



Pinole **Historical Society**

Newsbriefs

Winter 2023

P.O. Box 285, Pinole, CA 94564

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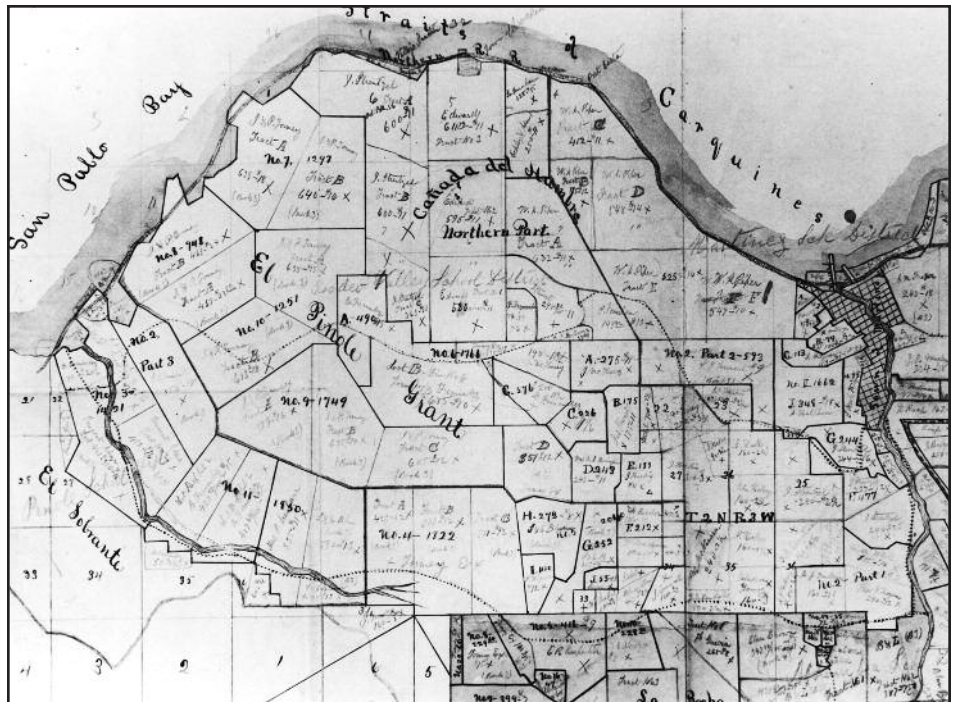
HELP THE PHS COMMEMORATE THE 200TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE EL PINOLE GRANT TO DON YGNACIO MARTÍNEZ

February 10 Pinole Historical Society meeting at Pinole Sportsmen's Club, 201 Piñon Avenue

In the book, "Images of America: Pinole," co-author George Vincent wrote, "in 1821, Mexico took control of California from Spain. In 1823, Ygnacio Martínez became the grantee of 17,786 acres stretching from San Pablo Bay to the Carquinez Strait. Martínez had been a soldier on the Spanish frontier for 42 years, most without pay. At first the rancho was called Nuestra Señora de la Merced, and later Rancho El Pinole."

This year marks the 200th anniversary of the El Pinole Grant. Though the grant included parts of today's West Contra Costa and Central Contra Costa, Martínez chose to build his estate on land in what is today's Pinole Valley Park.

How shall the Pinole Historical Society commemorate the bicentennial of the El Pinole Grant? That's the subject of the society's Friday, February 10, pro-



The El Pinole Grant encompassed 17,786 acres.

gram at the Pinole Sportsman's Club. The society invites its members and the community to attend

this free event at 6:30 PM to offer ideas and suggestions.

Continued on page 12

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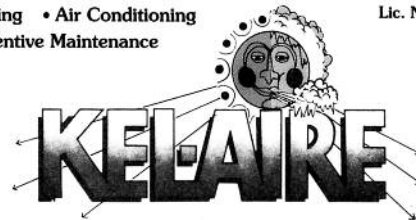
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President's Message

Jeff Rubin, President, Pinole Historical Society and Pinole History Museum

WRITING, STORYTELLING, AND A LIFE WELL LIVED



Jeff Rubin

One of the fortuitous happenstances of history is that it lends itself to good writing and storytelling.

