

from the U.S. Army to the National Guard.

Most of the Nike missile bases in the Bay Area had a brief lifespan. By 1962 they were already being deactivated as changing military technology made attack from long-range bombers unlikely. Inter-continental ballistic missiles (ICBM's) were being deployed and the defense of the United States homeland relied on the concept of "mutually assured destruction." It was assumed that the Soviet Union would not think of attacking the U.S. or our NATO allies if the Soviets knew that our ICBM's could reach their



Some roads and all of the Nike radar pads can still be found here at the radar site, reminding us of what this used to be. This view looks southeast toward the pad for the most easterly of the radar units. Mount Diablo is visible in the distance at the right.



On the left Nimitz Way wraps around the hillside to its junction with today's Conlon Trail. The "meadow" in the center area is the former Nike launch site.

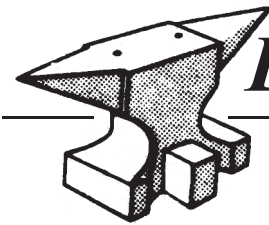
military placing these Nike sites where they did.

South of Inspiration Point in Tilden Park there is a large concrete ring. It is located a bit more than a mile or so up the Seaview Trail, which runs south from Wildcat Canyon Road. It has been suggested that this ring was the foundation for a structure that was part of the overall Nike program. However, no publicly available information has been found to support this suggestion.

- The Historical Society thanks Randy Cava, who supplied most of the information and pictures used in this article.



A concrete ring along the Seaview Trail. It is not believed to have been part of the Nike program.



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OUR NEXT MEETING:
2 PM SUNDAY, OCTOBER 29TH AT THE SENIOR CENTER

President's Message

I would like to thank all of you who attended our picnic at Huber Park in July. We had plenty to eat, the weather was very nice, and everyone enjoyed themselves very much. At the meeting we presented a Certificate of Historical Achievement to Verne Odlin. Verne has been a stalwart member and an officer of the Society for many years. Unfortunately we will lose him around the end of the year, when he and his wife Joyce plan to move up to Placerville. Verne has also done a great job taking care of our photo collection over the years.

At our next meeting we will be discussing Historic Preservation. This is a follow-up to the portfolio of pictures that Society member M. Selph put together for the July meeting. There are currently two historically significant sites in our area that are slated for redevelopment. One is the old Rodini house and property at 1715 Elm Street; the other is the Oishi and Sakai property in Richmond. Although the Oishi/Sakai property is in Richmond, it is important to us in El Cerrito because it is near by and because it is representative of similar properties that once existed in El Cerrito. Not only is the Oishi/Sakai property the last surviving Japanese nursery in the northwest El Cerrito/southeast Richmond area, it also includes what are the oldest known greenhouse buildings in California. So I would like the Society to spend some time discussing historic preservation and what our role in the process should be.

After this discussion, we will be viewing a short film (about 15 minutes) that was made by Berkeley-born filmmaker Ken Kokka. Ken's film is not actually "about" El Cerrito, but much of it was filmed at the Oishi/Sakai property mentioned above. The film depicts the "changing of the guard" in a Japanese nursery and could have taken place anywhere. It's hard to believe that nurseries were once as common in El Cerrito and Richmond as fast-food restaurants are today.

The El Cerrito Historical Society is a non-political, non-profit organization and has one agenda: to locate and preserve our local history. Anyone may join; dues are \$20 (Household member), \$50 (Sponsoring member), and \$250 (Life member).

Nike Missiles in OUR Back Yard!

In the Cold War aftermath of World War II, United States military planners were afraid of Soviet Union bombers attacking undefended U.S. urban centers and military installations. To that end, by 1946 the United States had developed the Nike-Ajax missile, the nation's first supersonic anti-aircraft guided missile. It was designed to intercept and destroy all types of bomber aircraft. The name Nike referred to the Greek



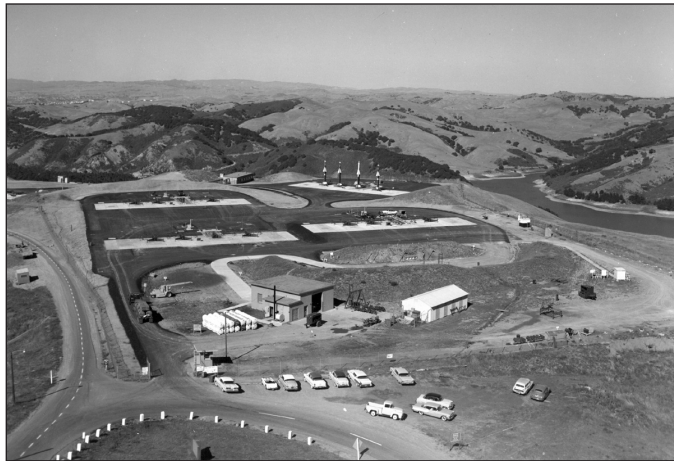
A nice view of the Nike-Ajax site on Angel Island. Our Cold War adversaries probably spent thousand of hours analyzing photos such as this one.

goddess of Victory. Nike missiles were guided to their targets by special radars located within a mile or two of the missiles' launch point. In one of the earliest uses of computer technology, computers were used to analyze the radar information and send the appropriate signals to the missile, guiding it to its target and telling it when to detonate. This assemblage of Nike missiles, launchers, and attendant radars comprised a Nike missile battery or base. By 1953 the

