



Bulletin

October 2026

Reflection, Gratitude At CCCHS

This is a time of mixed emotions here at CCCHS. On one hand, we have a lot to be thankful for, and proud of, these days. We had cause for celebration, for example, when the family of former Executive Director Betty Maffei donated her papers to us recently. This vast collection includes notebooks, photos and negatives, books, letters and other documents, including some of Betty's notes on her genealogical research on the county's coal-mining families – a real treasure for our archive.

Another bright spot is our progress cataloging and storing thousands of images taken by noted Alamo photographer Albert E. Davies in the early 1900s, which Executive Director LeighAnn Davis rescued from oblivion last year. The painstaking work is graciously co-funded by the Alamo Improvement Association, for which we are grateful.

Our CCCHS Book Club, for members of the Society, is growing in popularity. Former Board member and history professor Melissa Jacobsen has done a great job bringing the book club from an idea into a very popular program. A wide variety of books on local history are explored, sometimes with field trips to locations mentioned in the books.

On the other hand, we are deeply saddened by the death of our longtime Board member and Treasurer Steve James in late August. It is impossible to adequately describe Steve's impact on our organization, but we've tried, in the article on pages 4 and 5 of this issue. Our financial position is far stronger than it would have been without Steve's steady hand.

While we mourn this terrible loss, we are grateful that interest in our work continues to grow. We will stay focused on our mission of preserving, protecting and providing public access to Contra Costa history. It's the best way to honor those we've lost.

IN THE ARCHIVES

The origins of Contra Costa's coal mining families are revealed in a large collection of papers donated by the family of former Executive Director Betty Maffei ... see page 3

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Judge A.F. Bray was a key figure in creating CCCHS, seventy-five years ago ... p. 6

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CCCHS-related committee helps the County inventory its historic properties ... p. 9

The Valley Pioneer Covered All The News That Was Fit To Print

By Beverly Lane

Imagine a weekly newspaper which covered all that was happening in the San Ramon Valley: news, parties, politics, weddings, sports plus editorial opinions. When the valley had only 2,126 people in 1945 and grew to 58,000 by 1988, *The Valley Pioneer* was avidly anticipated every Wednesday.

In 1986 writer Victoria Williams wrote a history of the newspaper, which was founded by T. Eugene Haley in January 1945. Haley served as editor and publisher until 1948, when John DeForest bought the paper; DeForest sold it to Semmes Gordon in 1957. Leshner Communications bought it in 1971 and eventually merged it into their growing suburban newspaper empire.

Williams wrote, “The *Pioneer* was tabloid size, distributed through direct mail to subscribers and grew to a paid circulation of about 1,500 by 1960. ‘There weren’t many people living in the Valley at that time,’ said former editor and general manager Bill Ketsdever, who served from 1960 to 1979. ‘It was basically a cow town. There were a few bars, a few grocery stores, a few restaurants like the Brass Door. Highway 21 ... was the only road.’”



A 1945 issue of the Valley Pioneer, courtesy Beverly Lane.

“We didn’t have any reporters,’ said Ketsdever of the early 1960s. ‘I shot the photos and Semmes wrote the stories. Our wives helped us paste up the paper on Tuesday mornings.’”

When Safeway came to Danville, they used the store’s full-page ads which led to the paper changing from smaller tabloid size to a standard-size newspaper. More residents came to the area as the new Interstate 680 freeway opened to Sycamore Valley Road in 1964.

The newspaper covered everything. Ketsdever recalled going to the site of the Pacific Airlines crash in 1964 and wishing he hadn’t because there were body parts strewn over the Tassajara Valley hillside. Articles covered the sale of the Bishop Ranch to Western Electric, several Valley incorporation efforts (which all failed), the story of Sara Jane Moore who tried to assassinate President Gerald Ford, high school sports, elections, the celebrations when I-680 opened, and neighborhood flooding.

Robert Goll, who was a reporter and editor from 1977-82, said the *Pioneer* really flourished in 1981. “The staff I had was exceptional”, said Goll. “They would do almost anything to see the Wednesday paper was the best it could be.” He said that while the *Pioneer* wasn’t the only newspaper widely circulated in the Valley during the 1980s, “it gave residents what no other paper could. As opposed to a daily record of the past 24 hours, it offered a focused, weekly perspective, an overview, on local news and community events.”

No wonder old timers look back on the *Valley Pioneer* with nostalgia. In 1988 it ceased publication under its own name and was absorbed into the *East Bay Times*.

