



Bulletin

April 2026

CCCHS Helps Local Hiking Club Archive Its 106-Year History In New Program

The Contra Costa County Historical Society is proud to provide our new “Archive Yourself” program, in which we help individuals or groups to properly and safely archive their records. The **Contra Costa Hills Club**, a hiking club that goes back more than one hundred years, is our first client for the program.

The club was founded in 1920 by a man named Harold French, who along with some likeminded friends, established the club as a hiking and conservation club. There wasn't yet an organized movement in the area to conserve local open space. French and his group set about to change that and succeeded. Club members continue to enjoy hiking these places today, 106 years later, throughout the Bay Area.

We recently unveiled the “Archive Yourself” program, in which we assist people or groups in conserving their records in archival quality storage. .



We are delighted that the Contra Costa Hills Club is our first client in this program. We are assisting them in archival methods, helping them obtain the necessary storage boxes, and we will be keeping their archives at our History Center in downtown Martinez. We appreciate the chance to help them preserve their important history for future generations.

For information on the program please contact info@cocohistory.org. Information on the Contra Costa Hills Club is available at contracostahills.org.

IN THE ARCHIVES

El Sobrante woman's letters to soldiers in Vietnam provided a welcome bit of normalcy and kindness to our troops in the conflict ... see [page 3](#)

ALSO INSIDE...

We remember Kathleen Mero, longtime volunteer, Board member and president of the Society ... [p. 2](#)

The Anza Expedition reached our shores 250 years ago ... [p. 4](#)

The world's tallest smokestack graced the Contra Costa shoreline but didn't do its job ... [p. 5](#)

Contra Costa pioneer families merged through marriage ... [pp. 6-7](#)

Our annual meeting was a big hit for history and fundraising ... [p. 9](#)

CCCHS Remembers Kathleen Mero – Volunteer, Board Member And Society President

By Tara Weber

Kathleen Mero, a long-standing volunteer and Board member of CCCHS, passed away on December 24, 2025 at the age of 84.

Kathleen and her husband Bill began volunteering at the new CCCHS History Center in Pleasant Hill in the 1980's. They were a team to be reckoned with, and their many contributions are profound.

Kathleen is remembered for her extraordinary organizational skills, helping to establish our first databases that we still use today. She helped organize and index the Louis L. Stein Collection, a series of voluminous donations made by CCCHS co-founder Stein that marked the start of our archive.

By the 1990's Kathleen was overseeing the training and database input of Naturalization Records by the volunteers to ensure the entries into "LookBack" were consistent with the format she and Bill developed. The LookBack database program was written and developed exclusively for us by Bill Mero. There are not enough "thank you's" that can be extended for this extraordinary contribution to CCCHS.



Courtesy of the Mero family



Kathleen and Bil hard at work in 2014

In 1992 Kathleen was voted on as a Board member, contributing yet more to the Society. She served as Board President for a two-year term in 1999-2000.

Long-serving Board member and volunteer Scott Saftler shares one of the many stories he heard from the Meros. *"One story that I recall was their lunch breaks. A number of them would walk a couple of blocks to "Ann's Sunshine Café", at the corner of Oak Park and Patterson in Pleasant Hill. Apparently, Ann would bake pies for the lunch crowd but sold out quickly as they were so good. A few of the volunteers would order their desserts as soon as they walked in to make sure that they got some!"*

Those who worked with Kathleen remember her as welcoming, energetic, intelligent and enthusiastic. I concur. Our paths crossed briefly, for maybe a year, when I began volunteering at CCCHS. Kathleen always made me feel welcome, greeted me with a smile and was eager to show me the project she was working on. In addition to her decades with CCCHS, she was involved in saving the John Marsh House in Brentwood, and was a regular columnist for the *California HISTORIAN*, a publication of the Conference of California Historical Societies, which CCCHS is proud to display in our bookstore.

Kathleen called Contra Costa home for many decades until about 2017 when she and Bill moved to Lodi, California to be closer to family. We are deeply grateful for all she did for CCCHS. Thank you, Kathleen.

