

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 FIRE DEPARTMENT

BY TOM DAWDY



Everyone that has some knowledge of Millbrae history knows that Millbrae was incorporated in 1948, but the "Village of Millbrae" formed a Millbrae Fire Department several years before Millbrae became a city. Around the turn of the century, when structures in Millbrae caught fire it was likely that they would just burn to the ground. One example was the infamous *Millbrae Hotel*, opened to the public in December 1882 and sold to *World Heavy-weight Boxing Champion*

James Corbett in 1889. It was destroyed by fire without a single firefighter in site. In 1895, *William Dunphy's* residence burned to the ground on Linden Avenue. After the fire, the *Dunphy Mansion* was built on the site. The *Millbrae Train Depot* burned down twice before the third one, which houses the *Millbrae Train Museum* today, was built. After researching articles archived at the Museum, I learned about the old Spanish homes in Millbrae that did not burn because they were made of adobe with little wood. In the later "village years," new
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Millbrae Volunteer Fire Department (Circa 1940)
Left to Right: James McCarthy (Fire Marshal)
Jack Harris, Harvey Bell, Oscar Warner, Bert Cain and George Warman

PRESIDENT'S REPORT
JOHN MUNIZ

Millbrae, during the 1920s and 1930s when the densely-forested estate built by **D.O. Mills** in the 1870s was still intact, was hardly more than a collection of saloons, gambling establishments, and the *Sixteen Mile House* - a well known bordello. Flower and truck gardens flourished in the sun, a different picture from what we see today. Today, Millbrae is a bustling community, known for excel-

lent schools, population diversity, a transportation hub, and best-in-class recreation facilities.

Speaking of recreation, I hope that you had the opportunity to attend the new **Millbrae Recreation Center** ribbon cutting and grand opening on June 11th. Millbrae can be proud to show off our new, state-of-the-art facility. Did you notice the historical images of Millbrae displayed in the main hall? They were



carefully selected by the Recreation Department staff in conjunction with the **Millbrae Historical Society** and the **Millbrae Cultural Arts Committee**.

(continued on Page 2)

PRESIDENT'S REPORT
(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1)

I will bet you were not aware of the other golf facilities in Millbrae besides the **Green Hills Country Club**. There were two – the **Peninsula Golf Practice Range**, which was a driving range on Millbrae Avenue where the skate park is today, and the **Capuchino Golf Club**, a 96-acre golf course in northern Millbrae. Not much is known about the Peninsula Golf Practice Range, which closed about 1957. The Capuchino Golf Club was owned by the Capuchino Golf Corporation. The golf course land was subdivided in 1927 and parcels were sold in the late 1930 and early 1940's to create the Capuchino residential neighborhood. The only proof that the Millbrae Historical Society has that the two golf venues existed are the matchbook covers pictured at right.

Mark your calendar for Saturday, August 20th for the **Millbrae Machines** car and truck show, sponsored by the **Millbrae Lions Club**. The event will take place from 8:00 am to 2:00 pm along Broadway in Downtown Millbrae. It is the biggest and best car show in Northern California! See some of the most beautiful and unusual rides ever conceived. Great fun for the whole family. Well over three hundred cars and trucks will be on display along Broadway in Millbrae. Hope to see you there!



The **Millbrae Museum** and **Carriage House** held its Grand Opening on Saturday, June 25th, from 12:00 noon to 4:00 pm. The Millbrae Museum and carriage house had been closed for 27 months due to COVID restrictions. The facilities re-opened with a ribbon cutting ceremony and free popcorn, water, and sodas. Since the Museum

grand opening, we have returned to our regular open hours on Saturdays from 12:00 pm to 4:00 pm, weather permitting. Do not forget the **Millbrae Train Museum**, open on Saturdays from 10:00 am to 2:00 pm. Although the Millbrae Train Museum is still in its upgrade and restoration phase, it is currently open to the public.

Thank you for your continued support! I hope to see you around town this summer!

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



VICE-PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE
PAUL LARSON

Greetings Millbrae Historical Society Trustees, members and friends,

Happy June 2022! June for some reason is one of my favorite months. I like ALL the months in one way or another and each has special qualities, but June stands out to me. We are not quite in the full swing of summer, but June gives me the feeling of new beginning or a flowery season. Even though up and down the California coast we historically experience "June Gloom" (and before that "Gray May"), June is pleasant. June has nice mild days and still cool nights, some windy afternoons but it isn't overly hot or overly cold...just seems right.

