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THE LEFTOVERS

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Unusual Robbery in El Sobrante Highlights National Craze

Donald Bastin and Roxy Miravalle



Sometime during the night of April 30, 1952, three thieves broke into the “M and P Aviaries,” a business dedicated to the sale of parakeets, located at 4725 Appian Way. The business was owned by Thomas Moore and Ludwig Pelika, both of Richmond. According to the article in the El Sobrante Herald, the aviary had been in business in El Sobrante for about a year.

According to Mr. Moore, the thieves took only the male birds (preferred as pets, being more active, vocal and sociable than females). This would apparently doom the 350 babies in the 297 nests, as the mothers were completely dependent on the males for food. Moore went on to state that he had just purchased “\$600 worth of breeders and had an \$800 shipment ready to send” that day.

Business had been very good indeed, stated Mr. Moore, noting that he was “unable to meet

demand” for parakeets, and had “\$5,000 in back orders.”

Unfortunately, Moore had no insurance to cover his loss, and the outcome of this sad episode is not clear, as the Herald did not follow up on the story. But it highlights the fact that during the early 1950s America was undergoing one of its periodic “craze” periods. This time we were going bananas for budgies.

The budgerigar (or “budgie”) is native to Australia and was first described in 1805. In 1840, a pair was brought to Great Britain. In 1845, the popularity of the bird took off when Queen Victoria acquired a pair. Importation of the bird reached such a level that the health of the species was endangered, and in 1894 the trade was outlawed. By this time, however, budgies were being bred throughout Europe.



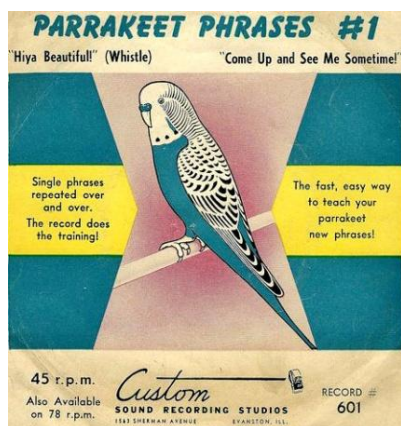
The budgerigar was introduced to America in the early 20th century and it was about this time that the name “parakeet” was created; it was apparently thought that this was a more appealing name. But it was not until the

1950s that the market began to soar. The parakeet’s ability to be easily tamed, intelligence and versatility charmed the American public. Suddenly a new craze was born, and, of course, money was to be made.



Growing up in San Pablo, and then in El Sobrante, in the 1950s, I clearly remember that my mother had a parakeet, as did many of our neighbors and friends.

They were an endless source of amusement, with their constant activity, singing, and, of course, imitation of sounds. Training a parakeet to repeat a name, or say something like “pretty bird” or “I love you,” engaged the attention of adults and children alike, and spurred the development of training aids, such as this record album.



The parakeet craze, like all crazes, died away in time. But for a short moment, they were popular enough and valuable enough to lead to serious criminal activity, even here in El Sobrante. The loss of around \$5500 in 1952, due to bird theft represents the value of an average home in the area at the time. It may well be that the business of Mr. Moore and Mr. Pelika did not survive this loss.

In fact, a check of the Richmond City Directory for 1954 shows that Mr. Moore was now listed as a “clerk” for the G & G Pet Shop in El Sobrante. Mr. Moore was now clearly not the



however.

Parakeet Theft Ring May Have Been Cracked

And what of the thieves? It seems they may have been caught. On July 31, 1953, the Contra Costa Gazette ran an article noting that a “parakeet theft and smuggling ring” had been apprehended by the Los Angeles police department. Mary DiMaggio Ascani and Roy Fred Surselley were in custody, charged with “grand theft and burglary.” A delivery truck in their possession, registered with the “Los Angeles Pet Exchange,” was impounded. The pair was charged with the burglary at the M & P Aviaries in El Sobrante.

The final outcome of this case is unknown.

Both businesses noted in this article seemed to have been short-term and to have occupied addresses that no longer exist. The original business, located at 4725 Appian Way would have been located at the intersection of Appian and Pebble Drive (about where the Midway Muffler shop is today). The G & G Pet Shop, at 4081 Dam Road, would have been located somewhere just east of Oliver’s Hardware.

If any of our readers has any information regarding these businesses, please let us know.

owner of his own shop. His fortunes had evidently declined. He was still working with birds,

Civilian Conservation Corps Camp at Kennedy Grove (1933-1942) *Roxy Miravalle and Donald Bastin*

A photo on page 39 of *El Sobrante - Images of America* by Donald Bastin with the description “The CCC camps were run on a semi-military basis, with emphasis on discipline and order. The camp at the San Pablo Dam was no exception” sparked me to research more information on the history of the camp and the barracks shown in the photo.



