

The Forge

JULY 2019

The official publication of the
El Cerrito Historical Society
Copyright 2019
Vol. 35 No. 1

The El Cerrito Historical Society, P.O. Box 304, El Cerrito, CA 94530
elcerritohistoricalsociety@yahoo.com, www.elcerritohistoricalsociety.

Eastshore Highway

The view on the shoreline roadway could be breathtaking -- but so could the odor



This 1952 Key System accident scene photo shows the Eastshore Highway at its original terminus where it meets San Pablo Avenue. The edge of Builders Emporium and Louie's Club are visible at the left.

By Chris Treadway

When the Eastshore Highway, forerunner of the modern Bay Area freeway system, was dedicated 82 years ago, it wasn't with the fanfare one might expect.

A ceremony and ribbon-cutting described as "informal" was held at San Pablo Avenue and Hill Street in El Cerrito on May 26, 1937 to mark the event, which was overshadowed by the anticipation of a much bigger opening ceremony the next day for the Golden Gate Bridge.

In fact, the opening of the East Bay highway stretch was timed to allow traffic to reach the huge fiesta in San Francisco celebrating the opening of the bridge.

Harry Hopkins, chairman of the State Highway Commission, cut the ribbon at the El Cerrito ceremony. He was joined by Alameda County Supervisor Thomas

Caldecott, Berkeley Mayor E.E. Ament, and Bay Bridge engineer Charles Purcell, Richmond Mayor Frank Tiller, representatives of East Bay business organizations and about 100 onlookers.

At the time of the opening, the section between Albany and the end of the highway in El Cerrito had only one of the two lanes in each direction open to traffic because the asphalt pavement was not yet built up to the desired thickness.

The new section was closed again to traffic the day after the fiesta to finish the paving work, completed July 1, 1937, when the highway opened for good. The cost of the final section between University Avenue was put at \$331,874.50, including the 1,452-foot concrete overpass by Albany Hill over the railroad tracks. Work also require cuts through Albany Hill and a Richmond

NEW EAST SHORE LINK OPENED



A new link in the East Shore Highway, the main approach to the Bay Bridge, was informally opened yesterday when **Harry A. Hopkins**, chairman of the State Highway Commission, snipped a ribbon stretched across the new project near El Cerrito. Participating in the ceremonies were (left to right in the front row between the two girls) **Thomas E. Caldecott**, Alameda County supervisor; **Hopkins**; **Mayor E. E. Ament**, of Berkeley, and **Charles H. Purcell**, Bay Bridge engineer. The girls, who represented the Oakland Junior Chamber of Commerce are (left) **Betty Guichard** and (right) **Ursula Telfer**.—*Tribune photo.*

Annex hill. The final tab for the entire highway was put at \$1,020,000 (equivalent to \$17,786,734.03 today, according to online CPI inflation calculators).

The Eastshore was the first newly built and dedicated intercity highway in the Bay Area, constructed to handle traffic heading to the new Bay Bridge and Oakland and relieve the increasing volume on San Pablo Avenue, which had served as the East Bay's highway route through the area.

The original Eastshore was a highway, not a freeway, with stop signs at intersections (rather than interchanges with on- and off-ramps) for traffic entering the roadway. Vehicle-activated traffic signals would be added later.

Built under the New Deal federal Civil Works Administration program, the Eastshore was one of the many large public works projects that put scores of Bay Area to work during the Great Depression.

