The Moraga Historical Society

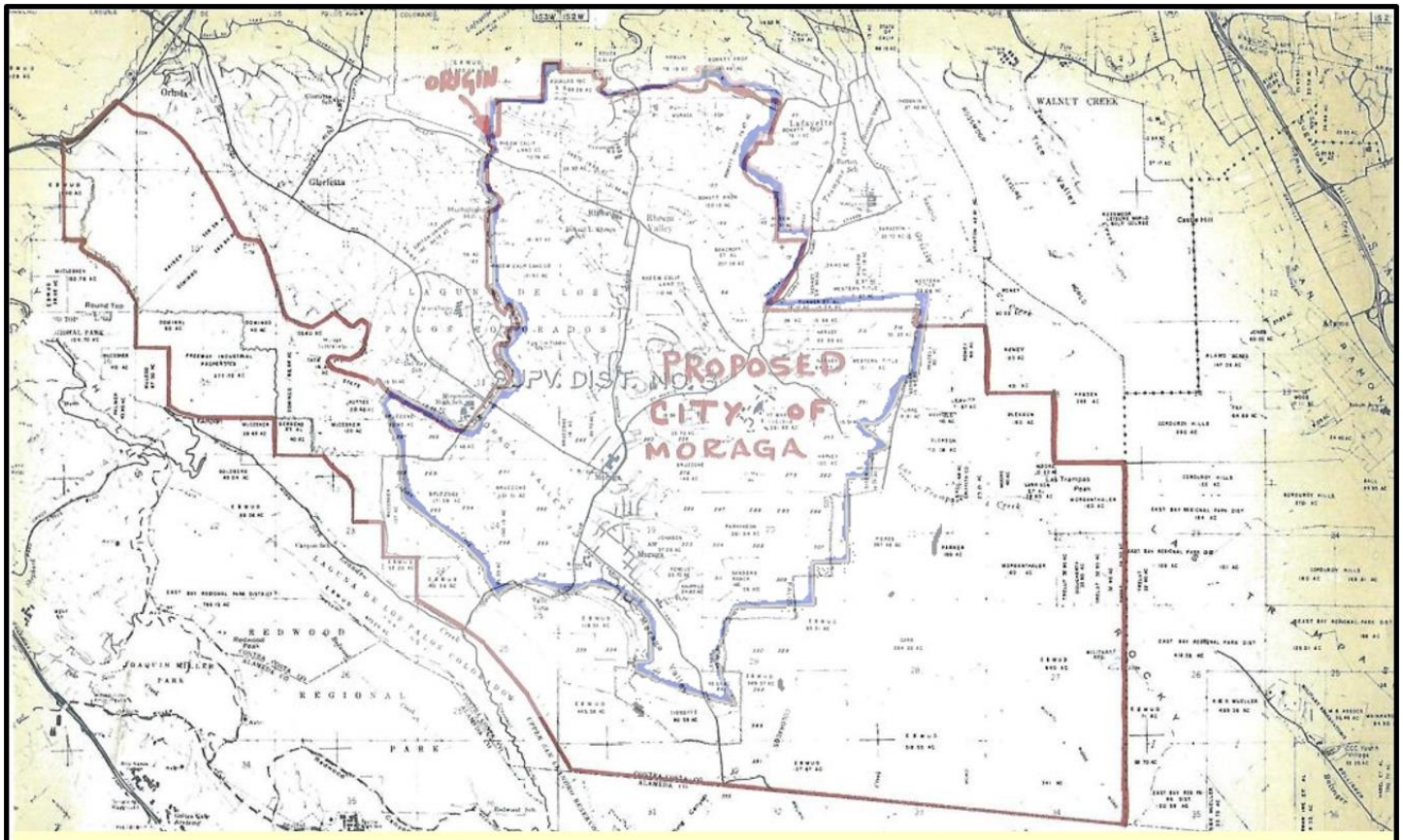
2024 FOURTH QUARTER MORAGA MEMORIES-YESTERDAY, TODAY, TOMORROW

The Town of Moraga Incorporates - "What do we do now?"

By Vera Kochan

According to a resolution dated Nov. 12, 1974, by the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors, "A petition for the incorporation of certain territory entirely within the County of Contra Costa into a general law city to be known as the Town of Moraga has been filed with this Board and all proceedings required by law have been taken. The election for said incorporation was held on Tuesday, November 5, 1974, in accordance with the law." The Board acknowledged that there were 3,686 votes in favor of incorporation and 2,546 against.

The Resolution also noted the five out of a field of 13 candidates (and 27 write-in votes) who would be Moraga's first town council members: Michael T. Cory (3,115 votes), William G. Combs (2,676), Barry Gross (2,595), Merle D. Gilliland (2,572), and Susan H. McNulty (1,920).



