



## El Cerrito High School Museum Showcases Gaucho History

**By Jon Bashor**

Just a few steps from the school office in the main building of El Cerrito High School stands a dedicated museum space displaying artifacts from the school's existence from its opening on January 6, 1941, until the summer of 2005, when the old structures were demolished to make way for a modern campus.

Dance cards from the 1950s. A 20-inch-long wooden paddle wielded by the dean of boys. The first football schedule. A makeup case from the drama department. A dusty blackboard with a wooden chalk tray. Decorative tiles of historical scenes made by California Art Tiles in Richmond. A poster telling the story of Clara Mabuchi, a Japanese-American student who was forced to leave the school and relocate to an internment camp in April 1942.

The roots of the project go back to 2003 when Lu Tipping, mother of three ECHS graduates, was a member of the West Contra Costa Unified School District committee reviewing which schools needed to be upgraded for seismic safety and which needed to be rebuilt. El Cerrito High fell into the second group.

"I approached then-Principal Vincent Rhea because I was worried about preserving artifacts at the school," said Tipping, then also chair of the ECHS Site Council.

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*The El Cerrito High School Museum is just off the main entry to the rebuilt school. Photo courtesy ECHS Archiving Project.*

### Breaking the Racial Barrier at El Cerrito High

*Helen Hamilton Holloway recalls being among the first Black students*

**By David Weinstein**

Today's El Cerrito High School has a notably diverse student body, with just over 70 percent of the students falling into categories other than "white," according to the California Department of Education. Hispanic and Latino students lead at 30.4 percent, followed by whites at 29.2 percent, Blacks at 17.2, and Asians at 14.5, then other categories at lesser percentages, according to numbers from 2022-2023.

Back when the school was new, though, opening in 1941 it was almost entirely white, the waning days of World War II and the earliest post-war years – not just the student body but teachers, aides, bus drivers.

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## When Gamblers Ran Our Town: A Tour

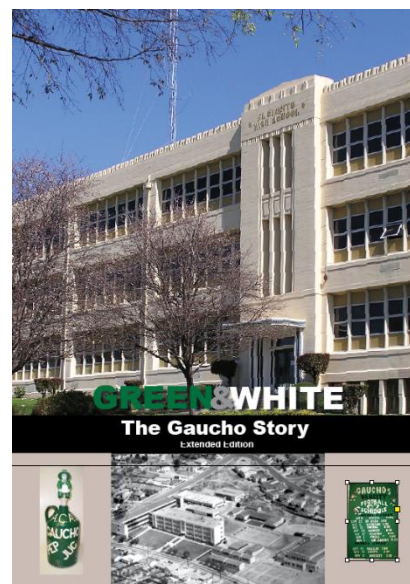
Join Historical Society President Dave Weinstein on a walking tour from 10 a.m. to Noon on Sunday, Nov. 12 to learn about El Cerrito's past when gambling and nightlife thrived.

From the teens into the 1940s, El Cerrito was a center for gambling, dog racing, drinking and other vices. The walk starts at the former Wagon Wheel Club, then passes the sites of other nightclubs and gambling halls including Rancho, the Hollywood Club and the It Club.

To join the free tour, meet at 10 a.m. by the Bayview Eagles Hall (the former Wagon Wheel Club) at 3223 Carlson Blvd. near Central Avenue.

Questions? Contact Dave at [davidsweinstein@yahoo.com](mailto:davidsweinstein@yahoo.com)

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 [echistoricalociety@gmail.com](mailto:echistoricalociety@gmail.com).



## Green & White: The ECHS Gaucho Story

The request was simple enough: Would Kent Sanctuary, class of 1964, be interested in putting together a slideshow illustrating the history of El Cerrito High School to show during a three-day bash to celebrate the 64-year-old school before it was demolished to make way for a modern campus? A graphic designer by trade, he agreed to do it.

By then, Sanctuary was living in Sacramento and came back to El Cerrito to meet with Lu Tipping and Joann Steck-Bayat who were helping to organize the event. But the project became something bigger.

To tell the story, Sanctuary interviewed students from the 1940s, '50s, '60s and up to the early 2000s. He caught up with a former principal and a few teachers.

