

## Dating Photographs

*Donald Bastin*

The History Center has thousands of photographs, and, through donations, is receiving more every month. Many of these images come with little or no information; nothing is written down, either on the face of the photo or on the back. Or, what is written is indecipherable or meaningless (except to the person who did the writing). The donor, just as often, can offer little of value in placing or dating the image. Thus, our volunteers must become detectives, seeking clues in the image that will place it in time.

We are all faced with this challenge. Who of us does not have family photos that are undated and unidentified? We all have to become detectives. What are the clues that can help us to date a photograph?

### FASHION

Clothing, accessories, and hair styles can all be of great help in dating a photograph. In particular, women's fashion changes quickly and can be used to place an image within a few years. Men's fashion is more subtle, but can be as useful in our quest. At the top of the following column, we see a happy group gathered together on a ranch in El Sobrante.

Looking at the women's dress, we see the high collars, tight bodices and full dresses typical of the 1880s. Also typical of that era is the swept-up hair style. The men wear the typical waistcoat of the time, and two



*Gathering at the Thode Ranch, El Sobrante, 1880s*

sport modest mustaches, which will grow into the “handlebar” of the 1890s.



*This is a photo of Henry Alvarado, showing the fully-developed handlebar mustache of the 1890s.*

Fashion can be broken down into eras, which often fall neatly into decades. Thus, the “flapper” style of the 1920s differs markedly from the much more modest style of the pre-WWI period. Dresses gradually become shorter during the 1920s (which has been linked to a “booming” economy) but return to ankle length during the depression years of the 1930s.



In the 1940s, women's dresses took on the squared shoulders that we see in the image on the left, while dresses again became shorter. Wide lapels and double-breasted suits were still in fashion for the men.

### AUTOMOBILES

Beginning in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, cars begin to make an appearance in photographs. The more autos that we can see, the more precise we can be in our dating. For instance, take a look at the following image:



A knowledgeable car fan will identify the car as a 1930 Ford. Based on this one piece of information, we

might conclude that the picture was taken in the early 1930s. But we would be wrong. Take a look at the full image:



Behind the Ford is a 1941 Cadillac. So we know that the picture cannot have been taken prior to 1941. So we can probably state, with some degree of certainty, that the picture was taken some time in the 1940s (but based just upon the two cars, we cannot even be sure of that). If we had five cars in the picture, and the newest was a 1941 model, we could be much more confident in our estimate.

### BUSINESSES

Buildings can last for hundreds of years, but the businesses that occupy them come and go. And just as more cars are better for an accurate dating, so are more businesses. If we can identify businesses in our photograph (grocery store, pharmacy, barber shop, etc.) it is an easy task to determine when those businesses were operating by simply checking old city directories (the precursor to the telephone directory). If a business first shows up in 1921 and disappears in the 1929 edition, we can be fairly sure that our photo was taken between those years. And if we have three businesses in the picture, it may be that they were all in business at the same time for only a year or so.

### THEATRE MARQUEES (and other stuff)

Beginning about 1910 or so, movie theaters begin to pop up in photographs taken in an urban setting. If we can zoom in on the theatre marquee, we can see what was playing, and that can be a very valuable piece of information. Take a look at this image:



No trouble here in reading the marquee. A quick Google of “Charley’s Aunt” tells us that the movie came out in 1941. A little more digging reveals that the movie was released in early August of that year. So what is the parade about? It can’t be an Independence Day parade as the date is too late, and the people are too lightly dressed for a holiday later in the year. So what other holiday rated a parade in 1941, and would have taken place in late summer or early fall?

This could be a Labor Day parade, but how to tell for sure? Luckily, with the help of a high-quality scanner, we can answer this question.

By zooming in on a sign in the Safeway store, we can see that the store was giving notice of its closure for



Labor Day. So that pretty much clinches it. Without too much fear of contradiction, we can say that this photo was taken on Labor Day, September 1, 1941.

Most photographs contain a good deal of information that can help us in making some

kind of identification possible. As Hercule Poirot would say, we just have to exercise our “little gray cells.”