Inside The Archives

Contra Costa Woman Was Pen Pal To Dozens Of U.S. Soldiers Stationed In Vietnam During The War

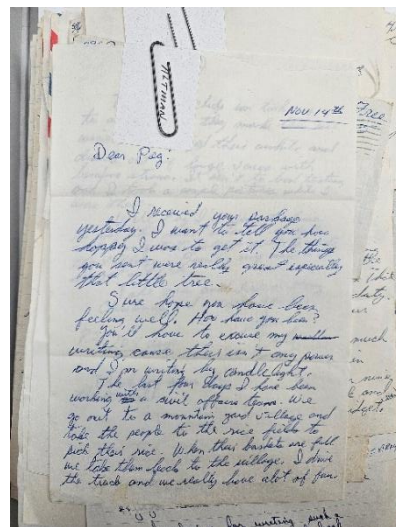
By John Greitzer

Our Special Collections Room is full of archives that reveal personal stories ranging from triumphant to tragic and everything in between. None is more moving than our collection of letters written by American soldiers in Vietnam to Margaret “Peggy” Ford of El Sobrante in 1967-1969.



Peggy Ford circa 1967
CCCHS Photo Archive

Peggy took it upon herself to become a “pen pal” with Contra Costa soldiers who were serving in Vietnam, writing letters to them and letting them know they weren’t forgotten. They wrote letters back whenever they could, and Peggy kept all of them. She was already in her 70s when she began writing to the soldiers, and she died while the war was still in progress. The letters she received back from the servicemen, carefully stored in boxes, were handed down to her daughter and then to her son, who donated them to CCCHS in 2006.



Letter to Peggy Ford
CCCHS Photo Archive

The letters from Vietnam spoke of loneliness, camaraderie among soldiers, loss of fellow troop members in combat, and more mundane subjects like the weather, food, and the soldiers’ plans for their futures after they returned home. Virtually all of the letters expressed the soldiers’ gratitude to Peggy for caring about them.

Peggy got the soldiers’ names and overseas addresses from various sources including local newspapers, high schools, churches and the soldiers’ parents when she could track them down. Her acts of kindness got her several writeups in Bay Area newspapers at the time, but she remained modest about her efforts. All three of her children had served in the military and she was a member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars. Earlier in her life, she was a piano teacher in Richmond and had a jazz band, the Seven Syncopators. Peggy Ford left a legacy of caring, along with all those letters.



Planned gifts are a powerful way to make a lasting difference without affecting your finances. By including CCCHS in your will or estate plans, you can help us create a lasting legacy that ensures our mission will continue for generations to come.

The Juan Bautista De Anza Expedition Of 1775-76 Was Thoroughly Chronicled In The Diary Of Father Pedro Font

By Beverly Lane

This year we commemorate two 250th anniversaries: the Declaration of Independence and the Anza Expedition to San Francisco. Juan Bautista de Anza was the extraordinary leader of this first overland expedition to the Bay Area. Another outstanding participant was Father Pedro Font, the Expedition's Franciscan chaplain.

There is no better source of information on the expedition than Spanish diaries, in particular those written by missionaries. Father Pedro Font's detailed writing about the 1775-1776 Juan Bautista de Anza expedition is a premier example. Historian Herbert Bolton wrote that "Font was a man of liberal education, which is reflected in the richness of his allusions and the clarity of his expression." As with all the first California Franciscan missionaries, he was born in Spain, well-educated and dedicated to converting Indians.

When expeditions into California began in 1769 there were clashes between the missionaries and Spanish military leaders. Disputes between a determined Father Junipero Serra and California's military governors Portola, Rivera and Fages are well documented. Anza insisted that he be appointed the sole commander of the trek, having experienced decision-making challenges with Father Francisco Garces in a 1774 exploratory trip to California.

Father Font was often a curmudgeon with sharp criticisms of Anza in his journals. His diary described the itinerary, the geography, the Natives, and the early missions, in addition to *fandangos* (dances) and gossip. While critical of the appearance, customs and homes of many tribes, Font wrote complimentary comments about some including the Quechan, Chumash and Ohlone. He wrote that Natives who had no opportunity to learn about Christ weren't necessarily hell-bound, contrary to Catholic doctrine.



In addition to serving as chaplain, Font had musical skills, a mathematical turn of mind, the ability to use instruments for noting longitudes and map-making skills. He used all his talents in service to this epic journey and produced one of the best diaries in Western exploration history, which are fundamental documents of exploration in the American West.

An Anza 250 Symposium will be held at Los Medanos College in Pittsburg on April 11. This is an opportunity to learn about the Expedition, its impact on Native peoples and its legacy. Register at [Eventbrite.com](https://www.eventbrite.com).

Font's diaries are online at webdeanza.org.

