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THE LEFTOVERS

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El Sobrante Fire Truck on Craigslist!

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Recently, our ace investigator, Roxy Miraválle, came upon this old truck, for sale on Craigslist. As can be seen, this vehicle appears to have been associated with the El Sobrante Fire Department, so she naturally shared her find with the rest of the Board.

The owner is asking \$15,000 for the truck, which is neither here nor there,

as, even if we could afford it (we can't) we would have no place to keep it. But was it really part of the old fire department? A little digging was required.

Looking through our old photos quickly affirmed that this old beast may have once been a very important part of our local volunteer department. The photo at right was taken in 1949, shortly after the brand-new station was opened in that year. The two engines shown here were both new, and much more sophisticated than the collection of older and smaller vehicles that had served since the 1930s. The



engine on the left is an American Lafrance, which was pretty much top-of-the-line for the time, and great for fighting fires in a more urban environment, as El Sobrante was then becoming. The other

truck is a GMC, and much more muscular and heavy-duty. It also has the dual axle that can be seen in the white truck above. This truck would be much more suited to the grass and brush fires and rough terrain that had always been a part of fire-fighting in the El Sobrante area. With these two trucks, and a new station El Sobrante had raised its stature considerably in its ability to address fire threats in the community. In any case, the GMC in this photo seems to be very similar to the truck in the Craigslist ad. Luckily, we were able to find other images to cinch the deal.



This photo was taken in 1958, and shows a much expanded fleet of trucks. But our GMC is clearly still part of this fleet, and has now been painted white, just like the Craigslist truck. We have a similar photo taken 10 years later which again shows the GMC, but, curiously, the American Lafrance seems to have been let

go in the intervening period. It may be that it was just not quite up to the job. A little research reveals that the Lafrance could be had with one of four different engines, all with 12 cylinders in a “V” configuration. Surprisingly, this engine gained a reputation for being somewhat underpowered; additionally, we suspect that our truck had the smallest version, as we were told by one of the original volunteers, Ed Campbell, that the vehicle was “all show and no go.”

In fact, for “show” and publicity purposes, it was the Lafrance that got the attention, as it looked like a proper fire engine, while the GMC looked like what it was, a truck. At the right is a typical publicity photo of the 1950s, showing the Lafrance, a pretty girl (Sharon Olson) and our local Justice of the Peace, Wilson Locke. The fireman is Melvin Lehmkuhl.



The effort at collecting information on our fire truck has involved most of our board members. Soon after getting the email from Roxy, Emil took a close look at the Craigslist photo and thought he recognized the area. Sure enough, with a little help from Google Earth, he was able to narrow down the photo site to an area near the bay, west of Gertrude Avenue. He visited the site, found the truck, took a few photos, and talked briefly with the owner. Shortly after this, I called the owner and filled in a few details about the truck and its history.

It seems that the truck was owned by an ex chief or assistant chief with the old El Sobrante department, and used on his property in northwestern California. About 10 years ago, he decided to dispose of the vehicle and looked into donating it to the current station, but, apparently, this offer was declined. It then ended up in Oliver's Towing and Storage facility, off Parr Blvd, in Richmond. Here, as luck would have it, it came to the attention of our board member, Lyle Miller, who managed to take photos of the truck while in storage.



The current owner picked up the truck in the intervening period, and has done some restoration work, and now wishes to pass it along to someone who can restore it. The image, above right, taken by Lyle, shows the truck in what appears to be fairly good shape. The mechanism over the front bumper, according to the owner, is a water pump, which allowed the truck to suck water out of a creek or pond to fill its water tank. This was an important feature for a vehicle designed to operate off-road. In fact, the name for this GMC model is, again



according to the owner, "Wildland." It was based on a military design and fire trucks are still sold today with this heavy-duty designation.

In keeping with the general beefiness of this truck, it was not only 4-wheel drive, but with the double rear axle, was 6-wheel drive. The image at left, taken by Emil, shows the instructions for operating the transfer case, with a reminder to disengage the front axle when running on paved roads.