At the time it was dedicated the Eastshore was de-

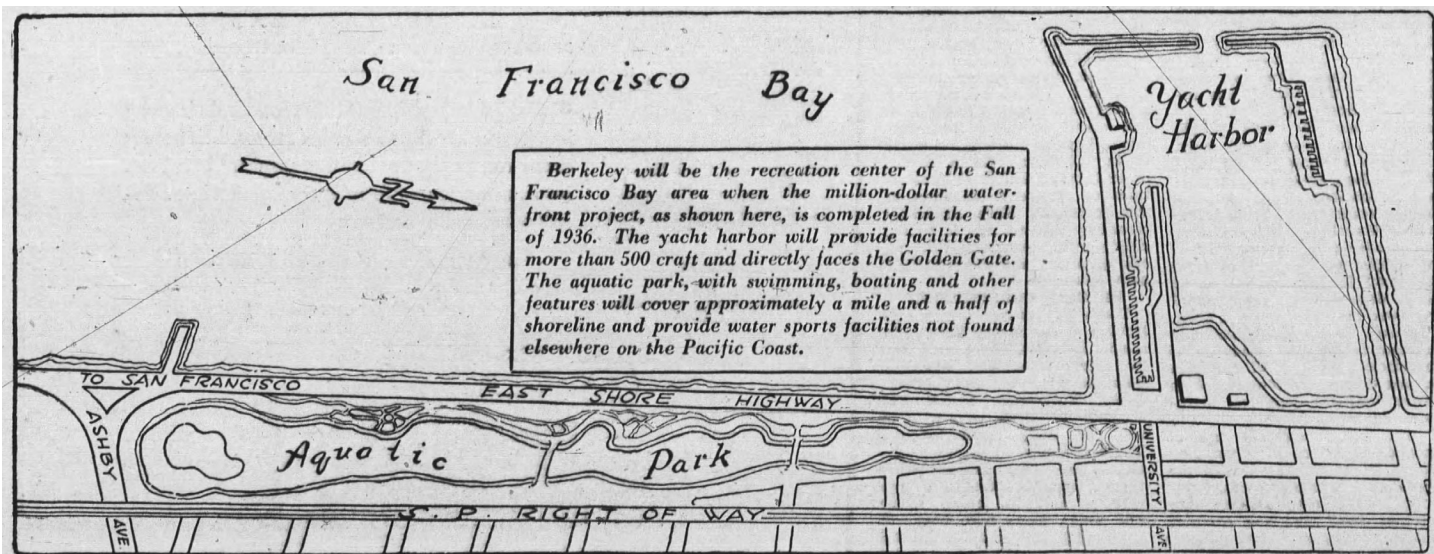
scribed as "one of the most modern and finest stretches of roadway in California," according to publicity from the state Department of Highways, boasting "curbing (a median) and electric lights."

While this pinnacle of pre-war highway engineering in the area did indeed boast a world class view of the Bay, San Francisco and Marin County, it also brought large numbers of people to the shoreline for the first time, and they all noticed one thing -- it literally stunk.

The East Bay wetlands were still used not only for active garbage dumps, but disposing of raw sewage and industrial waste as well, and many folks were just getting their first whiff of the foul condition when they traveled on the highway.

A large and steady number of complaints resulted and continued over the years as awareness about mistreatment of the Bay spread.

The idea of an "industrial highway" was originally proposed by Alameda County in 1930 as a 58-mile



This 1936 Oakland Tribune illustration gives an idea of how far out in the Bay the Eastshore was built and how Berkeley used the addition to build new amenities and infrastructure.

route from Richmond to the northern boundary of San Jose linking the growing number of industries locating along the shoreline, much of it, as state highway engineer C.H. Purcell noted, being built on “tidelands reclaimed for industrial purposes.”

The proposed highway project quickly followed the 1929 proposal to build the Bay Bridge.

A large portion of the highway itself was a massive demonstration of tidelands reclamation, built on dredged Bay landfill for about 2.5 miles from Ashby to University. Berkeley took advantage of the project by building Aquatic Park and a city marina (originally called a yacht harbor), with funding assistance from the federal Works Progress Administration.

Construction was delayed at some instances when portions of the landfill collapsed, creating large holes.

The original highway never reached the proposed 58-mile stretch from San Jose to Richmond, instead covering eight miles from the Bay Bridge distribution structure (the first complex interchange in the Bay Area and forerunner of today’s even more complex MacArthur Maze) to the northern end of El Cerrito. Plans were approved in 1933 and construction started in 1934.

The portion from Emeryville to University Avenue in Berkeley opened in 1936, just ahead of the dedication of the new Bay Bridge in November.

The second portion, which ended at San Pablo Avenue in El Cerrito, opened in May 1937. It required construction of an overpass at the intersection with railroad tracks just south of Albany Hill, as well as “a large fill in swampland north of the Contra Costa County line,” reported the Oakland Tribune.

“To speed the settling of this fill, earth was piled eight feet above the road level. This extra pressure squeezes water from the swamp land below through a series of gravel-filled shafts. Before the paving is laid the eight feet of extra earth will be scraped off and the swamp will be as compressed as it would be after several years of use with the regular fill.”