Sources: Herbert Bolton, *Outpost of Empire*; Alan K. Brown; *With Anza to California 1775-1776, The Journal of Pedro Font*; Vladimir Guerrero, *The Anza Trail and the Settling of California*. **Images:** Explorer and Missionary (Edith Hamel); expedition image (David Rickman). Courtesy National Park Service.

Beverly Lane is a historian, published author, curator of the Museum of the San Ramon Valley, former mayor of Danville, and member of the CCCHS Board of Directors. She is working with the National Park Service on events and exhibits memorializing the Anza Expedition and has been recognized by the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors for her efforts (see page 8).

Contra Costa Town Once Had World's Tallest Smokestack

By Marjorie Newton

The tallest smokestack in the world was erected in the 1930s in the town of Selby, a small industrial enclave on Contra Costa's northwestern shore, between Rodeo and Crockett. The tower stood at 605 feet and 9 inches and was built for the American Smelting and Refining Company to carry fumes from the plant away from local communities. Construction of the column was completed on July 13, 1937.

Originally, the smelting plant belonged to the Selby Smelting and Lead Company owned by Thomas Selby of San Francisco. He also served as Mayor of San Francisco from 1869 to 1871.

In 1883, needing more space, the company moved from San Francisco to the Contra Costa site, which was not yet called Selby. In 1886, the thriving new plant got a post office, with Thomas Selby's son Prentiss serving as its first postmaster. The town was later named for Prentiss Selby.

In 1905 the business was acquired by the American Smelting and Refining Company (ASARCO). The plant smelted ore from all over the western United States. By 1910, farmers across the water in Solano County complained that the plant was poisoning their animals and crops. Acidic smoke from the plant destroyed the lead that held sections of glass together in the stained-glass windows of St. Patrick's Church in Port Costa, five miles downwind.



It turned out that even the tallest smokestack in the world couldn't carry the fumes far enough away. The company was sued for the deaths of horses in Solano County. Researchers at the University of California at Davis concluded the animals had died of lead poisoning most likely from the Selby plant.



ASARCO closed the plant in 1971, blaming a labor strike and outdated equipment. Nearly 100 pounds of dynamite toppled the smokestack on June 14, 1973, shown at left. The property was bought by Wickland Oil in 1977. Plans for using the site for a coal terminal never came to fruition. All the old buildings have been razed.

In 2005, ASARCO, long gone from Selby, declared bankruptcy. The court earmarked \$33 million of the firm's funds to clean up a toxic slag pile left at the site. The

State of California is still overseeing efforts to clean it up.

Meanwhile, ASARCO emerged from bankruptcy and remains in business as an international mining company headquartered in Tucson, Arizona. The company history page on their website makes no mention of the Selby plant.

Photos from CCCHS Photo Archive

Contra Costa Pioneer Families Come Together

By Gene Welch

When we left off in the last newsletter, it was 1844, and William Welch was finally granted Rancho Las Juntas after 20 years of determination and perseverance. Welch tragically died two years later in 1846, and his broken-hearted family moved from the San Jose area to the wild and untamed land of Contra Costa County. Rancho Las Juntas encompassed 13,324 acres, and included Pleasant Hill, Pacheco, North Walnut Creek, and East Martinez. William Welch's son built an adobe for the family in Walnut Creek. He and his older sister, Maria Concepcion, struggled to take care of their widowed mother and seven younger siblings: Ana Maria Ramona, Maria de Guadalupe, Enrique, Maria Refugio Adelaida, Juan, Jose Vicente, and Guadalupe Reyes.

In 1829, when Kit Carson was exploring the Mount Diablo area, he found it occupied with hostile Miwok and Ohlone tribes. Before the family moved to Rancho Las Juntas, they burned down Welch's original adobe and corral on Las Juntas Street in Martinez, so he left the ranch in charge of some friendly vaqueros and relocated to Walnut Creek. By the time the family settled there in the late 1840's, pestilence had decimated the tribes.



Map of Rancho Las Juntas
Bancroft Library; UC Berkeley

Now squatters and new settlers were coming in from the east. As the Mexican-American War came to an end with the signing of the Treaty of Hildago on February 2, 1848, the new American government stated they would honor the Mexican land grants. However, William Jr. knew better than to trust this new government. To protect the land, the boundaries of Rancho Las Juntas had to be recorded in detail and secured.

