

# Sparks December 2022

**NOTE: In-person attendance at our January 29 annual meeting with a fascinating program about El Cerrito's Ouija Mania of the 1920s requires an RSVP due to limited space and at press time we were approaching a full house.**

**You can also attend via Zoom. Details below.**



A Ouija board from Elijah Bond (1847–1921) and Charles Kennard (1856–1925), Museum of Talking Boards, Public Domain, through Wikimedia Commons.

**When El Cerrito Went ‘Insane’: The Ouija-Mania Incident of 1920.** At this year's **January 29, 2023 annual meeting of the El Cerrito Historical Society**, Chris Sterba will give a presentation on one of the strangest events in the history of El Cerrito, and one of the few that have brought our small city national attention.

On the night of March 3, 1920, police broke down the door of a San Pablo Avenue house and arrested seven people on charges of insanity and being a threat to themselves and others.

The home's inhabitants had been conducting all-night séances for many weeks, using a Ouija board to communicate with the dead. Led by a woman who lost her daughter in a hit-and-run accident, the group initially sought to find out the identity of the girl's killer. But their meetings soon turned more ominous.

The group feared they had unleashed evil spirits, which were causing their children to go into trances. They felt the spirits could only be stopped by performing a series of increasingly bizarre rituals.

The police raid and insanity charges immediately became a national news story. Among the many sensationalized accounts was the claim that the entire city of El Cerrito suffered from "mass hysteria" and that all of its 2,000 residents needed psychiatric evaluation.

An array of lawmakers, religious leaders, and medical experts also weighed in, calling for a ban on the popular Ouija board game, which they felt threatened the country's morality and public health.

Historian Chris Sterba will describe these events and the sensation they caused. He will discuss how El Cerrito's "Ouija-mania" incident reflected important changes in American life after World War I and the deadly influenza epidemic of 1918.

*Sterba is a professor of American Studies at San Francisco State University and a longtime El Cerrito resident and member of the society. His research focuses on twentieth-century American social history and popular culture, and his writing has appeared in many publications, including the Journal of American History, the Pacific Historical Review, and California History.*

**Attend our annual meeting to hear about Ouija mania.** The society's annual meeting will be **Sunday, January 29, from 4 to 5:30 p.m. in the Garden Room of the El Cerrito Community Center, 7007 Moeser Lane.** The meeting is free and will also be available to watch on Zoom:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/82016218895?pwd=K3pxanBuVk41L0doSHB3U3pnNHBwZz09>

Meeting ID: 820 1621 8895 Passcode: 002811. +16699006833,,82016218895#,,,\*002811# US (San Jose)

Before Chris Sterba's presentation on Ouija Mania, a brief business meeting will include elections of officers, financial and operational reports, and the opportunity for public comment and questions.

**RSVPs are required for the in-person event** due to space limitations. RSVP to [davidsweinstein@yahoo.com](mailto:davidsweinstein@yahoo.com). Light refreshments will be served.

**Society members will consider revising our bylaws at the annual meeting.** The board is proposing several changes in the bylaws that govern the society. The decision is up to those members who attend the annual meeting.

Please see the attached draft bylaws, with changes underlined and in bold. We are proposing the changes because:

1. We want to shift the date of the annual meeting to February from January, to coincide with the board's fiscal year; and
2. We are clarifying procedures about board and member voting and quorums.

Questions? [Davidsw Weinstein@yahoo.com](mailto:Davidsw Weinstein@yahoo.com).





Tom Panas leading a thorough tour of Sunset View in 2019, the last time the Society enjoyed this event. Photo by Dave Weinstein

**Attend our always popular Sunset View Cemetery Tour.** Sunset View Cemetery, founded in 1908 and one of the oldest businesses in town, is one of the most fascinating places in El Cerrito or Kensington, which it straddles. Learn from tour leader Tom Panas the history of this cemetery, admire the cemetery's waterfall, and find out where the bodies are buried.

This event is free. Meet at Colusa & Fairmount Avenues, across from the cemetery. 10:30 a.m. to noon or 12:30, Saturday, March 18, 2023. **Attendance is strictly limited. RSVP is required.** [davidsweinstein@yahoo.com](mailto:davidsweinstein@yahoo.com).

**Pat Shaw departs the Historical Society Board.** Pat Shaw has served on the Historical Society's board since 2015, and as treasurer for much of that time, carefully and cheerfully overseeing our expenditures and income and reporting accurately on both.

Being treasurer for a small nonprofit is an important job, and Pat has always handled it superbly. Pat has also made innumerable contributions to the society and to the wider El Cerrito community in so many ways through contributions to board discussions, and efforts to digitize local newspapers, among other projects.

Pat also helped serve as the face of the society at many events, and coordinated the society's participation in the city of El Cerrito's centennial, back in 2017. She served at the time on the committee that organized the year-long celebration.

**The Historical Society Board meets the second Thursday of the month** at 5:30 p.m., these days via Zoom. Members are encouraged to attend. Meeting rarely take more than an hour. Occasionally we need to

change the date of a meeting. We will publicize our meetings in Sparks. Our next meeting is February 9. Topics will include: upcoming programs; archiving; membership drive; and more.

El Cerrito Historical Society is inviting you to a scheduled Zoom meeting.

Time: **Feb 9, 2023 05:30 PM** Pacific Time (US and Canada)

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/81333179431?pwd=UnNUSW1PdlpraG9rYmVpakpTV3NCQT09>

Meeting ID: 813 3317 9431. Passcode: 304133

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**The El Cerrito Historical Society produces two publications**, the Forge, which is a print publication, which we aim to produce four times a year, and Sparks (from the Anvil), an email publication which we aim to produce monthly. Both hark back to one of El Cerrito's original settlers, William Rust, a blacksmith who worked at his anvil producing, among other things, sparks.