The highway saw continual upgrades almost from the time it was completed and the installation of increasingly complex interchanges between Emeryville and El Cerrito that seem simplistic in an era of metering lights, HOV lanes and electronic traffic updates. An underpass on Ashby and an overpass at University were finally installed to replace the at-grade entrances that required crossing railroad tracks.

Extending Ashby Avenue included displacing the Chung Mei Home for Chinese Boys, which in 1935 would relocate to land purchased in El Cerrito.

Berkeley also had to upgrade Gilman Street, which previously had only seen local industrial traffic. In October 1936 Berkeley approved repaving Gilman from Hopkins to Second, and giving the previously unimproved section from First Street to the highway its first-ever paving.

The interchanges in Albany and El Cerrito were similarly unprepared when the highway opened. El Cerrito held talks with Richmond and the state highway department about widening Central Avenue to handle traffic to and from the Eastshore.

A traffic signal, only the second in El Cerrito, was installed at the San Pablo Avenue terminus. The interchange in Albany was on Pierce Street by Albany Hill, which was a residential area, though still not fully de-



Aerial view circa 1941 shows the four-lane overpass crossing the railroad tracks and the entrance and exit at Pierce Street in Albany. The new USDA regional laboratory is at the right. This view is before construction of the new Industrial or Shipyard Highway (forerunner of I-580) that would branch off at the left and the Shipyard Railway.

veloped. Residents complained about poor sightlines and being unable to back out of their driveways with all the new traffic coming over the rise.

The Pierce Street problem would remain for years until an interchange was built on Buchanan Street, which was realigned with Marin Avenue and extended through a northern corner of the Gill Tract.

Emeryville approved funding to pave Powell Street between the highway and Stanford Avenue in late June of 1937, "providing a needed outlet from San Pablo Avenue for Bay Bridge traffic," the Oakland Tribune reported.

The new highway was welcomed by Richmond, which relished the prospect of a projected 35-minute San Francisco commute time attracting more residents who previously had to travel by ferry or train.

"The San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge gives Richmond a new position on the Bay and removes any possible disadvantage the city may have suffered due to its relation to San Francisco," Chamber of Commerce President P.M. Sanford said just before the highway opened. "We are nearly as close to San Francisco as most parts of Oakland and nearer than some of the outlying sections to the east."

But many interests in El Cerrito did not hold the same glowing opinion of the Eastshore.

The opening of the highway did spur business growth at the north end of town, much of it highway-oriented, focused on truck and auto traffic coming to and from the terminus. But traffic was now bypassing San Pablo Avenue through the central and southern parts of the city and San Pablo was not visible from the Central Avenue intersection of the highway.

Nightclubs around unincorporated "No Man's Land"