## A Modest Acquisition by the Martinez Historical Society

*Paul Kraitz*

The Martinez Historical Society is working furiously to arrange the pickup and delivery of an 180,000 pound, 80 foot long historic 1901 Pullman type Executive train car to its new hometown of Martinez. A gift to the society from well-known Walnut Creek restaurateur and businessman John Herrington, this beautifully restored and luxuriously appointed vintage rail artifact has been a popular part of the recently



closed Vic Stewart’s steakhouse restaurant since the 1970s. The restaurant was housed in an expanded 1891 Walnut Creek train station which Mr. Herrington saved from demotion and moved its present location, attaching the train car to the station to provide additional luxury dining accommodations. The original station will now be repurposed for retail and office space.

The Martinez Historical Society intends to eventually display the vintage rail car adjacent to the historic Martinez train station and open it for public viewing.



The car must be removed from its present location to make way for new construction. Alas, the San Ramon Valley line that the car arrived on is long gone. The society seeks help from the public and has started a “Go Fund Me” account at:

[www.gofundme.com/MoveTheTrainCar](http://www.gofundme.com/MoveTheTrainCar)

to Martinez. Donations can also be mailed to the society at P.O. Box 14, Martinez, CA 94553.

**The Chinese and the Iron Rail:  
Building the Transcontinental** *Beverly Lane*



A new exhibit at the Museum of the San Ramon Valley opened on March 25, 2018. It features the history of Chinese immigrants to California, with an emphasis on the Chinese laborers who built the transcontinental railroad for the Central Pacific.

*Jin, the Hook family's Chinese cook in a formal photograph*

2019 is the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the famous Golden Spike celebration which recognized the successful completion of the railroad across America at Promontory Point, Utah. Charles Crocker led the effort to employ Chinese and ultimately about 12,000 Chinese from both California and south China built the Central Pacific.

The Chinese were rarely welcomed in California. American gold miners and settlers found their foreign customs, appearance, food preferences, religious beliefs and language very different from what they were used to. Chinese worked for lower wages which upset other workers. They were discriminated against in many ways from the miner's tax in the gold fields to requirements that their children attend segregated schools. In 1882 the Chinese Exclusion Act was the first of many laws discriminating against Chinese.

**In the exhibit look for:**

- Panels exploring the Chinese workers and the Central Pacific Railroad;
- Chinese arrival in California;
- Chinese life;
- Chinese in the San Ramon Valley and Contra Costa County;
- Challenges for Chinese;

March 25-June 10

The Museum of the San Ramon Valley  
205 Railroad Ave  
Danville CA 94526  
<http://www.museumsv.org>  
925 837-3750  
Tues-Fri 1-4, Sat 10-1,  
Sunday Noon-1



*The Baldwin cook around 1900.*

**HS Students in the HC** *Priscilla Couden*

A few weeks ago, an unbelievable number of teenagers (80) —juniors from Deer Valley High in Antioch—came through the History Center, intent on



learning how to research and something about primary sources. The History Center was ready for them with packets of materials on

Martinez pioneers buried in the Alhambra Cemetery. Subdivided into groups of 7 each and visiting each of 5 stations, they learned about our library, the court cases, tax assessment books, our photographs, and the Public Access Computer Terminal (PACT). Volunteers Jim Vail, John Greitzer, Lisa Gorrell, Janet Stapleton, and Maxine Brown manned the stations, and Kaori Evans, Steve James, and I coordinated the groups, with help from the teacher, Joan Setka. All went smoothly, and we plan to run the program again next year, for Deer Valley as well as for at least one other high school.

