

Sparks December 2023



The exhibit reception at Juku attracted about 50 people over the course of the evening and conversations flowed. Photo by Dave Weinstein

Check out the [winners](#) and [complete entries](#) of the society's Historical photo contest. More than 70 photos were submitted by about 20 contestants. It proved to be a wonderfully varied grouping of photos showing much of El Cerrito's history.

Thanks to all who took part. For those of you who did not, the society plans to do this contest annually. Winners took home prizes from an event at [Juku](#), 7019 Stockton Ave., a co-working and events space. The exhibit remains on view through mid January. Juku is open weekdays 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., but is closed through January 2 for the holidays.

The photos on display looked great, the slide show of all 70 entries did as well. Best of all was the spirit of the event, as people lingered, admired the display, enjoyed refreshments and each others' company.

Dianne Brenner, the society secretary and board member who proposed the photo contest, and organized it with Jon Bashor and Nick Brooks, summarized the contest and the event: "Well, we did it! All the hard work paid off and we had a show that everyone enjoyed. Watching people viewing the photos with such interest, and hearing the family stories behind them was the best."



The grand prize winning photo was submitted by Virginia Burns. Circa 1907, it is a photo of her great grandfather, Dr. Breneman and his family with the car all loaded up for a camping trip to Mt. Diablo.

The grand winner, Virginia Burns, has real roots in El Cerrito, being the great granddaughter of Dr. Joseph Breneman, who was probably the city's first doctor, and great-niece of the founder of the El Cerrito Library, Faye Breneman.



Thanks to the El Cerrito Soroptimists, who originally acquired the items of the Shadis' display, and the Shadi Holiday project, the display continues every holiday season. Here's how it looked in 2010. Photo by Dave Weinstein

Happy Holidays from the Historical Society! See you at the Sundar Shadi Holiday Display. Few people have brought as much joy to El Cerrito as the humble Mr. Shadi who, working with his wife Dorothy, spent decades creating a wonderful holiday display with wise men, shepherds, a city, and lights, alongside his El Cerrito Arlington Boulevard home, starting in 1950.

The historical society has a particular fondness for the couple because our office and archive in City Hall is named the Sundar and Dorothy Shadi History Room thanks to a donation from Sundar and Dorothy to the city providing a historical room.

Shadi, an immigrant from India, always said his display was non-denominational. It evokes Christmas, but in a way that appeals to all. For a time it drew tens of thousands of people a season to El Cerrito, some coming via bus. Sundar crafted the figures and architecture, true delights of folk art. Dorothy, a Spanish professor at Cal, did the costumes.

The scene is a bit quieter now, since Sundar died in 2002 and volunteers with [the Sundar Shadi Holiday Display](#) put up the village at 7501 Moeser Lane, near Seaview. See it any night from 5 to 10 p.m. till it goes dark after December 27.



Here's the original El Cerrito Doggie Diner head. What a beauty. Marvin Collins submitted this photo as part of our recent historic photo contest. Like all entries, it is now part of our archive for people to enjoy forevermore. Courtesy of Marvin Collins

How El Cerrito disposed of the dog on its Doggie Diner. Today the famed Doggie Diner head has become a renowned, even beloved icon of Bay Area roadside architecture. Collectors prize the heads of a dog that appears to be a dachshund in a chef's hat.

They had been installed in Golden Gate Park (and a furor ensued when some creep set one ablaze), and some can be seen on Treasure Island. One is on Sloat Boulevard by the San Francisco Zoo. Another appears regularly in beautiful downtown Port Costa. There is of course a [Facebook fan group](#).

But none are atop Doggie Diners, for the chain closed in 1986. And El Cerrito lost its Doggie Diner head in 1972, and not to a windstorm but to the desire of city leaders to create a more tasteful commercial district.

“Dog’s Head Sign Must be Removed by Owner” was the headline for the lead story in the El Cerrito Journal on February 16, 1972.

“The city council has ruled, by a vote of 3-2, that the dog’s head sign, a trade mark of Doggie Diner restaurants in the Bay Area, must be removed from the local hot dog stand because it violates the city’s sign ordinance.”

Planning and development officer Dean Armstrong told the council that the sign, which was mounted on a pole alongside the restaurant, “greatly exceeds the size requirements” set by the new ordinance.

“Armstrong also told the council the dogs’ head is considered to be an eyesore by most observers,” the paper reported. The restaurant was at 10001 San Pablo Avenue, the site today of Sara’s Nail Salon, on the west side of San Pablo Avenue just south of O’Reilly’s Auto Parts.

Al Ross, who founded the local chain in 1949, showed up to defend the big-eyed dog, which was adored by many fans. He told the council that his firm’s “livelihood was at stake,” adding, “The dog’s head is the main factor in the public’s recognizing the Doggie Diner.”

Ross and several other business owners had come to the council to appeal for their signs. Making the motion to deny Ross’s appeal was councilman Rich Bartke – who several years later helped found the El Cerrito Historical Society and served periodically on its board and as president until recent years.

Three other sign owners won the OK that night to keep their signs, which apparently were seen as less an “eyesore” than the dog.

Arguing against a reprieve for Doggie Diner was councilman Troy Kitchens who called the restaurant a “stand up, throw the wrappers on the street restaurant,” and said, in the words of the reporter, that Doggie Diner “was not a credit to the community.”

One councilman, however, had an eye for attractive roadside architecture -- mayor Roy Mespelt who, the paper said, “thought the dog’s head sign was delightful and that businessmen in the city had a right to maintain a method of signing that would best benefit their business.” Mespelt called removing the sign “censorship.” But soon the Doggie was no more.



You can't travel far in the Bay Area without seeing remembrances of Doggie Diner heads. This is by Cherin's Appliances, 18th and Mission Street in San Francisco. Photo by Dave Weinstein

The Historical Society Board meets the second Thursday of the month at 5 p.m., these days via Zoom. Members of the public are encouraged to attend. Meetings rarely take more than an hour. Occasionally we need to change the date of a meeting. Our next meeting is **January 11, 2024 at 5 p.m.** (The 4:45 start time provides a cushion in case of glitches.) Topics will include: Preservation of historic places, archiving, publications, fundraising, our annual meeting, membership drive and more.

Topic: El Cerrito Historical Society's Zoom Meeting

Time: Jan 11, 2024 04:45 PM Pacific Time (US and Canada)

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/86365831121?pwd=SXBjRkFnTnQyUVc2QU9qMi8wSnB1UT09>

Meeting ID: 863 6583 1121

Passcode: 002352

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The Historical Society needs you – to join! To join or to renew your membership in the El Cerrito Historical Society, please [visit the join or donate page on our website](#):

