



## Top Photos Selected in Historical Society's First-Ever Historical Photo Contest

With more than 70 images submitted, the El Cerrito Historical Society's first historic photo contest gathered new perspectives on the city's history. The photos spanned decades of city history, from 1907 to the 1970s.

Judges selected the best entries in the categories of Overall, School Life, People, Buildings, Events and Vehicles. Winners were announced and prizes awarded at a Dec. 6 reception at the Juku meeting space on Stockton Ave.

Judged Best Overall was this circa-1907 photo of El Cerrito's first doctor, Dr. Joseph Breneman, and his family ready for a camping trip to Mt. Diablo. The photo was submitted by Virginia Burns, great-granddaughter of Dr. Breneman. See back page for more images judged best in their categories.



## Hillside Mausoleum's Story of Trials, Triumphs

By Dave Weinstein

Seen from below in the 1920s, the hills of El Cerrito and Kensington, largely treeless and sparsely populated, beckoned -- so much empty land, such spectacular views. By the start of the decade building commenced, the sedate, Tudor-styled Berkeley Country Club in the northern El Cerrito hills, fine mansions and small subdivisions in the Kensington and El Cerrito hills.

But how about something grander? Something like the Taj Mahal -- only a Taj Mahal topped with neon and incandescent lights?

By 1927, Arthur Francois Edwards (1880-1950), who'd arrived in California only 20 years earlier as a journeyman marble worker who had never graduated

*Continued on page 3*

## All the World's a Stage and El Cerrito Is a Player

By Jon Bashor

Starting from a makeshift stage in a high school gym and a derelict movie house in the 1950s, El Cerrito's home-grown live theater community has not only staged hundreds of dramas, comedies and musicals, but also helped similar communities grow around the Bay Area and across the country.

From writing practical lesson books for drama teachers and students to training actors and directors to providing stage props to other theaters, the programs at Contra Costa Civic Theatre and El Cerrito High School share the spotlight.

The programs trace their roots back to two families, both of whom remain active in the community.

*Continued on page 7*

The El Cerrito Historical Society presents:

# **“An El Cerrito Master Builder: A conversation with Jack Freethy”**



*Jack Freethy and his father, Elmer Freethy. Photo courtesy of Jack Freethy*

Jack Freethy, a contractor, businessman, a leading community figure, and author of a memoir, will discuss his life and that of his father, Elmer Freethy, one of our city’s great builders in the mid and late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Elmer built such structures as our old high school, police station and many fine homes. He also owned El Cerrito Mill and Lumber.

**7 p.m. Thursday, February 8, 2024**

**Hana Gardens community room**

**10870 San Pablo Ave. (adjacent to City Hall)**

This is the Society’s annual meeting. The talk follows a brief business meeting with election of officers for the coming year. Free admission and light refreshments will be served. Questions?

[davidsweinstein@yahoo.com](mailto:davidsweinstein@yahoo.com)

## **Join Us!**

**Not a member of the  
historical society?**

Membership is \$30 a year. Be a sponsor for \$75 or get a life membership for \$400. We also accept donations of any amount. To join, go to [www.elcerritohistoricalsociety.org](http://www.elcerritohistoricalsociety.org) and click on How to Join.



## MAUSOLEUM

*Continued from page 1*

from college, was completing the concrete foundation for a “massive above ground temple of entombment,” according to the San Francisco Chronicle.

The price tag? \$7 million, the paper reported that May, and the initial section of Sunset Mausoleum would provide 2,400 crypts. Edwards vowed “to give San Francisco bay region residents a memorial to the dead that will be comparable to permanent monuments of ancient civilization.”

Sunset Mausoleum Association was incorporated June 13, 1927, as a California nonprofit corporation. From the start it was nondenominational.

Two years later, when the mausoleum was opened to serve “people of the Caucasian race,” the Chronicle praised the structure as a “community memorial that has been likened to Campo Santo in Italy, Taj Mahal in India, and other world-renowned edifices.”

Early photos show how the mausoleum, which was built behind Sunset View Cemetery, dominated the El Cerrito skyline – complete with an immense illuminated sign atop the building that could be seen from San Francisco.

(Sunset Mausoleum and Sunset View Cemetery have always been separate institutions, sharing only the word “Sunset.”)

Today, Golden Gate Mausoleum and Columbaria – a 2022 name change – presents a quieter profile. A canopy of trees allows only broken views from the streets of El Cerrito of the 96,000-square-foot building, which occupies two and a half acres of the mausoleum’s nine-acre site.

But the story behind the mausoleum is worth pondering as it approaches its 100<sup>th</sup> year as an important community institution and landmark that remains too little known. Indeed, some of what is “known” about its history, as recounted in literature and online by the mausoleum itself, turns out to be untrue.

The mausoleum’s true history is dramatic enough without the need for mythologizing, from its sudden appearance on a hillside overlooking a small, mostly working-class town to its subsequent success.