Army, were operational around vital industrial

areas and densely populated strategic areas. The Bay Area was one of approximately two hundred such "vital" areas throughout the nation. Eleven such Nike missile bases encircled the Bay Area, beginning with the first such base in San Francisco in 1954. The bases were considered top-secret and completely off-limits to the general public. In the Bay Area, a division of Bell Telephone designed and installed the Nike systems. There was a Nike base in northern San Rafael (SF-93), one on Angel Island (SF-91), two in the Marin Headlands (SF-87 & SF-88), one in the San Francisco Presidio (SF-89), one at Fort Funston in Daly City (SF-59), one near Pacifica (SF-51), one at what is now Coyote Hills Regional Park in Fremont (SF-37), one at what is now Chabot Regional Park in Castro Valley (SF-31), one at what is now Las Trampas Regional Park in San Ramon (SF-25), and one in El Cerrito's back yard, in what is now Wildcat Canyon Park (SF-08 and SF-09).

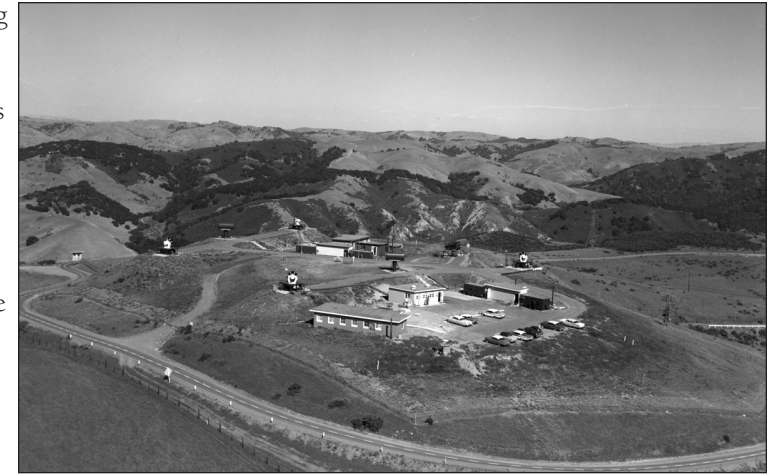
By 1959, the area that would become today's Wildcat Canyon Park was home to a Nike missile installation consisting of 24 Nike-Ajax guided missiles. Today's popular Nimitz Way hiking trail was then the carefully guarded entrance to the installation complex. Due to the technical require-



An aerial view of the Wildcat Canyon Nike launch site ca. 1959. San Pablo reservoir is in the background. Conlon Road (now Conlon Trail) is coming up from the lower left to join Nimitz Way. A very similar view (no Nikes) can be had today from the top of Wildcat Peak. The Nike site is now a large, flat, open field. It is marked with a sign that describes ... a grassland revegetation test area.

ments of the systems of those days, the radars used by Nike system had to be located at least one mile away from the missile launchers and also had to have a clear line-of-sight to the missile from launch to detonation. The radars used in the Wildcat Canyon installation were located on Potrero Ridge, about 1½ miles north of the actual missile-launching site. In 1959, six radars were in use. Following Nimitz Way north from Inspiration Point for four miles brought one to the Nike radar site. The Nike missile launching pads themselves were just over two miles north of Inspiration Point. Most of the Nike missile base installations stretched over several miles. Because of their line-of-sight requirement they usually had sweeping vistas of the area where they were located. This helps explain their popularity as Regional Parks today.

Each Nike missile was 34 feet in length including its booster rocket. They were one foot in diameter, weighed over 2,000 lbs., flew at over twice the speed of sound, and had a range of 25 miles. They carried non-nuclear high explosives to the target. In the event that Soviet bombers from the north made it to the Bay Area, these missiles would be launched into the bomber formation and detonated in their midst, hopefully destroying the bombers en masse. Nike was not capable of impacting specific targets the way today's weapons are.



An aerial view of the Wildcat Canyon Nike radar site looking east, ca. 1959. The four radars "at the corners" appear to be of one type and the two "inner" ones of another type. Nimitz Way is in the foreground; this is at exactly mile 4 on Nimitz Way. The paved road ends just past here.



Anyone who stands at the vacant lot on Belview Court and casts their gaze 40 degrees east of magnetic north (or forget the compass and use this picture) will see an odd, flattened-off ridge line on the far side of Wildcat Canyon (at the top center of this photo). This was the location of the Nike radar installation pictured above.

By 1958, the successor to Nike-Ajax, the Nike-Hercules, had been deployed at four sites in the Bay Area. This missile was bigger and faster than the Ajax and had a range of 87 miles. This extra range was crucial as the Nike-Hercules could carry a nuclear weapon to the target and if there were to be nuclear explosions, they had to occur as far away as possible. Unbelievable as it may seem today, such was the thinking in the midst of the Cold War. In addition to the radar buildings and missile launch and storage facilities, each site had administration buildings, housing, and even guard-dog kennels and training facilities. Each site had a round-the-clock military presence with dozens of military personnel. In July 1958, the operation of the Bay Area's Nike bases was transferred