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Orinda Historical Society Newsletter

September 2005

P. O. BOX 82, ORINDA, CA 94563

(925) 254-1353

A Brief History of the Wagner Ranch Area

By Erik Andersen

Native Americans occupied the coastal region of California for centuries prior to the arrival of Spanish settlers. The Bay Miwok and Costanoan tribes lived in permanent settlements and were hunters, gatherers, and fishermen. European explorers in the 16th and 17th century occasionally encountered Native Americans, whose way of life was fundamentally disrupted by the arrival of the Spanish missionaries.

Mexico declared independence from Spain in 1821, and the Mexican government offered land grants to early California settlers. The present-day Wagner Ranch School and Nature Area are located on what was a 22,000 acre tract granted to Victor Castro by the Mexican Government in 1841. Castro later served on the first Board of Supervisors in Contra Costa County, after California became a state in 1850.

Victor Castro sold a portion of his rancho to William Smith in 1847. Mr. Smith and his wife, Susana Martinez (a "Californio" of Spanish descent), were involved with the development of the town of Martinez.



Theodore Wagner Home in 1908

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Museum Location

Lower Level of
Orinda Library
24 Orinda Way

Museum Hours of Operation

Monday, Wednesday, &
Friday 3-5 p.m.

Also by Appointment
24 Hour Answering
Machine

925-254-1353

www.orindahistory.org

Upcoming Events

- **October Board Meeting:**
Wednesday, October 19,
3 to 5 pm at OHS
Museum
- **November Board Meeting:**
Wednesday, Nov. 16,
3 to 5 pm at OHS
Museum
- **Holiday Social:**
Wednesday, December 7,
6 to 9 pm at the Orinda
Community Church
*Invitations will be mailed
out in October*

Ben Randall Jr. to Speak at OHS Holiday Social

Mark your calendars for the Orinda Historical Society's annual Holiday Social on December 7th. We have a special treat this year. Long-time resident Ben Randall Jr., who moved to Orinda in 1940 when he was five years old, will be speaking about growing up here and share his memories. Ben has great stories about the Orinda Theater, since Ben's father Ben Randall Sr. was the manager of the Orinda Theater for many years. Ben Sr. was there when the Orinda Theater opened and knew Don Rheem (and his brother Bill), the owner of both the Orinda and Rheem Theaters at that time.

History in the Making: Orinda's Film Festival

Have you noticed the butterfly statues around the Orinda library? They are on display for the 4th annual Orinda Film Festival. This relatively new Orinda tradition was started in 2002 by Randy Holleschau, along with Andrew and Alex Yanev. Other Orinda residents on the current Board of Directors include: Jo Alice Canterbury, Lance Cowles, David Goss, Lynn Olson, and Kate Wiley. The film festival has attracted movie stars, including Faye Dunaway (2002), Jonathan Winters (2003), and Jacqueline Bisset (2003). In 2002, local resident and photographer Joe Munroe received an award recognizing his years of achievement in photography and documentary filmmaking. In 2004, a special program highlighting the films of high school students debuted. This year the 2005 festival will feature William Hurt on opening night for a screening of his new film, *The Blue Butterfly*. 150 films will be screened this year at two venues, the Orinda Theatre and the Orinda Library theater. Dates for this year's festival are Sept. 22-25.

The OHS Museum is currently displaying a tribute to the Orinda Film Festival in its front window.

Welcome New Members

Charmagne Peters
Dr. & Mrs. Joseph Stokes
Elvera Wallace
Emily Witt

**Got suggestions, or
 feedback for this
 newsletter? email
 newsletter@orindahistory.
 org or contact Teresa
 Long at 258-9771**



Chuck Blue Turns 90

Chuck Blue is a charter and lifetime member of the Orinda Historical Society. He turned 90 on August 29th.