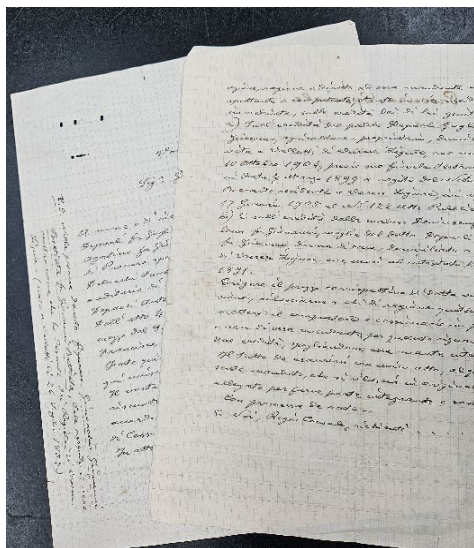
Sources: *The Valley Pioneer* Aug. 16, 1964, 1984 (Gordon column called “33 Memorable Years”), Oct. 1, 1986; and “Valley Vignette” (published in *Alamo Today*, April 2026).

Inside The Archives

Betty Maffei Family Archives Donated To CCCHS, Providing A Look At Coal Mining Families And Betty Herself

Article and photos by John Greitzer

The family of Betty Maffei, our longest-serving executive director, has kindly donated a treasure trove of Betty's personal archives to the History Center. Betty, who served as our executive director for 30 years until her retirement in 2009, died in 2025 at the age of 97. After starting as a volunteer and then serving as a member of our Board of Directors, she became the Society's executive director from the 1980s to 2009 and played a key role in establishing our History Center, among many other contributions too countless to mention.



Correspondence from Giovanni Ginocchio, grandfather of Betty Maffei.

Our volunteer staff has been going through the boxes of material that were donated by Betty's family and they have found everything from Betty's own correspondence and notes on her genealogical research on the families of Contra Costa County's coal-mining region, to letters her grandfather, Giovanni Ginocchio, wrote in Italian to banks and other businesses back in Italy (like the letters at left, which we have not yet translated).

There are even a few artifacts from the Nortonville coal-mining town where Betty lived as a child. These include a lantern from an old horse-drawn carriage used in Nortonville.

Betty wrote a book, Amelia's Nortonville, about the history of Nortonville and its families as described to her by her mother Amelia Ginocchio Peel. The book is available in the CCCHS bookstore, both in the History Center and at cocohistory.org.

The new donation of material includes some of Betty's research files which she used while writing the book. (If you'd like to hear from Betty herself, our website has a video of her discussing the origins and early years of CCCHS, in an interview conducted by CCCHS Board member Traci Gibbons in 2018. You can find it at cocohistory.org/ccch-history/videos.)

Overall, these papers, photographs and other mementos donated by the Maffei family will help us document the very rich history that Betty worked so hard to preserve

Once our staff has gone through all the items, they will be properly housed in archival containers and catalogued on our website. We are grateful to the Maffei family for the donation.

CCCHS Remembers Steve James -- Treasurer, Board Member, Tour Guide, History Advocate And Friend To Many

By John Greitzer; Photos from CCCHS Files

The Contra Costa County Historical Society is deeply saddened by the passing of long-time Board member, Treasurer, and friend Steve James. Steve passed away in his sleep in August, a month short of his 78th birthday.

As noted on the front page of this issue, it is impossible to overstate how much Steve meant to this organization, its members, and visitors to the History Center. His contributions and his commitment to CCCHS are too many to list, though we'll try in this article.

One way to get to know Steve is to hear from him, in the following excerpt from our July 2022 edition.



"I'm native to Contra Costa County, having lived in El Sobrante most of my life. I graduated from De Anza High School in 1966. I attended Contra Costa Junior College, receiving an Associate of Arts degree and then transferred to Sonoma State University majoring in Geography and History. In 1970 I entered the Army having won the draft lottery, lucky me.

After the Army I worked at several jobs, never being satisfied with what I was doing and always thinking I need to get back into college. With the benefit and support of the GI bill, my parents, and now wife Priscilla I entered Golden Gate University in San Francisco majoring in Business. I still loved history but was focused on a degree that would offer a good career job.

I graduated from Golden Gate University with a Business degree in 1978 and began working for Chevron. I retired after 32 years with Chevron as a Financial Analyst and Business Planner.

After retirement I was looking for something to satisfy my need to be productive. It was then that I found out that the most wanted person in the nonprofit arena was an accountant to fill their Treasurer needs. Before I learned to say NO, I became the Treasurer of three non-profits -- the El Sobrante Historical Society, the Contra Costa County Historical Society, and the Chevron Retirement Association - East Bay Chapter.

