



BULLETIN

SUMMER 2014

The Centennial of the First State Highway in Contra Costa County

John Mercurio

Most of us give little thought, as we negotiate the highway and freeway network of Contra Costa County, about what it was like to travel overland a century ago. But exactly one hundred years ago in the western part of our county an important event took place. The California Highway Commission awarded a contract to grade an improved road between San Pablo and Pinole on August 11, 1914. While it was only 3.6 miles in length, it would become not only an important route for the county and the state, but a link in a transcontinental highway. But for those present at the time it was recognized as the first state highway contract in Contra Costa County.



San Pablo Avenue just south of Contra Costa County's first state highway project, c. 1914. Road condition is probably slightly better than road between San Pablo and Pinole before work done by state. At right is a car of the Eastshore & Suburban Railway line. Photo courtesy of Richmond Museum of History.

But to get to that point, a number of developments

had to occur starting with California voters' approval in 1910 of an eighteen million dollar bond issue for the construction of a network of paved highways up and down the state. It was then necessary to create an organization to plan design and construct the promised network of highways that would get travelers (which still included horse drawn conveyances at that time) out of the mud.

Three commissioners appointed by Governor Hiram Johnson had the responsibility to initiate all that, beginning with a motoring adventure all around California to figure out the routes of the various highways. One of the routes laid out was designated as route 14 in the statutes and was to run between Albany and Martinez, and serve as part of the route to Sacramento via Benicia and Davis.

In Contra Costa County the Commission wasn't starting from scratch. An evolving network of mostly unimproved roads was being developed by Contra Costa County. The road north from Alameda County roughly paralleling the bay was known as the San Pablo Road and later San Pablo Avenue. But it was not paved and was in need of improvement to modern standards especially the climb up San Pablo Hill, just north of San Pablo.

In February, 1912, the three commissioners traveled the northern waterfront route from east to west passing through Martinez and Crockett. They were escorted by the Board of Supervisors and prominent citizens of the county. Shortly after, the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors adopted a resolution

responding to petitions gathered around the county asking the California Highway Commission to adopt the route through Contra Costa County as the state highway. As a result of this resolution and the tour the commissioners had taken the previous month, the commissioners looked favorably upon the routing they were shown and ordered preliminary surveys to be made.

The people driving the effort to secure the state highway route in Contra Costa County were Arthur B. Coleman of Martinez, and Warren H. McBryde of Hercules. McBryde was the assistant superintendent of the Hercules Powder Company plant and the District 1 Supervisor on the County Board. Commenting on his extensive efforts to get better roads for Contra Costa County, the Richmond Independent newspaper called him “the king pin of good road boosters in this county.” Other individuals active in the effort were Will R. Sharkey, editor of the Martinez Daily Standard and Luther D. Dimm, superintendent of the Standard Oil refinery.

The commissioners and state engineers visited Contra Costa County once again on September 12, 1913 to inspect the completed route survey. This visit was the subject of a talk given by McBryde at a large banquet in Richmond and was viewed as the most encouraging sign yet, that the state highway was, indeed, coming to Contra Costa County.

But before the road could actually be built, the matter of funding needed to be dealt with. However, the designated interest rate specified in the 1910 bond issue proved to be too low to attract investors. As a result, the state could not sell the bonds to provide funding for construction. So the State Highway Commission came up with a plan that required each county to purchase the bonds to finance construction within its borders. They would then be sold on the market, presumably for a loss, but allowing construction to continue and most importantly, allowing the state’s program of road improvements to continue. The Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors needed a month to come around to the

necessity of the bond purchase. But finally, at its November 17, 1913 meeting, the Board voted unanimously to adopt McBryde’s resolution to purchase \$300,000 of the state highway bond issue. The need was clear and perhaps the board also took to heart the testimony of Commissioner Charles D. Blaney who had attended an earlier meeting: “With your waterfront, climate and farming sections, you have a most wonderful country. Hundreds of thousands of people will be attracted to your county when the state highway is completed. We want you to assist us in the work by subscribing to our bonds and we assure you that every dollar of the money subscribed will be spent in your county.” As it turned out, the extra cost of buying the bonds at a higher price than the eventual sale price was \$15,000. This was generally regarded as a wise investment given the fact that the county would no longer have to pay for maintaining this road.

Purchasing the bonds wasn’t the only manner in which the state enlisted the help of the counties. All over the state, counties chipped in and provided the right of way for the roads. Landowners would donate the land knowing that having the state highway nearby would add value to their property as well as contribute toward a project for the public good.