"It went from being a slideshow to a documentary," Sanctuary said. "It was quite a project."

When finished, "Green and White: The Gaucho Story," ran for 45 minutes and was shown in the girls' gymnasium during the "Before the wrecking ball hits the Wall" last blast for the school. But Sanctuary wasn't finished. He went on to add extra features, including scenes from the event itself.

Subsequently entered in the Berkeley Film Festival, the video earned honorable mention and was made available as a DVD. The project also encouraged Sanctuary to create a video highlighting the life of his son and his fiancée, which was shown at their wedding. The two projects also earned him a promotion at work as he added creating training videos to his duties.

"It really turned out to be quite a project," he said.

*Copies of Green & White: The Gaucho Story are available for \$18. To order contact Jackie Fonken at [j\\_fonken@hotmail.com](mailto:j_fonken@hotmail.com) or Donna Houser at [houserini@sbcglobal.net](mailto:houserini@sbcglobal.net).*

## Helen Hamilton Holloway

*Continued from page 1*

Black people were among the tide of newcomers who had flooded the Bay Area during the war to build ships, tanks, and work in other war industries. Many longtime residents of what had been largely white communities adopted attitudes that combined fear with loathing toward their new Black neighbors.

### A pioneering student

Helen Hamilton Holloway, who is 96, remembers what schooling was like at El Cerrito High, where she was among the first Black students to integrate the school. She and her younger brother Willie may have been the very first. She believes they were the first, both starting in 1944, shortly after Helen Hamilton moved to Richmond at age 16. She graduated two years later.

The family – there were also two younger children, Maurice and Emma Lee (who died as a girl) – migrated to Richmond during the 1940s from Wellington, Texas. Helen's mother, Glossie McKellar, and Helen's stepfather, Claude McKellar, came to Richmond first, soon sending for their children, who had stayed behind with their grandmother.

Helen, who lives in her longtime Oakland home with family, shared her story recently with the historical society, recalling incidents of racism by school employees and fellow students, but also mentioning friendships with white children who may never have met Black people before.

"There were quite a few" incidents of racial animosity at her new school, she says. It was "Just making fun of me, that's all. Your color."

"But me, I looked the other way," she says. "I just looked at them, smiled and put my hand on my hip."

Helen says she became friends with many white girls and boys, even those who berated her at first. "I just did fine. I got along when they were evil to me, I got along with them."



*Helen Hamilton's senior class photo in the 1946 ECHS yearbook. Photo courtesy Helen Holloway/El Cerrito Historical Society.*

It's hard to say for sure whether Helen and Willie Hamilton were the first Black children at El Cerrito High, but there is no reason to doubt the sincerity of Helen's belief.

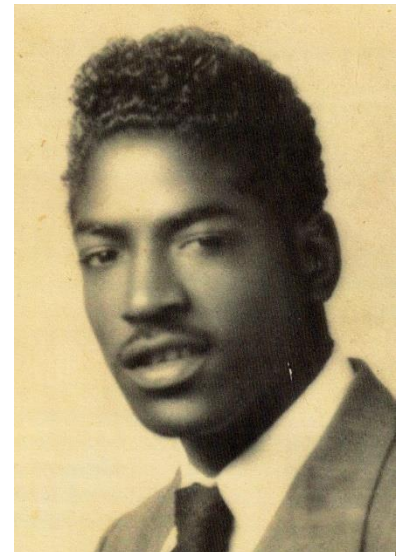
Leafing through the earliest editions of *El Camino*, the school's twice-a-year "yearbook" of the time, does show how few Blacks, or ethnic minorities of any kind, attended the school.

The June 1944 book, which leaders of the El Cerrito High School Archiving Project believe may be the publication's first edition, pictures no Black students – which doesn't mean there were none; the book notes that some students were "camera shy."

Helen is not seen in the 1944 or 1945 books, but that isn't surprising as she wasn't a senior until 1946, and the books focused on senior portraits, showing other students either in passing or in club groupings.

The June 1945 *El Camino*, shows one Black student in the senior class, Dorine Hawthorne. The Fall 1945 *El Camino* shows another Black senior, Alverse Gardner; a handful of other Black students can be seen in group photos.

