered by the waters of the rising reservoir. In this photo, undated but taken some time during

the construction of the dam, we can see what is very likely the old Warnecke Ranch, which was leased by Soren Skow in the late 1890s. Soren and his sons began a dairy operation, later named the Richmond Farm Creamery, which remained in business until 1955. Forced to move by the dam construction in 1921, the home and other structures were dismantled and the lumber used to build a new home and business along Clark Road. The road running diagonally across the image is the old San Pablo Creek Road, which would be moved to the opposite side of the rising lake and renamed the San Pablo Dam Road. The black dot on the left end of the road is a horse.

In 1936, as soon as the new lake was full, a movement began to open the waters to recreation. The utility district resisted this effort for decades, but finally relented and in 1973 the area was opened to fishing, boating, and general recreation, but not swimming. Today, the San Pablo Reservoir is a singular amenity associated with the community of El Sobrante. We are lucky to have it.





## What's in a Name?

*Emil Munkres*

El Sobrante. We all know where this is today, right? It encompasses everything within the 94803 postal zip-code. It's a good-sized valley, stretching from the San Pablo Ridge up to Pinole and the Sobrante Ridge. It covers the watershed of San Pablo Creek from Highway 80 on out to the San Pablo Reservoir - with lots and lots of smaller hills, ridges, canyons and creeks throughout.

Much of this El Sobrante Valley is incorporated within the legal city limits and jurisdictions of our neighboring cities - San Pablo, Pinole and Richmond - and much of it remains happily rural and unincorporated. But even so, this one valley called El Sobrante includes it all. We have several different fire departments, 5 or 6 independent law enforcement agencies, and multiple and differing city and county laws, rules and regulations. What a spread! It's a pot-luck. Some would say...leftovers...

The Rancho El Sobrante, the “remainder, excess, extras or residuals” is the Spanish name for the Mexican land grant awarded in 1841 to local Mexican-Californio brothers Juan-Jose and Victor Castro. They lived in San Pablo, and the Rancho El Sobrante was granted to them by their brother-in-law, Juan B. Alvarado, the Mexican-California governor.

This large 20,000+ acre grant of prime cattle-ranching lands extended from near Clark Road and the Santa Rita and Sobrante Ridges southeast all the way to current-day Lafayette, Orinda and Oakland. This grant consisted of all of the remaining lands then left un-granted between the land grants in San Pablo, Pinole, Lafayette, Moraga and Oakland.

This was a lot of land - over 33 square miles. In the next 50 years, the Castros lost nearly all of it to lawyers, politicians, speculators and trespassers. By the 1890s, the El Sobrante Castro Ranch was reduced to several hundred acres near Castro Ranch Road. Here, the Castro family continued to raise cattle and run a beef supply operation up into the 1980s.

In the mid to late 1800s, when people began settling on ranches and farms in this area along San Pablo Creek, it was known as San Pablo Valley or sometimes San Pablo Canyon. This makes sense. If you received mail, it was addressed to you at San Pablo Creek or just San Pablo. Later, from the 1900s and into the early 1930s, Rural Free Delivery (R.F.D.) mail addresses became standardized. Based on which particular mail route you lived on, your address could be San Pablo, or Richmond, or Pinole. Some addresses on San Pablo Creek Road were even listed as Berkeley, because their postal route started and ended in Berkeley.

Until the 1930s, the name El Sobrante was used almost exclusively as a description in legal documents of real-estate transactions that involved lands within the old Rancho El Sobrante land grant. El Sobrante was also the name used specifically to refer to the small parcel of land that remained in the possession of the Castro family: the Castro El Sobrante Ranch.

Construction on the dam for the new San Pablo reservoir began in 1916. This brought in more people to work, more houses, more automobiles and improved roads. People also came in search of a rural or country setting to enjoy away from the surrounding cities. Hunting cabins, garden lands, and weekend or summer retreats were drawing more and more people into the area. As demand increased, owners of large parcels of land along San Pablo Creek began to subdivide and sell off many smaller, affordable parcels.

In early 1935, an Oakland real estate firm called the Minney Company began to promote the sale of hundreds of prime lots along upper Appian creek and the surrounding hills area. The Minney Company had incorporated in Oakland in 1907 and was in the very profitable business of buying up tracts of land all over Contra Costa and Alameda counties. They would improve the land, subdivide and sell smaller parcels ready to build on. Roads were graded and electricity lines and poles were erected. The Minney Company would offer empty “buildable” lots where new owners could come in and design and build their own home, on their own time, where city folks could have their place in the country.