From the great prose of co-founder and historian George Vincent, to the intriguing entries submitted by students who have participated in the society's annual history essay contest since 2009, the society has been enriched with priceless narrative and ideas.

George's programs for our members, walking tours of historic downtown Pinole, and storytelling to schoolchildren in the early part of the 21st century about the lives of schoolchildren in the early part of the 20th century, have contributed a great deal to the preservation of Pinole's history. It's among the reasons he was honored at the Pinole History Museum fundraising dinner last September.

In this newsletter George regales us with another well-told story of a quirky Pinolean who lived more than a hundred years ago, a character among an array of early 20th century characters he's profiled on these pages. This one, though, may or may not have left a pot of gold at the end of his personal rainbow. Read "John Henry's Treasure and the Great Pinole Gold Rush" on page 8.

BICENTENNIAL ESSAY CONTEST

As you read on the front page, 2023 is the 200th

anniversary of the El Pinole Grant, a gift of land to Mexican soldier Ygnacio Martinez that encompasses what is present-day Pinole.

It's not often that an historical society gets to commemorate a bicentennial. In addition to seeking input from our members and the public at our February 10 quarterly meeting (front page), we're also seeking ideas from Pinole students in our history essay contest.

The question this year is: *2023 marks the 200th anniversary of the El Pinole Grant that eventually created the city of Pinole. There were many land grants awarded by the Mexican government in the Bay Area in the early 19th century. Why were these land grants important to Pinole's, and the Bay Area's history?*

We can't wait to read the essays.

Continued on page 4



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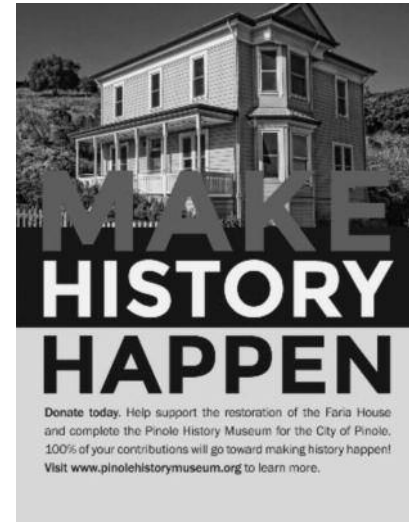
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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Continued from page 3

A LIFE WELL LIVED

A man who led an extraordinary life, some of it in Pinole, died January 7.

His name was Edgar A. Vovsi, and for the 10 years he lived here, he left a legacy of civic involvement and public service that is well worth emulating.

Edgar was a Pinole City Councilman (1972-75), Mayor of Pinole (1973-74), and a member and past president of the Pinole Jaycees, the local chapter of the United States Junior Chamber, a leadership-training and civic organization for people between the ages of 18 and 40.

He was also a member of the Pinole Historical and Museum Commission.

All this in the scant 10 years he lived in Pinole while an executive at the American Heart Association in Oakland and San Francisco.

The irony of him being a history aficionado — Edgar wrote his Holy Names University master's thesis "Ignacio Martínez and The Rancho El Pinole 1823-1868," which chronicled the 50 years spanning the land grant and the actions of the Federal Land

Commission that led to the rancho's demise — and me being the president of the historical society is that though we never met, we carried on a years-long email friendship based on shared faith (Judaism), careers (journalism), and, by serendipitous happenstance, graduating from the same university (Bradley), where we were taught by the same journal-

ism professor (Dr. Paul B. Snider), though 15 years apart.

Our emails were filled with mutual love of Pinole's history and college basketball.

Bradley was once a college hoops power, not so much in my lifetime, but certainly in Edgar's. I'll miss our correspondence.

There's more — much more — to his story. See page 6.