Priscilla and I have a daughter and son, along with 3 grandkids that fill all the time gaps in my volunteering."

Our Board is grateful that Steve joined us and became Treasurer before he learned to say "no".

Remembering Steve James, *continued*

As our treasurer, Steve kept us on the best possible financial path, which is a challenge for small non-profits like us. He was always on the lookout for ways to better capitalize on our limited assets and consistently provided us with great advice on that. He also excelled in financial negotiations on the occasions when we had to do so.



On a more personal level, Steve was one of our most popular tour guides at the History Center, where he enjoyed showing visitors the many collections in our archive. Visitors often remarked that their interaction with Steve was one of the most memorable things about their visit.

His great interest in local history led him to join both CCCHS and the El Sobrante Historical Society, and he donated some of his late father's papers to our archive a few years ago. The photo at left shows Steve, on the left, with our former Board member Donald Bastin at an event for the El Sobrante Historical Society, of which both were Board members.

"I am certain that I am not alone when I say I have not lost just a former colleague, but I have also lost a very dear friend," said Mike McCarron, CCCHS Executive Director from 2020 to 2023.

"During one of our many Wednesday afternoon chats, Steve came up with the idea of an essay scholarship for Contra Costa County high school seniors. It was a brilliant idea and the Board agreed," Mike recalled. The scholarship program continues today. Mike suggested the Board honor Steve by naming the scholarship program in his memory.

Board member Tara Weber recalls how Steve "absolutely adored his grandson," bringing him to the History Center when he was a young child. Tara also recalled how proud Steve was of his military service, and, recalling Steve's whimsical side, she noted that he named our History Center vacuum cleaner "Betty," after our legendary executive director Betty Maffei.

The photo at right shows Steve volunteering at the "Trunk or Treat" event in Martinez several years ago, in which he and others gave out candy to trick or treaters from the trunk of a vintage car, at a very rainy Halloween event. Steve reported there was a decent turnout for the event despite the rain.



Steve did so many things and committed so much of his time to CCCHS that we can barely scratch the surface. He left his mark in more ways than we can count, and we are grateful we had him for as long as we did.

He is survived by his wife Priscilla, their children Kathlene and Joseph, and three grandchildren.

Steven O. James (September 29, 1948 – August 25, 2026)

CCCHS Co-Founder A.F. Bray Was A Leader And Supporter Of Many In Contra Costa County

As we near the end of our 75th year and publish our final *Bulletin* of 2026, we commemorate CCCHS Co-Founder A.F. Bray.

By Tara Weber

Born in Butte, Montana, Absalom Francis Bray came to California in 1904 to attend Mt. Tamalpais Military Academy in San Rafael. He later decided upon a legal career, registering at the University of California at Berkeley. After receiving his law degree, Bray practiced in San Francisco for two years. He then moved to Martinez, joining the firm of J. E. Rodgers, later Rodgers and Bray. In 1914 he became an Assistant District Attorney for Contra Costa County. He also served as City Attorney for Martinez, Concord, and Pinole.

In 1935 Governor Merriam appointed Bray to the Superior Court of Contra Costa County. He served until 1947, when Governor Earl Warren named him Justice of the District Court of Appeals in San Francisco. He became presiding judge in 1959. Although he officially retired in 1964, Bray remained active, serving part-time on both the appellate court and the Supreme Court until he was ninety-three.

In 1913 Bray married Leila Veale, daughter of Richard Rains Veale, Sheriff of Contra Costa County. Leila, who became the first female deputy sheriff in California, was interested in literature and child welfare throughout her life, being active in the Well Baby Clinic and founding the first Parent Teacher Association (PTA) in Martinez. She and A.F. were married seventy years.

Justice Bray recognized the importance of preserving our past. In 1950 he was Landmarks Committee Chairman of the Contra Costa Development Association, which he had founded in 1936. In April 1951 Bray initiated an organizational meeting of the Contra Costa Historical Society at a local restaurant called Nick's Place. Elected first president of the Society, Bray served for thirty years, handing over his office to Carol Leland in 1981.



Source: CCCHS Photo Archive

Justice Bray remained on the Board of Directors of the Contra Costa County Historical Society until 1985. He also helped organize the Martinez Historical Society (1973). He was a member of the California Historical Society, the California Heritage Council, E Clampus Vitus, the Pony Express Centennial Celebration Committee (1960) and the County Bicentennial Committee (1976) and was associated with many civic and charitable organizations in the area.