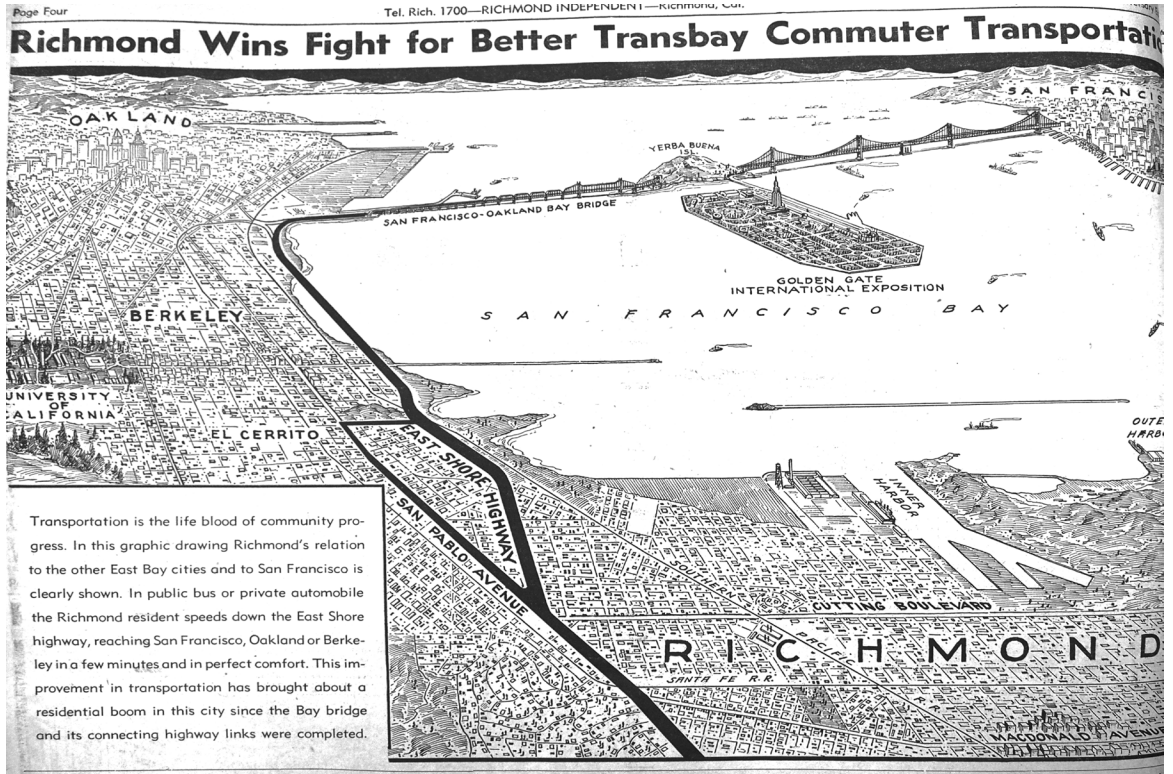
tried putting up billboards around the Central Avenue interchange, but those were quickly outlawed. Nightclubs in El Cerrito in particular would increase advertising and promotions hoping to entice and divert the additional traffic anticipated on the highway heading to the Golden Gate International Exposition on Treasure Island in 1939.

Modern as it was boasted to be, the highway quickly became outdated. There were calls to expand capacity just before the war and a lane in each direction was added to relieve traffic from the Kaiser shipyards that opened in Richmond in 1941. In 1942 a second roadway branching off at Albany and originally dubbed the Shipyard Highway, was created using more Bay fill along Point Isabel and Stege Marsh. The right-of-way, meant to deal with the bottleneck at San Pablo Avenue by directing defense worker traffic to Hoffman Boulevard in Richmond, included property seized from "an enemy alien" (Japanese-American, presumably), according to news accounts.

From 1954 to 1960 the Eastshore Highway was upgraded and extended through West Contra Costa to the Carquinez Bridge and renamed the Eastshore Freeway. Today it's mostly known as Interstate 80 and the route is annually among the most congested stretches of freeway in the Bay Area.

The second portion of the original highway south from the Bay Bridge to San Jose was delayed by World War II; when its construction started in 1949 it was as part of the Eastshore Freeway. But when it was dedicated a decade later, it had its own identity, named for U.S. Navy Admiral Chester Nimitz, commander of the Pacific Fleet during World War II. Its official designation today is Interstate 880.

The new highway was long-awaited in Richmond, which had lacked a quick road link to San Francisco and the greater East Bay. But, as this 1940 illustration indicates, the highway bypassed the core of El Cerrito's business district. Below left, the highway section through Richmond and into El Cerrito.



Oakland Tribune
OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA, SUNDAY, SEPT. 5, 1937

The thriving area of the Eastbay north of the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge to Richmond, along San Pablo Avenue, the Panhandle Boulevard and the Eastshore Highway is pictured here. The region is the scene of pronounced home building activity, largely due to excellent building sites and new transportation facilities. The arrow points to the district where Phil Henry, subdivider and builder, has occupied some 300 sites for a building program of low-cost homes.

Holiday Home Show
Berkeley's Best Buys
Open Sunday and Monday, 2 to 5 P. M.