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In memoriam

EDGAR A. VOVSI

January 21, 1933 – January 7, 2023. Age 89

Edgar A. Vovsi, a former Pinole City Councilman and Mayor, died January 7, just 14 days before his 90th birthday. He died in his sleep, peacefully according to his wife of 65 years, Mary.

That he lived at all is a story of courage.

Edgar was a native of Riga, Latvia, the son of a Russian father and a Latvian mother. He and his parents, Orthodox Jews, escaped in 1940 as the Nazis were applying their final solution to the Jews of Europe.

"His father was an attorney in Riga and a foreign correspondent for the London Times," said Mary by phone days after Edgar's death. "He knew the war was brewing and what the Germans were doing, and he decided to leave. He made arrangements somehow, probably put some money under the table, and got a passport for Ed. They left in April of 1940, took a plane to Stockholm, and ended up in Oslo. They sailed (for the United States) a day before the Germans invaded Norway.

"The Germans radioed the ship to come back, but the captain refused, and they eventually arrived in New York." Edgar was 7.

No one else in the Vovsi family would leave; they all died in the concentration camps.

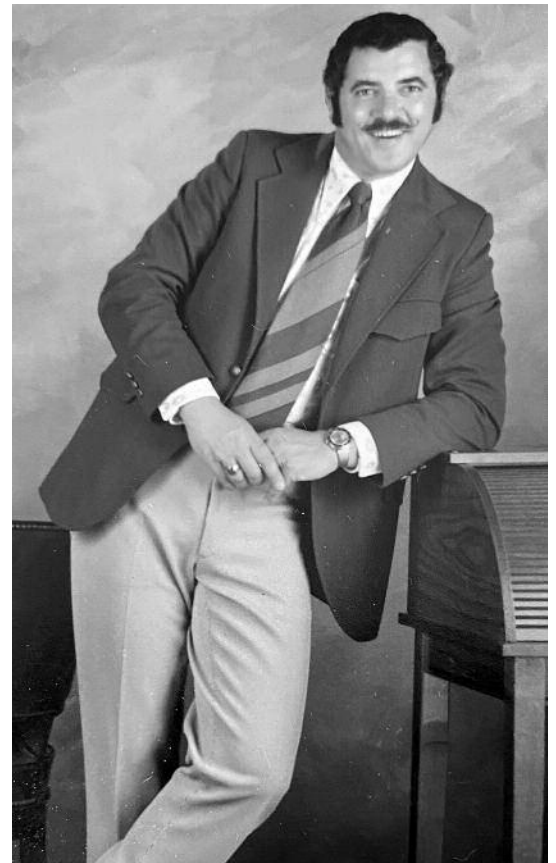
Once in the U.S., the Vovsis lived in the Jewish tenements in New York City before they were re-settled to a cramped apartment in Peoria, IL. At age 39, Vovsi's father, who'd been working in a factory in Peoria, died of a heart attack. Edgar was 12.

In a 2016 article in the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, Edgar spoke about his life.

"The stress of getting us out and not being able to support us as he did in Latvia killed my father," Edgar said.

Following four years in the U.S. Air Force after high school, Edgar returned to Peoria to attend Bradley University, from which he graduated with a degree in journalism in 1959. He and Mary met in college. Mary graduated in 1957.

Continued on page 7



Edgar A. Vovsi



1971 Jaycees installation dinner (L-R): Mike and Roberta Rei, Edgar and Mary Vovsi, Roy and Rose Swearingen.

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EDGAR A. VOVSI

Continued from page 6

Edgar began his short newspaper career in Peoria and Pekin, IL.. His long career with heart associations included stops in Springfield (IL), Alameda (Executive Director of the Alameda County Heart Association), San Francisco, Los Angeles, and back to Springfield, where he was Executive Vice President of the Illinois Heart Association.