Besides Helen, the senior class seen in the June 1946 *El Camino* includes four Black students: Lessie Davis, Charlie Mae Freeman ("honor society"), Wilma Shepherd and the



*Willie Hamilton was the first Black student to play football at ECHS. Photo courtesy Helen Holloway/El Cerrito Historical Society.*

only boy, Ira Waller ("junior statesman, art club, rally committee").

A group photo of juniors shows a handful of Black students.

As Helen tells the tale, she and Willie were the pioneers. Unable to attend Richmond High because the south Richmond war worker housing where they lived with their parents, Seaport, was outside of that school's district, their father was given a letter (it's not clear from which jurisdiction) essentially demanding that El Cerrito High admit them.

Administrators at the school did not want to, Helen says. But her stepfather, Claude McKellar, insisted.

"When we got to El Cerrito, they told us, 'No, no Blacks, no Black kids go here,'" Helen says. She says her stepfather then produced the letter and told the school, "It says we've got to come here."

"That's how we ended up in El Cerrito, me and Willie Hamilton," she says, adding, "There were no other Black students there at that time."

"But later, in 1944, some other Black kids joined us," Helen says, adding, "Some of them lived in the projects where we lived, and we told them. And within two weeks later they joined."

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## High School Museum

*Continued from page 1*

"The school was really an important part of this community—generations of students had gone there," Tipping said.

Joann Steck-Bayat was the PTA parliamentarian in 2005 when Principal Rhea mentioned to her that the school was going to be torn down and parents should try to save what they could.

"We had carte blanche to go through everything and every space in the school," Steck-Bayat recalls. "Volunteers, teachers and janitors went through the basement, crawl spaces and rooms, some of which hadn't been opened in decades."

A coach found the first poster-sized football schedule behind his desk. The basement yielded two remaining bentwood chairs from the original library; the chairs were stashed away when a new librarian in the 1950s replaced them with modern plastic seating and gradually disappeared until only two were left.

News about the quest for items spread via Bay Area newspapers, television stations and word of mouth. Parents, alumni and the community responded.

"We got tremendous support from the community and many keepsakes were donated by former students," Steck-Bayat said.

The old school went out with a bang — a three-day reunion/tribute dubbed "Before the wrecking ball hits the wall" and included a Saturday night dance in the gym, with a banner reading "Eve of Destruction" on the wall and one of the largest parades ever held in the city. Not long afterward, the ECHS Archiving Project was formed to coordinate and document the collection of old-school relics.

One of their first actions was to begin lobbying for a dedicated museum space to be incorporated into the new school design. Driven by Tipping and Steck-Bayat, that effort was successful and the result is believed by the group to be the only



*Decorated dance cards from school dances. Photo by Jon Bashor.*

museum housed in an operating American high school.

"We worked hand-in-hand to get this done," Tipping said. "It was an intergenerational effort by thousands of people."

### Sorting, labeling, documenting

At the same time volunteers began meeting every Saturday to go through the found items as well as donations from the community, coming from as far away as Fairfax and San Jose. Volunteers went over each item, labeled it according to date, department, who donated it and added a description. Every item was cataloged and recorded in a database.

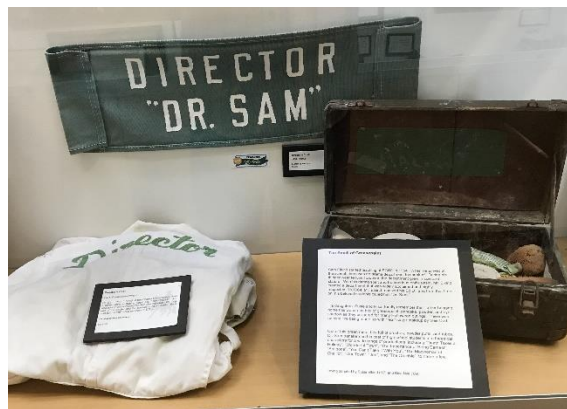
The cataloging work was led by Sandi Genser-Maack and Lynn Maack, who were instrumental in

helping catalog materials for the Richmond History Museum, Tipping said, adding "people came to us with all of these talents to offer."