The mausoleum soldiered on past challenges posed by the Great Depression and a world war, then financial woes, personal scandal, the threat of bankruptcy – followed by new ownership led by a now-legendary religious leader the Los Angeles

Left to right: A. F. EDWARDS, owner and builder of the \$7,000,000 Sunset Mausoleum in the Berkeley hills, and FRED A. PURNER, general manager.



*Image from the June 26, 1927 edition of the Oakland Tribune.*

Times called a “flamboyant and plain-speaking pastor and television preacher.”

It’s not surprising that the tale of Sunset Mausoleum that has come down to us blends truth with myth. The man who owned the mausoleum from 1950 to 1970, expanded its footprint, and promoted it widely, was a showman by avocation, an actor, co-author with his wife of a play about a zebra, and a sometime song-and-dance man.

Arthur Francois Edwards Jr. (1914-1994), who took over the mausoleum after the death of his father in 1950, was a fabulist in real life as well as on the stage – a character flaw that later destroyed his career and marriage.

The story of Edwards Sr., which is fabulous enough, got embellished by his son in the mid-1950s, as Edwards Jr. expanded both the mausoleum and the business.

Now his father was described as an architect, the architect of the mausoleum, and as a man who had traveled in Europe studying mausoleums before undertaking to build his own. The mausoleum website states that Edwards became a licensed architect in St. Louis, where indeed he lived around 1906, according to census records.

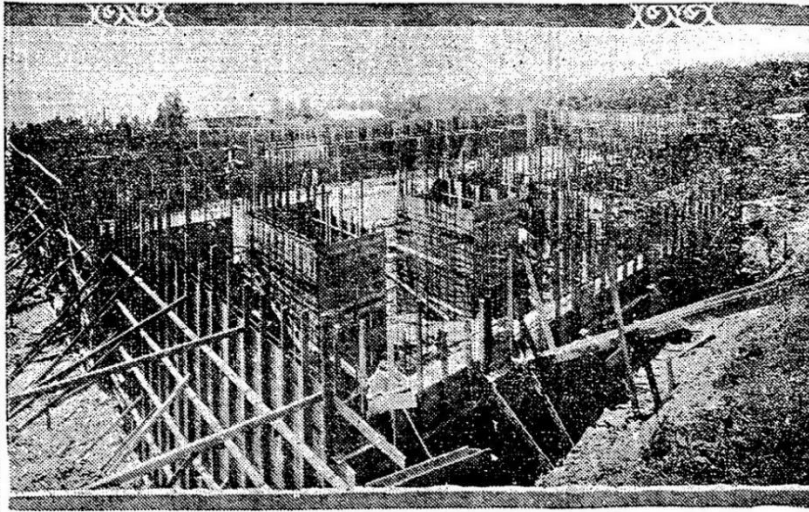
In fact, Edwards was not a licensed architect – none of the press coverage from the early days of the mausoleum ever identifies him as such, though he would clearly have boasted of the professional achievement in his many interviews with the press.

*Continued on next page 4*

## MAUSOLEUM

*Continued from page 3*

### Monumental East Bay Structure



*This photo from the July 10, 1927 San Francisco Chronicle shows progress on the mausoleum construction.*

Instead, he was identified as “a journeyman marble worker” in his Chronicle obituary, and variously as the director of the California Builders Exchange, head of the Building Trades Employers Association, a leader of the Marble Contractors Association and owner of the American Marble Co. in San Francisco, “of which he was president for 43 years, and pioneered California’s marble industry.”

Edwards is not listed in the Pacific Coast Architecture Database, which attempts to track architectural and related professionals and their work on the West Coast.

Missouri’s Division of Professional Registration has no listing for Edwards as a licensed architect. There is also no record of his attending the St. Louis School of Fine Art, then the city’s only architecture school.

In 1940, Edwards Sr. told the census that his education ended at the eighth grade, a decade later he told the census he had left college before graduating. Yet he clearly styled himself an architect. That’s how at age 20 he described his profession to a different census taker in 1900, when he was living with his father in Hartford, Connecticut.

Census records in subsequent years identified Edwards’ profession as a marble contractor or marble merchant.

Edwards Sr. came from a middle class background. His father was a wholesale baker, according to census records, then a real estate agent. Edwards lived in St. Louis briefly before

arriving in San Francisco in 1907. In 1953, as Edwards Jr. prepared to expand the mausoleum, he spread another myth: that his dad had toured Europe to visit marble quarries for the stone for his new building.

“To search for the costly marble, granite and stained glass which will go into the new hall,” the paper wrote, “Edwards (Jr.) will shortly leave on a trip through Europe and Africa. During the trip he will retrace the route that Sunset’s founder, the late Arthur F. Edwards Sr., took over 25 years ago to buy materials for the original Cathedral Hall.”