## **THANKS TO ALL OF OUR 2017 DONORS!**

### **Benefactors:**

#### **\$10,000+**

Dean and Margaret Leshner Foundation;

#### **\$5000+**

National Endowment for the Humanities;  
Estate Planning and Probate Section, Contra Costa  
County Bar Association

#### **\$3000+**

Steven & Priscilla James;  
Chevron Matching Employee Funds

#### **\$2000+**

Oliver Whitney Bray

#### **\$1000+**

Chevron Federal Credit Union;  
John & Jill Mercurio; John Burgh; Betty Maffei; Linda  
& Mike Massone; City of Martinez

### **Patrons:**

#### **\$500+**

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#### **\$25+**

Paul & Peggy Grunland; Thelma Wheeler; Marian  
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**\$10+** Cheri Snyder; Madeline Yanov; Joseph  
Barkley Jr.; Patricia Cannon; Sherida Bush & Tim  
Platt; Kevin Murray; Rosalind Graves; Ruth Epstein;  
Hercules Historical Society; Mike Loper

*Please note: These donations are above and beyond membership dues*

**Thank you again. You make all the difference!**

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The Board is looking for Contra Costa County



residents interested in history to fill  
vacant board slots.

Board members are expected to  
attend the monthly meetings at our  
History Center located at 724  
Escobar Street in Martinez.

Members are also typically active volunteers helping  
out with various events put on by the Society.

If you are interested in learning more, please drop an  
email to our Board President, John Mercurio, at  
[johnmercurio@astound.net](mailto:johnmercurio@astound.net).

*Our mission is to preserve, protect, and provide public access to the  
records and heritage of Contra Costa County.*

## Remembering Lucille Irish



Lucille Irish passed away on February 6 of this year, at the age of 89. Born in El Cerrito, she was a lifelong local resident, and loved local history. She was twice president of the El Cerrito Historical Society, as well as president of the CCCHS in 2001 and 2002. She remained

on the CCCHS board until failing health led to her retirement in 2011. In 2001, when the Society turned 50, Lucille wrote the following:

*Today we celebrate a half-century of life. It is a time to remember, appreciate and warmly thank our many friends, public and private, for their unstinting interest and participation in what our American President has called the responsibility of history.*

*Our Society was founded 50 years ago upon the scheme of a volunteer venture to be managed and operated by willing-hearted people who recognized the importance of preserving the memory of this county's historic past. That idea still successfully gives the Society its kinetic energy to collect, catalogue, preserve and publish remembrances of Contra Costa which over the years may well have been lost or forgotten.*

*Prior to my term of office, the Society has thrived under the dedicated leadership of 11 presidents, virtually all of whom not only left their mark of ascendant interest but maintained their participation as a regular volunteer after stepping down from the highest office. We owe them an undying debt.*

*Similarly, we have enjoyed the continuing friendly attention of county officials who over the years have designated our Society the official history-recording agency of Contra Costa County, and have appointed our facility the protector of numerous official court records.*

*Over the five decades of our life many of our members have contributed untold hours of their time to organizing and cataloging the voluminous collections of historical records and making these materials available to researchers for reference.*

*They have spent thousands of hours at the computer recording valuable data for future use. While others have painstakingly inspected, recorded and filed a rich bank of photographs that depict Contra Costa life from its earliest days. To all of the dedicated volunteers I express the Society's heartfelt thanks.*

*This Society has become the treasure house of Contra Costa County. I am proud to be a member in fulfilling its promise.*

*Lucille Irish, President*

**Thank You, Lucille**

**CCCHS Board**

## CCCHS MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

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### DUES:

\_\_\_ Individual \$40    \_\_\_ Couple \$70    \_\_\_ Sponsor \$100

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\_\_\_ Benefactor \$1000    \_\_\_ Student \$20

*Your membership renewal date can be determined by checking the address label on this newsletter. If you receive your newsletter via e-mail please call the History Center at: 925-229-1042, or e-mail [info@cocohistory.com](mailto:info@cocohistory.com) to renew.*

***Please consider CCCHS in your estate planning. It is simple, and any gift is tax deductible. We have a Schwab account that makes it easier for members and others to donate shares of stock to the Society, a good way to make a year-end or other contribution.***

## From the Executive Director



Dear Members,

The visit of the Deer Valley High School students is but a small example of the things that have been happening at the History Center during the first quarter. We have been completing an oral history of Betty Maffei that focuses on the “corporate” history of the Society. We have completed the installation of environmental monitoring and emergency supplies that came to us through our National Endowment for the Humanities grant. We have begun a project of re-housing our Naturalization books. Maxine, our archivist, has been re-housing and re-shelving an enormous number of materials. Our Finder’s Aid is coming to fruition under the competent hands of volunteer and board member Lisa Gorrell. We held our now annual Scan-a-Thon. And we began the process of converting our LookBack database to PastPerfect.