Another way counties assisted the state was to provide most bridges on the highway. By early December, grading had been completed but the bridges had not been started. The bridges over Wildcat Creek and San Pablo Creek in two locations were substantial steel and concrete construction as required by the state. Despite the lack of bridges, portions of the road were opened to traffic after a temporary surface of gravel was applied. This was especially appreciated by motorists due to heavy rainfall early in 1915.

By the spring of 1915, all bridges had been completed and by late spring paving crews were busy placing the permanent concrete paving. On this project, the concrete was 4 ½ inches thick and varied from 15 to 18 feet wide. The paving work was completed in early

December, 1915. At least 100 mules were employed on this project which kept to the same alignment except for a little over a mile just north of San Pablo which was rerouted in order to climb San Pablo Hill at a more gradual grade. Total volume of excavation was almost 35,000 cubic yards. The final cost for grading and paving was just over \$84,000 or about \$1.4 million in today's dollars.

In the ensuing years, the Lincoln Highway would be shifted to this road after the Carquinez Bridge was completed in 1927. In the following year, the first U.S. highway shield markers in California would be erected along San Pablo Avenue and carried the U.S. 40 designation. This continued until 1958 when the freeway that is now Interstate 80 was opened, bypassing this route.

San Pablo Ave now serves as a regional route and is at least as important as it was in 1914 when it "paved the way" for all the later state highway work in Contra Costa County.

April Board Meeting at ECCHS

Donald Bastin

As part of our ongoing efforts to connect with other historical societies in Contra Costa County, the CCCHS Board held its April meeting at the site of the East Contra Costa Historical Society and Museum, in Brentwood. We were invited by our board member, Kathy Leighton, who also sits on the board of the ECCHS. The society is focused on the history of the communities of Brentwood, Byron, Knightsen, Oakley, Bethel Island, Discovery Bay, and the Delta. There is much to see, and the board members took time out from their meeting duties to tour the Byer/Nail House, which was built in 1878. Society member Virginia Karlberg



entertained our group with a detailed history of the two-story structure, which was donated to the society in 1986. We also were free to tour the grounds, which contain an antique tool shed, farm machinery,



and both horse-drawn and motorized vehicles. Our meeting was held in an old one-room schoolroom, complete with iron and wood desks. For most of us,



who had never been to the ECCHS site, it was an eye-opener. Our county is home to no fewer than 22 historical societies, all of which have a unique history to recount and unique and interesting artifacts. Check out the ECCHS for yourself, and visit their website at ecchs.net.

In August, our board meeting will again be out of town, in Richmond, at the Rosie the Riveter World War II Home Front National Historical Park. The park visitor center is located in what was once the "oil house" next to the Ford assembly plant, opened in 1931. Our meeting, scheduled for a Saturday afternoon, will give the board members a chance to tour the facility and to view the great new exhibits, just recently opened to the public. This is a great place to visit. They are open 7 days a week, and they are right on the Bay Trail, so pack a lunch.

Opening Day of Brand New Exhibits at the Rosie Visitor Center, May 24, 2014.

Donald Bastin

The Rosie the Riveter World War II Home Front National Historical Park is located smack on the Richmond Bay Trail, right next to the old Ford Building. That's convenient, as the VC celebration also included a celebration of the 25th anniversary of the Bay Trail Project, an ambitious attempt to completely encircle San Francisco and San Pablo bays in a 500-mile walking and bicycling trail. Richmond has been ahead of the curve for years in completing its part of the trail, and the Marina section, which includes the VC, is probably the most beautiful, developed, and varied.

The new VC exhibits are extraordinary, and include wonderful static displays as well as well-thought-out interactive components. Be sure to bring the kids, as they will be fascinated. The park rangers and docents offer a wealth of detail, and you will usually run into an actual Rosie, one of the extraordinary women who worked in the Richmond shipyards during WW II, or



in one of the many yards or military facilities around the Bay. Here we see Mary Torres, sitting next to one of the unique mannequins that are scattered

throughout the VC. She enthralled all around her with her story of traveling on a bus, for 5 days, to Richmond, with little to eat, no showers, and few bathroom facilities. Like many who came, she decided to stay.

There were many speakers and dignitaries, probably the most prominent was Congressman George Miller III, seen here addressing the crowd. After the



initial ceremony broke up, your editor took the opportunity to corner the Congressman and ask that he speak at our December General Membership Meeting. "I'd love to," he said. Whether he will actually be available remains to be determined, but we are now in "active negotiation," so stay tuned.

