

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: MILLS FIELD TO SFO BY TOM DAWDY



Many members of the Millbrae Historical Society know the basic history of our lovely City of Millbrae. Our City Father, **Darius Ogden Mills** named his beautiful estate "Millbrae" ("Mill" for his name and "brae" for the Scottish word for "rolling hills"). D.O. Mills, along with his partner **A.F. Green**, also owned hundreds of acres of cow fields that provided the grazing for the Millbrae Dairy.

In 1927, the City and County of San Francisco was urgently searching for a location to build a municipal airport. The SF Board of Supervisors was considering several sites from Crissy Field all the way south to Redwood City. In Feb. 1927, it was decided that

the best site for an airport would be on a 150-acre cow pasture now owned by **Ogden Livingston Mills**, the son of D.O. Mills. San Francisco leased the 150 acres from Mills for \$1,500 per year to construct a "temporary, experimental" airport.

There have been several local places named after the Mills family. In 1908, Mills Hospital, and of course Mills High School in 1958. On May 7, 1927, the new airport built on part of the Mills Estate was officially dedicated as **Mills Field Municipal Airport**. The Administration Building and hangar were completed in September, but were just bolted together because they were intended to be temporary facilities.

1927 was a big year for aviation history. Earlier that year, **Charles Lindbergh** made his historic solo flight across the Atlantic. On his goodwill tour, he landed at the brand (continued on Page 4)

PRESIDENT'S REPORT JOHN MUNIZ

Well here we are again, almost the 4th of July. You know what that means! The 34th Annual **Millbrae Historical Society Fourth of July Picnic** is coming up. This year, we have changed the Fourth of July Picnic menu. We are catering the picnic from Joe DiMaggio's favorite delicatessen, **Leonardo's Deli**. Please see the Fourth of July Picnic Flyer in this

issue of the newsletter. We decided to try the new menu, which is much less work for our members. We will still have a great selection of raffle prizes, updates on the Historical Society, and a lot of fun. Hope to see you at this year's Picnic! Get your reservation in as soon as possible.

The Millbrae Historical Society has made a significant donation to the success of the 250th Anniversary of



the first European sighting of San Francisco Bay by Spanish explorer **Gaspar De Portolá** and his expedition on November 4, 1769. **Joe Teresi** is overseeing the funding in conjunction with the **San Mateo** (continued on Page 2)

PRESIDENT'S REPORT

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1)

County Historical Association for the celebration and events. See Joe's article in this newsletter.

Next year, the Millbrae Historical Society will celebrate our **Golden Anniversary** — 50 years of service — as an educational resource. **Joe Teresi** has been placed in charge of the committee to determine what type of celebration would be fun for the community. I would like the Golden Anniversary to be scheduled sometime next August, when the weather is nice in Millbrae.

What do you think is going into the old **Orchard Supply Hardware** location on El Camino Real? The land and building are owned by the **San Francisco Public Utilities Commission**. It was leased by **Lowe's**, own-

er of Orchard Supply Hardware. I heard through the grapevine that it may become a **Target** store. I also ran into a former Orchard employee who said that it may become a garden supply company. Some residents say the location could be used as the new **Millbrae Recreation Center**. How about a theater complex like the **Century** in Redwood City? All potential candidates must be presented before the SF PUC. Whatever moves in, I hope it is soon!

Thank you all for your service and continued support of the Millbrae Historical Society

John Muniz

Millbrae Historical Society President
2009—present

250TH ANNIVERSARY OF GASPAR DE PORTOLÁ EXPEDITION



Depiction of first European sighting of San Francisco Bay by the Gaspar de Portolá Expedition

Info at: <https://parks.smcgov.org/ohlone-portola-heritage-trail-project>

November 4, 2019 will mark the 250th Anniversary of the first European sighting of San Francisco Bay from atop Sweeney Ridge above present-day San Bruno by members of the **Gaspar de Portolá Expedition**. To commemorate the event, the **San Mateo County Parks Department**, in collaboration with the **San Mateo County Historical Association** and others, is establishing the **Ohlone-Portolá Heritage Trail**, which will highlight stories of the original natives of the area along with the Portolá Expedition. The Millbrae Historical Society is participating in the anniversary celebration by funding two interpretive signs to be placed along the new Heritage Trail at the Portolá campsite monument at the top of Hillcrest Blvd. Further details will be discussed at the 4th of July Picnic, and commemorative ceremonies will be held near the November anniversary date. More info coming soon!