Edwards Jr. and his wife Helen, who was lead author of the zebra play, may have made this trip but it’s not likely his dad did; Edwards Sr. would certainly have mentioned such an adventure to reporters during one of his many interviews in the 1920s and ’30s.

What is clear is that Edwards Sr. prospered in the marble business and won prominence in his industry and in society. (Though, unlike his son, he never became a fixture in the society columns.)

Born and raised in Hartford, Edwards came to California a year or two after the 1906 earthquake to find work rebuilding San Francisco.

In San Francisco, Edwards joined, or perhaps helped found American Marble Co. A 1956 Chronicle obituary for John Fabbris credits Fabbris as founder.

The firm provided marble to such San Francisco institutions as the Palace Hotel.

By 1939 Edwards Sr. was doing well enough to buy three properties in one of the city’s most attractive residential parks, Forest Hill, including 85 Sotelo Avenue, built a few years earlier, where he and his wife Ethel Grace raised their son. Ethel died in 1947.

As director of the Builders Exchange, Edwards Sr. often spoke before organizations, including on the topic “controlled inflation” in 1939 and 1940.

It’s not clear why a marble and building contractor would enter the mausoleum business.

*Continued on page 5*



## MAUSOLEUM

*Continued from page 4*

According to the Golden Gate Mortuary's website, it was all about altruism:

"During his lifetime, he gained no personal profit from the mausoleum, and it may be said that the creation and building of Sunset Mausoleum was his contribution to the community in which it stands."

Edwards certainly knew marble, which bathes the interior in a wide range of colors and patterns. A brochure lavishly illustrated with Rembrandt prints published by Edwards Jr. in the early 1950s, as he prepared to expand the mausoleum, describes the marble.

The walls were primarily of Roman travertine. The floors a "mosaic pattern of the most beautiful of imported marbles." Other marbles included "Italian travertine embellished with French Levanto, Verde Antique and French Escallette." The brochure bragged of the use of costly Italian Paonazzo marble.

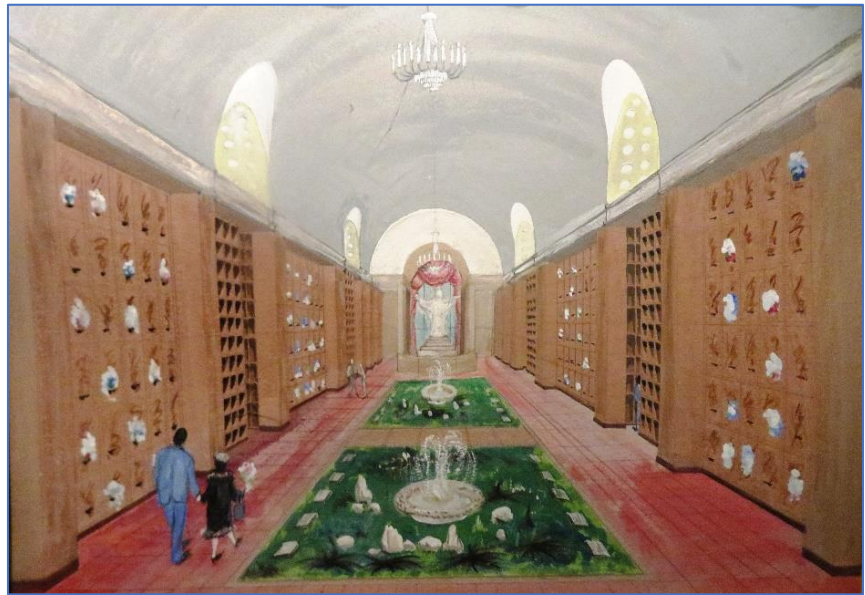
In the brochure, Edwards Sr. is said to have financed the mausoleum out of his earnings in the marble business, bringing in no investors. Considering the cost of the venture, this seems unlikely.

It is clear that Edwards hired an architect: Wallace H. Hubbert, whose name can be seen on architectural renderings for the structure, and who wrote about it in a cover story for the November 1927 issue of the magazine *Architect and Engineer*.

Identifying it as "Sunset Mausoleum, Berkeley Hills" (most coverage placed the mausoleum in Berkeley, undoubtedly because Berkeley is more identifiable to out-of-towners than Kensington), Hubbert quoted H.L. Mencken on the virtues of mausoleums over cemeteries: "Ground burial ... is out of date and barbarous. Mausoleum entombment is modern, progressive and humanitarian."

"You have the choice of just two things: one typifying death in the darkness, looking down, always down, into the grave; the other typifying light, death in sunshine and brightness, death in hope of resurrection."

Hubbert, who worked in San Francisco and died in 1948, made a specialty of mausoleums, designing them for San Rafael, Oakland, Eureka, Santa Monica and Merced. Not all were built.



*An architect's rendering from the early 1950s shows the expansion of the mausoleum. These interior fountains were never installed. El Cerrito Historical Society, gift of Golden Gate Mausoleum*

Hubbert also designed churches, office buildings and homes. The Pacific Coast Architecture Database lists several of his buildings in Modesto.