We have also gone out into the community. In February, I spoke to the Pleasant Hill Rotary; on March 30, we were the non-profit partner of Act II’s Improv presentation at the Vukasin Theater of the Leshner Center in Walnut Creek. And the community came to us in the form of a tour for docents and members of the Walnut Creek Historical Society and a total of 117 visitors, 80 from Deer Valley.

Coming up will be a presentation to the County Board of Supervisors, our annual volunteer appreciation lunch (we really appreciate them!), the presentation of Joanna Kafarowski, our first Author in the Archives of the year, and a birthday reception for Betty Maffei as we launch our recently created corporate history. Watch for the Society’s e-mails and flyers. If you have not already done so, please renew your membership and invite a friend to join or support us. Bringing someone to the History Center for a tour will often increase their chance of becoming a member. Thanks for your continuing support. Our members are the greatest!

*Priscilla*

## From the President



On a rainy Monday in February, nearly every board member and our executive director gathered at the Diablo Country Club for a special meeting in a beautiful room that the club provided at no cost. We held the board retreat to provide a large block of time not available during our normal meeting dates and we did it in a fresh location. We only had two items on the agenda, but they were two important issues that warranted some extra attention.

The first was the completion of our strategic plan. We needed some dedicated time to polish it up and get consensus on its various elements. The board feels that having a plan of how we want the society to develop is very important and will help guide and inspire us as we implement new policies and programs. We are also cognizant that when we approach grant funders, we need to show that we have given consideration to the long-term future of our organization. Some of the goals in the plan are:

- Expanded activities, staffing and History Center hours
- Ownership of our own archive building
- A larger, stable revenue stream

The other item we considered involved developing a policy that will encourage a stronger commitment by each board member to provide significant financial support to the society. This will support the third bullet listed above. We believe if we can demonstrate solid financial support by all our board members, we will be looked upon even more favorably by funders. And by growing our annual fund balance, we will be in a position to fund new initiatives and retain a reserve to address unforeseen circumstances that come our way.

These two items are meant to inspire confidence from our board and membership in our striving to be a well-managed organization that is truly in it for the long-term.

*John Mercurio*



724 Escobar St,  
Martinez, CA 94553

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***Mark Your Calendar***

**Saturday, April 21 – Author in the Archives**, The Story of Louise Arner Boyd, “The Polar Adventures of a Rich American Dame.” Author: Joanna Kafarowski.

**Saturday, May 19** – History Center open 10-2

**Saturday, June 16 – History Center Open, 10-3; Author in the Archives:** John Mercurio and Steve Minniear at the Campbell Theater in Martinez.

**Saturday, July 21** – Ice Cream Social

**Saturday, August 18** – Martinez Vintage Market. History Center open.

**Mission Statement**

*Our Mission is to Preserve, Protect and Provide public access to the records and heritage of Contra Costa County, California.*

**Contra Costa County Historical Society  
Officers and Directors:**

President.....John Mercurio  
1<sup>st</sup> Vice President..... Donald Bastin  
2<sup>nd</sup> Vice President.....John Burgh  
Secretary..... John Greitzer  
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Kathy Leighton    Scott Saftler  
Tara Weber                      Betty Maffei – Member Emeritus

**Executive Director:** Priscilla A. Couden, Ph.D.

**Newsletter Editor:** Donald Bastin

**The History Center**

724 Escobar Street, Martinez, CA 94553

Phone: 925-229-1042 Fax: 925-229-1772

**Open Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, 9 am-4 pm**

Open 3<sup>rd</sup> Saturday, 10 am-2 pm; Email: [info@cocohistory.com](mailto:info@cocohistory.com)

Website: [www.cocohistory.com](http://www.cocohistory.com); Find us on Facebook at:

**Contra Costa County Historical Society**