With his keen intellect, spirit of service, and breadth of interests, there is no doubt A. F. Bray left his mark on Contra Costa County.

Excerpts from the CCCHS Memorial Bulletin January 1987 and [The Bray Law Firm History page](#).

An article about CCCHS Co-Founder Louis L. Stein appeared in our July 2026 *Bulletin*.

Seniors Can Donate To CCCHS And Lower Their Taxes Through Annual IRA Withdrawal Program

By Dean McLeod

Did you know? A donation from your IRA can benefit both you *and* the Contra Costa County Historical Society, thanks to the Federal Government's program for seniors 73 years and older.

At 73, you are required by tax law to take Required Minimum Distributions (RMD's) from your IRA.

If you decide to donate all or part of your RMD, the normal tax requirement is waived on the amount you donate. The donation also reduces your taxable income. That's a WIN-WIN for you and the archives!

Your financial advisor or Retirement Plan's custodian can advise you of the steps to take and provide the forms you need to complete for this type of transaction.

Additional information can also be found at www.irs.gov/retirement-plans.

The Contra Costa County Historical Society is a registered 501(c)3 charity. Federal tax ID# 23-7327190.

Support our mission and volunteer with us!



We are actively seeking volunteers that can assist us with the following:

Data Entry

Office administration

Membership Assistant

Research Specialist

Event Planning & Marketing

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

Delta Heritage Forum To Focus On Culinary Culture Of California Delta Region In Event Co-Sponsored By CCCHS

This article is adapted from a news release from the Delta National Heritage Area

The 2026 Delta Heritage Forum will focus on the theme of “the Delta as Culinary Journey,” featuring presentations on the culinary riches to be found in the California Delta region.

The event will take place on Thursday, November 5 at the Brentwood Community Center, 35 Oak Street, Brentwood, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. CCCHS is co-sponsoring the event, as a significant portion of eastern Contra Costa County is within the Delta area.

The Delta Heritage Forum is an annual event dedicated to celebrating stories of the Sacramento – San Joaquin River Delta, nurturing collaboration, and inspiring new thinking and initiatives in the Delta heritage community.

This year’s forum will provide a full-day kaleidoscope of food-related cultural stories centered in the Delta, both historic and modern. This will be the first time the event focuses on food-centric pioneering innovations and multicultural contributions, as well as the agricultural bounty of the region.

Darrell Corti, president of Corti Brothers in Sacramento, will deliver the opening talk: “Delta as Food Source and Inspiration.” Corti Brothers, founded in 1947, is a purveyor of Italian foods in Sacramento.



Delta photo downloaded from Wikipedia.org.

Other notable speakers include Austin Stevenot, a Northern Sierra Mewuk cultural practitioner who will discuss the foods of the Original People who flourished in the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta; and Dr. Karen Leonard of the University of California at Irvine, who will present the history and food traditions of the Punjabi-Mexican community, a unique cultural fusion of early 20th-century immigrants in California's Delta and Central Valley regions.

Participants will be well fed – the event includes morning coffee and pastries, a full lunch and a vintage cake tasting. *(Editor’s note -- we hope it’s the recipe that’s vintage, not the cake.)*

Tickets are \$55 (plus an Eventbrite fee), available on the Eventbrite website (search on “the Delta As Culinary Journey”). Tickets cover all food costs and seating is limited.

For more information about the Delta Heritage Forum or the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta National Heritage Area, contact Kira O’Donnell, information officer, at kira.odonnell@delta.ca.gov, or at (530) 650-6362.

Advisory Committee Helps Contra Costa County Identify And Preserve Historic Buildings And Sites

Adapted From An Article By Carol Jensen

Editor's note: This is the first of a two-part series looking at the Historical Landmarks Advisory Committee and its accomplishments in preserving the history of Contra Costa County.

The task of the Contra Costa County Historical Landmarks Advisory Committee is to advise the County on the identification and preservation of historical resources within the County's border. The committee was created in the 1970s by the County's governing body – the Board of Supervisors -- to preserve the county's historic properties, buildings, and communities.

One of the committee's key duties is to help identify eligible buildings and places to be listed in the County's Historic Resources Inventory. Notable entries in the inventory include the John Marsh Home (shown below), Salvio Pacheco Adobe, Byron Hot Springs Hotel, the Town of Valona, the Stanley Dollar House, and the original Knightsen town site area.