In June 1927 Edwards described the future building's look to the *Chronicle* as "Classical Italian Renaissance architecture."

"Statues and works of art will adorn the corridors," the *Chronicle* reported. "Space for 2400 crypts, including private burial chapels, is provided on the two terraces, Lawn and Sunset, now being built."

"Marble from all parts of the world covers the floors, walls and many of the ceilings in Sunset Mausoleum," the paper went on. "Reinforced concrete, bronze and glass are the only other permanent building materials used."

Edwards may not have been the mausoleum's architect, but he clearly played a major role in the design. Not only did he lay out the vision, choosing the site with its awesome views of the bay and determining the program for the architect to follow, but he focused as well on detailing – or lack thereof.

Hubbert's renderings show intricate detailing both exterior and interior – decorative capitols, ornamental coffering, what appear to be carved wooden or perhaps hammered metal doors – all of which would have produced a pictorial, almost medieval feeling.

Instead what we have is a kind of stripped down classicism, retaining the forms of Hubbert's design but rejecting the flourishes. Was this to save money? Or because Edwards preferred a more modern look?

*Continued on page 6*

## MAUSOLEUM

*Continued from page 5*

The latter seems more likely, though the client's motivation might have included a bit of both. By the late 1920s what has come to be called Art Deco had emerged as an architectural movement, where elements from historical styles were often simplified, or otherwise adjusted for effect. Sunset Mausoleum is far from Deco in its look, but the simplification is there. In discussing the building's form and size, Edwards reached back to pre-Renaissance days for inspiration.

"It has been the universal custom before the time of the pharaohs to honor the departed by entombment such as in pyramids," he told the Chronicle. "Mausoleum entombment now is recognized in this country, and practically every city of any importance, and even some of the smaller centers, have monumental buildings of this character."

The building focused on function as well as monumentality, as the early 1950s mausoleum brochure explained: "The foundations are deeply embedded in the rock of the hillside, and the building has been so designed that all crypts and niches are separate and free from the walls of the building by a two-foot space that is an inaccessible vault-tight



*The Sunset Mausoleum lighted sign can be seen among the trees (upper center). The El Cerrito Kennel Club's dog racing track is in the foreground. El Cerrito Historical Society photo.*

air and ventilation chamber." The original plan called for six "terraces" (long hallways housing crypts) on two levels. Four were built in the original phase, as well as Cathedral Hall inside, with a lobby,

offices, and two large fireplace niches.

But it would be years before the full plan could be carried out, in part due to the Great Depression of the 1930s and by World War II materials restrictions for builders.

News reports show that the mausoleum played an important community role during the late 1920s and 1930s.

*This article will continue in the next issue of the Forge, looking at Sunset Mausoleum as it fared under the direction of Arthur Edwards Jr., prospering and growing at first, then facing financial crisis, and a personal scandal.*



*Rendering from The November 1927 The Architect and Engineer. Photo courtesy Golden Gate Mortuary.*



## THEATER

*Continued from page 1*

Samuel Elkind, better known as Dr. Sam, launched the El Cerrito High School drama program in 1953 by creating classes in Drama and Stagecraft and putting on plays in the gym. Louis and Bettianne Flynn took over the empty Vista movie theater at the corner of San Pablo and Blake streets and established the Contra Costa Civic Theatre in 1959.

Today, CCCT, located at the corner of Pomona Avenue and Moeser Lane in a remodeled Boys Club structure, is officially christened the Flynn Building. When El Cerrito High School was rebuilt and reopened in January 2009, the new campus included a museum where Dr. Sam's director's chair is on display, along with his well-used stage makeup kit.

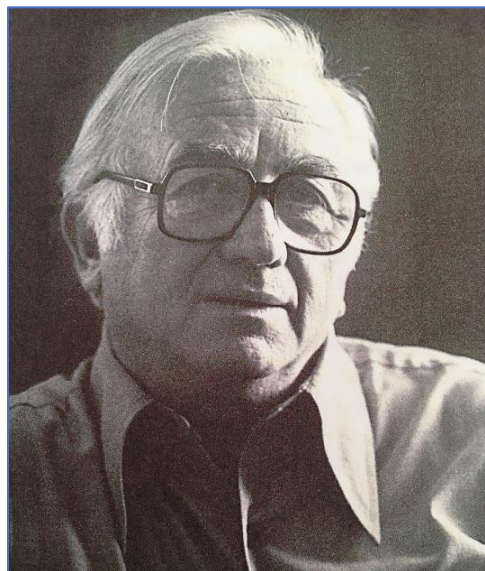
### **The show opens**

After serving as a director of radio programs (and writing them, too) in the U.S. Army, Elkind returned home to San Francisco where he completed his education, got married, and started a family. He began teaching in the 1950s, first at Roosevelt Junior High in Richmond, then at El Cerrito High. The family moved from Richmond to El Cerrito in 1963. Under his tutelage, students put on one drama and one musical during each school year.

