

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:
MILLBRAE'S DRIVE-IN RESTAURANTS:
"THE HEYDAYS"**
BY TOM DAWDY



Drive-In restaurants across the USA became popular when middle-class Americans started to drive their own cars, and the highway system was being built across the country. The first drive-in in America was called the "Texas Pig Stand", opened by **Jessie G Kirby** in 1921 outside of Dallas. They served brisket sandwiches that were brought out to the customers' cars. Shortly after that, the "Tam O' Shanter" opened in Southern California. Their food was served by "Tray Boys", who asked drivers to roll their windows half-way down for the tray to fit on.

In the early 1920's, **Roy Allen** and **Frank Wright** opened their first **A&W Drive-In**, named after the first letters in their two last names. By 1933, A&W became the first national drive-in chain, with 171 locations — all with full "Car Hop Service". After the Great Depression and the war years, these roadside eateries became very popular across the country. Booths were added inside, and a lot of neon lights on the outside serviced by car hops in fun uniforms.

This brings us to Millbrae in 1945 (three years before our city was incorporated) — **Elmer C. Smith** opened up his drive-in restaurant on El Camino Real just after the end of World War II. One of their specials was a full Turkey Dinner for \$1.25. If you wanted red meat, the N.Y. Steak would set you back \$1.50. He paid his workers around \$2.00 per hour, which was above minimum wage. **Smith's Drive-In** was a big hit in Millbrae! Elmer rented a house on Hemlock Avenue for his male workers to stay. In 1948, the

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**PRESIDENT'S REPORT
JOHN MUNIZ**

Let's harken back to January 14th, 1948 - **Harry Truman** was preparing to run for a second full term as President. World War II had ended three years earlier, the country was in recession, and the United States was the only country in the world to have an atomic bomb and the means to deliver it anywhere in the world.

The Academy Award for best picture would go to **Gentleman's**

Agreement starring Gregory Peck. The tunes on the hit parade were **On a Slow Boat to China** by **Dinah Shore** and **Because** by **Perry Como**. The **Cleveland Indians** won the World Series. The State of Israel was formed. The "Cold War" started while planes were airlifting food and supplies to the American sector of Soviet-controlled Berlin. The average cost to see a movie was 20 cents, and the United States vs. Para-



mount pictures decided the fate of film studios owning their own theaters chains. Three cents for postage, and a **Ford Deluxe** two-door coupe cost \$1,230.

And then there was Millbrae, the

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PRESIDENT'S REPORT (CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1)

sleepy little unincorporated bedroom community, nestled 16 miles south of San Francisco, with mountains to the west, a bay to the east, and cows still roaming the Bayside neighborhoods. The green hills were dotted with flower and truck gardens. You could hitch a ride on the #40 streetcar to Fifth and Market Steets in San Francisco for ten cents. Ride the Southern Pacific commuter train from Millbrae to the Third and Townsend Station in San Francisco. Take a drive three miles north on the two-lane El Camino to Tanforan Park and spend a Saturday at the races. Golfers could practice at the Millbrae Driving Range on Millbrae Avenue, or Green Hills Country Club members could play 18 holes and then have lunch. We had a 1500-acre parcel called the Mills Estate with a mansion built in 1870 by Darius Ogden Mills. Kids could take a swim in one of the Mills Estate's two lakes or hunt jackrabbits. With a population of nearly 8,000 residents, Millbrae was safe and clean with a prosperous downtown shopping district. Millbrae was also known for social vices such as gambling, and a brothel known as 16 Mile House on El Camino and Center Street. A very popular hangout was the Coral Reef, located across the street from the 16 Mile House on Center Street. Millbrae did not get a movie house until the Millbrae Theater opened in 1949.

On January 14th, 1948, after a decade of heated discussions about incorporation, members of the Millbrae City Council-elect drove to Sacramento where the Secretary of State handed them a certificate giving Millbrae status as a legal entity. Finally, Millbrae had grown up as an official City within San Mateo County. At right is a picture of the Millbrae Sun issue dated January 23, 1948, announcing the details of the incorporation of City of Millbrae and the new city map.

On Sunday, March 13th, the Millbrae Historical Society held its 52nd Installation of Officers and Trustees. Joe Teresi gathered a group of current and former owners of the oldest house in Millbrae at 1 Lewis Avenue. We heard some interesting tales and experiences from the residents, the former home of Alfred F. Green, owner of the Millbrae Dairy. Yes, I will be serving as your President for another year, my 15th!

For our long-time residents, who used the Southern Pacific train to commute from Millbrae to San Francisco or south to San Jose, the Millbrae Train Museum has almost completed an exact replica of the station office, which is being replicated from a 1979 photo. The museum has several other exciting exhibits that will transport visitors back to an age when the Southern Pacific Railroad was king in the West.