MILLBRAE HISTORY WALK



Saturday, July 20, 1:00 to 3:30 pm

Join us for a 2.2 mile walk around town to visit some of Millbrae's historic sites, featuring stops at the Original Firehouse, the oldest house in Millbrae, Millbrae Train Museum, and Our Lady of Lebanon Maronite Catholic Church. Part of the Victorian Days Celebration in San Mateo County throughout July and August.

- **Meet at the Millbrae Museum (420 Poplar Avenue) at 1:00 pm.**
- **Please wear comfortable shoes and hat and bring a reusable water bottle!**
- **Questions? Please contact Joe Teresi at (650) 455-4887**

VICE-PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

PAUL LARSON

Greetings MHS Trustees, members and friends!

With news circulating about current plans for a bigger, better **Millbrae Community Center** (to replace the fire-ravaged building destroyed on July 21, 2016), it sparked my interest to learn more about the history of the original facility. Over the years, I participated in many community events at the Recreation Center, such as **Millbrae Lions Club** projects and meetings, fund-raising activities, and the annual Senior Health Fair booth where I provided info on **Chapel of the Highlands** to interested patrons. This building had been the heart of

tion (WPA). Later it was taken over by the community nursery school which in 1958 made their move to Center Street where they currently operate. In 1957, Millbrae decided to establish their own recreation department and moved to their own facility in 1970.

Continuing my research, I called **Don Dambrosio**, who was a founding force and Director of the **Millbrae Parks & Recreation Department** from its inception in 1957 until 1991. Don told me that the Rec Center was designed by Al Kahl (the same architect as for the 1956 Millbrae Civic Center buildings, including City Hall and the former Library). The gleaming new



along with a comfortably-sized Convertible Hall, including a convenient corner warming kitchen. This building was approximately 16,000 square feet and wrapped around a central plaza, along with a secondary courtyard, tennis courts, and two ample parking lots.



Millbrae for a long time and is currently missed... but details about its history that I thought I would easily find on the internet were surprisingly absent.

I decided to make an inquiry to our wonderful and knowledgeable MHS Curator **Dorothy Semke**. She provided a wealth of information, starting off with the fact that young Dorothy and the other Millbrae kids frequented a place they knew as **The Adobe** clubhouse. According to Dorothy, The Adobe was a 1000 square-foot structure that was built in 1936 at the end of Laurel Avenue by volunteers with assistance from the **Works Progress Administra-**

tion (WPA). Later it was taken over by the community nursery school which in 1958 made their move to Center Street where they currently operate. In 1957, Millbrae decided to establish their own recreation department and moved to their own facility in 1970. Continuing my research, I called **Don Dambrosio**, who was a founding force and Director of the **Millbrae Parks & Recreation Department** from its inception in 1957 until 1991. Don told me that the Rec Center was designed by Al Kahl (the same architect as for the 1956 Millbrae Civic Center buildings, including City Hall and the former Library). The gleaming new

Millbrae Recreation Center was dedicated by **Mayor Lew Grasberger** on March 27, 1970. Located at 477 Lincoln Circle adjacent to **Central Park**, this facility was designed to serve the needs of a growing community by boasting a spacious reception area with wrap-around counter and offices, a large main Assembly Room with hardwood floors and a stage for entertainment, a fully equipped catering kitchen, a medium-sized Game Room, as well as several convertible Activity Rooms/Classrooms. A short number of years later, an addition called the Senior Wing was built featuring a separate entrance and lobby, a reception desk with office space,

For 46 years, the residents of Millbrae enjoyed this facility as a hub for countless activities and events for youths, families and seniors. Now as Millbrae City leaders engage in the process of rebuilding for the future, and have the chance to get it right, the residents of Millbrae look forward to a state-of-the-art experience and a Community Center that will lead the way well into a good portion of the 21st Century.