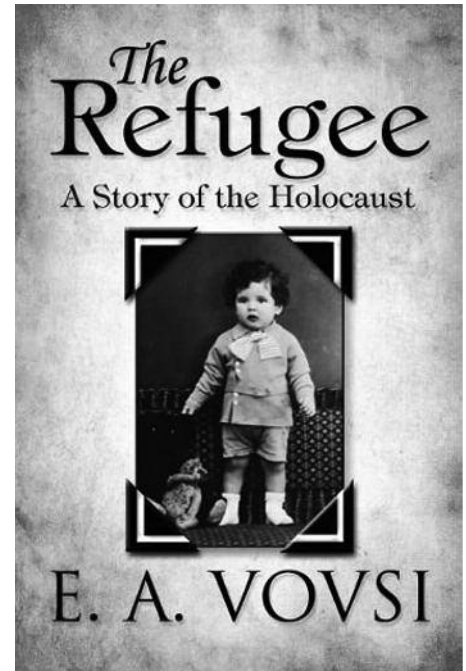
As part of the heart association's anti-smoking campaign, he helped write 1988 legislation banning smoking on U.S. commercial airline flights.

"I enjoyed using government to make positive contributions," Vovsi told the *Review-Journal*. "They weren't earth-shattering, but helped quality of life.

"I often ask, 'Why am I alive and hundreds of thousands of other kids didn't make it?' I don't know why, but because I'm alive I believe I must try and make a difference."

During his 10 years in Pinole he was a Pinole City Councilman (1972-75), Mayor of Pinole (1973-74), and member and past president of the Pinole Jaycees. He played a part in the construction of the tennis courts by the Pinole Library. He was also a member of the Pinole Historical and Museum Commission.

He wrote three books, including a memoir of his life as a refugee of the Holocaust. The latter, pictured at right, is housed at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.



Edgar A. Vovsi's memoir.

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Back in the day

George R. Vincent

JOHN HENRY'S TREASURE AND THE GREAT PINOLE GOLD RUSH

As a youngster, I was intrigued by my father's stories of early Pinole's eccentric characters.

One story in particular fascinated me, about a town hermit and miser named John Henry. The tale told was that he had buried a hoard of gold coins near Pinole, and the treasure had never been found. At age ten, I had gold dreams and was determined to find it.

The local dumpsite was off Franklin Canyon Road and not far from John Henry's supposed old homesite. I would ask my dad if we could stop on our dump trip and dig for the treasure.

My dad said the legend of John Henry's gold was only a fairy tale. He also said as a teenager in Pinole he had been fooled by the story and had dug more empty holes than a gopher.

But as an adult and

historian, the curious story of John Henry still stayed with me. I became more interested in finding out more about his life than finding his fictional treasure trove.

How could he have fooled so many into believing he was wealthy while creating a lasting folklore of hidden riches for his legacy?

My research for evidence and facts of John Henry's existence and background took me to many sources. I combed through Contra Costa history archives, old newspapers, county tax records, maps, Bancroft Library documents, and The History Center of The Church of Latter-Day Saints in Oakland.

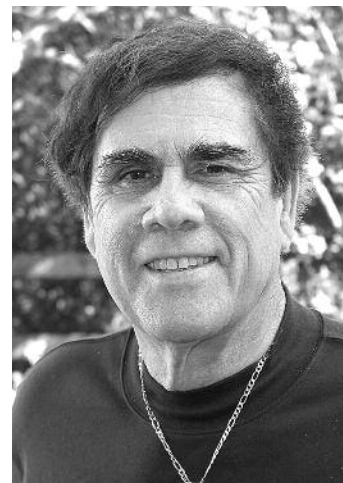
What emerged was the personality sketch of a reclusive man of mystery whose odd habits and suspicious lifestyle spawned a mythology of buried treasure.

John Henry valued his

privacy and lonesome lifestyle and revealed little about himself to others. It seems he trusted no one.

It is likely that John Henry as a young man left his Ohio home for the lure of the California gold fields. He was born in May 1837 to Barnabas Henry and Nancy Wolf, and had one brother, Nate Henry. While in California, John Henry also went by John Henry Davenaugh.

