

Some Buildings on San Pablo Avenue

By Mervin Belfils

Peekaboo Auto Camp

In 1927, just north of Blake Street along San Pablo Avenue, where Lafayette Park had been in the earlier days, stood the Peekaboo Auto Camp and Cabins among tall eucalyptus trees. It was owned by Carl Hansen. Out front at the corner they had a small service station and next door a large building with plenty of parking space.

Inside they served chicken dinners in one portion of the building and short orders and a coffee shop in another. They featured dancing and on weekends had an orchestra to entertain the public. They also had private rooms for groups to dine and dance. The Peekaboo was one of the liveliest spots along San Pablo Avenue at that time and well known throughout the area.

Quite a few years before, when it was known as Lafayette Park, people from all over the bay area would gather in various groups to picnic among the trees and drink and dance on the outside dance pavilion.

The Peekaboo restaurant has long ago been demolished, but the property still has a number of small cottages and spaces for trailers and is now known as the Peekaboo Trailer Court.

Twins Service Station

At the southwest corner of Cutting Boulevard and San Pablo Avenue, around 1927 or 1928, stood the Twins Service Station selling General Gasoline. This two-pump small service station stood out in front of the Ralph Beck Garage and was run by Ramon and Baddon Kristavich.

During these years the gas pumps were pumped by hand until the gasoline filled the glass container on top of the pump, about 10 gallons. When gassing the vehicle the gas would run by gravity down through the hose into the car's gas tank.

Economy Market

On San Pablo Avenue in the same year, about 100 feet south of the Twins Service Station, stood the Economy Market. It specialized in fruit and vegetables. The W. B. Patterson family ran this business. Their big advertisement was the famous Magnus Root Beer and one of their sellers at that time was honey in any size jar. The daughter, Jenny Patterson, married Howard Thulin, the former Chief of Police of El Cerrito, who retired some years ago.

Louis Poloni - The Central Meat Market and Grocery

In 1926, at 1529 San Pablo Avenue on the west side between Potrero and Cypress, but nearer to Cypress, stood the Central Meat Market and Grocery operated by Louis and Rose Poloni. They also employed a helper, Frank Gasparini, who is now a medical doctor. They also ran another store out in Richmond at one time.

The store in El Cerrito carried a complete line of imported and domestic goods. Imagine buying bacon at 19 cents a pound, lamb chops 15 cents a pound, ham 19 cents a pound, baby beef roast 15 cents a pound, sweet potatoes 5 lbs. for 10 cents, chokes 25 cents a dozen, tomatoes

20 cents a box, and melons 2 for 15 cents. The prices they charged were low in 1926 compared to the prices they charge now. This store belonged to the Neighborhood Stores Incorporated.

The address at that time had four numbers, but in later years a change was made at all addresses on San Pablo Avenue and they now have five numbers instead of four.

Louis Poloni's son, Gene, in later years purchased a very small store at Liberty and Potrero and after a few years enlarged this store, at which time Louis moved in with his son and handled the meat market section for a number of years until he passed away.

Charles Schwake home

At the corner of San Pablo Avenue and San Diego, where the Travalini Furniture Store now stands, was the Charles Henry Schwake home. This was a two story large building with living quarters upstairs and a plumbing shop downstairs. [Editor's note: now the north end of Pastime Hardware.]

Charles' father had settled in the town of San Pablo in 1895 and a few years later bought the shop the William Rust had established and then moved to this village. He carried on the Rust shop until he passed away in about 1902 at which time the blacksmith shop was sold back to William Rust.

The son Charles went to public school in the bay area and at a very early age learned the plumbing trade. During slack times he worked for Standard Oil in Richmond.

In 1913, he married Queenie Evett in San Francisco and they had a daughter Frances.

During World War 1 he served as a plumbing and maintenance man in the army camps. After his service in the army, he started and opened his own plumbing shop, where his parents lived, in May 1923 He carried on the plumbing business for a number of years and also acted in the capacity of Constable in El Cerrito. He was very active in playing baseball throughout the state and also played for the Praetorians who were the bay area champion baseball club in 1914 and 1915.

Queenie and Charles were very active in the Praetorian Lodge and later after Queenie passed away and Charles retired, he married Nellie Shoute. They moved up to the delta region and made their home there in Contra Costa County.

C.E. Bagley Store

On the west side of San Pablo Avenue near Fairmount Avenue on the property of the present Pastime Hardware store, stood the Rust Building. In 1926, it housed the El Cerrito Consumers Supply Building on the lower floor. This store was operated by the C. E. Bagley family, well known citizens in this area. Roy Dahlen worked for the Bagley family at this store but he later became Superintendent of Streets for the City of El Cerrito.

This store was well stocked with all types of groceries, vegetables, fresh fruits, you name it, they had it. Even though it was well stocked, they made it a point to always have it neatly arranged.

There are probably lots of old time El Cerrito residents who still remember the Bagley Store and purchased their items there.

Buildings Near Fairmount Avenue

Along about 1927, at the corner of Fairmount and San Pablo stood the now Mechanics Bank building where the old 7 Mile House had stood in 1879. Out in front of the bank was a large clock hanging off the front wall of the building high above the sidewalk where passers-by could set the time on their pocket watches.

Next store to the south of the bank was a candy store and fountain service, but this was only a portion of the original bank building itself. Further to the south was another building which housed four businesses. There was a real estate office, Bank's Shoe Repair Shop, beauty shop, and the William F. Huber Attorney Office. Judge Huber was the owner of the building then. He was a former City Councilman for a long time in this city and passed away at the age of 93 in 1965.

William Huber was Justice of the Peace when this village was called Rust. He served as a councilman for the City of El Cerrito from 1932 until 1940, including three years as Mayor. Huber Park on Terrace Drive and Sea View in El Cerrito was named after him and was built by the W.P.A.

Running along the center of San Pablo Avenue was a double set of streetcar tracks which ran from Oakland to Richmond. A little farther down San Pablo stood the B. F. Denton Coal, Wood, Hay and Grain Building, from which he supplied the residents of El Cerrito. He carried all sorts of animal food and sacked his coal at the railroad siding from the cars parked at the Santa Fe tracks near Fairmount Avenue.

John Grondona - Farmer's Produce Market - The Crab Shack

John Grondona had the Farmer's Produce Market for several years on San Pablo Avenue just north of the now Griffin Lumber Company. He sold all types of fruit and specialized in all types of melon on ice. He was located in the former old Panama Pacific Saloon, a two story building. [Editor's note: on the east side of San Pablo Avenue, just south of Madison.]

In those days when one asked to purchase a melon, they would cut a three cornered tapered hole in the melon which they called a plug. Some fruit stands cut a round tapered hole plug which they gave to the purchaser to try to see if the melon was ripe enough. If you were not satisfied, you were not obligated to make a purchase.

This building burned down on November 2, 1925. After the fire, John Grondona started a new Farmer's Produce Market a couple hundred feet north of the old building. In 1928, he had his young friend Frank "Babe" Borges helping him in his new stand. They sold all types of fruit and some fresh crab. He continued for years and gradually did away with the fruit entirely and sold all types of seafood. He changed the name to the "Crab Shack" and started to serve dinners

with the help of his wife and daughters. He had the only fish dinners served in this area and had a very successful business.

John was well liked in the area and played a very important part in this city until he passed away. His last place of business, the Crab Shack, was on San Pablo Avenue about 150 feet south of Madison Street.

John was made an honorary volunteer fireman during the war years. He also was connected to a couple of inventions during his days.

Copyright Mervin Belfils, October 1975

Copyright El Cerrito Historical Society, June 2006