This map was drawn circa 1970-1974. It depicts Moraga extending its boundary into Orinda; the blue outline reflects the final boundary.

Before Moraga's official incorporation occurred, many residents today are unaware of the early discussions with regards to the town's boundaries. In a Jan. 7, 1974 letter to the Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO), from proponents of the incorporation, the point was made that "you have requested that we address the alternative of incorporating the communities of Orinda, Moraga and Lafayette as one city (the "Tri-community Concept"). This idea, while attractive from many aspects, particularly financial, was rejected after

considerable study, because it was felt to be politically unfeasible and contrary to the desires of a majority of the citizens in both Orinda and Moraga."

Possibly in order to appease LAFCO, the letter added, "it is felt that the best plan for the future is to incorporate Moraga and then work toward consolidation of some or all of the governmental functions and services with Lafayette, and perhaps Orinda."

McNulty (now Rainey), who along with Gross, are the only two remaining council members still with us, were interviewed for this article. "There were disagreements about the boundaries," McNulty recalled. "Lafayette wanted a large chunk of Moraga."

Immediately after the Nov. 5 election, four of the five new council members went to Sacramento and met with Governor Ronald Reagan in order to receive the official certification of incorporation. Reagan mentioned that Moraga was the only city incorporated up to that point of 1974.

During her campaign for town council McNulty enumerated several factors that needed to be considered once Moraga incorporated: creating a new general plan while keeping in mind a projected growth in the population; slope density and ridgeline ordinances to protect the hills; establish a new budget; give consideration to roads and transportation; and give thought to commercial standards, signs, tree ordinances and open space.

"We had only three employees - a clerk, a planner, and a manager," stated Gross. "We had no public works department, and we told the manager that he'd have to fill any potholes himself. We tried to be economical. We did not have our own police department and joined Lafayette with a contract. We later used East Bay Regional Parks." Moraga also turned to Lafayette's attorney, Charles Williams, to help out in setting up a government structure.

Within the week Town of Moraga offices went into operation at the Hacienda de las Flores in a former caretaker's cottage. Town Council meetings were held on the first, second, and fourth Wednesday of each month at 7:30 pm. The meetings were held in the Joaquin Moraga Intermediate School auditorium. The very first town council meeting was held the day after incorporation, on Nov 13, to a capacity crowd which gave a standing ovation for the occasion.

It was decided that the county would continue all ordinances in effect for 120 days and continue to furnish services until the end of the fiscal year, June 30, 1975.

An article in the Nov. 15, 1974, Moraga Sun stated, "The Town of Moraga will also immediately execute a promissory note of $10,000 from the county for operating expenses for the remainder of the fiscal year with a six to eight percent interest charge. Up to $100,000 can be borrowed."

Additionally, "This relief allows the new Council to set up its commissions and get the finances in order through incoming revenues."

Some immediate council decisions included: filing a statement of boundary creation for tax purposes; creating a special gas tax for street improvements; imposing a documentary stamp tax on real property; recognizing that the county jail would be used for imprisonment of town ordinance violations; adopting zoning regulations with regards to land use permits; and approve the joining of the League of California Cities.

Both McNulty and Gross agree that the first five council members were a close team. "We developed strong friendships," she said. "We got together for potlucks and parties, but we stuck to our guns about the Brown Act. The enthusiasm was always there between us."

Gross added, “The thing that amazed me was the number and quality of the volunteers.”

When the town celebrated its 10th anniversary in 1984, the Contra Costa Sun newspaper ran a story to commemorate the occasion. “In the fall of 1974, Moraga was blessed with leadership of the Citizens to Incorporate Moraga (CIM), headed by Robert Merritt, which overcame horrendous obstacles to incorporate the city of the Town of Moraga.

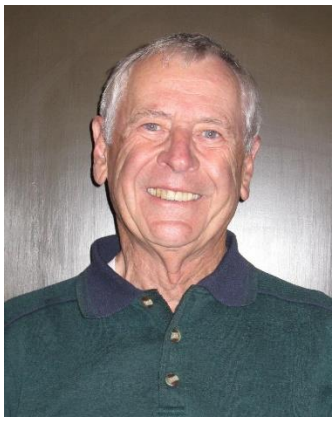
“The time was right. Cityhood has been immensely successful, and none of the dire predictions of the opponents have come about. The proliferation of government has not happened. The taxes have not gone up. The “big egos” of empire-builders have never surfaced. The town has not run out of volunteers or spirit.”

The article continued, “Moragans had the wisdom to vote in a unique first council. They had their disagreements, but through those fledgling years, they pulled together, and measured all their hard work by what was best for ‘our town’.”

Happy 50th Anniversary Moraga!!