The engine seems to have been a fairly standard GM 6-cylinder, overhead valve model, sometimes referred to as a "stove-bolt six." This engine, introduced originally by GM in the late 1920s, was improved over the years and was in use until well into the 1950s. It was solid and reliable, and well-suited to the kind of low-speed, rough use that this truck was expected to encounter. Thanks to Lyle for this photograph.



The investigation of this old truck has been interesting and instructive. Frankly, we had, until now, never really bothered to learn the details of our old volunteer fire department, and especially about the equipment that served the department. With the posting of this vehicle on Craigslist, we now know more than we did. It is our hope that whoever buys this fire truck is a local resident, and would be willing to share it with our society and its members on special occasions. Whatever we find out, we will let you know.



Fine
Paved
Roads
to
All Lots
•
Ideal for
Chickens
and a
Cow
•
Good
Water

Santa Rita Acres

IN SAN PABLO VALLEY
NEAR RICHMOND

•

**Rolling Hills
Scenic Surroundings
Fresh Country Air**

*The kind of a home place
you have been seeking*

FERTILE RICH SOIL

*Choice Sites Available
in New Unit*

M. A. HAYS COMPANY
General Sales Agents
2216 Macdonald Ave. Richmond, Calif.



LOCATION MAP
of
SANTA RITA ACRES

Santa Rita Acres

Two miles from Richmond — 25 minutes over Bay Bridge to San Francisco — easy distance from western Contra Costa County industrial plants.

DIRECTIONS

Turn east from state highway north of Richmond at Lighthouse Inn. Follow San Pablo Valley county highway to main office.

BUILD YOUR OWN HOME
F. H. A. Title Loans Now Available

Our easy terms make it possible for you to make a down payment and start building right away.

M. A. HAYS COMPANY
General Sales Agents
2216 Macdonald Ave. Richmond, Calif.

Recently, fellow El Sobrante Historical Society member Robert Antaki shared a very eye-opening piece of El Sobrante history with us in the form of a real estate brochure for the “Santa Rita Acres.” This was a promotional piece put out in 1939 by the M.A.Hays Company of Richmond, CA.

Santa Rita Acres was a large tract of land that extended east from the San Pablo Creek Highway (Dam Road), and was accessed by crossing San Pablo Creek on a narrow, single-lane wooden bridge and

continuing up the valley along a country road which was at that time known variously as El Sobrante Road, County Road 18 and “the road to Pinole.” This road would soon be renamed as “Appian Way.”

Santa Rita Acres included lots on both sides of Appian Way from Dam Road almost to where the fire station is located today. Potential buyers could also purchase lots on Santa Rita Road, Garden Road and La Paloma Road.

The developer, the M. A. Hays Co, advertised heavily in local newspapers from 1937 to 1940. They placed hundreds of classified ads in the San Francisco Examiner, the Oakland Tribune and the Richmond Independent.

Santa Rita Acres

Sunny and Healthy San Pablo Valley



Choice of
HOMESITES
on Hilltops or
in Valleys . . .



One of the new type homes being offered for sale in Unit No. 1

Home owners in Santa Rita Acres have varied income possibilities


FREEDOM FROM FOG

Freedom of the Country



Many home owners doing their own building in spare time

With City Conveniences



Home of industrial worker who enjoys hobbies on 2-acre tract

Bus Transportation to All Schools



Panorama of Santa Rita Acres where every season has delightful new beauty

**One-fourth to Ten Acre Pieces
as low as \$300 per Acre**

Reasonable Terms • No City Taxes

They promoted country living, paved roads, piped in water and electricity to each property. This was pre-WWII and the Depression was finally coming to a close. Buyers could select their lot, make a down-payment and build their own house, using federally backed low-interest FHA loans. This was ideal for someone who lived and worked nearby in Oakland, Berkeley or Richmond. They could come out and build their house on the weekends.

Families moving into the area were encouraged to start their own small farm and to get chickens and a cow. Or create their own weekend retreat in the rolling hills underneath a canopy of mature oaks! Highlights included:

- Fresh Country Air
- FERTILE RICH SOIL
- Ideal for Chickens and a Cow
- Sunny and Healthful
- FREEDOM FROM FOG!
- Freedom of the Country ... With City Conveniences
- No City Taxes!
- The kind of a home place you have been seeking!

