

Millbrae Life & Times

M I L L B R A E H I S T O R I C A L S O C I E T Y N E W S L E T T E R

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HISTORICAL SPOTLIGHT:

THE BELOVED EL RANCHO INN

BY TOM DAWDY



If you have lived in Millbrae for a while, you have probably been to the **El Rancho Inn**. Most of us have attended events at the **Terrace Café** such as weddings, parties and other events that have celebrated special times in your life or those of your friends.

In 1948 **Martin** and his son **Earl Wilms** received approval to build their 40-unit motel on **El Camino Real**. On May 15, 1949, Millbrae's new modern motel held its grand opening celebration. When the motel opened, it was named "**El Rancho De Mill**". The jewel of the El Rancho has always been the restaurant with the "world's largest swimming pool window". The restaurant has had many names over the years. When the Wilms' opened the eatery in the mid-1950's, it was named "**The Dolphin Room**". Later on it was renamed as "**The Mermaid Room**", and many years later after a remodel it was rechristened as "**Remingtons**". Finally, after its latest major renovation it became the present-day "**Terrace Cafe**".



There have been many visitors and VIP guests at the El Rancho over the years. One of the most notable visits was in 1954 when **Vice-President Richard Nixon** stayed there. **Robert Young** and **Joan Crawford** also stayed at the Inn. The swimming pool was a magnet for filming. When

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PRESIDENT'S REPORT JOHN MUNIZ

It's that time of the year again! The **Millbrae Historical Society Installation of Officers** will be held in Millbrae Library Room A on **Sunday, March 12th** at 1:00 pm - the same day as Daylight Savings Time begins. **Millbrae Mayor Reuben Holoher** will be on hand to perform the swearing-in of the President and the Board of Trustees. We are also fortunate to

have as our guest speaker **Josh Milstein**, Deputy City Attorney for the City and County of San Francisco. Mr. Milstein will speak about the History of the **Peninsula Water-shed/Spring Valley Water Company/San Francisco Water Department**. His talk will be accompanied by a PowerPoint presentation. Thank you to **Joe Teresi** for procuring such a great guest speaker.



Everyone is invited to attend the installation. You do not have to be a member of the Millbrae Historical Society to attend. We will serve light refreshments and cookies.

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PRESIDENT'S REPORT

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1)

Once again, I am blessed to continue as your President. This will be my eighth year as President of this historic organization serving the people of Millbrae.

At last, after three years of planning and 32 years of discussion, the **Millbrae Historical Society's Carriage House** project is in full swing. The groundbreaking was held on **Monday, February 13th** at the construction site. 35 attendees witnessed the most significant moment in MHS history since 1985 when the Museum was moved to **Constitution Square**. We are well on our way to completing the Carriage House by June (depends on the weather cooperating). We will plan on a City-wide dedication and celebration sometime in August.

In case you are wondering what will go into the Carriage House upon its completion: Our **1931 Southern Pacific Fire Engine** (currently stored at the Millbrae Train Museum), our **1890 Surrey** (currently on display at the South San Francisco Wells Fargo Bank branch), and other historical exhibits currently not on display due to lack of space at the Millbrae Museum. Next time you're at the Library or Constitution Square, check out the progress of the building foundation and construction.

Thank you to the **Millbrae Historical Society Board of Trustees** for allowing this dream to come true. **John Brucato**, our founder and first President would be proud!

Best wishes,

John Muniz

Millbrae Historical Society President
2009 – Present



Millbrae Historical Society charter members (since 1970) **George and Helen Habeeb**, turn over the first shovel of sacred Millbrae soil.



Millbrae Mayor Reuben Holoher, turns over the second mound of soil, using the official "gold" shovel.