**Congratulations
 Chuck!!!!**

Thank You

Recent Donations to OHS

- **Chris Couper** donated 1956 Meadow Pool Photos
- **Emily Witt** donated papers & brochures on the Orinda Council for Civil Unity.
- **Leland Anderson** donated papers photos and articles on Orinda photographer Challis Gore.
- **Ben Randall** donated 1940s photos and articles on Orinda Union School, American Trust Bank and the Orinda Theater.
- **Shirley White** donated her time and her drawings for the reorganization of the museum, and she also donated the relocation of the phones.
- **Erik Andersen** donated a computer to be used for the membership and artifact archives.
- **Kent Long** donated a computer monitor for the photographic archive computer system.
- **The Orinda Park & Recreations Foundation** donated money in memory of Sarge Littlehale.
- **Ms. Montgomery & Ms. Wallace's 3rd Grade** class from Del Rey Elementary school in Orinda donated money.

**Without the support of all the members of OHS the Museum
 wouldn't be possible—Thank You**

OHS Photo Archive Computer Up and Running

OHS has a ton of old photographic negatives just sitting in storage, and now, we have the means to scan and digitize these images. This will make finding and viewing old-time Orinda photographs much easier.

With the help of a generous grant from the Orinda Rotary Club, OHS has a new computer system dedicated to photographs at the OHS Museum. Funds from the Rotary grant paid for the computer, printer, and scanner. A computer monitor was donated by Kent Long.

Work has already started on scanning these negatives and adding them to our computer catalog of Orinda photographs. Thanks to Kent Long for his many hours of hard work setting up the computer and the photos archive database system and to Dan Holmes for his help with the scanning of photographic negatives. This exciting project is a large undertaking, but we are now on our way!

OHS Board Members 2005/2006

President: Lucy Hupp Williams
(650) 349-3382

Vice President: Erik Andersen
(925) 254-8444

Treasurer: Pat Jackson Draa
(925) 376-6657

Archivist: Susan Ross
(925) 254-3720

At-Large: Charles Blue
(925) 254-2324

Assistant Archivist: Kent Long
(925) 258-9771

Finance/City Liaison: Carl Weber
(925) 254-8473

Newsletter: John Holmgren
(925) 254-5677
Teresa Long
(925) 258-9771

School Liaison: Kay Norman
(925) 254-9536

Videographer:
Jerry & Ruth Vurek
(925) 253-7995

Displays: Barbara Burkhalter
(925) 254-6868

Grants: Dan Holmes
(925) 254-3360

★ *Thank you to Rose Bolin,* ★
★ *the new owner of Allen's* ★
★ *Office Supplies in* ★
★ *Orinda, for generously* ★
★ *providing the printing of* ★
★ *this newsletter.* ★

3rd Graders Get History Lesson



3rd Graders from Del Rey Elementary School in Orinda were treated to an informative history tour of Orinda this month. When Kay Norman, their OHS tour director, asked them when they thought Orinda's history began, they answered, "20 or 19 years ago?" "Try 10 million," Kay answered. She then proceeded to tell them all about the geographic beginnings of Orinda, the Spanish settlers, building of the town and on to modern day Orinda. This 2 hour walking tour for 3rd graders is very popular, and it fits in with their school curriculum. If you'd like to help with these tours or want to schedule a tour for a 3rd grade class, contact Kay Norman at 254-9536.

Down Memory Lane.....

The following is the part one of Erza Nelson's memories of growing up in one of the oldest houses in Orinda, the "Old Yellow House." This house was built in 1893 by Captain Jenkins and is located on Moraga Way near McDonnell Nursery—the house is now painted a pale orange.

Part I: Growing up in the Old Yellow House by Ezra Nelson:

My Parents, Charles A. and Karen M. Nelson with their four children moved over from Albany California to what was then called Moraga Valley in June, 1918. Their two sons and two daughters at the time were from almost five years to six months of age. The flu epidemic was the driving force behind this move. Six years later I was born, missing out on the way things were at first.

My father tried his hand at farming by purchasing two work horses and some farming equipment from a nearby rancher. There were also two cows and a well trained dog named Bobby. This dog when told to would bring in the cows from the field and even the chickens. Papa raised hay across the road.

The four children, Earl, Mabel, Clyde and Clare, all started school in the one room Moraga Valley School across the road. Their teacher was Mrs. Madden, who for a time lived in one of our downstairs rooms. Some of her students came to school on horseback.

My father had a phone put in the house. He worked for Moore Shipyard in Oakland and rode a Thor motorcycle which was kept in the front hall. My brother Earl remembered Papa taking him as a youngster to the dentist in Oakland. He put Earl in front riding on the gas tank. They went up over the old Tunnel Road through the dimly lit tunnel and down the long curvy road to town. The motorcycle had a gas head lamp that would be lit with a wad of burning paper before starting out.