All my best to you and your family,
from MHS 1st VP **Paul Larson**.

MILLS FIELD TO SFO

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1)

new Mills Field. Thousands of people turned out to see this event, and he had a difficult time landing because police had to hold back the crowds to keep them off the runway.

For the next three years Mills Field sometimes struggled — having more flying air circus events and other shows than commercial air traffic. Some people referred to it as a “muddy airstrip”. Although the airport was losing money every month, by 1930 it was decided that the new airport would become permanent. With the original three-year lease with the Mills family about to end, negotiations with Ogden Mills began, and in August 1930 San Francisco purchased 1,112 acres, including the original 150-acre plot, for an expanded airport site. On June 9, 1931, the name of the facility was officially changed from Mills Field to **San Francisco Airport**. On January 8, 1932, the administration responsibilities for the Air-

port were placed under the authority of the **Public Utilities Commission**. In the 1930's, **Works Progress Administration** (WPA) workers made many improvements to the airport and its runways. Between 1934 and 1937, there were often as many as 2,000 workers laboring on airfield improvements each day. A new Administration Building, Passenger Terminal, and a 4-story Control Tower were all completed in 1937. By the end of the 1930's, San Francisco

Airport had taken its place among the nation's major terminals. During fiscal year 1939-40, the airport handled over 126,000 passengers.

During World War II, the airport became an extremely important asset to our country. After the war, the aviation technology developed for the military was converted to commercial use and thrived at the airport. There was also a post-war boom in passenger traffic. By 1946-47, passenger traffic had risen to over 980,000. In 1947, **British Commonwealth Pacific Airlines** and **Philippine Airlines** started service to the airport, and the airport's code in the American Aviation Air Traffic Guide was changed to “SFO”. It was now officially designated as an international airport. At the end of the 1940's, the

next phase of the airport was under development. More services, such as international travel, freight, ground transportation, and maintenance were in demand.

Construction of a new terminal building began in 1951, culminating with the dedication of the **Central Terminal** on August 27, 1954. This was by far the biggest event ever held at the airport. The crowds that day numbered in the hundreds of thousands. It was called a **Three Day Flight Festival**, featuring two air shows per day and participation by twelve cities. The **Millbrae Sun** reported that the entire Millbrae Police Department attended (I wonder who was watching the store?). We lived in **Bay-side Manor** at the time, and I remember sitting on our back fence that overlooked the cow pasture watching the air show. I felt like planes were going to crash into our house!



1928



1940



1954



2019

Five years later in 1959, SFO came into the Jet Age when **Trans World Airlines** (TWA) started their non-stop flights to New York flying their brand new 707-131's. In that same year, SFO was the first airport in the country to install Jet Bridges so that passengers did not have to walk out onto the tarmac and climb the staircase to the aircraft. As long as I can remember, there has always been construction at SFO — new buildings, parking

structures, improved runways, and of course new technology, which continues today and into the future.

In closing, some SFO Facts:

- 7th busiest airport in the country
- 24th busiest airport in the world
- Serving over 43,000,000 travelers a year
- Even though SFO is owned and policed by San Francisco, the airport is located within San Mateo County

For more information, go to San Francisco International Airport/Wikipedia or better yet plan a visit to the **Louis A. Turpen Aviation Museum**, located in the SFO International Terminal.

The Millbrae Historical Society

Proudly Presents

The 34th Annual Fourth of July Picnic



1936 American La France

Where can I find this
fantastic 4th of July
celebration?

On Thursday, 7-4-19, Dave Chetcuti Room at Civic Center
Plaza: 450 Poplar Avenue between the Millbrae Library
and the Millbrae Museum - 11:00 AM until 3:00 PM.
\$16.00 adults, \$5.00 for kids under 12 years old.