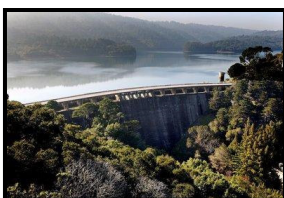
MHS 2017-18 OFFICER / TRUSTEE INSTALLATION

Please join us at this year's MHS Officer/Trustee Installation on **Sunday, March 12 at 1:00 pm** in the **Millbrae Library Community Room "A"**, featuring a presentation by **Josh Milstein**, Deputy City Attorney for the City and County of San Francisco, on the history of the Peninsula Watershed/Spring Valley Water Company/San Francisco Water Department.

The MHS Nominating Committee has placed the following names into nomination to serve as MHS Officers and Trustees for the year 2017-18:

President:	John Muniz
1st Vice-President:	Paul Larson
2nd Vice-President:	Joe Teresi
Secretary:	Gaetane Andrews
Treasurer:	Vern Bruce
Parliamentarian:	Mary Vella Treseler

Trustees: Gaetane Andrews, Judy Cullina, Tom Dawdy, Cathy Quigg, Dorothy Semke



VICE-PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE PAUL LARSON

As of this writing (February 17th), **"Rain Rain Go Away, Come Again Another Day"** is the theme for the moment. At this point in the season, we have seen more rain than in many years, and according to the weather authorities the drought is officially over for the Bay Area. I like the rain and missed it during the drought... but the rain has had an adverse effect on those who are not prepared. Flooding and various water-related calamities, such as the recent overflowing of **Oroville Reservoir**, has made life for many not too pleasant. But still, the water is a blessing and the underground aquifers are being replenished.

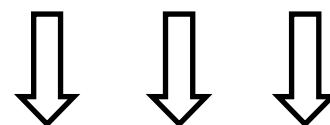
Speaking of rain... how many of you can name a song or movie with the word "rain" in the title? I will start off with the obvious: **"Singing in the Rain"** is a song and movie. Also **"Purple Rain"** and **"It's Raining Men"** are a few songs that come to mind, both having been featured in movies. Other songs about precipitation can be added to the list... remember **Lena Horne** singing **"Stormy Weather"** or **Al Jolson** singing **"April Showers"**? How many more songs can you think of?

Several days ago (Monday, February 13th), the rain let up enough for a great group of Millbrae Historical Society Trustees, Millbrae big-wigs and well-wishers to witness the ground breaking of the new **MHS Carriage House**. I know that all who listened to MHS President **John Muniz** talk about the various historical displays he arranged for this special event were very appreciative. Great job MHS President John! Have a great March and beautiful upcoming spring! April showers bring May flowers. All my best!

Paul Larson
MHS 1st Vice President



WORD FIND PUZZLE



Millbrae Street Names

S	A	Z	T	G	X	F	L	K	Y	N	L	R	R	N	M	F	A	S	J
B	S	W	Y	L	O	M	I	T	A	L	Z	O	S	D	I	F	C	H	M
R	A	S	E	B	A	S	T	I	A	N	Q	W	E	K	L	U	O	T	I
O	L	A	U	R	E	L	L	W	W	K	J	H	N	R	L	V	N	F	L
A	C	N	P	J	C	O	C	D	U	L	Q	M	C	F	W	U	A	Z	L
D	C	A	Q	F	N	H	O	O	B	Y	N	T	M	R	O	G	K	T	B
W	A	R	T	G	E	O	A	N	Z	E	U	S	Z	M	O	I	D	X	R
A	P	D	A	M	W	R	M	D	N	Z	S	G	A	I	D	W	F	B	A
Y	U	M	B	E	F	L	N	O	B	A	O	R	T	Z	U	J	L	M	E
R	C	B	G	N	P	A	S	W	V	O	A	L	M	O	I	W	N	C	P
J	H	D	R	V	T	I	C	D	O	P	U	F	I	D	U	A	E	J	K
K	I	X	D	I	H	T	O	R	B	O	R	R	E	N	M	X	O	N	T
R	N	B	J	C	C	H	B	T	E	A	D	E	N	E	O	M	G	S	T
S	O	A	R	M	J	H	B	Z	T	S	N	T	D	E	N	Z	E	E	K
P	J	U	S	T	E	D	M	I	O	H	T	U	A	Z	Z	R	N	Q	D
F	M	Z	T	H	L	H	N	O	A	R	L	V	T	Y	C	E	Y	U	Y
O	Z	C	H	F	T	A	K	W	N	K	J	W	I	L	L	C	P	O	F
X	E	J	D	Q	H	O	H	W	B	D	N	K	L	E	S	O	L	I	K
V	R	T	Y	N	E	A	N	M	E	X	X	I	H	E	W	L	R	A	G
C	S	W	N	X	T	C	D	E	I	P	H	Y	S	D	A	X	O	A	H

