

## Local History Community Loses Two Of Its Leading Lights

The CCCHS community suffered the profound loss of two of our most important and influential history advocates in recent months. **Betty Maffei**, our first executive director and true pioneer in establishing the Society's archive, passed away in June at age 97. **Harriett Burt**, a longtime Society volunteer, former board member and history teacher died in May at age 85.



It is impossible to overstate, or even adequately describe, the influence **Betty Maffei** (shown at left) had on CCCHS. More than any other individual, she was responsible for the organization we have become today. Our archives, our preservation practices, and our reputation in the local history community can all be traced directly back to Betty. Her life and career are described in detail starting on page 2.

**Harriett Burt's** role in preserving local history defies easy summation. She taught history at Martinez Junior High School for decades, then had a second career in other types of public service. She served CCCHS and its cause in ways too numerous to list. She also served her local community in other ways, as you'll find in the article starting on page 4.

We will miss Betty and Harriett for their tireless commitment to preserving local history. On a more personal note, our staff, our members, and Board members who knew them personally will miss their friendship.

We are lucky to have known both of them.



### IN THE ARCHIVES

**Green newsprint** helped distinguish some newspapers back in the day, including one right here in Contra Costa County ... [see page 6](#)

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# Betty Maffei, Our First And Longest-Serving Executive Director, Passes Away at 97

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By Traci Gibbons

The Contra Costa County Historical Society is saddened by the passing of History Center Director Emeritus, Betty Maffei. Betty passed away on June 18, 2025, at age 97.



*Photo of Betty Maffei in 2004, taken by Traci Gibbons.*

Betty was not only the Executive Director of the History Center for many years, but she was also my dear friend. Betty and I began serving together on the Contra Costa County Historical Society Board of Directors in 1983. I also knew Betty and her mother, Amelia (Ginochio) Peel, through my work as Supervising Naturalist at Black Diamond Mines Regional Preserve, part of the East Bay Regional Park District.

Betty Jane (Peel) Maffei, the only child of Amelia and Samuel Peel, was born in Oakland, California in May 1928. Betty's roots in Contra Costa County extend back to the time when her grandfather, Giovanni Ginochio, arrived in the Mount Diablo Coal Field.

Giovanni traveled to California in the 1870s and lived in the coal mining community of Nortonville, Contra Costa County. Giovanni's wife, Angelina, and their daughter, Marie, came over from Italy and joined him in 1883. Giovanni independently mined coal and, as Betty often said, "built the largest house in the dying town of Nortonville." The structure included a boardinghouse and saloon. Betty's mother, Amelia, was born in Nortonville in 1892 and spent her youth there.

Growing up, Betty heard stories about the coal mining families of Nortonville. She also met former coal field residents.

In 1981, Betty's 89-year-old mother moved in with her and brought along all her stories and memories of Nortonville. Around the same time, Betty's interest in Contra Costa County history was sparked when she attended a class on the history of Contra Costa County at Diablo Valley College. Her mother suggested that Betty join the Contra Costa County Historical Society. In 1981, Betty did just that.

To help prove the "Papa said" stories that her mother shared with her, Betty spent time at the History Center, researching documents from their archives. In 2014, after many years of work, Betty's book, *Amelia's Nortonville*, was published by the Contra Costa County Historical Society. The book is based on the many oral history interviews that Betty conducted with her mother.

Betty was an active volunteer at the History Center. After being elected to the Board of Directors, she was appointed Director of Operations in 1985. Betty served as president of the Society from 1987 to 1988 and eventually presided as the first paid Executive Director of our History Center, retaining the position until retiring in December 2009.

## Betty Maffei, *continued*

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During her years as Executive Director, Betty did much for the Contra Costa County Historical Society. In addition to her daily duties of keeping the History Center open for researchers and visitors, she also established policies and procedures for the operation of the History Center, recruited volunteers, and obtained and organized numerous extensive acquisitions including the Stein, Sipes, Mutnick, and Veale Collections. Betty was also responsible for helping the Society become designated as the official historical archive of Contra Costa County.



*Photo from CCCHS Archives.*

Betty was known for going out into the community and presenting talks about the history of Contra Costa County to service organizations (such as the Lions Club, shown at left) as well as third grade, middle school, and college students. She helped facilitate the move of the History Center from its location in Pleasant Hill to a building on Main Street in Martinez. It was a monumental task!

When Betty was not at the History Center, she assisted the East Bay Regional Park District by serving as a moderator for the oral history forums that were held during the annual Black Diamond Days Celebration at the Preserve. She interviewed her mother and other former coal field residents and descendants on stage during the event.

Additionally, Betty shared information and photographs with the Park District regarding the Ginochio family and other families of the Mount Diablo Coal Field. I had the pleasure of conducting oral history interviews with Betty regarding her family and their life in the coal mining towns. Betty was a tremendous source of information, and the Park District is grateful to her for all that she has done to help document the history of the Mount Diablo Coal Field.

It is difficult to detail everything that Betty Maffei accomplished during her time with the Contra Costa County Historical Society. She did so much to acquire, document, and preserve the history of Contra Costa County and built the Historical Society into the organization we are today.