By this time, the son of Ignacio Martinez, Vincente, was living in the two-story adobe that still stands today on the John Muir National Historic Site. Vincente asked his brother-in-law, Colonel William M. Smith, to lay out a town, so he hired surveyor Thomas A. Brown, who divided the area into lots. With the Gold Rush in 1849, the lots sold so well that Widow Welch asked him to lay out 500 more acres.

Widow Welch only spoke Spanish, so the squatters and new settlers tried to take advantage of her. Her son-in-law, Joseph Swanson, became the administrator of the Welch estate and filed *William Welch vs. The United States* on December 20, 1853 to save the land from illegal occupation.



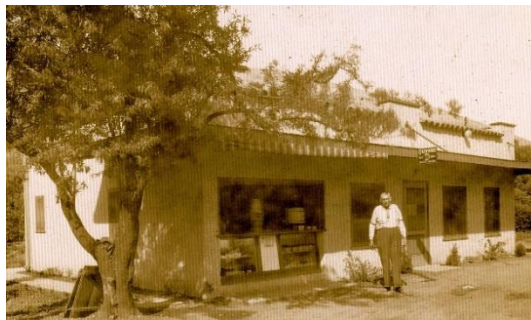
Bing cherries for former
President Taft, 1915

It was becoming clear to William Jr. that it would be nearly impossible to hold onto the land. His siblings wanted to sell their portions, and his mother needed the money to survive. After the immense effort his father put in to obtain Rancho Las Juntas, William Jr. felt he was betraying him, but he acquiesced for his family.

Pioneer Families, *continued*

By the 1880's, most of the land was sold. All that remained was the Walnut Creek ranch. About this time, a determined young nurseryman arrived from upstate New York -- Tom Duane. He sought out Dr. John Strentzel, a well-known orchardist (and father-in-law of John Muir). Strentzel advised him to consider the land near his house in Franklin Canyon, letting Duane take his horse and wagon.

Unfortunately, Duane ran over a ranch dog with the wagon, so he went to the nearest house, apologized to the owner, and offered to pay for the dog. After telling him he was looking to start an orchard, the owner, Mr. Franklin sold him one hundred acres for \$500. Duane, a very large man standing at 6'7" tall, became a successful orchardist.



Tom Duane at his fruit stand in 1920

Among his many accomplishments, Duane developed the California Bing Cherry, the Duane Plum & Prune, won a gold medal at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair, and gave a gift of his prized cherries to former President Taft when he visited the 1915 San Francisco World's Fair. Duane married Sadie Rodgers in 1894, who was born in the farmhouse at Rodgers Ranch.



George Welch

A great-grandson of William Welch, George Welch, married Thomas Duane's daughter Verna in 1926. George also was a Galindo, Soto, Briones, Bernal, Rajas, Pacheco, Martinez, Moraga, and just about any settler you can think of from the 1776 Anza Expedition (celebrating its 250th Anniversary this year).

William Welch's brother-in-law, Francisco Pacheco, co-founded Concord, along with Salvio Pacheco. As for Verna, her mother was born at Rodgers Ranch and her grandfather was Patrick Rodgers, who founded and named Pleasant Hill with his brother, Edward. Rodgers Ranch was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1991.



Verna Duane

Steve Welch grew up among his great-grandfather's orchards. In his memory, Steve decided to bring back what remained of the Duane Ranch to its former glory. In 2005, with support from his family, Steve removed the old walnut trees and brush to reveal a terraced hill, perfect for a vineyard. Rich Pato, owner of Pato Vineyards in Oakley and a good friend of Steve's, helped him procure a contract with Rosenblum Cellars of Oakland, who said it would be best if we had a good family story on which to name the vineyard and winery. Hmm, let's see...I think we have just the story.

Geneve Welch's husband, Steve, is a direct descendant of William Welch, Maria Antonia Galindo, Patrick Rodgers, Tom Duane, and many Los Californianos. Steve & Geneve own William Welch Wines and Rancho Las Juntas Vineyard in Martinez. Look for Geneve's book, Escape to California: The Incredible True Story of William Welch, coming out this summer. Farm and portrait photos provided by the Welch family.

Board Of Supervisors Honors CCCHS Board Member Beverly Lane And National Park Service Planner For Work On Anza 250



Congratulations to our own Beverly Lane, Board member and key organizer of events marking the 250th anniversary of the Anza Expedition.

The Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors honored Beverly and National Park Service Planner Estrella Sainburg with a resolution memorializing the 250th anniversary of the seminal expedition to Alta California (upper California).

The photo at left shows, from left, Beverly, Estrella, and CCCHS Board President Tara Weber, outside the Board of Supervisors' Chambers at the County Administration Building on Escobar Street in Martinez.

See page 4 for Beverly's article about the legendary expedition, and page 9 for an article about our Annual Meeting in January, where Beverly was the featured speaker.

Photo courtesy Beverly Lane

Volunteer with us!



We are always looking for talented individuals with a wide range of skills to share their experiences, abilities, and education with us as we fulfill our mission to preserve and protect the history and culture of Contra Costa County. We are actively seeking volunteers that can assist us with the following:

Data Entry

Event Planning & Marketing

IT/Computers

Membership Assistant

Office administration

Research Specialist

Our Volunteer Application can be found on our website cocohistory.org/support#volunteer-opportunities or in-person at the History Center. Questions first? Call our Exec. Director LeighAnn Davis at (925) 229-1042.

See you at the Center!

75th Annual Meeting For CCCHS Draws Enthusiastic Crowd

By John Greitzer

Our 75th Annual Meeting was held at the Concord Museum and Event Center on January 24, with an enthusiastic audience of 81 there to hear Beverly Lane presenting the history of the Juan Bautista De Anza Expedition in 1776 (a year in which some other important events occurred on the East Coast).



CCCHS Treasurer Steve James, President Tara Weber and Executive Director LeighAnn Davis provided updates on achievements and challenges over the past year and the near future.

The main draw, however, was Beverly's talk on the Anza Expedition (left). As noted elsewhere in this issue, she is taking a lead role in organizing local events marking the 250th anniversary of the expedition, which opened up the Bay Area to European colonization.

Beverly is working with the National Park Service on the events and a historical exhibit at the Museum of the San Ramon Valley in Danville, where she is curator.



At left, Executive Director LeighAnn Davis reports on work accomplished at the History Center during 2025, and challenges facing the organization in 2026.

Below, a shot of the nice accommodations at the Concord Museum and Event Center, which made for a comfortable and enjoyable meeting and luncheon.



After the presentations, our annual raffle of prizes netted us \$750 -- not a bad way to end the day! Thanks to all who participated.

We also appreciate the help we got from Event Center staff. It made our day much easier and we are grateful.

Fragments Tell Of A Mystery In Early Contra Costa County

By John Greitzer

Justice of the Peace Absalom Peak had a busy June in 1850, a few months after Contra Costa became an official county in the new State of California. On June 11, he took testimony from Martine Berrellesa, of Martinez, about the disappearance and apparent murder of Martine's brother the day before in the company of four unknown "indians." On the same day, Peak took testimony about the discovery of an unidentified body. In September of that year, two men described as "indians" were arrested for murder, but records didn't identify their victim or the circumstances of their arrest.

Whether these cases are related is unknown, because all we have of the record is fragments – a few pages from court records rather than the full case file. These loose pages are stored in a box labelled "fragments" in our court-case file room. The court, back in 1850, was called the Court of Sessions. It was a three-judge panel that served as the county's executive, legislative and judicial branches all in one. As a Justice of the Peace, Absalom Peak was one of the three judges on the Court, presided over by County Judge F.M. Warmcastle (if you do historical research about the county's early years, you'll see Warmcastle's name all over the place).

According to Martine Berrellesa's statement of June 11, his brother left home the day before with four men whom Martine didn't recognize, whom he described as "indians." The statement doesn't record the first name of Martine's brother. Martine stated that his brother had with him about "twenty-five dollars in cash and some small bundels (sic), the contents he did not know. The money was found with him, the bundels was not. The indians I have never seen since them and my brother left."

Also on June 11, Peak took testimony from William Hendricks of Martinez, stating that around 5 p.m. that day Hendricks saw a saddle and hat by the roadside (he didn't give a location) and then found the nearby body of a man "down the hill" and "I believe him to have been murdered." The statement does not indicate whether the body Hendricks found was that of Martine Berrellesa's brother.

Later that year, in September, two men identified as "Indians" named Wempett and Wampett were charged with manslaughter, briefly jailed and fined, but available records don't provide any details.