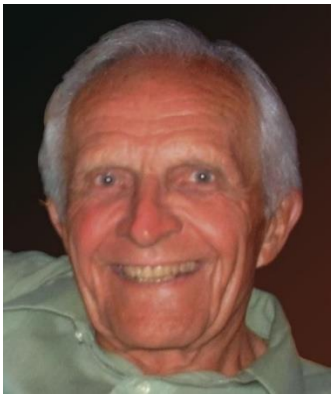
(Special thanks to Moraga’s Director of Public Works/Town Engineer Shawn Knapp for providing copies of maps and documents for the purpose of this article.)

Ron Louis Retires from the MHS Board of Directors



After 20+ years of dedicated service on the Board of Directors of the Moraga Historical Society, Ron Louis is stepping down from his multiple positions! Ron has been a valuable member to the Society holding positions as president, marketing, and program chairman. For many years he could be seen at the 4th of July celebration and/or Pear and Wine Festival lugging *Moraga’s Pride* books, throws and boxes of note cards across the Commons grounds to the MHS booth. Multiple times a year Ron arranged speakers to enlighten our membership on events of historical significance. Always willing to help in any capacity, Ron will be greatly missed.

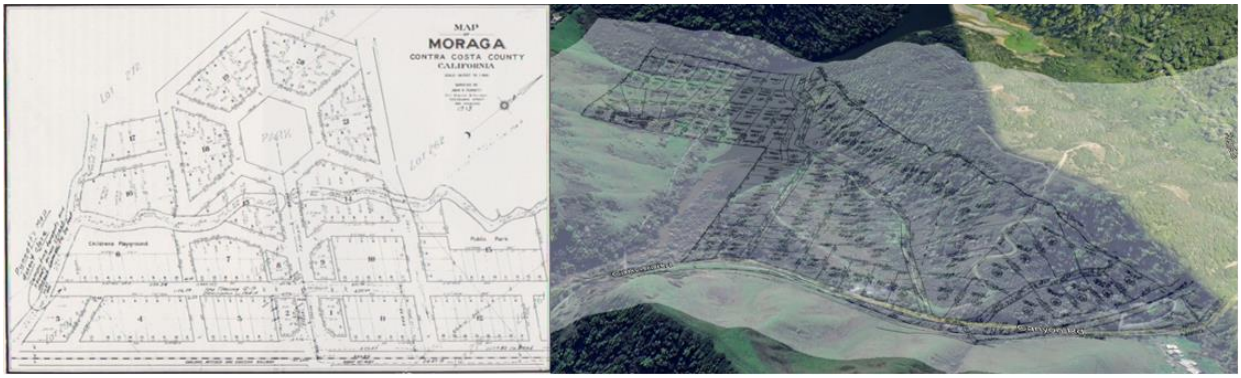
Treasurer Bob Sornsen retires on the Eve of his 90th Birthday



After seven productive years as Treasurer of the Moraga Historical Society, Bob Sornsen has retired! The monumental task of collecting, recording and depositing the plethora of donations made to MHS for our $100,000 donation to the Friends of the Joaquin Moraga Adobe rested on Bob’s shoulders. By providing thorough, accurate monthly reports, the Board was kept well informed of the progress being made through this extended campaign. We are very grateful for his attention to detail and professionalism. We will miss you!

A 20th Century Visual Timeline of Moraga to Incorporation

Horace Carpentier sells Rancho holdings to Charles Hooper in 1912 who sells to James Irvine in 1913-23.



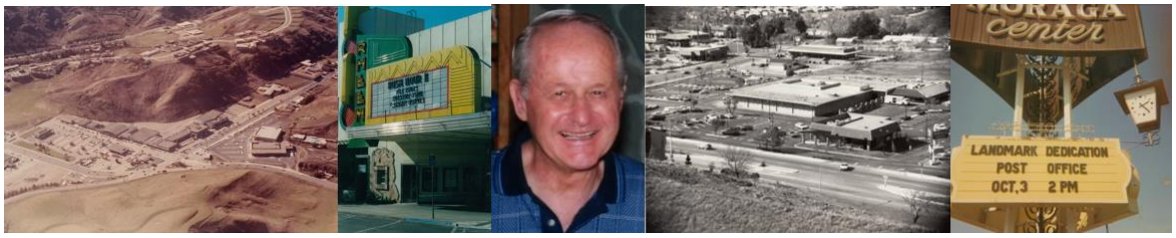
Moraga Company develops old town site in 1913 and Valle Vista subdivision in 1914, part of which is flooded in 1926 by San Leandro Reservoir and the rest bought up by EBMUD over next two decades.

Electric train renamed Sacramento Northern passes through Moraga Valley from 1913-1957, attracting Saint Mary's College in 1928 through land donated by the Moraga Company hoping it will spur development.