AHWAHNEE
BROADWAY
COZZOLINO
HELEN
LOMITA
MILLBRAE
PARAMOUNT
SEBASTIAN
TIOGA

ANITA
CAPUCHINO
CRESTVIEW
HILLCREST
LUDEMAN
MILLWOOD
RICHMOND
SEQUOIA

ASHTON
CHADBOURNE
FERNWOOD
LAUREL
MAGNOLIA
MURCHISON
RIDGEWOOD
TAYLOR

MILLBRAE'S BELOVED EL RANCHO INN (CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1)

Hollywood came to film on the Peninsula, they often came to the El Rancho. One of the most notable filming at the motel took place in 1982 when film crews came in to shoot scenes for the blockbuster film **The Right Stuff**. Over 100 people from the movie stayed at the motel. The **Mermaid Room** was transformed into a 1960's lounge and **Bill Nokes**, the organist for the Mermaid Room for 27 years, was hired to play himself in the movie. One of the funniest **Super Bowl** commercials was also filmed at the pool. The hilarious **Bud Light** commercial took place at night by the pool when a couple thought they were alone and decided to "skinny-dip" in the pool. Of course in the next scene there is huge party in the Mermaid Room with everyone getting a free show through the "world's largest swimming pool window"!

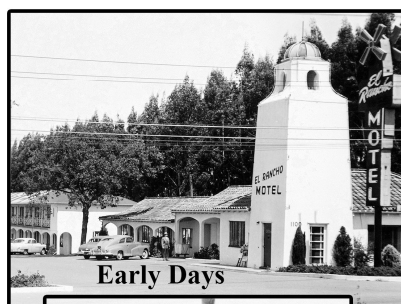
The Wilms Family has always been heavily involved in our community. **Earl Wilms** was the 9th Mayor of Millbrae (1955-56) and also served as the President of the **San Mateo County Chamber of Commerce**. During his stint as Chamber President, Earl proposed that all of San Mateo County become one City and County (like San Francisco). Earl suggested that a unified county would run more smoothly and more economically with uniform regulations like building codes. Under his proposal, each individual City would retain its own Police & Fire Chiefs and City Manager. Maybe Earl was ahead of his time, as over 60 years later Millbrae has joined its neighbors to form the Central County Fire Department and is served by the San Mateo County Sheriff.

The El Rancho was no stranger to action. In 1950 and again in 1951 there were armed robberies at the front desk. In

1950, several guests were kidnapped by armed robbers. In 1951, the Wilms' called the Millbrae Police during another holdup. Police officers **Alan Roper** and **Frank Paglia** were close to the motel and arrived in seconds. The gunman opened fire on the officers, and a real gun battle ensued. The police cars were riddled with bullets and the gunman was arrested. The gunman (**James Alonza Rogers**) ended up in **San Quentin**, where he later tried to escape and killed two prison guards and was then sentenced to the gas chamber.

The El Rancho Inn is well known for so many Millbrae memories. Several **Miss Millbrae Pageants** were hosted by the pool over the years, and we can't forget the heliport built across the street (where **McDonalds** is now located). The pad, opened on a trial basis in 1960 as a "Helicopter Taxi", offered rides to **Bay Meadows**, **Candlestick Park**, and downtown San Francisco. Prices were \$10 one-way and \$15 round trip. When you enter the property, you can't miss the statue that was rescued from the **Mills Mansion**. Earl named the statue "**Aphrodite, Goddess of the El Rancho Motel**". There were press reports at that time calling this a Millbrae landmark.