His earliest record in California was in the 1860 census describing him as a 23-year-old farmer near Martinez with \$300 in personal property. Twenty years later, in 1880, his circumstances had changed. He was then penned as a 42-year-old saloon keeper between Pinole and Martinez and was joined by his 27-year-old brother, Nate. He sold mostly beer, and rumor had it that he favored this trade



George Vincent

because of family ties to European brewmaster skills.

The censuses of 1900 and 1910 also found him to be in the same location in the Rodeo valley. He was described as a single man and keeper of a roadhouse outside of the Pinole Township.

Pinole at that time had a narrow dirt road running through the little hamlet with more than 13 saloons along its Main Street thoroughfare, with more bars on the side streets. Business was brisk, but John Henry wanted to be by himself and be his own boss.

He chose to locate his small beer tavern away from the bigger competition and on the roadside to Martinez near the present-day Franklin Canyon Golf Course. Curiously,

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JOHN HENRY'S TREASURE

Continued from page 8

he was allowed by landowners of the property to squat there free of rent from 1874 to 1914. Somehow, he befriended and outlasted them all, from the Miner Ranch in 1874 to Patrick Tormey and Bernardo Fernandez by 1914.

He lived on four acres from the 1870s until his health failed in 1914. The county tax assessor in 1890 showed him with \$650 in improvements and paying \$9 in tax.

He had a working self-sufficient farm, as well as a shabby saloon. He had wagons, horses, cows, chickens, hogs, blacksmith tools, one dog, a gun and \$60 in saloon and liquor fixtures. John Henry knew how to write

and signed his name to the tax receipt.

His dingy roadside bar became a popular stop for thirsty travelers, gold seekers, and Santa Fe Railroad workers on the "Christie Crossing" trestle. John Henry became well known to the county's inhabitants and was called "The Hermit of Rodeo Valley."

He was a familiar figure sitting in the doorway of his rundown wayside inn. The interior of his premises was dated and the place and its furnishings were described as "bearing the earmarks of time." There were souvenirs of Contra Costa's pioneer days, dismal walls decorated with old advertisements and posters as well as news copies of all divorce

notices in the county.

The story was told about John Henry's war against the opposite sex. He posted the notices of failed marriages behind his bar for all to see. He might have once had a marriage that turned sour. Upon his death, authorities somehow found a former brother-in-law to notify of his passing.

There was one outstanding feature that customers remembered about John Henry. He was not only a hermit but had a King Midas fondness for gold coins garnished from his warm beer sales. He always disappeared with patrons' gold coins and gave them change in silver coinage. This habit fueled the rumor that he had a

golden fortune stored or buried somewhere.

In 1914, John Henry suffered a debilitating stroke and was paralyzed and taken to the county hospital in Martinez. He died there, indigent and feeble-minded, on August 15, 1915, at the age of 78. Pinole's Dr. Manuel Fernandez and Town Constable Fraser notified his next of kin, a brother in Fresno and an ex brother-in-law in San Francisco.

Not believing in banks, John Henry had kept his money somewhere, and gossip quickly spread that the old man had buried it near his shack.

Gold fever gripped the area from Pinole to Martinez! His ramshackle cabin and saloon in

Continued on page 10

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JOHN HENRY'S TREASURE

Continued from page 9

Franklin Canyon were ripped to the ground and trampled to pieces. Digging was rampant everywhere, including at "Indian Peak," a hill far east of Rodeo where John had once been seen.

A follow-up news article denoting the scene summed up the feelings of the time when things had calmed down:

"From all the procurable evidence of John Henry's fabulous wealth, it is only a myth. John Henry was a man who never spent a wooden nickel, and who never made a ripple in his life."

But John Henry's ghost got the last laugh after all. Fifty-one years later, in 1966, federal Treasury agents swarmed over the Pinole and Rodeo Hills. Residents knew that something big was up. A fortune in gold coins had been mysteriously uncovered and then quietly disappeared again by a new generation of hoarders. Its value was estimated at the time as more than \$50,000.