Elkind's daughter, Risa Nye, who graduated from the school in 1969 is on the board of directors for the El Cerrito High School Archiving Project, remembers her dad taking her and her sister with him to rehearsals, where the students would babysit the young girls. "When I was a little girl, I remember seeing the students on stage in high heels, smoking and kissing and thinking they were glamorous grownups," said Nye, "but now I realize that they were really relative babies."

Although he considered a career in entertainment, Elkind ultimately decided he wanted to teach. Lack of acting chops among students was not a deterrent to participating. Nye remembers her dad asking a student who wasn't cut out for acting "Do you know how to use a hammer?" When the student said yes, Dr. Sam told him, "Ok, you're in stagecraft."

"My dad was a great role model and mentor for students. His door was always open," Nye said.



*Sam Elkind started the ECHS drama program and wrote several books for learning theater arts. Photo courtesy Risa Nye.*

"He enjoyed watching his students blossom." The family continued the theater tradition and Nye said her father lived to see his grandchildren acting on stage in school plays. Nye's son Myles also caught the theater bug and was an active member of CCCT drama camp through high school and beyond.

In a 1960 interview in the *Caballero*, the high school newspaper, Elkind said his pet peeve was the lack of theater and its related facilities at the school his pet peeve. "It robs the students of opportunities," he said.

When the Contra Costa Civic Theatre staged its first series of plays in 1960, Elkind directed "Our Town." In 1967, he joined the San Francisco State University faculty as a professor of theater arts. During his career, he also wrote a series of instructional books for teachers and students of drama (see accompanying story).

### **CCCT's first stage**

Louis and Bettianne Flynn met in Seattle, where he was studying theater at Seattle University and she was a critic attending another college. They married in 1949 and moved to El Cerrito in 1956 when Louis was hired as a bookkeeper for California Parkerizing Co. in Berkeley.

Their daughter, Kathleen Flynn Ray, said her father dreamed of being a star as a young man and was featured in a KQED production on the history of San Francisco. Her father appeared live as a jailed prisoner wearing striped clothing.

*Continued on page 9*

## El Cerrito's "Dr. Sam" Wrote the Books on Acting, Teaching and Directing Live Drama

During his 15 years teaching drama and stage craft at El Cerrito, followed by 30 more years as a professor of theater arts at San Francisco State University, Sam "Dr. Sam" Elkind directed thousands of students as they learned the ropes of acting, directing and producing live shows.

But he also influenced an untold number of other students and teachers through the instructional books he wrote. Although now out of print, copies of some of his books can still be found for sale online.

Known as Dr. Sam to those who met him – he earned his doctorate in education from Columbia Teachers College – he wrote his thesis on "High School Drama as Self-Discovery" in 1958. He followed that with a series of books aimed at helping both students and teachers hone their talents.

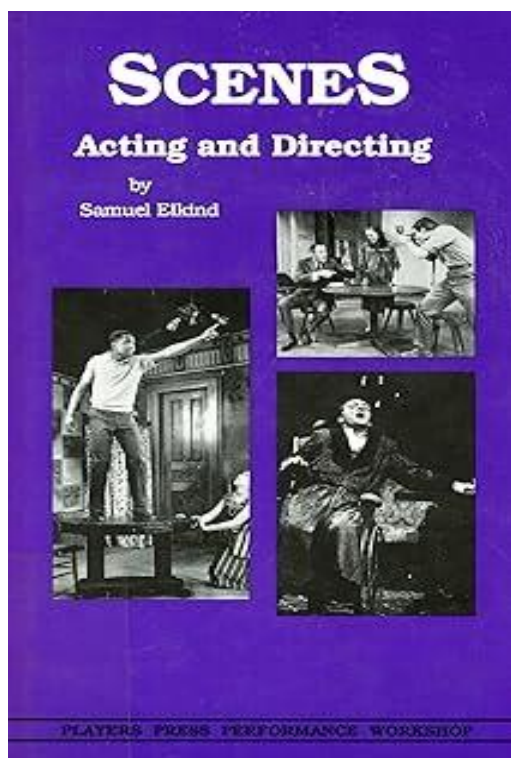
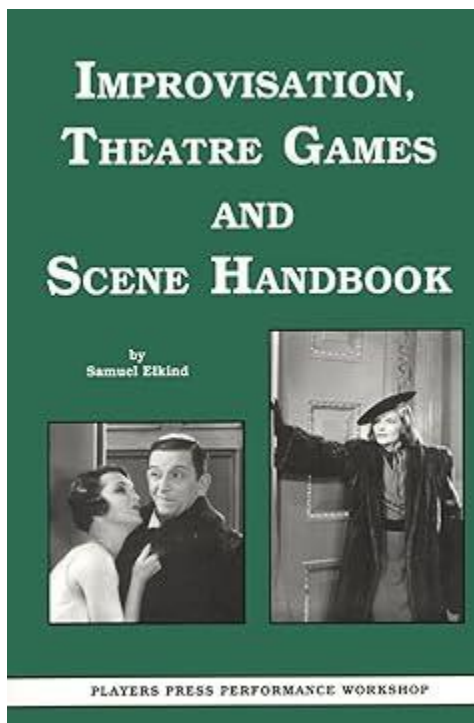
His first books were "Scenes for Acting and Directing, Vols. 1, 2 and 3" published by the Players Press Performance Workshop.