Many of the donations were family heirlooms. Risa Elkind Nye's father, Sam Elkind, taught drama and stagecraft at the high school and her family donated a well-used makeup case as well as the fabric back of his director's chair, imprinted with the words "DIRECTOR DR. SAM." They found the items in a shack behind their house that her dad had used as his office. Nye said her father had earned his doctor of education degree from Columbia University and was known as Dr. Sam. He taught at ECHS for 15 years and went on to teach at San Francisco State.

"He started the theater program and they would put on one drama and one musical each year," Nye said. "Several of my dad's students went on to careers in theater or taught drama themselves."

Elkind had attended Lowell High School and one of his classmates was Carol Channing, who became famous as an actress, comedian, singer and dancer.



*Artifacts from Dr. Sam Elkind, former drama teacher. Photo by Jon Bashor.*

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## High School Museum

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Channing would make occasional appearances in Elkind's classes to speak with students.

### Still coming in

The collection now stands at more than 500 items and more continue to come in.

"The other day someone sent me an original playbook from the 1964 football team, which was given to each player to learn the plays" said Roddy Lee, who graduated from El Cerrito High in 1967, studied at UC Berkeley and returned to the school district as a teacher. After 10 years at Kennedy High in Richmond, Lee joined the El Cerrito faculty and taught everything from computer science to physical education and coached girls' volleyball and track. His son and daughter both attended ECHS and his daughter now teaches at Kensington Hilltop School.

Lee, who represented the Republic of China (Taiwan) at the 1972 Olympics in Munich and competed in three track events, is one of 23 students recognized for their post-ECHS athletic. Others include Elijah "Pumpsie" Green, class of 1952, who in 1959 became the first Black player for the Boston Red Sox, the last team in major league baseball to integrate its roster, NBA star Drew Gooden, and 13 young men drafted by NFL teams.

Other students highlighted in the displays include:

- Kenneth Tavalara, the only ECHS student killed in World War II; Roy Rufus and J.L. Woods, both of whom died in the Korean War; and John V. Williams, David Middlekauff, Esmond E. Snell, Jr., Andy Garnica and Ronald E. James, who were all killed in Vietnam.
- Maria Remenyi, whose family emigrated from Hungary. She graduated from ECHS and went on to become an astrophysicist.

In 1965, she was selected as Miss Oakland and went on to be chosen Miss California, then Miss USA 1966 and was a semifinalist in the Miss Universe contest. She served as grand marshal for the school's farewell parade.

- Doug Clifford, Stu Cook and John Fogerty, all members of the class of 1963, who formed a band with John's older brother Tom and went on to worldwide fame as Creedence Clearwater Revival.

### Expanding the project's reach

To better showcase the breadth of the collection, a large Wall of Fame display was built in the hallway outside the new school gym. In addition to trophies, sports uniforms, team photos and the like is a white sweater, testimony to Rose Aguilar McHone, the first female student to earn a letter in three sports: tennis, softball and basketball. When a local sporting goods store refused to sell her a regulation sweater, her mother created one, doing all the embroidery and sewing on the coveted block "C" and sports symbols herself. Rose graduated in 1975.



*Sweater created by the mother of Rose Aguilar McHone, the first female student to letter at ECHS. Photo by Jon Bashor.*

In addition to the main museum, smaller display areas are scattered around the school, highlighting the history of Math (with a giant slide rule), Forensics, English and Science departments. Even the cafeteria is included, with two vintage trays and menus.

Inside the gym, championship banners won over the decades hang from the rafters while the opposite wall features a wooden gaucho astride his horse standing 10 feet tall; a handmade gift to the school from former coach and athletic director John Nules in the early 1960s.

A large architectural drawing of the original Art Deco school building hangs in the main office. In all, there are 20 identified points of historic interest around the campus.

### A true group effort

The Archiving Project board meets every other month at the Juku meeting space on Stockton Avenue, hosted by owner Gregg Mayer, himself an ECHS grad. At the September meeting, President Jackie Fleming Fonken, ECHS class of 1956, presides, with about two dozen attendees participating. Minutes are approved, finances reviewed and activities reported on, including a table at the city's Fourth of July event.

There's a new donation of items from KECG, the campus radio station and plans are made to meet with the new principal and school librarian.