CCC Camp, under construction, February, 1934

The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) set up five camps in the East Bay hills, starting in 1933, carrying on until 1942. From those camps, the “CCC boys” set out into the newly-created East Bay regional parks to perform a wide range of improvements.

What was the CCC? “The Civilian Conservation

Corps provided healthy, outdoor work for young men between the ages of 17-28, who were paid \$30 a month. ¹All but \$5 went to the boys' families, which was very welcome during the dark days of the Depression.” It was initiated in March 1933 by newly-elected president Roosevelt, and the various government agencies he selected to oversee its progress to partially relieve the unemployment situation and improve the Nation’s economic and social conditions by employing unmarried, single young men in projects related to the development and conservation of natural resources all over the United States. These young men lived in army barracks in camps run by the military and served in camps run by the War Department, under the guidance of the Department of the Interior and Agriculture, with a special role played by State and Federal Forestry Departments.

CONSTRUCTION OF SAN PABLO DAM C.C.C. CAMP UNDER WAY

Contra Costa Gazette - 27 Oct 1933

The construction of one such CCC camp, that was being built in San Pablo Canyon, began in October 1933. It was to be known as San Pablo Dam Camp run under the temporary direction of the following Army personnel: Lieutenant Lyman G. Bolles, construction officer; and Lieutenant Pierre B. Denson, commanding officer. In several government reports, the camp was also listed as San Pablo Dam Metropolitan Park, ²SP-7.

MAKE PERMANENT CIVILIAN CONSERVATION CORPS

51

Directory Civilian Conservation Corps camps, ninth period, 1937—Continued
CALIFORNIA—Continued

Camp no.	Land ownership	County	Post office
SP-4.....	Cuyamaca Rancho State Park.....	San Diego.....	Descanso.
SP-7.....	San Pablo Dam Metropolitan Park.....	Contra Costa.....	Richmond.
SP-11.....	Russian Gulch State Park.....	Mendocino.....	Mendocino.
SP-16 ¹	Palomar Mountain State Park.....	San Diego (SO).....	Palomar

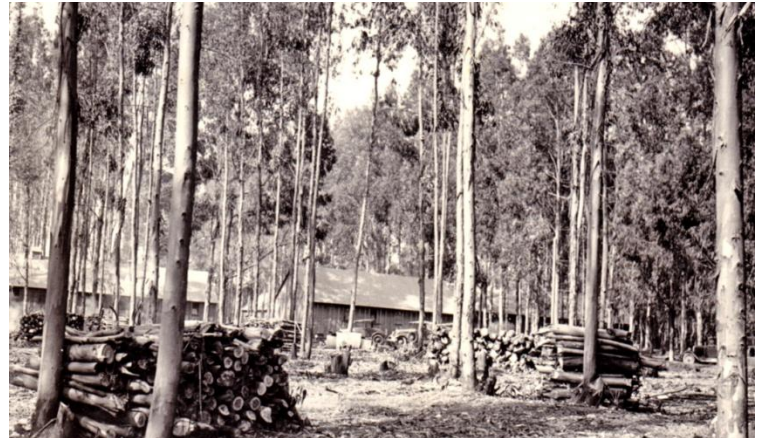
US Congress House Committee on Labor report · 1937



Clearing brush, December, 1934

The young men stationed here to help build San Pablo Dam camp, recruited by US federal entities like the Department of Labor, were initially from within California and came mostly from the Sacramento Valley and surrounding foothill area. The work to be done would be to build roads, cutting of fire trails, clearing brush, landscaping and planting trees, and laying out picnic areas. The group of buildings that would make up the camp consisted of four barracks, one mess hall and kitchen, one recreation hall, one office and officers'

quarters, one state park service building, one shower room, one drying room, and one hospital at an approximate cost of \$10,000. The civilian work crew included 30 carpenters, 10 laborers, 2 roofers and one electrician.



"Forest Improvement" December 1934

Lieutenant Bolles estimated, at that time, the camp would be completed in early November 1933. Once the camp and barracks were completed, several waves of young employees would be enrolled to work for the CCC, first completing a physical exam by the County Health Officer. As young men were needed for various

projects, including recruiting those with specific skills like woodsmen or mechanics, the state park service would announce special open enrollments allowing them to sign up with the Civilian Conservation Corps. The camp at San Pablo even formed its own baseball team and participated in many championship tournaments.