John Henry had at last indeed made a very big ripple in his life.

"We have had a great experience at St Joseph. I am very grateful that we found it, and my children have thrived here thanks to the warm and supportive community."

"We've always had good experiences with our children's teachers. They clearly work really hard, take pride in what they do, and care a lot about the kids' success."

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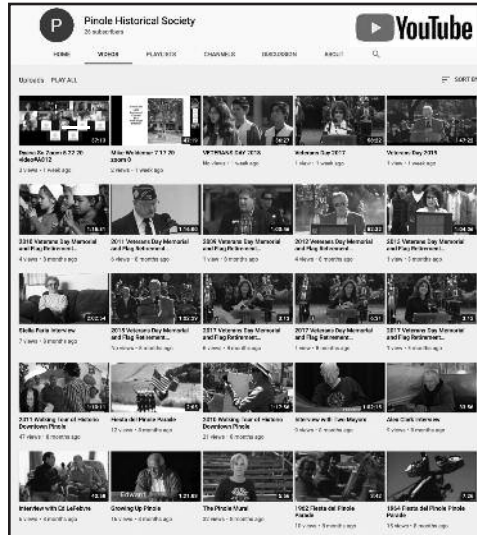
PHS YouTube Channel Updated With Recent Program Videos

More videos have been uploaded to the Pinole Historical Society's YouTube channel, including the September and November 2022 programs by Cal State-East Bay professor John Robinson and representatives from the Contra Costa History Center in Martinez.

All of the programs we've recorded since 2008 are on our YouTube channel for your enjoyment. Our thanks to Pinole History Museum board member Alec Jason, who reformatted more than a decade's worth of PHS programs and uploaded them to YouTube.

Among the 30-plus videos include:

- **GEORGE VINCENT'S** two walking tours of historic



downtown Pinole.

- **THE PINOLE MURAL:** Wells Fargo Bank produced this video about the history of Pinole. The mural hangs in the bank's Pinole office on Fitzgerald Drive.

- **AN INTERVIEW WITH TWO MAYORS:** Former mayors Jack Meehan and Tom Cutino tell how they saved Fitzgerald Drive — and the sales-tax dollars its shopping centers produce — for Pinole.

- **WHAT'S IN A NAME?:** How Pinole streets got their names, and the characters behind those names.

- **1962, '63, '64 AND '65 FIESTA DEL PINOLE PARADES,** courtesy of PHS member Jim Payne.

PHS YouTube: <https://youtu.be/0mOUvgFlrp4>.

200TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE EL PINOLE GRANT

Continued from front page

Pinole holds the distinction of having one of the oldest names in Contra Costa County.

Spaniards first explored the area in the 1772 Pedro Fages expedition. Father Juan Crespi penned the name in his diary, recording the Spanish word "penole" or "pinolli" for the meal made from seeds, grain, and acorns given to the explorers by the welcoming Native Americans. The name stuck to the area, so that when Don Ygnacio Martínez applied in 1823 for a land grant of almost 18,000 acres in the Contra Costa region, he requested the grant as El Pinole.

At the time, Pinole Valley was described as a wild and desolate place with herds of deer and elk and numerous grizzly bear. The Martínez girls learned to rope grizzlies for sport from horseback.

By 1836, Martínez had built a large adobe home in the valley about three miles inland from the bay where he kept a large boat. Into this setting he brought his wife, Doña Maria Arellanes, and most of his eleven children.

The Martínez sons built adobe homes next to their father. The cluster became known as Los Adobes of Pinole Viejo (old Pinole).

Ygnacio Martínez died in 1848 and was buried at Mission San Jose. The new township of Martinez, which incorporated in 1876, was named to honor the pioneer family.

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO HELP CREATE THE PINOLE HISTORY MUSEUM?