They also discuss new fundraising ideas to support their scholarship program, with Mayer having met with the ECHS PTA leadership. One option would be to change the focus to be more of an alumni organization, but the group is unsure that they can provide the time and energy to greatly expand their focus.

"I think the group is at a crossroads," said Nye, who graduated in 1969 and is a more recent member of the board. "I think we need to think about what we want to do and how to get more people involved."

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## Helen Hamilton Holloway

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"After one year," Helen says, "they started getting (Black) kids from all different areas of Richmond." Helen is clearly proud of the role she and her brother played in opening El Cerrito High to Black students.

But being accepted into the school wasn't the only challenge. There was also getting there. A public bus took children from Seaport, which was near the shipyards across the then Hoffman Boulevard, to San Pablo Avenue in El Cerrito, where a school bus awaited for the last leg to the school.

"Lots of times they wouldn't let the Black kids on," Helen says. "They would say it was too much (for the size of the bus.) So I just started walking up the hill." Soon, she says, a handful of other Black children were walking with her.

Helen's brother, Willie, who was younger by a year, "was quite an athlete," she says, and became a standout on the school's football team – but not without resistance from some teammates. "They'd beat him up," Willie told her at the time. Still, Willie Otha Hamilton became the first Black youth to play on the high school varsity team.

Sister and brother had different personalities that complemented each other. They were close throughout their lives. Willie was active in school, particularly football. "After school," Helen says, "I came home."

Patricia Hamilton Bolds, Willie's daughter and Helen's niece, who with other family members and a friend attended the historical society's interview, says: "One thing to know about Helen's personality, some personalities would fight, (but) Helen has a sweetness. She's going to try to make sure everybody gets along. So something that would be really a slap to someone else, Helen would take it and smile.

"My daddy was a little bit more of a fighter because he was not supposed to be on the football team, but he decided that he was going to do it no



*A page from the 1946 El Camino yearbook showing Helen Hamilton, bottom left. Photo courtesy Helen Hamilton Holloway/El Cerrito Historical Society.*

matter what," Patricia says. "And so the two of them together made a unit."

"Wasn't it so that people knew that if they messed with you," Patricia says, addressing Helen, "what would your brother do?"

"He'd beat them up," Helen replies.

Patricia concludes, "A lot of things did not happen to her because people knew who Willie Hamilton was."

Helen recalls attending all the school dances, mostly sitting in her seat but watching as girls – the white ones too – lined up to dance with Willie.

Sweet she may have been, and an occasional wallflower, but Helen showed leadership skills early on.

After three months in the school, she says, "It was nice, because I got in with the PE teacher. I was doing PE (physical education) and kids would make fun of me doing PE and

everything. So I just would stand up and just stop."

The teacher stepped in. "She told me, 'I will give you a job. You take the roll of everybody who is present.'"

The role of gym teacher's assistant was one of the first leadership roles she would adopt.

She attended dances and other events for young people at a community center at Seaport. "The guy at the center asked me if I would like to help out. Yes I would like to help out," Helen recalls. Soon she was helping supervise events there, and the fact that she could call on her stepfather to step in when things got out of hand added to her qualifications for

the job.

A year after graduating El Cerrito High, the war newly over, Helen says, "I did something wrong and I got pregnant and I got married." The father was Robert Holloway, just home from the service. The couple had six children.

Robert worked as a civilian for more than three decades at the Naval Air Station in Alameda. The family moved to the Pullman Project in Richmond, then to Alameda, and then to Oakland.

Helen was very much a churchgoer, Robert not so much. His passion was fishing.

"He would go out on boats, would do sea bass, and he would bring striped bass home on Fridays," daughter Doris Holloway recalls. "We knew we'd be having fish because he'd get off work and go fishing.

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## Helen Hamilton Holloway

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“He would go out on big boats or he would go down near Emeryville. He would go to Tracy, all over. It was his hobby. He loved it.”

At Oakland’s Bethel Missionary Baptist Church, which Helen joined in 1961, “I became a member of the Usher Board there for years. But then I became the president. And I stayed president almost 10, 12 years, president of the Senior Usher Board.”