The brochure includes photos of homes that were finished or near completion in 1939.



We have identified two that are still around today - 447 La Paloma Rd. (above) and 4082 Santa Rita Rd. (left). Many of these homes in the Santa Rita

Acres that were hand-built by their owners over 80 years ago in the late 1930s are still lived in and cared for today. See if you can spot a few!

Editor's Note:

This article is an introduction to a more complete story on the development and growth in El Sobrante during the 1930s. This is a period about which we had known little, and had assumed that there wasn't a lot to know. However, with the information provided by our member, Robert Antaki, and through the investigations of our board member, Emil Munkres, we have gained a fuller understanding of this time as one of, not only population growth, but the emergence of the idea of El Sobrante as a viable community, with its own unique identity. We have also gained an increased appreciation for the work of the El Sobrante Improvement Club, which was at the center of this growing community identity.

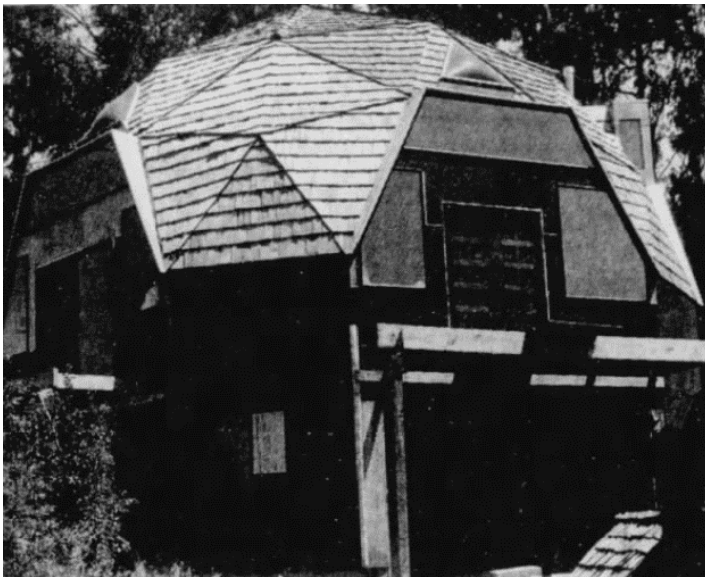
More in our next issue.

Modern Day El Sobrante Pioneers

Roxy Miravalle

Most of us are familiar with El Sobrante's rancho history and the pioneers that helped form it into a city that remains virtually unchanged with its country-like atmosphere. However, there are a few modern-day pioneers who have left their mark upon El Sobrante that you may not have heard of or who have long been forgotten.

One of those unsung individuals is Roy Mespelt, Jr. If the name is unfamiliar, perhaps knowing his occupation will refresh your memory. Roy was El Sobrante's milkman for many years. Sometimes even entrusted with a house key to let himself in and leave a customer's order inside their fridge. It was a different time when everyone knew their neighbors and children played outside until it was time for dinner. Roy started his dairy career in 1947 at the Challenge Creamery Dairy facility in Oakland and then home delivery service working for Golden State Dairy. Eventually, he went to work for and managed the Royal Jersey Dairy, located at 3508 San Pablo Dam Road, founded by Robert E. Morris in 1958. By the 1980s, Royal Jersey was one of the few remaining dairies still offering delivery service in the Eastbay. Royal Jersey survived because they had their own cows and produced their own milk. Roy was one of the few remaining daily delivery men left at that time. He passed away in March 2008 at the age of 83. If you had home delivery, then you know there's nothing better than a nice cold glass of milk from a bottle, which tasted much better than from a wax carton. Got Milk?



Another modern-day pioneer is Ray Aguilera, Jr. Ray is a local artist, a home repairman and attended De Anza. He followed the example of the early pioneers who built their own shelters. He had plans to build his own home, because he knew the high cost of housing can be a nightmare. So, he prepared to build his dream house by taking a basic construction course at the Owner Builder Center in Berkeley in the late 1970s. His goal was to put up a geodesic dome structure because he didn't want the standard square box tract-type home. He had purchased the plans and a basic construction kit from Cathedralite Domes, Inc. The kit included 60 wooden triangles which when fitted together and

bolted, formed the basic dome. Cathedralite also helped Ray through the permit process, providing the necessary engineering analysis, calculations, and drawings.