As listed on Amazon, Volume 1 contained 28 scenes designed for actors, directors and teachers, offering "a wide and varied range of material for developing, practicing and improving theatrical and communicational skills. The scenes are chosen to focus on critical moments, important ideas, actions, or character revelations."

Each scene included an introduction providing detail and "general background for understanding the characters, plots and settings. Production notes, in the margins, have been written to stimulate the actor or student and to encourage directorial approaches for continuous action, emotion and interpretation. Each scene was carefully selected for maximum presentational quality and minimal props, sets or costumes. An invaluable collection, offering those desirable, less familiar, select scenes of major American, British and world playwrights."

The series was followed by "Improvisation, Theatre Games and Scene Handbook," also published by Players Press Performance Workshop. "In this book Dr. Elkind adds more high-quality scenes that can be used for study and auditions. He then shows you how to develop your scenes and the characters in it, using the games and improvisations that he also introduces in this text. Then he opens the door to exploration of the techniques so that the actor and director can develop the skills necessary to utilize these in developing any scene or play," according to one online post.

His other books included "28 Scenes for Acting Practice," in 1971 and "Improvisation Handbook" in 1975, both published by Scott, Foresman & Co.





## THEATER

*Continued from page 7*

At the time, she was convinced her dad had been arrested and wouldn't go to sleep until he came home. He got his break in local theater by playing Elwood P. Dowd in "Harvey" at the Richmond Community

Players in Point Richmond. A rave review in the San Francisco Chronicle led to a 10-week run for the show.

He went on to star in other shows.

But her father didn't like how people were treated in theater and set out to create his own theater and do a better job. In the fall of 1959, the Flynns had their eyes set on using the vacant Vista movie theater at the corner of San Pablo Avenue and Blake Street, but the journey to setting up a community theater required a detour to Reno.

The Vista (in what is today the Atlas Liquor store) was a property of Blumenfeld Theaters, a Bay Area chain, and "closed and trashed" at the time, Ray said. Her mother borrowed money for a Greyhound bus trip to Reno to negotiate a \$300 a month lease with the owner Pete Claudianos. Once that was secured, Bettiane approached Mechanics Bank for a \$20,000 loan, secured by the Flynn's house and that of a neighbor.

"The only reason the theater is here is because of my mom and her business acumen," Ray said. "It's all due to her."

With the funds, the Flynns and a small army of volunteers rehabbed the theater, built a stage and put on their first show, "Dear Ruth," which opened Feb. 5, 1960. "It was fabulous—I had the greatest childhood," said Ray, who was 9 years old at the time. "The Sunday dress rehearsals were a family event with my dad directing and my mom taking notes."

Among the cast members was Robert Campbell, then a grocery clerk at the Mayfair market (now the site of the Mayfair apartment complex). Campbell would go on to other things, including representing west Contra Costa County in



*The CCCT's first home was in the vacant Vista Theatre on San Pablo Avenue. Photo courtesy Matt Flynn.*

the state Assembly for 16 years. In all, six plays were staged that first year, including "The Orchid Sandwich," written by Louis Flynn.

Also around this time, Bettianne Flynn and Betty McCarthy created a program for children. Called Pocket Theater, the program allowed kids to learn all aspects of theater, culminating with on-stage performances. The program for young people continues today, with three after-school programs serving different age groups and a summer drama camp, with the fees providing a major source of financial support for the theater.

Two years after the theater opened, a torrential storm caused storm drains on San Pablo Avenue to back up and flood the theater during a performance. Soon after that, Bettiane Flynn appeared before the city council and, using her persuasive powers, convinced them to fix the drains. The Richmond Independent newspaper featured her forceful appeal under the headline "Second Storm Hits El Cerrito." The drains were repaired and the project was informally known as "Flynn's ditch," Ray said.

### **The Move to Harding**

In 1968 the theater building was sold and CCCT found an interim home in the Harding Elementary auditorium, sharing the space with school programs and community events. In 1970, the Flynns convinced the city to lease them the closed Boys Club building on Pomona Avenue for \$1 a year, a deal that still holds 54 years later.

*Continued on page 10*

## THEATER

*Continued from page 9*

And again, a large group of volunteers helped turn the structure, composed of two surplus military buildings, into a theater. A foundation was poured, the stage was designed and built, and rows of raised seating were installed. The seats were reclaimed from an Oakland burlesque theater and reupholstered in the basement of CCCT's new home.