Ushers greet people, keep order, organize events, including anniversaries that pull in people from churches throughout the Bay Area. It’s a position of responsibility. Helen recalls supervising dozens of people. “I enjoy meeting people and greeting people and telling people about the Lord,” she says.

In addition to her church duties and raising a family Helen worked for more than 20 years as a janitor at the Del Monte cannery in Emeryville, worked in school cafeterias and cleaned homes.

For many years she was primary caregiver for her ailing mother, her family members say. And then there was the care she devoted to her brother Willie after his service with the Army during the Korean War.

“A bullet went across the top of his skull and paralyzed him. But when he came out, she was the one who took care of him and refused to give up on him,” says Patricia, Willie’s daughter. “And he ended up with a limp. But he walked and he worked. And he and his sister stayed in touch with each other every single day until he died.”

Willie, who raised a family with his wife in Richmond, worked for 30 years as a custodian for the U.S. Postal Service and was a commander with the VFW, died in 2010.



*Helen Hamilton Holloway, pictured at a church celebration in the 1980s. Photo courtesy Helen Hamilton Holloway/El Cerrito Historical Society.*

It was a friend of Helen’s, Jocelyn Foreman, who serves as her caregiver and works as a family engagement specialist with Berkeley Unified School District, who brought Helen’s story to the El Cerrito Historical Society.

During the conversation, Helen’s daughter Doris, grandchildren Robert Turner and Katrina Williams, and Willie’s daughter Patricia listened as Helen recalled the old days, asked questions themselves and filled in

information as needed.

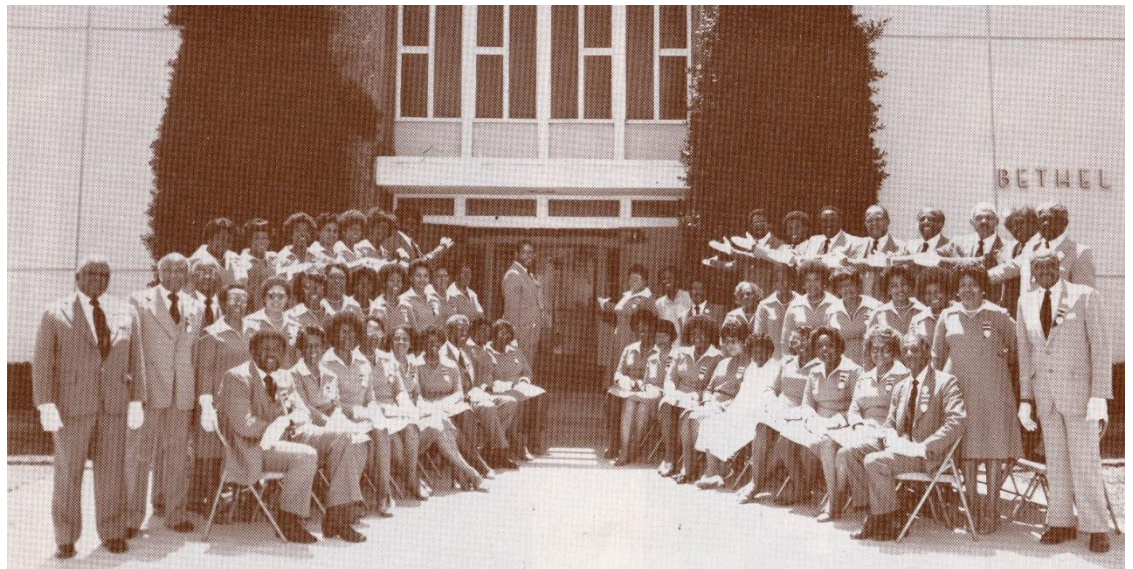
Katrina concluded the formal interview when she was asked what makes Helen Hamilton Holloway special.

“She is very loving, but she gives you boundaries and structure. She’s always been a straight shooter for me as a granddaughter and as a girl. She always taught me about being ladylike, but also showing up as my best self at all times. Even on my down days, I make sure that I show up as my best self.”

“I did a lot of stuff because my grandmother always made sure to support me. She showed up. She was there every graduation from preschool to my doctorate,” Katrina says.

“She corrected us in love, and made sure that when we walked out of here, we didn’t feel like we were less than, even if we were in trouble.”