Martine Berrellesa would meet his own untimely death in 1864 when he was murdered in Martinez by a man named Francisco, with whom he reportedly had a running feud. He and his brother were among numerous Berrellesa men – about a dozen from this very large extended family -- who died by violence in the Bay Area and southern California in the 1800s. Many of the murders were committed by American settlers intent on stealing the Berrellesas' extensive land holdings and businesses. One of the murders was committed by General John Fremont's troops in San Rafael in June 1846 during the American settlers' short-lived Bear Flag Rebellion. Fremont's men, led by Kit Carson, shot and killed an unarmed Jose Reyes Berryessa and his two nephews in that instance (Reyes Berryessa used the Anglicized spelling of the family name).

Sources: CCCHS Archives (statements of Martine Berrellesa and William Hendricks); Wempett and Wampett and Martine Berrellesa's murder from J.P. Munro-Fraser, *History of Contra Costa County, California*, W.A. Slocum & Co. Publishers, 1882 and reprinted by CCCHS in 2000, available in the CCCHS Bookstore. Information on Reyes Berryessa murder from numerous online and published sources including letters published in newspapers by witnesses.

President's Message

By Tara Weber

Happy Birthday CCCHS! April 30th will mark 75 years since CCCHS became an official historical society with 150 charter members paying their first dues of \$5 and receiving a "Gold Charter Card" from Chairman A.F. Bray. So much has transpired since we began in 1951. This year began with our Annual Membership Meeting paying tribute to our co-founders, Judge Bray and pharmacist Louis L. Stein. I believe they would be very proud of how far the Society has come and how much Contra Costa history has been preserved.

Important work continues at the History Center: written documentation of the extensive **L.L. Stein Collection** is nearing completion; re-housing of the **Albert M. Davies Collection** began in January, and the scanning of his photo negatives will begin later this year. Thank you to all who have contributed to this work. The **CCCHS Book Club** took off in January with great enthusiasm. Thanks to Melissa Jacobson for organizing the talks and field trips. Be sure to check out where they're going next -- scan the QR code at right.

The "For Sale" sign went up on the building we lease at 724 Escobar Street. We are actively looking for a permanent home. If you or someone you know has a spare building to gift or sell, please call me or Executive Director Leigh Ann Davis at **(925) 229-1042**.

Until next time,
Tara



CCCHS Membership Application

New Renewal Gift Date _____

Name(s) _____

Address _____ Apt/Ste. _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Phone _____ Email _____

Newsletter delivery: Mail Email (PDF file) Both

I have enclosed a check in the amount of \$ _____

Please call CCCHS with your credit card information. (925) 229-1042

Member Benefits:

- Society's quarterly newsletter *Bulletin*
- Invitation to member only events
- Reduced rates for CCCHS-performed research at the History Center
- Reprint of c 1890 Contra Costa map
- Eligible to join CFCU (Chevron Federal Credit Union)
- 10% bookstore discount

Historian Level and Up: Benefits vary by level. Please visit coohistory.org for a complete listing.

- Reprint of the 1882 book *History of Contra Costa County*
- Set of 4 notecards depicting Contra Costa County
- Complimentary admission & VIP seating at the CCCHS Annual Meeting & Luncheon for member and one guest
- Private Tour of the History Center for member (and up to 4 guests)
- CCCHS presentation to the business/organization of your choice

Annual Dues:

<input type="checkbox"/> Student	\$20
<input type="checkbox"/> Individual	\$50
<input type="checkbox"/> Couple	\$90
<input type="checkbox"/> Historian	\$150
<input type="checkbox"/> Mt. Diablo	\$300
<input type="checkbox"/> The 1951 Club	\$750
<input type="checkbox"/> Stein & Bray Founder's Circle	\$1500

Your membership is tax deductible as allowed by law.



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History inside.

Contra Costa County Historical Society

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

Upcoming Events

Saturday, April 11: Anza 250 Symposium

9:00–4:00, Los Medanos College, Student Union Building , 2700 E. Leland Road, Pittsburg

Saturday, April 18: CCCHS Members Book Club

10:30-12, History Center, 724 Escobar Street, Martinez

Friday, April 24: CCCHS Members Book Club visit to Rose Hill Cemetery

1:00-2:30, History Center, 724 Escobar Street, Martinez

Wednesday, May 6: Contra Costa History Conference

11:00-4:00, Diablo Valley College, 321 Golf Club Road, Pleasant Hill

Saturday, July 18: Author in the Archives

4:00-6:00, Campbell Theater, 636 Ward Street, Martinez

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.

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Beverly Lane, 2nd Vice President

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