Betty's knowledge of the County's history is a loss to us all. We owe Betty a debt of gratitude for preserving so much of Contra Costa County's rich history for future generations.



*Traci Gibbons with Betty in 2021.  
Photo by Janiele Maffei Tovani.*

***Betty Maffei (May 19, 1928 – June 18, 2025)***



# Harriett Burt Was A History Teacher, Dedicated Public Servant, Champion For Martinez, CCCHS Volunteer and Board Member

By John Greitzer

Harriett Burt, one of our most vibrant, productive and beloved volunteers and Board members, passed away on May 6 at the age of 85, in San Antonio Texas.

Harriett served her community in ways that are too numerous to list completely and was highly successful at all of them. She spent the first part of her career as a history teacher at Martinez Junior High School, and then traveled the country providing training on classroom discipline to teachers, worked for the California Public Utilities Commission, served on the Martinez City Council and City Planning Commission, and most importantly for us, worked as a volunteer at our History Center and served on our Board of Directors from 2011 to 2014.

Harriett was well known to three members of our Board long before any of them joined CCCHS.



*"She was my history teacher at Martinez Junior High. She was truly an ambassador of Martinez." – Board member Oliver Bray*

*"Harriet was a lovely, upbeat person. When I was Presiding Judge, she would come to the jury assembly room many mornings and give the potential jurors an introduction to the City of Martinez. She told them what they could do during their breaks and lunch hours. I think it made people feel a bit better about having to be there." -- Board member Barry Goode*

*"We were friends since elementary school and junior high school. She knew who she was and what she believed. She was always passionate about what she believed in. She loved what she loved." – Board member Andrea Blachman*

*Class photo courtesy Andrea Blachman*

In the sixth-grade class photo above, from the Kensington School in 1951, Harriett is circled in blue. Andrea Blachman is two rows above her, with dark hair. To Harriett's left, the smiling blond boy in the white shirt is Philip Lesh, who would go on to be a founding member of the Grateful Dead. The boy in the upper right corner in the dark shirt is Tim Southwick, who went on to establish Berkeley Toyota and gained local fame for his TV ads for the dealership ("Nobody beats Berkeley! They never have, and they never will.")

After graduating high school Harriett attended the University of California at Berkeley for two years and then transferred to Fresno State College when her parents moved to Fresno. She got her degree at Fresno State.

## Harriett Burt, *continued*

Her work in local education was the start of an impressive resume. Harriett went on to travel the country, giving workshops to teachers on how to maintain classroom discipline with difficult students. She also:

- served as deputy chief of staff for the president of the California Public Utilities Commission;
- worked on the successful campaign of Delaine Eastin to be elected State Superintendent of Public Instruction in 1995 (the first and only woman ever elected to that post);
- served a term on the Martinez City Council from 1992 to 1996;
- served on the Martinez Planning Commission from 1999 to 2013; and
- volunteered at our History Center and served on our Board of Directors from 2011 to 2014.



*Photo courtesy Andrea Blachman*

Her friend Migs Carter recalled Harriett was always fond of teaching. Migs met Harriett when Migs's son was a student in Harriett's class. "It was a wonderful gift to this community when Harriett was offered the teaching job and said yes," Migs said. "Her students loved being her students."

In an oral history interview conducted by the Martinez Historical Society in 2013, Harriett recalled that when she would first start a new class in the fall, she would tell the students that if they were good to her, she would be good to them. If they were bad to her, she would be bad to them, and she was better at it than they were because she had more experience. That seemed to put just a bit of fear into the students at first, she remembered, and it worked to her advantage and theirs in the end.

Harriett joined many groups in town. "She threw herself into all things Martinez," said Migs. "The Italian community made her an honorary Italian. I think the smallness of Martinez gave her an opportunity to do all these things."

Harriett also wrote for the *Martinez News-Gazette* from 1969-79 and 1983-1990, covering local topics, particularly Martinez history. The paper was located just around the corner from our History Center.

She also enjoyed hosting events as master of ceremonies. "She never met a microphone she didn't like," Migs said. The photo above shows Harriett addressing the 20<sup>th</sup> reunion of the Martinez Junior High School class of 1968.



*Andrea Blachman (left) and Harriett  
Photo courtesy Andrea Blachman*

Harriett left her beloved Martinez and moved to San Antonio for the last few years of her life, to be close to relatives. She will be missed by the many people whose lives she touched during her 60 years in Martinez.

***Harriett Burt (April 3, 1940 – May 6, 2025)***

# Green Newspapers Stood Out From The Black-&-White Crowd

By Marjorie Newton

If you lived in Contra Costa County in the 1960s you know what the “Green Sheet” was. For you newcomers, it was a newspaper printed on green paper, delivered to 40,000 homes across the county on Sundays and Wednesdays at no cost to the customers. The Green Sheet was originally the *Walnut Creek Courier-Journal*, which began publishing in 1911.