The Millbrae Museum, Carriage House, and Millbrae Train Museum still remained closed to the public, pending County COVID mandates. When Millbrae City Hall is opened to he public without appointments, our three museums can re-open.

The Millbrae Historical Society is looking forward to Millbrae's Diamond Jubilee 75th Anniversary celebrations. I heard that the City has hired an event planner to coordinate the project. We do have some members who were part of Millbrae's 50th Anniversary events who can provide a lot of ideas to contribute to a successful celebration. Also, the Millbrae Museum has an extensive archive of information regarding the 50th anniversary.

All the best to everyone, John Muniz Millbrae Historical Society President "The Past is our Key to the Future."



V I C E - P R E S I D E N T ' S M E S S A G E
P A U L L A R S O N

Greetings Millbrae Historical Society Trustees, members, and friends!

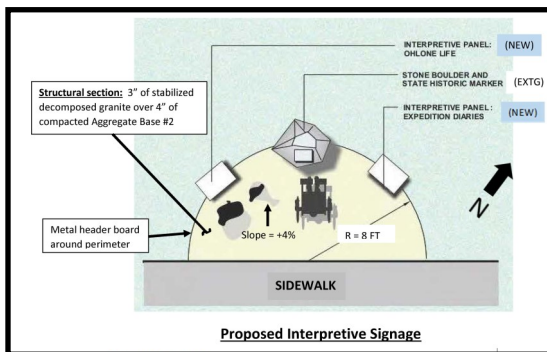
So much to write about and yet so little. The MHS has been working on a number of projects, and our Trustees have been meeting monthly on Zoom. Yet, the museum has been closed to the public since the beginning of COVID, and our live events have been on hold until it's known that mingling together is safe enough. Even though the State of California has now lifted face mask mandates, a good many businesses, restaurants, and gathering places request that indoor precautions still take precedence.

This is an historic time we're living through, not only regarding COVID-19, but with newsworthy events going on locally, around the country, and specific places in the world. Historians in the future will look back at us and have a lot to write about, but with regard to our social events and mingling with others, it can seem like so little. So, remember this is all temporary and the pandemic will have an end (or a transition), and will be in our rear view mirrors (in some form) sooner rather than later.



All my best wishes to you, your family and loved ones,
Paul Larson
 MHS 1st Vice-President

O H L O N E - P O R T O L A I N T E R P R E T I V E S I G N A G E



The Millbrae Historical Society is working cooperatively with San Mateo County Parks, the San Mateo County Historical Association, the Millbrae Community Foundation, and the City of Millbrae to install interpretive signage about the native Ohlone people and the Gaspar de Portola Expedition adjacent to the existing State Historical Marker at the top of Hillcrest Boulevard in Millbrae. The historical marker is near the site of where Portola's expedition camped after first sighting San Francisco Bay from atop nearby Sweeney Ridge. The signage is scheduled to be installed in Fall 2022.

Please patronize our Millbrae Historical Society Lifetime Business Members:



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MILLBRAE'S DRIVE-IN RESTAURANTS: "THE HEYDAYS"
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house was sold and Elmer tried to build a dormitory on his lot, but after complaints from the neighbors the Planning Commission denied him a permit.

In 1956, Elmer sold his drive-in to **W.H. Schoenhals** from San Francisco, who kept the restaurant's name as Smiths Drive-In. In less than a year, the restaurant failed and was boarded up.

At that same time, **San Francisco Supervisor Harold S. Dobbs** was building several drive-ins and bowling alleys in the Bay Area. Dobbs opened up **King's Drive-In** and **King's Bowl** in Millbrae. King's Drive-In (on the SE corner of Millbrae Avenue & El Camino Real) was on a 32,000 sq. ft. lot, had parking for 60 cars, and was open 24 hours a day. The local newspapers reported that from the day King's Drive-In opened it attracted teenagers like a "moth to a flame". Harold Dobbs was an interesting person. He was **San Francisco Mayor George Christopher's** right-hand man and would always fill in as Mayor when Christopher was traveling. He also ran for Mayor three times, always coming in second place, one time just barely losing to **Joe Alioto**.

Meanwhile, back in Millbrae **Niki Cruz**, a former employee of Smith's Drive-In, bought the old Smith's Drive-In and, after extensive remodeling, Cruz opened up as **Niki's Drive-In**. In

the 1960's, Millbrae had two very busy drive-in restaurants, not to mention **Becky Burgers** at the north end of town that was trying to grow larger, but kept being denied permits for big neon signs. Finally in 1965, Becky's was torn down and rebuilt as **Flings**.