836 Oxford Street One of the most attractive, modern, "Year 1937" homes in Berkeley. Features a full bath, built-in refrigerator and a beautiful garden. Price \$10,000. Open Sat. & Sun.	91 Arlington Avenue New, attractive modern, 1 1/2 bedroom home featuring a full bath, built-in refrigerator and a beautiful garden. Price \$10,000. Open Sat. & Sun.
1714 Euclid Avenue Six-room detached view home near the University and other schools. Price \$10,000. Open Sat. & Sun.	565 Spang Street New, modern Colonial view home. One bedroom and bath. Price \$10,000. Open Sat. & Sun.
2753 Shady Road Charming in most attractive home in Berkeley. Price \$10,000. Open Sat. & Sun.	585 6th Casual Park Two bedroom architect designed home, surrounding a "leaf" lawn. Price \$10,000. Open Sat. & Sun.
921 Euclid Avenue One of the most attractive, modern, "Year 1937" homes in Berkeley. Features a full bath, built-in refrigerator and a beautiful garden. Price \$10,000. Open Sat. & Sun.	585 6th Casual Park Two bedroom architect designed home, surrounding a "leaf" lawn. Price \$10,000. Open Sat. & Sun.

OFFICE OPEN SUNDAY AND MONDAY 10 a. m. - 5 p. m.

MASON-McDUFFIE CO.
2810 Shattuck Avenue, Berkeley, California
Berkeley's Leading Builders for Over 20 Years

Complete Building Service
ESTIMATES, CONTRACTS & CALLS
PAGE & COMPANY
1817 Broadway—Berkeley 1922

on Built by
ms & Slade
Architects

RINDA
ITIN PROPERTY
24 Office - Tel. 96-1122

NEW HIGHWAY 'OPENS'



This crack, eight feet deep, appeared mysteriously on the fill for the new Eastshore Highway to the bay bridge approach at the Alameda-Contra Costa County line. State highway engineers said the crack was due to the pressure of the fill on the marshy land, and that work would not be unduly delayed. John Morrill, one of the workmen, is shown measuring the fault.

Fill Settles, Crack Appears In Bay Bridge Approach

Sudden settling of the fill being constructed for the roadway on the Eastshore Highway from Richmond to the Bay Bridge approach, caused an eight-foot crack to appear for several hundred feet along the fill at the Alameda County-Contra Costa County line, north of El Cerrito Hill yesterday.

The proposed highway at this point runs over marshy land, and a system of vertical and horizontal drains had been constructed by the

State Highway Commission contractors in charge of the work. Eight feet of gravel had been placed over the roadway to "squeeze" the fill, and expedite drainage of the marsh.

Yesterday there was a sudden settling of four feet, and the crack resulted.

State Highway officials said that the settling was not unexpected due to the nature of the land, and that work would not be delayed by the incident.

Upcoming programs

Sunset View Cemetery: A historic walking tour

Led by Tom Panas, 2-4 p.m. Aug. 10 (free)

Join us for a moderate walk through Sunset View Cemetery, which was founded in 1908.

The cemetery is one of the most fascinating places in El Cerrito or Kensington, which it straddles.

Learn the history of this cemetery and the people who are buried here.

We'll walk by the beautiful chapel, as we walk up the hill.

We are repeating this popular program due to strong interest in the community.

Meet in the vacant lot across Colusa Avenue from the cemetery. Do not park in the cemetery parking lot.

Creedence Clearwater Revival: The first decade, 1959-69

A talk by writer, producer and archivist Alec Palao, 2 p.m. Oct. 13, El Cerrito Community Center, 7007 Moeser Lane

Creedence Clearwater Revival took a full 10 years since their inception at Portola Junior High to become one of the world's top rock & roll acts.

Grammy-nominated producer and El Cerrito resident Alec Palao discusses the quartet's local background and their apprenticeship as the Blue Velvets, Visions, Golliwogs and finally CCR, using rare visuals and audio, along with insights gleaned during his extensive work on the group's catalog.

Wheelchair accessible. No need to RSVP!

El Cerrito Historical Society

P.O. Box 304, El Cerrito, CA 94530

2019 society board members

Dave Weinstein, president

Chris Horn, vice president

Pat Shaw, treasurer

Tom Panas, Joanne Rubio, Barbara Hill, John Falconer, Chris Treadway

WHERE TO FIND US

By email:

elcerritohistoricalsociety@yahoo.com,

Online:

www.elcerritohistoricalsociety.org

On Facebook:

www.facebook.com/elcerritohistoricalsociety/

In-person:

The Shadi Room, on the second floor of El Cerrito City Hall 10890 San Pablo Ave., is open to the public on the third Thursday of the month from 4:30 to 6 p.m. It is also open by appointment by emailing

elcerritohistoricalsociety@yahoo.com.