These were some of the things I missed. Changes happen as time goes by. The cows had to be destroyed because of an outbreak of hoof and mouth disease. The horses were sold. A new two room Orinda Union School was opened in 1925, putting an end to the long history of the one across the road. My father bought a new 1923 Model T Ford roadster and his motorcycling days were over. The road going by our house was made into a paved but narrow two lane highway in 1922. Sad to say the phone was gone.

To be continued in the next OHS Newsletter.

History of Wagner Ranch Area (continued from page 1).

After William Smith's death in 1853, the land was owned by the Lauterwasser family, for whom Lauterwasser Creek in Sleepy Hollow (just below lower Van Ripper) was named. The property was then acquired by Laurentz Huertzel, who moved William Smith's house to near what is now the intersection of Bear Creek and San Pablo Dam roads.

In 1875 and 1876, William Camron purchased about 3,000 acres around the Wildcat Canyon, Bear Creek, and San Pablo Dam Road area. His wife, Alice Marsh Camron, was the daughter of John Marsh, the first "Yankee" to own a house in Contra Costa. Alice Marsh Camron suggested that the area be named "Orinda."

Mr. Camron subdivided his 3000 acres and sold 350 of them to Herman Sandow. Sandow's daughter, Ida, married General Theodore Wagner, who obtained 241 of the 350 acres through his marriage into the Sandow family. Wagner's title of "General" was due to his role as United States Surveyor General.

Wagner loved the scenic beauty of the valley, and in 1882 he built a very expensive house on what is now the Wagner Ranch Nature Area. The house and grounds reportedly cost \$140,000 – a fortune at that time. The grounds included barns, a dairy, a hotel, a blacksmith shop, a brick-making kiln, and the first telephone in Orinda.

Florence McNeil (later Florence Sullivan), an Orinda school teacher, wrote in 1907 that "the grounds around the home had been laid out with infinite care... a platform had been built and here the band would play on Sunday afternoon while the delighted neighbors would bathe in the glory of the music and surrounding grounds... A fountain sprang up from the center of the pond, shooting forth a tiny spray of water, the bird fluttering near, and in the branches above many songs could be heard." Wagner became famous for his parties and festivals, and was instrumental in creating the image of Orinda as a pleasant, scenic retreat.

In July, 1887 the original Wagner home was destroyed in a fire. Wagner rebuilt the house, although on a smaller scale.

The Orinda Park School District was formed in 1881, and the building of the first school was led by the community. Seven men living in the area, including General Wagner, James Miner, and Eugene Sullivan, raised \$700 and built the school in 1882 in their spare time. The Orinda Park School – Orinda's first school – was built in 1882 on a site across the road from General Wagner's house. The first teacher was Miss Nettie Parkhurst, who was paid \$60 a month.

The Orinda Union School District first met on August 1, 1923. It was formed by combining the Orinda Park School District and the Moraga School District. The Orinda Union School (now the Orinda Community Center) opened in January 1925, and the Orinda Park School building was auctioned off on April 17, 1925, and the land – which had had been donated by General Wagner – reverted to the East Bay Water Company (later East Bay MUD).

In the 1960's, the Orinda Union School District chose the Wagner site for construction of a new school. The Wagner Ranch Elementary School opened for its first students in September, 1969.

Today, programs such as Indian Days, Rancho Days, and Pioneer Days are held at the Wagner Ranch Nature Area. It is hard to imagine a more appropriate setting – one that can trace its way from the Native Americans to the Mexican land grants, through the birth of California and our County, to the woman who named Orinda, and then on to a respected US Surveyor General who contributed to our young state and to a tiny community by giving land, money, and muscle to build its first school.

Finally, the Wagner Ranch Nature Area currently provides experiential learning that reinforces and extends textbook and classroom learning. Given the site's historical relevance to these important transitions in California history, the location is an appropriate setting for these educational programs. In addition, many students, parents, and educators value the opportunity to introduce plant science, archaeology, wildlife and fish biology, ecology, and other disciplines in a historical context.



1887- Laying the corner stone of the second Wagner House