Please join us for an
Independence Day tradition -
Everyone is welcome

Lunch starts at High
Noon

BBQ Beef Ribs
Italian Salad
Chili Beans
Penne Pasta with
Marinara Sauce
Garlic Bread
Ice Cream
Soda - Water
Raffle Prizes



Carriage House

Please use this handy coupon to RSVP or call (650) 697-3319 (deadline for reservations is Monday 7/1/19)

Number attending MHS BBQ _____ Name(s) _____

Address _____

Phone Number _____ RSVP's Only. Sorry, No Walk-Ins

Checks Payable to:
Millbrae Historical Society
P.O. Box 511
Millbrae, CA 94030

CURATOR'S REPORT

DOROTHY SEMKE

Fourth of July is fast approaching and with that is our big picnic and raffle. If you haven't signed up for it yet, be sure and drop in to the Museum any Saturday to pick up a reservation form. We are looking forward to seeing everyone again this year!

Thank you to former Millbrae resident **Gail Gerstmar**, who now lives out-of-State, for taking the time to mail us a 1980 Southern Pacific

Timetable, which has been given to our Train Museum for display.

Welcome to new members **Antoinette Pilz**, **Judi Sullivan**, and **Bill's Lock Shop**!

We were delighted to have a visit by a relative of one of the owners of **Bruce & Griffin's 5 & 10** (also known as the **Dime Store**). It was located in the 300 block of Broadway for many years.



If anyone has any old photos of Millbrae businesses that we could borrow, copy, and return, we would be very happy. Hope to see you all soon!

Dorothy Semke
Millbrae Museum Curator

TRAIN MUSEUM NEWS

ELIZABETH FURBER, EDITOR
VERN BRUCE, REPORTER

This report is packed with lots of great news! First of all, we have finally gotten a new roof to replace the decades-old, leaking one. It looks great, and has been leak-tested. Additionally, all the rusted and clogged gutters & downspouts were replaced. Now our **Train Museum** looks like it was just built!

All of the pavement in the parking lot is being redone also. This was started the first week of June, and will be completed by month's end.

The Museum interior will also be completely repainted, all of this care of Caltrain, our landlord responsible for such maintenance. We profusely

thank **Seth Worden** of Transit America (subcontractor to Caltrain) for completing all of the above projects in such an efficient manner.

Other recent work includes the complete replacement and re-routing of our north-side water spigot, materials and labor donated by **Charles (Smitty) Smith**; Internet access installation and research on the exact paint colors to match the original ones, courtesy of **Peter Sheerin**.

Also, significant preparation for the repainting of our museum was done by **Charlie Hegarty**, **Peter Sheerin**, and **Vern Bruce** over the last few months.



Lastly, we would like to thank the following volunteers for their efforts as docents, and/or worker bees that have given their time on other various things since our last report: **Jorge Quesada**; **Jay King**; **Peter Sheerin**; **Charlie Hegarty**; **Richard Kennedy**; and **Vern Bruce**.

Vernon Bruce
Reporter

Please patronize our Millbrae Historical Society Lifetime Business Members:



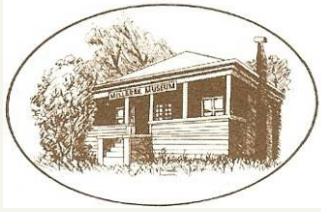
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**MILLBRAE
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY**

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MHS OFFICERS – 2019-20

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 & Carriage House Curator
Ray Gier, Museum Facilitator
Joe Teresi, Newsletter Editor

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

Thursday, July 4: Annual MHS Fourth of July Family Picnic, 11:00 am to 3:00 pm

- David Chetcuti Community Room, 450 Poplar Avenue
- Food by Leonardo's Deli, raffle prizes, fun times!!

Saturday, July 20: Millbrae History Walk, 1:00 to 3:30 pm

- Join us for a 2.2 mile walk around town to visit some of Millbrae's historic sites, featuring stops at the Original Firehouse, the oldest house in Millbrae, Millbrae Train Museum, and Our Lady of Lebanon Maronite Catholic Church. Meet at the Millbrae Museum (420 Poplar Avenue) at 1:00 pm.
- Please wear comfortable shoes and hat and bring a reusable water bottle!
- Questions? Please contact Joe Teresi at (650) 455-4887

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