"To prevent vandalism, we sometimes slept in the building," Ray said. "We brought our dog and slept on couches. When you love something as much as we loved it, it's not a problem."

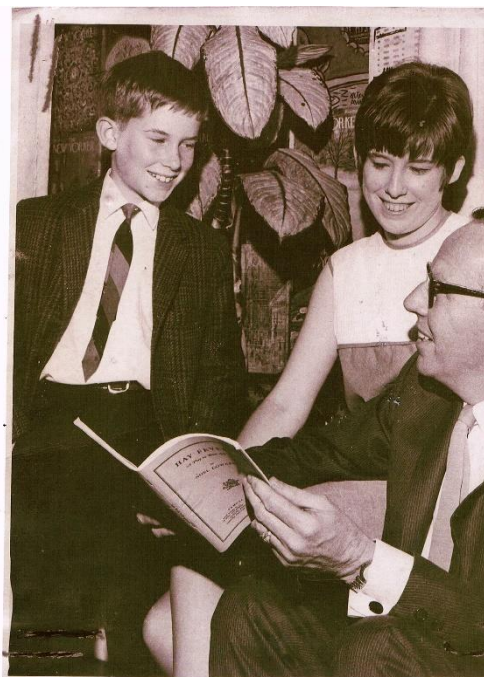
According to a detailed history on the CCCT website, "Finally, with a new stage and 199 seats to sit in, CCCT held its grand opening on Friday, July 23, 1971, with 'Play It Again, Sam.' Straight plays were done until 1973, when the theater gave its first musical production of "My Fair Lady."

While most people familiar with CCCT see only the theater and lobby, the building also contains a wardrobe room, dressing rooms, office space and a rehearsal area on the main floor. The basement includes a large shop for building sets, a tool room, and a rabbit warren of smaller rooms for storing props ranging from couches to chairs, kitchen glassware and bottles to a cabinet full of telephones, a stash of suitcases and briefcases to a stack of vintage radios, lanterns to lampshades. In one corner are parts from the old burlesque theater seats for making repairs.

"It's a real luxury having a storage area in our theater," Ray said. "We also loan out furniture and props to other local theaters."

Another luxury is having an online system for buying tickets. Ray recalled how she and her brother Matt used to handle ticket requests by answering a second phone in their El Cerrito home.

As they grew up and pursued their own careers, Ray and Matt Flynn didn't stray too far from their roots. Flynn majored in architecture at the California College of Arts and Crafts (now the California College of the Arts) and then earned a second degree in scenic design at UCLA. He became a set designer for television shows, including "The Office" and "Just Shoot Me." When the pandemic hit, he retired and moved back to El Cerrito, living in the family home. He's also back with CCCT, serving as vice president of facilities.



*Matt (left) and Kathleen Flynn go over a script with their father, Louis Flynn. Photo courtesy Kathleen Flynn Ray.*

Ray went on to teach drama at El Cerrito High School for six years, sometimes drawing upon the teaching books written by Sam Elkind. When the West Contra Costa Unified School District filed for bankruptcy in 1990, her job was cut. She then spent almost 30 years teaching at the Head-Royce School in Oakland.

The school didn't have a dedicated theater or stage so Ray continued her family tradition of building a stage and hanging lights in the gym, staging shows for 10 days and then taking everything down until the next show. When the school shut down due to COVID, she managed to stage plays via Zoom, which she described as heartbreaking.

But she and her students rose to the challenge. In staging "Annie Jr.," she divided the show in half and had two students play Annie. The student who played Daddy Warbucks had moved to Atlanta and for his dancing scenes, he held a computer screen showing his partner.

"Every time I hear 'You're Never Fully Dressed Without a Smile' from that show it makes me smile," she said. Now retired from teaching, she is also a member of the CCCT board and usually can be found in the lobby greeting people coming to shows at the theater.

*Continued on page 11*



## THEATER

*Continued from page 10*

### On stage and on the board

Kimberly Mayer was a kid when she was invited by a friend to her first work party to help build sets at CCCT in the late 1970s. Then the friend took her to see a show at the theater. This was followed by taking summer classes and acting in a show. And then more shows, including “The Music Man,” “Mame” and others. She played the queen in “Once Upon A Mattress.” In her 20s, Mayer worked on costuming for various shows.

“CCCT has been a crucial part of my life. It’s a great place with opportunities to do lots of interesting things,” said Mayer, who is the director of the California Social Work Education Center at UC Berkeley. “It’s also a great multi-generational place, with the kids’ programs being the heart and soul of the theater.”

Mayer served on CCCT’s Board of Directors from 2004-15, including as Board President from 2012-15, when her increased travel schedule made it necessary to step down. She continues to be a donor and to advise the board when asked.