Changing the subject, as I write this column, an exceptionally contagious variant of COVID is running its course in San Mateo County. Hos-

pitalizations are up, but people seem to be coping since a good majority of those on the Peninsula are vaccinated. There are those I know around me that have been doing the right thing for the past two years – sheltering in place, wearing face coverings, social distancing, staying home, etc. But now that masks seem to have gone the way of the Dodo Bird, all those who were seemingly COVID-immune are now getting COVID (but in a relatively mild form). Fatalities are down, so that is good news. We will see what happens.

Famous celebrities named "June" are **June Allyson** and **June Lockhart**. Can you think of any others? In 2022 – Sunday, June 5th is Pentecost and also National Doughnut Day. June 6th is D-Day. June 19th or "Juneteenth" is known as Emanci-



ipation Day for enslaved African Americans in 1865. June 21st will be the Summer Solstice, longest day of the year. What other June holidays or commemorations can you think of?

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

**MILLBRAE RECREATION CENTER
GRAND OPENING**



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HISTORY OF MILLBRAE'S FIRE DEPARTMENT
(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1)

buildings like the **16 Mile House** were framed with wood. It was said that if they caught fire, you got out as fast as you could and just watched them burn.

Fast forward to 1931 when the Millbrae community organized the **Millbrae Volunteer Fire Department**. In the beginning, you could join the department and become a volunteer firefighter by paying the dues of 25 cents per month. 39 community members soon signed up to be volunteer firefighters. This helped finance operations and training. The bylaws from the San Bruno FD were used as a guide to form the group and the fire districts. The firefighters were paid one cold beer after fighting one hot fire! So things were off and running for the "MVFD"! The first three members were **Les Pallas**, **Art Snider**, and **Harold Terrill**. Art Snider was elected the first Fire Captain in Millbrae (1932-1938). In August 1931, a siren was installed at a local business that sounded the alarm to summon the volunteers for a fire. In 1934, the **Millbrae Fire District** was formed. **Niels Schultz**, developer of the **Millbrae Highlands**, donated the first piece of equipment to the MVFD. It was a two-wheel hand cart carrying 400 feet of hose. Later a 1931 Chevrolet truck was donated by the Redwood City Fire Department and converted into a "hose wagon" with the same 400 feet of hose. This became Millbrae's first fire truck. This truck was nicknamed **Junior**. Schultz also provided the beer after fires.

Another big event happened in 1937, when a new fire house was built at **225 Broadway**. The lot was purchased for \$600, and community volunteers with the help of WPA workers constructed Millbrae's new fire house for \$2,500. The **Ogden Mills Family** donated \$3,000 so the Fire Department could buy their first real fire engine for \$6,500. The sparkling new engine was a



500-gallon-per-minute **American LaFrance Pumper**. This beautiful fire engine is currently housed at the **Millbrae Museum Carriage House!**

In March 1942, a second piece of equipment, a 750 GPM **Challenger Triple Pumper**, was added. The purchase price for the Challenger was \$9,450. This new fire engine replaced **Junior** - the original Millbrae fire truck. Most of the fire department were still volunteers - **Mel**

and **Sil Massolo** along with **Billie Wallace** and **Jerry Schumaker** headed up the volunteer staff.

Millbrae's population was growing fast after World War II, and the 25x55-foot fire house building on Broadway was getting obsolete. After two failed bond elections, Millbrae



New Millbrae Fire House

voters passed a \$70,000 bond in 1955 to purchase an acre of land on Magnolia Avenue from the **San Francisco Water Department** to build a new fire station. The City

came up with \$130,885 to build the new station by dissolving the City's two fire districts and selling the old fire station building on Broadway. Millbrae's new fire station was opened in time to celebrate the City's ten year anniversary in 1958, along with the acquisition of a fifth vehicle, a combination tanker-pumper fire truck.

In the early 1970's, there was a tragic fire in the upper **Millbrae Meadows** neighborhood. Millbrae residents were concerned about the response time by the Fire Department, and approved a second Millbrae fire house in March 1974, which opened in December 1975.

In 1966, Chief Pallas retired after 35 years of service. He was replaced by **Robert Kohler**. In 1979, **Mike Golder** became Millbrae's third Fire Chief, followed by **William Moke**. **Brian Kelly** became chief in 1987.