This was also a very busy time for the Millbrae Police Department. Reports show that almost every night the Police were dispatched to Millbrae drive-ins to quell disturbances. In the late 1950's and early 60's, Millbrae was the place to be if you cruised El Camino Real — also known at that time as "cruising the strip".

By the mid 1960's, several drive-in restaurants on the Peninsula had put restrictions on their patrons. You could not just "hang out" at the drive-ins and had to buy food, eat, and leave. On a Saturday night in March 1965 at 11:15pm, around 100 cars drove into King's, and everyone got really rowdy. King's had three private police on duty that night, but they could not handle the crowd. When the melee began, one teenager threw a bottle at officer **Paul Brannum** and knocked him out cold. Soon Police arrived from Millbrae, San Bruno, Burlingame, Hillsborough, San Mateo County Sheriff, and the California Highway Patrol (33 officers in all)! Things did not calm down until after 2:00 am. There were injuries on both sides. In the end, 13 teenagers were arrested — 9 boys and 4 girls. Some of the teens were from Millbrae, and others were from out-of-town (a few were my friends!).

In early 1967, almost 10 years to the day it opened, King's closed its doors. It was noted in one of the newspapers that the local police celebrated this event. The property was sold to **Great Western Financial**, and their bank was constructed. Today **Chase Bank** sits on that corner.

Three years later in 1970, Niki Cruz closed down his drive-in restaurant, and it was bulldozed in 1972. Soon after a new drive-in was built on this spot called

TLC. Later it became **The Brave Burro**. In 1977, **Burger King** took over the spot and just recently closed.

So ends the story of the Millbrae drive-in restaurants. It is sad to say that we have no photographs of King's Drive-In at the Millbrae Museum. In the 1980's, the **San Mateo Times** published a story about **Martee Thomas** from the Millbrae Police Department searching for photos of King's. Martee had recently contacted the former owners, and all their files and photos had been thrown away. So next time you are driving down El Camino Real, please think about the "heyday" of drive-ins in Millbrae or just watch a few early episodes of **Happy Days!**



CURATOR'S REPORT
DOROTHY SEMKE

Hi everyone!

Hope you are all well and staying active and happy. Soon we hope to be able to reopen the Museum.

We would like to thank a few people for donations they have recently made to the Museum.

Alan Kirth donated a beautiful china cabinet.

Dan & Cathy Quigg contributed an old Folger's coffee can.

Sherry Neilsen Wood donated a Brownie Scrapbook put together by 12 girls in Millbrae Girl Scout Troop #187 in 1953 - 1956.

Gino Bavi's estate gave us a solid oak barrel chair over 100-years-old, two wine decanters, and an old phone which will be placed in the Train Museum.



Stay well,
Dorothy Semke
Curator

1 LEWIS AVENUE RESTORATION



At our March 13th Officer/Trustee Installation event, MHS Member Dean Woo shared these photos of his family's recently-completed restoration of the historic home at 1 Lewis Avenue. The photos show the care and loving attention that Dean and his wife put into the project. The house's original cream-colored stove/oven was completely refurbished by a restoration specialist. The dining room table is made from a repurposed wooden door covered with a sheet of glass. The new furniture and paint, although modern, were selected to match the home's historic character.

**HELP SUPPORT THE
NEW MILLBRAE RECREATION CENTER!**

Millbrae's beloved Recreation Center burnt to the ground on July 21, 2016. Our new facility will create a safe and healthy space for our seniors, youth, and families. Construction is almost complete, and a grand opening celebration is planned by the City of Millbrae for **Saturday, June 11th**.

While the City has secured the funds to build the structure, they are still in need of additional finan-

cial resources to bring this vital facility to life. Additional funds are needed to purchase furnishings, fixtures, and equipment for the new center. This is a team effort - we need your help now to reach our fundraising goal and give Millbrae back its beloved Recreation Center! Please consider making a donation TODAY. To get your name inscribed on the Donor Wall for the Grand Opening, please donate by **Thurs, April 21st!**

Your contribution can be permanently recognized on the donor wall.

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HISTORICAL
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MHS OFFICERS – 2022-23

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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, May 26: 3rd Annual Millbrae Rotary Mayor's Cup Golf Tournament

- 8:00 am Tee Time; Crystal Springs Golf Course, Burlingame
- Fundraiser supporting the *Rotary Club of Millbrae* and the new Millbrae Rec Center
- \$195 per person, includes breakfast and lunch buffet
- Register at bit.ly/milgolf

Saturday, June 11: Millbrae Recreation Center Grand Opening Celebration!

- 477 Lincoln Circle, Millbrae
- Save the Date for this special community celebration. Event details and exact times will be publicized by the City of Millbrae in the near future.

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!
(Please note that Board meetings are being held online via Zoom until further notice)