Mess Hall, March 1935

Camp San Pablo was located near the northwest shore of San Pablo Reservoir (Kennedy Grove). This camp was also integrated with African American enrollees, and historic photographs of San Pablo's African American enrollees were

from California and Oregon and a majority from Southern California who worked on the San Pablo Dam project. By August 1935, Company 2940-C, a segregated camp of 182 young African Americans from California, were stationed at what is today known as Kennedy Grove for the SP-7 camp projects. They were credited with a high rating of efficiency in carrying on the conservation, reforestation, and protection work around the entire area of the San Pablo Dam. In the years to come, they created many of the roads and park features we enjoy today in Tilden Regional Park, Wildcat Canyon, San Pablo Reservoir, and Kennedy Grove, including the Tilden Golf Course. Yet, Company 2940-C was often the

target of discrimination from the communities that they served. Company 2940-C of Camp SP-7 disbanded in 1937.

Years after the CCC camp's era, the East Bay Regional Park system conducted some of their "nature education" programs in these 1930s-era camp buildings which had been subjected to dry rot and termites.⁴ The camp barracks eventually were abandoned and torn down.



African American group, SP Dam, late 1935. Although the CCC act banned racial discrimination, by this date groups were racially segregated.

This 95-acre grove area (once a part of the Clancy Ranch) located in southern area of El Sobrante was first owned by Contra Costa County until it was annexed into the East Bay Regional Park District in June 1964, but not without much debate and protest. **Kennedy Grove Regional Recreation Area** (KGRRA), also known simply as **Kennedy Grove**, and now part of the East Bay Regional Park District, was named in honor of former President John F. Kennedy and formally opened after much planning and anticipation on October 22, 1967. It was the first park dedicated in Contra Costa County by the East Bay Regional Park District.

This year marks the 90th anniversary of the establishment of the Civilian Conservation Corps. As we continue today to use and enjoy the paved roads, recreation areas and our beautiful range of park systems created and maintained by the CCC youth, including improvements to the East Bay watershed projects we extend our deep gratitude to them for all the hard work done in serving their community.

~Research Resources~

[The United States Congress House Committee on Labor's report of 1937: 'To Make the Civilian Conservation Corps a Permanent Agency'](#)

<https://livingnewdeal.org>; <https://www.ebparks.org>; <https://ccclegacy.org>; [newspapers.com](#);

[Roosevelt's Tree Army](#)

[Civilian Conservation Corps Final Report \(April 1933 – June 20, 1942\)](#)

¹*El Sobrante - Images of America* By Donald Bastin. Pages 38-39

²SP = State Park

³ <https://www.ebparks.org/about-us/stories/company-2940-c-civilian-conservation-corps>

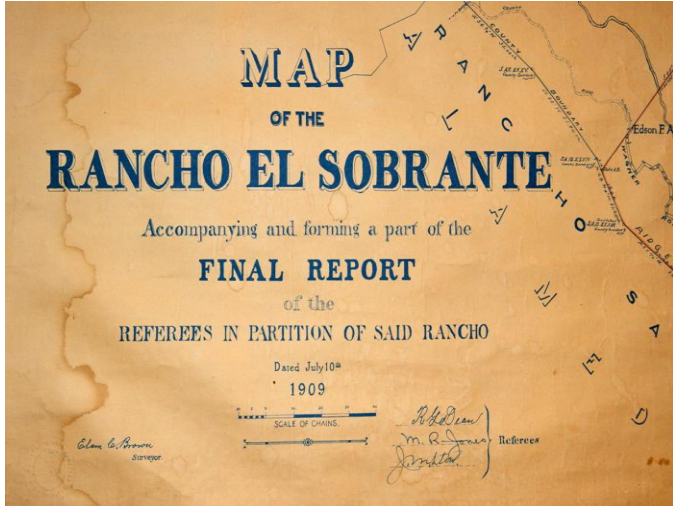
⁴ CoCo Times article – May 1972

Upcoming Events!

**Tuesday, August 1, 6:30 pm,
El Sobrante Library:**

A Brief History of El Sobrante

Presented by Donald Bastin



Join us for a slide-show presentation of the history of our community. El Sobrante has a unique and interesting past, and we hope that this program will whet your appetite for learning more. There will be time for questions and time to share your own knowledge of the area. Talk followed by a tour of our History Center (in the Fahden House, behind library).

El Sobrante Stroll, Sunday, September 17



This will be the 28th year that the El Sobrante Chamber of Commerce has hosted its annual party, celebrating our community and shutting down the Dam Road to thru traffic for our own

amusement! We will be there, talking up local history and offering El Sobrante History books for sale. As always, there will be a parade, food, music, and noise. Be there!

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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www.elsobranthehistoricalsociety.com

Questions, Comments, and other communication? Send to:
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