Millbrae's final Fire Chief was **Dennis Haag**. Dennis was born and raised in Millbrae and served his hometown fire department for 33 years before his retirement in 2012. Dennis was a very unique chief, serving as both police and fire chief for some time under the title of "Director of Public Safety". Dennis not only wore two hats in Millbrae, but he also served as Millbrae-San Bruno Fire Chief and led the response to the Sept. 9, 2010 fatal San Bruno gas pipeline explosion.

Today Millbrae is part of the **Central County Fire Department** that includes Burlingame and Hillsborough. The Department's coverage area is approximately 15 square miles, with a population of 70,000. There are seven fire stations, including the headquarters on Rollins Road in Burlingame. Millbrae has come a long way from **Junior**, their first fire truck, to a high-tech modern fire department staffed with highly-trained firefighters and paramedics.

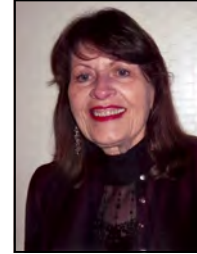
CURATOR'S REPORT

DOROTHY SEMKE

Hi everyone!

I certainly hope you are all well and engaging in your normal life style. It has been a while since we have all been able to get together. I certainly enjoyed seeing many of you at the Museum Grand Opening on June 25th!

Sadly we recently lost one of our MHS members and long-time Millbrae residents and business owners – **Ray Bianchi**. He and his brother Roy opened up **Roy and Ray's Chevron Gas Station** in the mid 1940's on Millbrae Avenue.



Stay well,
Dorothy Semke
Curator

TRAIN MUSEUM NEWS

VERN BRUCE

Hello everyone! I have good news (overall) regarding the proposed **High Speed Rail** plan's effect on our **Train Museum**. The final Environmental Impact Report (EIR) for the San Francisco to San Jose portion of the proposed High Speed Rail project was released in June. To summarize: The relocation of our Millbrae Depot to accommodate High Speed Rail track expansion will still place the depot in close proximity to the relocated operating Caltrain tracks. Also, they had already provided space for our parking needs and the **Civic Center** railcar. However, the report indicates that it is not likely that there will be enough space for our 1 and 1/10th-mile operating rail

line, although they did not rule it out entirely.

If you would like to view the relevant parts of the EIR, you may go to the website:

<http://www.hsr.ca.gov>

then push the blue button entitled "San Francisco to San Jose Final EIR/EIS". Then hit the link "Final Environmental Impact Report/ Environmental Impact Statement" and scroll down to "Volume 4" and click "Chapter 23" and scroll down to Page 135. If you want to see the final proposed station-area plans and renderings, go back and find Volume 3, Book A3, sheets #45 to 50. I am satisfied that the High Speed Rail Authority has adequately addressed our concerns.



CALIFORNIA
High-Speed Rail Authority

MILLBRAE HISTORY WALK

Millbrae History Walk – Sunday, August 14 from 1:00 – 3:30 pm

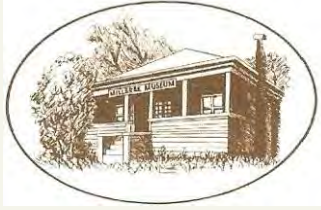
Please join MHS Member Joe Teresi on a walking tour of historic sites of Millbrae. The two-mile looped walk will feature stops to view and discuss **Taylor Middle School**, the **Spur Property**, **Josephine Waugh Soroptimist Park**, the former site of the historic **Mills Mansion**, and the oldest remaining

house in Millbrae at **1 Lewis Avenue**. Meet at the Millbrae History Museum at 420 Poplar Avenue, Millbrae. RSVP requested. Call Joe at 650.455.4887 to RSVP or ask questions.

Difficulty Level: Easy (city sidewalks with moderate slopes)(100-foot elevation gain)



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**MILLBRAE
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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

Sunday, August 14: Millbrae History Walk

- 1:00–3:30 pm; meet at Millbrae History Museum, 420 Poplar Avenue
- Please join MHS Member Joe Teresi on a walking tour of historic sites of Millbrae
- RSVP requested. Call Joe at 650.455.4887 to RSVP or ask questions

Saturday, August 20: Millbrae Machines Car & Truck Show

- 8:00 am–2:00 pm; Broadway, Downtown Millbrae
- Enjoy this special event sponsored by the Millbrae Lions Club!

Friday, October 14: Millbrae Man, Woman & Student of the Year Dinner

- 6:00–9:30 pm; Green Hills Country Club, 500 Ludeman Lane, Millbrae
- Please attend this special event honoring Millbrae volunteers; RSVP required

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)