In 1947, Harvard-educated lawyer Dean Leshner, who hailed from Nebraska, arrived in California looking for an area with growth potential. He decided on Walnut Creek, here in Contra Costa County. Leshner purchased the *Courier-Journal*, circulation 2,000, in 1952 and renamed it the *Contra Costa Times*. This was one of 15 small suburban newspapers that Leshner bought between 1947 and 1979.

The Green Sheet covered local news, reporting on local councils, boards and clubs, who got married, who got divorced, and who got born. High school, junior college and youth sports were a feature, and there was a place for Lost and Found items. The most popular part of the newspaper were the ads for grocery, drug, furniture and appliance stores, and car dealers. In 1957 Leshner began what was called “controlled circulation,” the distribution of the newspaper for free to its readers.



The (barely) Green Sheet from August 2, 1964 (from CCCHS Newspaper Archive).

Carriers were encouraged to solicit voluntary subscriptions to the paper. Contests were held with prizes and bonuses. The carrier was paid for delivering the paper and the readers continued to receive the paper whether they paid for a subscription or not.

A Friday edition began publication in 1961. Thursday was added in 1963 and Tuesday in 1965, followed by a Monday edition in 1977. By 1981 the *Contra Costa Times* was a daily newspaper published seven days a week.

Leshner's goal was to produce family newspapers that could be read by children and adults alike. The Green Sheet ended in 1974 when the paper began printing on white paper.

Dean Leshner died in 1993. His newspapers were acquired by Knight-Ridder, a national newspaper chain, and the paper eventually changed its name to the *East Bay Times*. The region's major performing arts center is named after him, as he was a patron of many community arts efforts. His foundation also has kindly awarded CCCHS some valuable grants over the years to help us finance our operations, for which we are grateful.

We have copies of the Green Sheet in our newspaper archive. If you're interested in having a look at them, come in to see them soon, because the green dye in the paper has faded a lot, to the point where it's barely green in some issues (see photo above). We also have many other local newspapers in our archive, and they are available for researchers to use, by appointment.

Come on in and find out the price of a pound of ground beef in 1985, if you're interested.



# President's Message

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By Tara Weber

I am dedicating this column to two women we lost recently who were so instrumental in Contra Costa's history community and volunteered much of their time to this Society: Betty Maffei and Harriett Burt.

The articles about Betty and Harriett in this newsletter give a terrific overview of their lives and roles within the community and CCCHS. What I'll add to that is how I and many others I've met during my time with CCCHS strive to accomplish just a small portion of what these two women did in their lifetimes. They were truly amazing. CCCHS has been, and still is, blessed with kind, smart, hard-working, history-loving individuals (plus a few feisty ones like Harriett ☺) who make our volunteer work enjoyable and our mission obtainable.

In 2018, a few of those individuals dedicated their time and expertise to give us a lasting treasure: an oral history interview with Betty Maffei describing the beginnings of, and her time with, the Contra Costa County Historical Society; **plus** a transcription of that interview with dozens of detailed footnotes. These two items are simply priceless. A special thanks goes out to Crystal Jimenez with the East Bay Regional Park District who provided the detailed footnotes and transcription of the recording, to Traci Gibbons (Board member) who conducted the interview with Betty, and to John Mercurio (Board member) and Priscilla Couden (Betty's successor as executive director) for proofreading and providing the final edits before "going to print."

The interview of Betty Maffei is in six parts and can be viewed by going to the [CCC History](#) tab of our website [www.cocohistory.org](http://www.cocohistory.org). Click on the Videos section and you'll see the tab for Betty Maffei. Now, anytime someone wants to see/hear Betty Maffei, all they need to do is go to cocohistory.org.

Harriett Burt's work is also on our website! She researched and wrote many essays about People, Places and Events during her tenure with CCCHS. You'll find her essays, in those categories, also on the [CCC History](#) Page of cocohistory.org.

I hope everyone takes the time to enjoy these treasures. Ladies, your legacy lives on!

With fond memories,

Tara

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## Enjoy the research of another long-standing CCCHS member on July 27<sup>th</sup> at the Campbell Theater!

Dean McLeod returns to Martinez to share "the rest of the story" of Port Chicago.

Expect a walk through time and some unexpected discussion, including theories of secrets, spies and bombs.

For details, go to [cocohistory.org/events](http://cocohistory.org/events). Secure your seat today!



*Port Chicago circa WWII by Keith Grover. Courtesy Dean McLeod.*



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**History inside.**

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## **Contra Costa County Historical Society**

**"Preserve, protect, and provide public access to the records and heritage of Contra Costa County."**

### **Upcoming Events**

**Sunday, July 27: Author In The Archives: Dean McLeod, "Port Chicago: The Rest Of The Story,"**  
Campbell Theater, Martinez

**Saturday, October 4: Open House** at the History Center, Martinez

**Sunday, October 19: Author In The Archives series** (TBA)

**We hope you can join us for these events.**

**History Center hours:**

**Tuesday through Thursday, 9 a.m. – 4 p.m.**

**First and third Saturdays of the month, 10 a.m. – 2 p.m.**