“And most importantly, it was her love for God. I’m still very active in the church. I am on the senior usher board now. ... There are only eight of us, and I’m the youngest, and I still wear my grandmother’s uniform .... It doesn’t fit, but I still wear it.”



**SENIOR USHERS**  
**Sis. Helen Holloway, President**

*Helen Holloway is seated in the first row, left, closest to the door of Bethel church, when she was president of the Senior Ushers. Courtesy of Helen Holloway/El Cerrito Historical Society.*

## High School Museum

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Since 2006, the organization has provided three scholarships to graduating ECHS seniors “who have demonstrated the desire and ability to continue higher education pursuits and embody the Gaucho spirit.”

Lee has seen how the Gaucho spirit has changed. During his student days, the school held weekly spirit rallies before games, with all students filing to the football field to take part. But in the 1980s and ‘90s, there were fewer schoolwide activities, such as rallies and plays. When rallies were moved to after school, many students opted to go home.

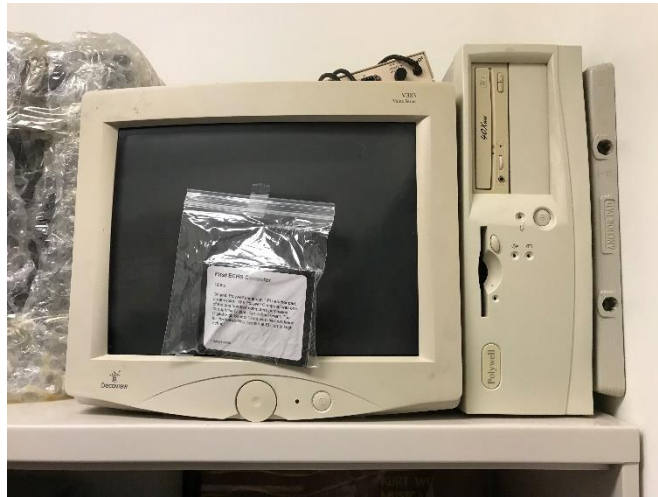
“There was a greater sense of belonging back in the day,” Lee said.

As an example, as a coach Lee said he taught the girls on the volleyball team the song “Down the Field,” which his teams sang on the bus rides to their games. “That was the tradition, that was our school song,” he said. Lee also drilled into his students the importance of continuing their education beyond high school.

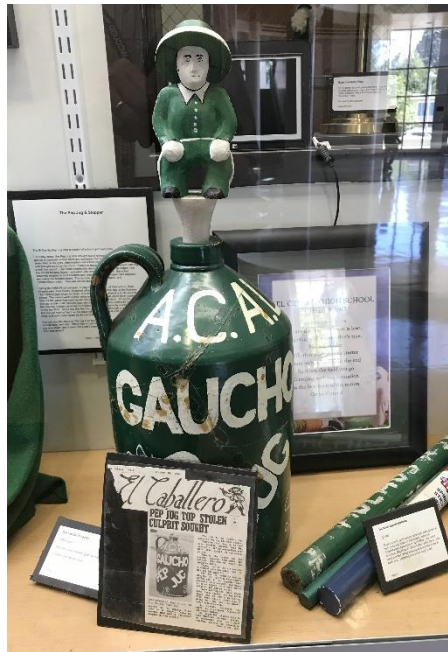
“For many people, high school is remembered as one of the best times of their lives,” Lee said. “I think every school needs an archiving project. We realized that history is important – and it helps you remember the good times.”

Tipping added “Young people today need to know about the past so they can understand where they stand today; seeing that history is much better than just getting it from a textbook or a lecture.”

*The Archiving Project museum is open during regular El Cerrito High School hours, 8:15 a.m.-4 p.m. Monday through Friday. The school phone number is 510-231-1437. To donate to the museum, contact Joann Steck-Bayat at 510-524-9468. To donate to the scholarship fund, send a check made out to ECHS Archiving Scholarship Fund to Dianne Chambers, 2234 Lupine Rd. Hercules, CA 94547.*



*More artifacts from the ECHS museum, clockwise from top: the first computer on campus; a “board of education” wielded by the dean of boys; and the “Pep Jug,” which when uncapped during games led to raucous cheers.*



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