Ground was broken on Ray's El Sobrante lot located in the Santa Rita Acres neighborhood in November 1979. He didn't do it alone, though, because his friends and neighbors helped assemble the dome's triangles and, after a year of almost full-time work on his own, he moved into his new home in

July 1980. The dome was covered in shake shingles and had three floors with 2,600 square feet of living space. It features a soaring living room equipped with a wood stove, four bedrooms, three baths, and a ground floor studio. In a 1981 Berkeley Gazette article Ray mentioned he had about \$50,000 worth of materials invested in his house, and realtors told him it was worth from \$250k to \$300k. Today, it is worth between \$800k and \$900k. Not bad for a DIY home. You may have noticed a strange structure among all the homes in the Hilltop Drive area of El Sobrante and wondered about it; now you know.

New Acquisitions:



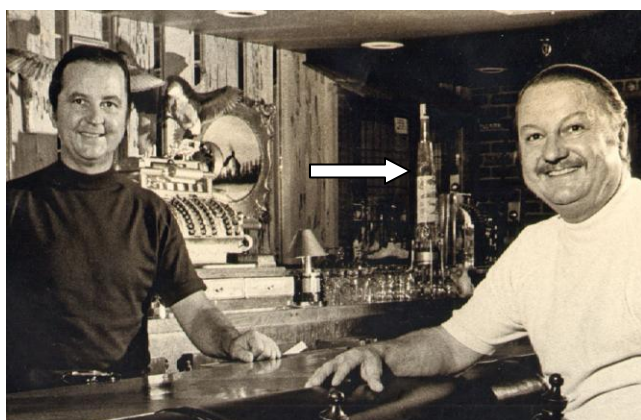
These “projectile points” were donated to us by Kimberley Mattox, who lived in El Sobrante till around 8 or 9 years old, attending Valley View Elementary School. She lived on Monte Verde road, on the ridge above Sobrante Avenue. Now living in Oklahoma, Kimberley has very fond memories of living in the hills of El Sobrante, and it was there, sometime in the 1970s, that she collected these very fine arrowheads, or, more precisely, “projectile points.” Nicely made, they are quite large, the largest being over 3 inches in length, and may have been hafted onto a spear for hunting large game. The “ears” are all cut similarly (“corner-notched”) indicating that they may have been made by members of one group. The notches in the base of the point serve to assist in attaching the point to a shaft.

The two outside points appear to be chert, a locally occurring hard, sedimentary rock commonly used for tool and weapons-making. The center piece may be obsidian, suggesting a connection to a more northerly group (obsidian is not found in this area). However, it could easily be a darker variety of chert (or flint, which, for tool-making, is a harder and more desirable variety of chert). This piece is also nicely serrated, and could have doubled as a “blade” for cutting and skinning game.

We are very grateful to Kimberley for this donation, as it represents the only collection of Native American “points” that we have. They are now on display in our History Center.



We are grateful to El Sobrante resident Robert Brower for the donation of the very large liqueur bottle shown at the left. Robert reports that he picked up the bottle at an estate sale of artifacts from Ed's Tavern, some time following the passing of Ed Banducci (jr.) in 2009 (Ed is at the left in the photo below). The bottle is well over 2 feet tall and holds one gallon of spirits known as "Liquore Galliano" which is a sweet 80 proof liqueur imported from Italy. Bottles of this



size are rare and collectible. According to Robert, he was told that the bottle sat on the bar, and may, after the liqueur had been consumed, have been used to collect quarters for some purpose, perhaps for donations to a local cause. It is well known that Ed's mother, Teresa, was very active in El Sobrante and for years was chairwoman of the March of Dimes effort. In the background of this photo, a very similar bottle can be seen (see arrow), though the label is somewhat different.



In addition, Mr. Brower donated a T-shirt that was apparently sold or given away from Joe's Pizza, which was located at 4203 Valley View Road in El Sobrante (recent home of 4 Corners Pizza). Joe's was in business until around 2005. Does anyone out there remember Joe's?

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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Visit us on-line at:

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