Memories of Millbrae and the El Rancho Inn have been together hand-in-hand for almost 70 years. In January 2017, the owners announced that the Millbrae landmark had been sold to a development company. Rumors spread all over town as to what might happen to our "beloved El Rancho Inn". I guess this is a future chapter in Millbrae history, time will tell. Let's hope that some of our beloved Inn will be preserved for Millbrae's future generations.



CURATOR'S REPORT

DOROTHY SEMKE

We are well into the beginning of 2017 and very excited to watch the progress of the building of our long-awaited **Carriage House**. As you may know, the **Millbrae History Museum**, which was moved in 1985 from its location on **Broadway and Ludeman Lane**, originally had a Carriage House which was too damaged to be salvaged and had to be destroyed.

I personally want to thank all those who helped in the decorating and un-decorating of the Museum for our **Christmas Party**. It was loads of fun! The weather was good, allowing lots of people to attend. The food was delicious as usual, and the music supplied by the **Side Track Band** wonderful as always. A special "thank you" to all the members who donated the tasty desserts.

Welcome to our new docent **Kelly Rodriguez** who will soon be helping out. So glad to have you joining us! Also, we are happy to welcome new MHS members **Joyce & Rich Wheeler, Greg & Connie Muscat, Christine Peng, Annie Merics and Philip Warring**.

We now have a new album on display in the bookcase in the Dining Room, donated by **Mary Vella Treseler**. Because of her far-reaching contacts and involvement in the city, the former **Millbrae Sun** newspaper asked her to write a bi-weekly community column titled "**Mary Sez**". Mary wrote her column as a volunteer from 1992 until her son's tragic death in 1993. It was too difficult for her to continue at that time, and so she curtailed



this activity. Thank you so much Mary for sharing these articles with all of us.

We recently had a visit by **Maria Elena Barr**, who was a friend of the late **Gordon Silva**. Gordon was a descendent of the pioneering Silva family of Millbrae. She is researching the family and writing a book about their involvement in the 1846 **Battle of San Pasqual** in **Escondido**.

Dorothy Semke,
Curator

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MILLBRAE NOW AND THEN

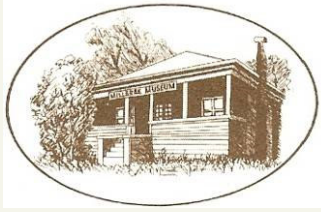


Corner of Broadway and La Cruz Avenue, early 1950's



Corner of Broadway and La Cruz Avenue today.

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**MILLBRAE
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY**

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Phone: 650-692-5786

MHS OFFICERS – 2016-17

John Muniz, President
Paul Larson, 1st Vice-President
Joe Teresi, 2nd Vice-President
Gaetane Andrews, Secretary
Vern Bruce, Treasurer
Mary Vella Treseler, Parliamentarian

Dorothy Semke, Curator
Tom Dawdy, Historian
Ray Gier, Museum Facilitator
Joe Teresi, Newsletter Editor

C A L E N D A R O F E V E N T S

Sunday, March 12: Millbrae Historical Society Installation of 2017 Officers and Board of Trustees, 1:00 pm, Millbrae Library Community Room "A", 1 Library Avenue.

- featuring a presentation on the history of the Peninsula Water/Spring Valley Water Company/San Francisco Water Department by **Josh Milstein**, Deputy City Attorney for the City and County of San Francisco. Light refreshments will be served.

Ongoing basis: Take time to visit the area behind the Millbrae Museum from time to time to check out the progress on our new **Carriage House** as it begins to take shape!

Fourth Wednesdays of the Month: Millbrae Historical Society Board Meetings, 7:00 pm, Millbrae Museum, 420 Poplar Avenue. MHS members and guests are welcome to attend!

Millbrae Historical Society Museum Operating Hours

Millbrae Museum: Saturdays, 12:00 noon to 4:00 pm

Millbrae Train Museum: Saturdays, 10:00 am to 2:00 pm