The Minney Company had recently purchased the old McMahon Ranch and other adjoining properties. They advertised heavily and directed potential buyers to drive from Oakland and Berkeley and to follow the signs and the big red arrows that proclaimed “El Sobrante.” Ads appeared daily in all the local newspapers encouraging folks to come to “El Sobrante Ranch” and “El Sobrante Heights.” Along with good roads and electricity, they promoted health, hills, nature, vegetable farming, chicken farms, camping cabins and beautiful sunny views. This is the area we now recognize as Appian Way near the triangle at Valley View Road and Sobrante Avenue. It includes Rincon Rd, Oak Knoll Rd and Circle Drive.

These 1935 advertisements are the first known use of the name El Sobrante to describe this area:

- *Oakland Tribune*, Sat, March 2, 1935:

**El Sobrante Ranch**  
Garden acres, \$250. Wooded acres, \$150; 2 to 20-acre parcels; good roads; electricity, well water; soft soil. Drive out and look them over, 30 minutes from Oakland, 20 from Berkeley; 4 miles off San Pablo Avenue via Reservoir Road, Minney Co., 8144 Foothill.

*At right,  
Oakland  
Tribune,  
April 28,  
1935*

**El Sobrante  
Rancho**  
**3 Hot Sunday Specials**  
\$99.00—Trees, ferns, flowers, loam soil, 160 feet frontage. \$25 down; \$5 month.  
\$179.00—212 feet frontage, over 200 feet deep. Oak trees, good roads, electricity. Only 30 minutes from Oakland City Hall. \$30 down \$5 month.  
\$685.00—Full 5 acres, including a fine protected building site. A never dry spring. Big grassy knoll for pasture. \$100 down, \$14 month.  
El Sobrante is selling—Homes are building—New scenic roads open. Drive through. Only 14 miles from Oakland City Hall. 20 minutes from Berkeley, via San Pablo Avenue and Dam Road, follow arrows. The Minney Company, 8144 Foothill.



This area called El Sobrante grew quickly, with over 100 new homes built in the first few years and many times that by 1940. Residents began to hold regular meetings to push for needed upgrades and



*El Sobrante Improvement Club, c. 1955. Local teens are helping to make "improvements" to the Improvement Club*



*Improvement Club today, now the site of the "Smith & Witter" Funeral Parlor*

with a real fire engine and a firehouse. They constructed a clubhouse for the new El Sobrante Improvement Club to hold meetings, dances, fundraisers and community events.

improvements. They wanted piped in water, new and better graded roads, updated electric service and more. These new resident locals formed the El Sobrante Improvement Association and incorporated in Sept, 1937 with a long list of needed improvements and projects. They organized the volunteer El Sobrante Fire Dept -

Over the next decade, the Minney Company expanded their offerings of El Sobrante parcels up the hill to the area of Skyline Blvd at the top of Sobrante Ridge. They also started selling land up Maloney Road (Appian) towards Argyle and Rancho Roads.

As businesses began to increase in the area in the late 1930s and 1940s, the name El Sobrante also expanded its area of coverage. It quickly came to include all of the newer neighborhoods adjacent to Appian Way and Hilltop Drive, as well as the older established communities along San Pablo Creek on the Dam Road. By the end of WWII, El Sobrante was known by all as we know it today - El Sobrante!

### **New Acquisitions:**

We are indebted to the Banducci family for the donation of this antique fire extinguisher, which was owned and used by Ed Banducci (Senior and Junior). This old piece is in very nice condition, with large, wonderful wooden wheels. It is heavy but rolls easily. These devices were fairly common in the



*Emil Munkres and Steve James posing with new acquisition*

past, particularly in areas that were marginally served by a volunteer fire department, such as was the case in the early days of our community. They were often required by insurance companies for policy approval.

This is similar to the common hand-held extinguisher in use today. One difference is that pressure is not normally constantly maintained in the tank, but is generated by mixing of chemicals, which can be as simple as sodium bicarbonate (baking soda) and acid. This extinguisher probably used water to extinguish a fire, but, just like today, chemicals could be used. According to John Banducci, Ed Banducci jr's nephew, it is not known exactly where the device was meant to be used, but he speculates that it was in the service station. Whether it was ever used is also unknown.

The history and origin of the device is also a mystery: we cannot find a manufacturer's name anywhere, which suggests that it may well be home-made. According to John, his uncles were very self-reliant and great do-it-yourselfers. In any case, the work is first-rate. If it is home-made, the wheels are likely the oldest parts of the unit. The hose is imprinted with the words "War Quality," which suggests that the beast might have been put together some time during World War II.

The donation of this artifact marks a milestone in the history of El Sobrante, as the Banducci property, at the corner of the Dam Road and Valley View, has been sold. The fate of Ed's Tavern is unknown, but we are assured that, if it is torn down, we will be gifted the sign.

Our new acquisition does not fit into our history center, so is proudly displayed just outside the door. **More donations from the Banducci family in our next issue!**

*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](http://elsobranthehistoricalsociety.com).*

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<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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