The Pinole City Council needs to hear from the community why a museum in the Faria House would be a welcome and worthwhile addition to the city.

Let them know by sending an email to all of the council members — or publicly state that you support the Pinole History Museum at a council meeting (1st and 3rd Tuesdays of the month), Pinole City Hall, 2131 Pear Street. Meetings are hybrid, open to the public at City Hall and online via Zoom.

Mayor Devin Murphy:
dmurphy@ci.pinole.ca.us

Councilmember Norma Martínez-Rubin:
nmartinez-rubin@ci.pinole.ca.us

Councilmember Cameron Sasai:
csasai@ci.pinole.ca.us

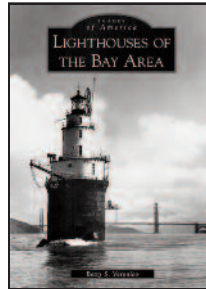
Councilmember Anthony Tave:
atave@ci.pinole.ca.us

Councilmember Maureen Toms:
mtoms@ci.pinole.ca.us

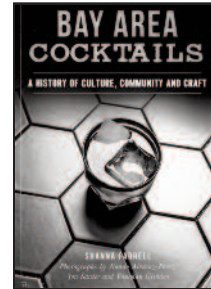
"The challenge of history is to recognize its time flow so we can better understand it. To understand history, we have to somehow bridge then and now and connect the dots of past events with the present. One way to do this is by learning to view the past not in terms of timelines or yesterdays, but rather as an ongoing present."

— George R. Vincent —

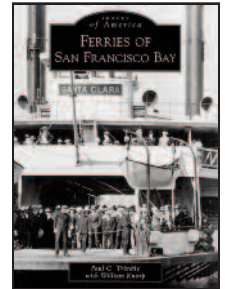
PHS HAS NEW BOOK TITLES FOR SALE AT THE PINOLE FARMERS MARKET OR BY MAIL ORDER (SEE PAGE 15)



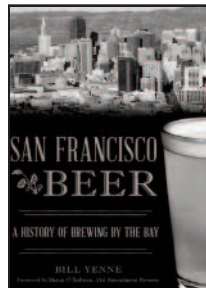
Lighthouses of the Bay Area



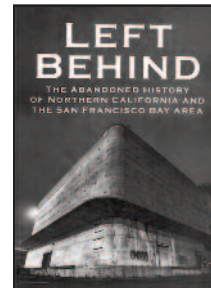
Bay Area Cocktails



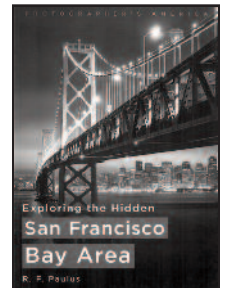
Ferries of the Bay Area



San Francisco Beer



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SUPPORT THE ACTIVITIES OF THE PHS BY BECOMING A MEMBER IN 2023

For only \$30, you can help the PHS accomplish its mission of bringing the history of Pinole to our residents through exhibits at the Pinole Library, Pinole history programs in schools, Pinole Community TV programs, walking tours of downtown Pinole, the Veterans Day event in Fernandez Park — and you'll have the satisfaction of helping promote and preserve Pinole's history for future generations.

JOIN THE PINOLE HISTORICAL SOCIETY (OR RENEW YOUR MEMBERSHIP) AND HELP PROMOTE AND PRESERVE THE HISTORY OF OUR CITY.

Please mail the membership application in this newsletter today!