The Law in These Parts

As the county's foremost repository of its legal records, it is only appropriate that we are now contributing essays, on legal history, to the *Contra Costa Lawyer*, an on-line magazine serving the county's legal profession. In the June issue, Bill Mero provides an excellent introduction to a 1938 radio broadcast, presented by Judge Bray. Titled "The Law and Moraga Women," it shines a light on the legal sagacity of the women of early California. To read the article, go to: cccba.org/attorney/pdf/cclawyer/2014-06.pdf.

The piece begins on page 34.

Hercules Historical Society

Steve Lawton

An Oakland-based local newspaper columnist recently observed, on a field trip to the distant hamlets of Port Costa and Martinez, that the traces of industry and settlement along the Carquinez Straits tell stories of a 19th Century heyday, followed by decline and disappearance. Carol Jensen's recent Arcadia book, "Maritime Contra Costa County", tells the little-known story of dozens of industries along the northern Contra Costa waterfront that are found only in traces today. The first and largest such industry was the Hercules Powder Works. For nearly forty years, the Hercules Historical Society has worked to discover, collect and preserve the buildings, artifacts, documents, photos and oral histories of the Hercules Powder Works during its vital century as the mysterious dynamite factory, and afterward as a place to live.

Today's City of Hercules occupies the entire factory site of the Hercules Powder Company, one of the most significant explosives and chemical factories in the West, and indeed the world. The men of the California Powder Works secured this land on San Pablo Bay, along the northern edge of Contra Costa, for the "Hercules Works" in 1878. They needed to relocate their production of dynamite, then the world's new technology, away from growing San Francisco to open land on the Opposite Coast.

Dynamite was the first of the "high explosives", invented beginning in the late 1860s, that literally powered the latter half of the Industrial Revolution. In the years before abundant petroleum, high explosives were the first magical source of chemical energy harnessed for work. California's mines and railroads could not have been built without strong, efficient dynamite. The rough-and-ready chemical engineer who stole the dynamite formula for California Powder had earlier saved the Central Pacific Railroad a year's effort blasting through the granite of the High Sierra – and so may have rescued it from financial disaster.

California Powder Works was the largest of dozens of California's explosives firms, and by 1903 was effectively a monopoly in the West. In 1913, it was forcibly reorganized under one of the first antitrust actions brought by the Federal government. In 1918, the Hercules Works was among the largest in the world, with 3,000 workers and nine TNT lines producing seven million pounds per month, or one-third of all the TNT used by the United States in the Great War. The factory covered nine square miles of the Refugio Creek watershed, with two piers onto the San Pablo Bay and an extensive internal railroad system powered by compressed-air locomotives.

But from 1972, the plant site was transformed into a collection of residential subdivisions. Today, only twenty-seven buildings remain from the Works: twenty are restored as private dwellings, five are in restorable condition, and two have been savaged by neglect. Few of today's residents know of their home

turf as holding a National and even globally significant history, with stories to tell and lessons to learn.



Here in 1929 Joe Scarsella wheels an "angel buggy" loaded with nitroglycerine on a network of wooden causeways between production houses at the Hercules Powder Works. Today this location is a residential neighborhood.

In the late 1970s, local preservationists, including Dr. Joseph Mariotti of Pinole, formed the Hercules Area Restoration and Preservation Committee, Inc. In 1982, the Hercules Historical Society was formed by former City council-members Lynn Fissell (formerly Judnich) and John Cadigan. Since then, its membership has served to preserve and restore historical artifacts and documents about the City and its industrial past.

In 2013, the Society moved and consolidated its collection of Hercules Powder Works artifacts from scattered and unsecured sites to a leased building adjacent to City Hall. The Society holds monthly meetings, and mounts occasional displays in the City Library. Members seek out, collect and receive artifacts, documents and photographs pertaining to both the industrial years and the years of growing a residential city. With Jennifer Posedel of Rodeo, the Society published an Arcadia book in 2011. The Society works with private owners of the remaining unrestored historical buildings to secure their preservation and restoration.

The Society's new, accessible headquarters space allows its members at last to organize, catalog,

interpret and display its collection of assets. The Society has recently launched a social media presence, and aspires tell the obscure, fascinating story of how the explosives industry shaped the Bay Area, the West, and Contra Costa County.