The Moraga Company instead operates the valley as a sharecropper agribusiness until Irvine's 1947 death.

Donald Rheem starts buying land in 1934 while SMC serves as a pre-flight training school in 1940-1946.

Utah Construction acquires Moraga Company in 1953 and with 21 independent builders develops 31 subdivisions from Orinda through Moraga while the Hwy 77 Shepherd Canyon controversy rages 1953-1975.



D.L. Rheem builds Rheem Center 1954-57, Russell Bruzzone buys out Utah in 1962 and builds Moraga Center.

The struggle for control of development ends with incorporation of the Town of Moraga on Nov 12, 1974.

MHS guest speaker, Mark Harrigan, draws a sell-out crowd to the Casita
By Vera Kochan

This past August, the Moraga Historical Society welcomed another fantastic guest speaker, Mark Harrigan, to enthrall the audience with narrated videos of Valle Vista, Moraga Adobe, Lafayette's Roundup Saloon, Moraga Barn, Rheem Bowl, and the California & Nevada Railroad that once ran through Orinda. With each location, Harrigan added appropriate music for each video to enhance the whole experience, thereby creating mini documentaries in the process.

Harrigan stated that years ago, before the dawn of GPS technology, he used a Thomas Guide to find his way around local towns. After he began researching the history of Contra Costa County, he decided to share his findings with the world by producing CCC history videos on Facebook's "680/24 Corridor History Group" for the past 10 years. Harrigan is also a frequent contributor to the "I grew up in Moraga" Facebook site. With over 300 videos to his credit, his passion for the area's history was evident in the quality of his presentation to MHS members and guests.

The Valle Vista video literally took viewers through possibly the only remaining foundation of a home that was abandoned to the elements over 100 years ago after EBMUD purchased properties in order to create the San Leandro Reservoir. Harrigan himself filmed the sequence.

The Moraga Adobe video showed photos of the adobe through various stages of its existence, culminating with new footage of the adobe as it strives to welcome visitors through its doors later this year.

Likening the Roundup Saloon as Lafayette's answer to TV's "Cheers", Harrigan's video was accompanied by western-style music and focused on many of the artifacts and traditions accumulated through the nearly 100 years of Roundup's existence.

The Moraga Barn video showed a variety of photos dating back to when the Sacramento Northern Railway traversed through town, but not before stopping at the station located directly across the street from the multi-purposed building.

Many were unaware of the California & Nevada Railroad that ran 23 miles between Emeryville and Orinda bringing Sunday picnickers to the area in 1891. Its many mishaps and derailments brought a quick end to the venture.

The final video caused a collective, yet nostalgic, sigh from the audience when the very first photo of the colorful Rheem Bowl sign appeared on screen. Many members of the crowd recalled having bowled there before the doors were closed and the last pins fell in July of 1999.The MHS wishes to thank Mark Harrigan again for his entertaining presentation to Lamorinda's history lovers.

Bobby Landers, Lance Beason (Moraga descendent) and Kent Long (President of FJMA) Celebrating the Moraga Adobe acquisition!

On June 29th supporters of the Moraga Adobe celebrated an important milestone with a ribbon cutting ceremony at the adobe. This event commemorated the completion of the restoration of the oldest home in Contra Costa County and the subsequent purchase of the adobe and its surrounding two plus acres by the **Friends of the Joaquin Moraga Adobe**. Landscaping and museum planning are now underway and the goal is to get this historic property opened to the public by the end of 2024**.**

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

As predicted in the first edition of the 2024 MHS newsletter, this has been an exciting and growing year for the Moraga Historical Society! This last edition for 2024 will conclude our series on the incorporation of our Town. A huge success was Sam Sperry spotlighting the passenger and freight trains that once ran through Moraga. Following that sold out event, Mark Harrigan took us on a nostalgic trip to many of Lamorinda's familiar historical sites. Over one hundred interested locals showed interest in each speaker. Our growing membership makes it imperative that members wishing to attend reserve seats for these exciting events. Thank you everyone for your responses to our fabulous speakers. The speaker series will resume the first of the year.

However, we are still "on the job" with the upcoming **Pear and Wine Festival** on September 28th. Look for our booth at the Commons to purchase one or both of our history books, a throw, notecards or a membership to give to a special person for the holidays. A parade will kick off the day starting on School Street and circling through the Moraga Country Club. A pictorial timetable leading up to incorporation will be displayed in the Moraga Library. Members of the MHS Board of Directors have been involved in every step of this planning. Don't miss any of these events.

In this fourth edition we say goodbye and thank you to Bob Sornsen as treasurer for seven years, and Ron Louis as president, and marketing/program chairman over a span of 20+ years. We will miss you both!

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