Pinole Historical Society
2023 MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

(PINOLE RESIDENCY NOT REQUIRED FOR MEMBERSHIP)

PLEASE PROVIDE THE FOLLOWING INFORMATION AND SEND THIS FORM TO PINOLE HISTORICAL SOCIETY, P.O. Box 285, PINOLE, CA 94564

MEMBERSHIPS ARE FOR THE 2023 CALENDAR YEAR (EXCEPT LIFETIME MEMBERSHIPS)

NAME: (each member): _____

ADDRESS: _____

CITY/STATE/ZIP _____

PHONE: () _____

E-MAIL (please!): _____

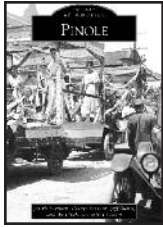
CIRCLE ONE: Annual-new (\$30) Annual-renewal (\$30) Business (\$50) Life (\$150)

METHOD OF PAYMENT: Check (Payable to Pinole Historical Society)

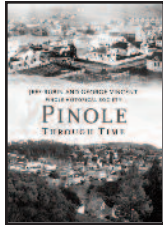
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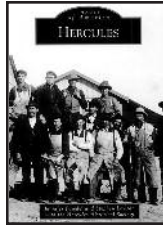
TOTAL ENCLOSED: _____



Pinole



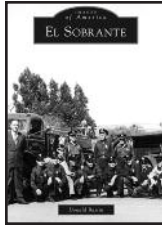
Pinole Through Time



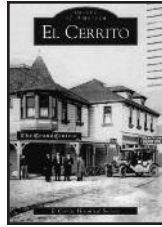
Hercules



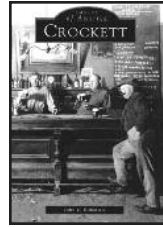
Richmond



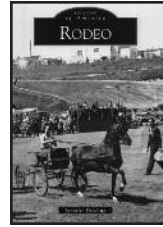
El Sobrante



El Cerrito



Crockett



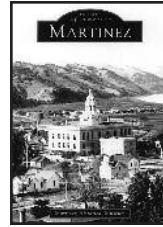
Rodeo

LOCAL HISTORY BOOKS AVAILABLE FROM THE PINOLE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

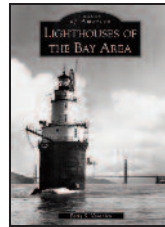
The Pinole Historical Society sells these Arcadia books at the Pinole Farmers' Market two Saturdays per month, April through December.

Most are \$25, including sales tax. A few of the older books are \$23, including sales tax.

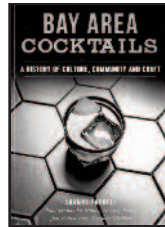
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Lighthouses of the Bay Area



Bay Area Cocktails



Ferries of the Bay Area



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| # of Hercules @\$30 _____ | # of Richmond @\$30 _____ |
| # of El Sobrante @\$30 _____ | # of El Cerrito @\$30 _____ |
| # of Maritime CCC @\$30 _____ | # of East Bay Hills @\$30 _____ |
| # of Crockett @\$28 _____ | # of Rodeo @\$28 _____ |
| # of Martinez @\$28 _____ | # of Port Costa @\$28 _____ |
| # of Tilden Park @\$30 _____ | # of Napa Valley @\$30 _____ |
| # of Bay Area Cocktails @\$30 _____ | # of Hidden SF @\$30 _____ |
| # of Bay Area Ferries @\$30 _____ | # of Left Behind @\$30 _____ |
| # of Lighthouses @\$30 _____ | # of SF Beer @\$30 _____ |

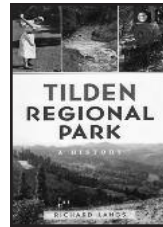
TOTAL AMOUNT ENCLOSED \$ _____

Please mail to PINOLE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

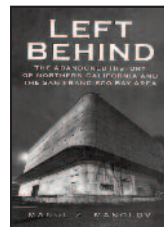
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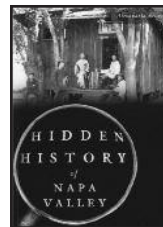
San Francisco Beer



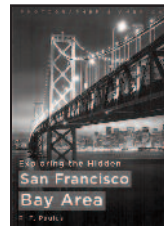
Tilden Park



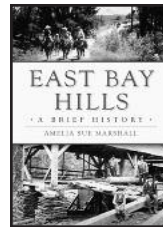
Left Behind



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