Visit the HHS at: *HerculesHistory.Org*.

Note: The foregoing is part of our ongoing effort to connect with the county's many historical societies and to make our members more aware of the rich historical resources that are available to them. ~ Ed.

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A Century of Law Enforcement

CONTRA COSTA COUNTY DEPUTY SHERIFF – FEMALE *Marjorie Newton*

The first female Deputy Sheriff in the state of California was Contra Costa County Deputy Sheriff Leila Veale. Immediately after the election in which women in California won the right to vote in 1911, Sheriff Richard Veale who served the county as sheriff for 40 years, asked Governor Hiram Johnson for permission to appoint his daughter as a Deputy Sheriff. Leila was a graduate of Martinez's Alhambra High School in 1909, where she had an outstanding record of achievements.

Among Deputy Veale's duties was cooking the meals for the jailers and the prisoners. She occasionally accompanied fugitives on their return to the Martinez Jail. Deputy Leila received no pay. She continued to serve as a deputy after her marriage to A. Francis Bray, in 1913. Her husband was appointed to the Superior Court and later the District Court of Appeals. His name appears on one of the court buildings.

Today, the highest ranking female in the Contra Costa County Sheriff's Department is Assistant Sheriff Elise Warren. Assistant Sheriff Warren rose through the ranks, beginning her employment as a Deputy in April of 1990. She was promoted to Sergeant in 1997, Lieutenant in 2005, and Captain in 2011, before achieving her current assignment. Assistant Sheriff Warren has served in the Main Jail, Investigation, Civil and other units prior to Support Services. She has had different experiences than those of Deputy Veale.

The Los Angeles Sheriff's Department also claims to have the first female deputy sheriff in the United States hired in 1912. Margaret Q. Adams remained a deputy in the evidence department at the Los Angeles Courthouse for 35 years, until her retirement in 1947. Deputy Adams was appointed by her sheriff brother-

in-law. Her duties were primarily clerical.

In 1963, the Equal Pay Act was passed. Until 1965, women in law enforcement in Contra Costa County were hired as Deputy Sheriff Matrons. They were paid \$2.78 an hour. At the end of the probation period, the salary was increased to \$3.13 an hour. An additional 5% was paid for night work. Applicants were between the ages of 21 and 35. They needed to possess a California driver's license, be a US citizen and a resident of the county for a year and be of good moral character. In addition they needed to be able to type 25 words per minute.

A new position was created: Deputy Sheriff – Female. In addition to the requirements for Matron, a high school diploma was required. Applicants had to pass an agility test which included jumping jacks, women's pushups and burpees, for those applicants accepted. Salary began at \$628 a month.

In 1972, the Equal Rights Amendment failed to be ratified by 3 states. The amendment guaranteed equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex.

Santa Clara, in 1973 hired a matron who is now their Sheriff. Recently Salinas County advertised Deputy Sheriff Openings for Female Only applicants.

In 1979, Sheriff Rainey assigned the first female deputy to the Crime Prevention Unit. This deputy was one of the first female deputies to do patrol duty and had spent 16 months in the West Pittsburg area. The four year veteran had also served in the Main Jail and in Transportation.

Contra Costa County currently employs 704 sworn officers, 99 of which are female. It also employs many women who are in the non-sworn category. Many of those positions originally were held by men, such as Radio Technician which has evolved into Dispatch, Custodians which are now Institutional Service workers, Criminalists, and Sheriff's Aide. Initially, women were hired in clerical jobs. The

Typist Clerk or Stenographer Clerk has become a Data Entry Operator. In 1945 she was paid \$196.00 a month. The Data Entry Operator made \$1411 a month in 1989. The telephone operator position was replaced by Communication Clerks who were then replaced by Dispatch. A Lead Fingerprint Technician in 2002 had begun her career with the department as a Student Worker in 1990. Over half of the non-sworn positions are filled by women. Many positions are still clerical but many are also technical, financial, and instructional. Where once Leila Bray was the cook for the jail, most Lead Cook jobs today are filled by men.

From Deputy Sheriff Leila Veale Bray to Assistant Sheriff Elise Warren, the women of the Contra Costa County Sheriff's Office can be proud of their contribution to law enforcement for the past 100 years. The people of Contra Costa County owe a debt of gratitude to both the sworn and the non-sworn women and men of the Contra Costa County Sheriff's Office.



*Leila
Veale,
c. 1950*

Note: E.D. and President's report will return next issue.