Steve Kirby’s route to the board was different. He was a member of the Boys’ Club in the late 1950s. Years ago, he convinced Louis Flynn and some of his buddies to talk about old memories as Kirby got it all down on a tape recorder. And as a fourth-grade teacher at Castro Elementary, Kirby taught both of the Flynn’s grandchildren. When the theater created a formal board of directors, Kirby accepted an invitation to join.

Then he made his bid to appear on stage. With no experience, he went into the audition for the musical “Fiddler On the Roof” wearing a beanie and, playing his guitar, sang “I Won’t Grow Up.”

“I didn’t realize that serious actors would come in with a music script and ask the musicians to play it,” Kirby said. “Since I was the board president, I figured they wouldn’t kick me out. I got a call back, but not for a singing part.”

He went on to act in more musicals, including “Oliver,” “Annie” (which he co-produced) and “My



*CCCT's basement is filled with props used upstairs and loaned out to other community theaters. Photo by Jon Bashor.*

Fair Lady,” which he produced. “It was all really cool,” he said.

As a teacher, Kirby also sees the value of live theater for younger participants.

“Theater provides stuff you can’t get in the schools. It’s a great opportunity for kids to sing and dance, be creative and have fun,” he said. “You can see the younger ones open up and gain confidence.”

### New challenges

In 2020, CCCT was getting ready for its next show when COVID hit and everything shut down on the eve of opening night. The set for “The Waverly Gallery,” a play by Kenneth Lonergan, collected dust as it sat unused on the stage. When the Bay Area and the rest of the country began to open back up, the theater entered a new era.

*In the next issue of The Forge, read about how CCCT managed through the pandemic and is planning for the future as it enters its 65th year of bringing live theater to the area.*

The Forge is published by the El Cerrito Historical Society and edited by Jon Bashor and Dave Weinstein. Sent to all members of the society, The Forge takes its name from the forge of blacksmith Wilhelm Rust, an early settler and one of the founders of our city. Our goal is to publish The Forge quarterly. The society also publishes Sparks, a monthly online newsletter. Send ideas for articles to [echistoricalsociety@gmail.com](mailto:echistoricalsociety@gmail.com).

## More photos from our first-ever historic photo contest



**Overall Runner-up:** Wendy Adachi's circa 1938 photo of her grandparents, Isaburo and Wakako Adachi, and her uncle Tosh Adachi in their greenhouse at the Adachi Nursery on San Pablo Ave.

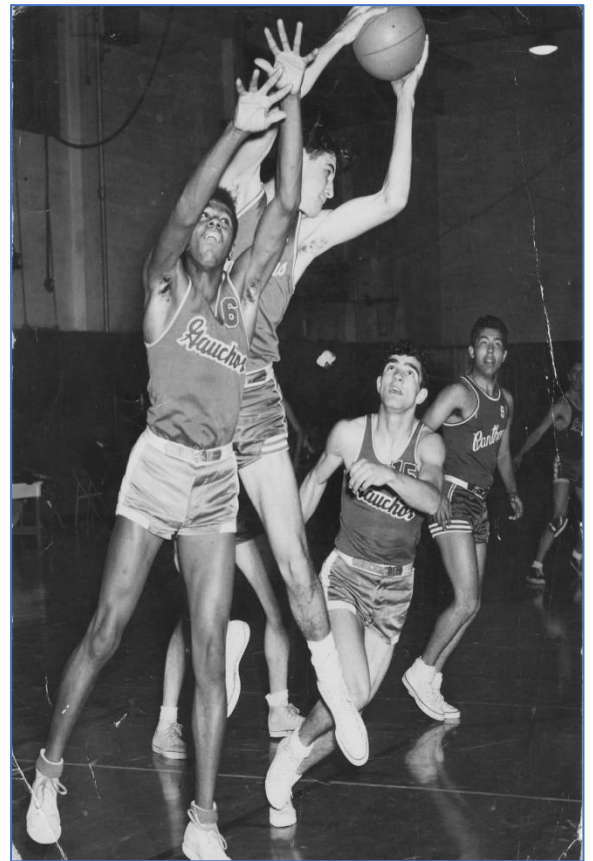


**Vehicles:** Gregory Han's circa 1962 photo of himself and his sister, Lisa Marie, with his family's 1958 Oldsmobile Super 88 station wagon.

### Photo Contest Displays

Thanks to Juku co-working and events space for displaying the winning photos through Tuesday, Jan. 30. The photos will next be on display at El Cerrito City Hall from Feb. 1 until March 21. All of the photos submitted for the contest can also be viewed on the historical society's website.

The society also thanks longtime member Marvin Collins for his generous donation supporting this expanded issue of The Forge.



**Events:** Taylor Melton's circa 1949 photo of the Gauchos in action during an El Cerrito High School basketball game.



**People:** Charlie Soldavini's circa 1920s photo taken of his grandfather (sitting on keg) and friends along San Pablo Avenue.