

Prohibition

By Mervin Belfils

Arthur Peralta, a well-liked person, was a veteran El Cerrito police officer who retired from the police department in 1958 after many years of service and lived at 543 Kearney Street with his family until he passed away.

In 1931 he was at the Potrero and San Pablo Avenue intersection directing traffic for children going to school. He heard a heavily laden truck drive over the streetcar tracks, which at the time branched off and ran down Potrero from San Pablo Avenue. The noise he heard was a loose rail on the tracks caused by the heavy truck crossing it with solid rubber tires.

He glanced up and noticed the truck had a big sign on the side which read, "Reno, Biggest Little City in the West", and had Nevada license plates. He did not give it much thought at the time. The next morning at about the time when he was directing traffic, he noticed this heavily laden truck go by again. He began to wonder how a truck of this type could make the long run to Reno and back in such a short time. He got on his motorcycle and chased after the truck stopping it farther down the avenue.

He asked the driver what he was carrying in the truck and he said just merchandise. He then asked the driver to let him look at the load. The load consisted of 18 barrels of wine at 50 gallons per barrel. They confiscated the whole load, which they stored in a garage where the present city police department is now located. This was the type of bootlegging that was going on all over the state during the days of Prohibition.

After being used for evidence, the barrels were rolled over to where the present front lawn of the city hall is now located, but was a vacant lot at the time. Chief of Police, R. R. Cheek and his officers, broke each of the barrels open allowing the wine to sink into the ground. After all of the wine had been dumped a number of Italians in town gathered up the hoops and staves from the barrels which they evidently reconstructed into barrels for their own use as most Italians in town made their own wine.

Arthur John Peralta was a fifth generation descendent of Don Luis Maria Peralta. In 1818 Luis, then 59, applied for a grant of land on the east side of the bay, to be known as San Antonio Rancho. Two years later the Governor of California, Pablo Vincente de Sola, ordered Captain Luis Arguello to detail someone to place Peralta in possession of the lands he requested, and to "place landmarks on the four points of the compass that it may be known at all times the extent of said lands which have been granted him".

The huge land mass covered what is now Oakland, Alameda, Berkeley, Emeryville, Piedmont, Albany, and part of San Leandro. In 1872 the U. S. Supreme Court confirmed the Peralta Grant. This land was one of the last grants made by the King of Spain.

The 18th Amendment of the constitution was adopted on January 16, 1919 and went into effect one year later. During the time of Prohibition, the state was overrun with bootleggers, who were getting exorbitant prices for their liquid goods.

The pro-hides, as the liquor enforcement officers were called in those days, would often contact the Stege Sanitary District Maintenance Department and tag along with the workers as they were checking the sewer manholes and flushing the line. At each manhole the pro-hides would check the bottom of the manhole to see if any of the mash from the still was lying at the bottom. There were very few houses in each block and if there was any mash in the line it wasn't hard for them to pick out the building where they were making liquor.

Bootlegging liquor became a major problem and Prohibition was repealed on December 5, 1933 by the 21st Amendment.

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