Source: CCCHS Photo Archive

There are tax benefits and grants available to property owners whose property is listed in the Historic Resources Inventory. One of the most important benefits is property tax relief thanks to a state law known as the Mills Act. This law allows participating local governments to provide lower tax assessments to owners of qualified historic properties. The owner must participate in the restoration and maintenance of the property. This is an incentive for the preservation of historic buildings and neighborhoods or districts.

The Historical Landmarks Advisory Committee plays a key role in periodically updating the Historic Resources Inventory, making these benefits available to property owners and helping the County keep track of its many historic buildings and locations.

The committee works with the numerous local historical societies within the County to keep the inventory up to date.

The five-member Advisory Committee is comprised of four Contra Costa County Historical Society (CCCHS) members and the Deputy Director of the County Department of Conservation and Development. The four CCCHS members, who must be residents of Contra Costa County, are nominated and recommended by CCCHS and approved by the Board of Supervisors. The Committee meets on a quarterly basis, on the second Thursday of the month at 30 Muir Road, Martinez, at 2:30 p.m. The agenda for each meeting is posted on the committee website, at the link below. The public is encouraged to attend. There is always an open agenda item for public comment at the beginning of every meeting.

<https://www.contracosta.ca.gov/4318/Historical-Landmarks-Advisory-Committee>

Consider Joining CCCHS At A Tier That's Right For You, With Benefits For All History Lovers

CCCHS Membership Application

☐ New ☐ Renewal ☐ Gift Date _____

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Newsletter delivery: ☐ Mail ☐ Email (PDF file) ☐ Both

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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 cocohistory.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:

☐ Student	\$20
☐ Individual	\$50
☐ Couple	\$90
☐ Historian	\$150
☐ Mt. Diablo	\$300
☐ The 1951 Club	\$750
☐ Stein & Bray Founder's Circle	\$1500

Your membership is tax deductible as allowed by law.

You can use the above form to join our Society. Please mail it to the **Contra Costa County Historical Society, 724 Escobar Street, Martinez, CA 94553.**

You can also join us online – go to www.cocohistory.org/support and then scroll down the page to choose your membership tier and join.

As a small non-profit organization, we depend on memberships to help us cover our costs and to expand our network of people interested in the history of Contra Costa County.

We would love to have you join us. Thank you!

County Supervisors' Archives Provide A Look At Issues, Communications And Campaigning In Contra Costa

By John Greitzer

We are fortunate to have collections of archives donated to us by the staffs and families of four former members of the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors, which is the five-member board of elected officials that governs the County. Every county in California has such a board.

Perhaps most notable among our former supervisors' collections are those of Nancy Fahden, a Martinez native who was the first female elected to the Board of Supervisors in 1976, and Federal Glover of Pittsburg, who was the first African American elected to the Board in 2000. We also have a collection from the second female Supervisor, Sunne McPeak (her first name is pronounced "Sunny") and a collection from Gayle Uilkema, who passed away from cancer during her fourth term on the Board in 2012.

These collections give a comprehensive look at the kinds of issues that our Board of Supervisors deals with on a daily basis. There are files on environmental issues in specific neighborhoods, economic development programs, complaints about crime, road conditions, allegations of wasteful county spending, and the need for better maintenance for parks and other public facilities, just to name a few.

There is plenty of correspondence in these archives. Many of the letters are from angry residents complaining about some issue that affects them, and many others are letters of thanks from people who appreciate the supervisors' efforts in solving some problem or addressing their issue.

The Nancy Fahden collection also includes interesting newspaper clippings that covered her campaign for the Board of Supervisors, as the first woman to do so in Contra Costa County. She told reporters later on that her candidacy was "a fluke," as she put it. She had been campaigning for another local candidate, but he had to withdraw from the race at the last minute. Lacking any other options, Nancy put her name down as the candidate and ran despite widespread doubts that a woman could get elected in Contra Costa County.

She certainly proved them wrong, winning her race and getting re-elected three times before retiring from the Board in 1992 at the end of her fourth term. Nancy retired to her family's ranch in Calistoga after her career in elective office ended. She died in 2015 at age 92.

Gayle Uilkema died of cancer during her fourth term on the Board of Supervisors, passing away at age 73 in 2012. She previously had served 19 years on the Lafayette City Council.

Sunne McPeak was elected to the Board of Supervisors at the tender age of 30 in 1979, served until 1992, then went on to other activities in both the public and private sectors. Currently CEO of California Emerging Technology Fund, she served as Secretary of Business, Transportation and Housing for the State of California from 2003 to 2006 under Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Federal Glover served on the Board of Supervisors for six terms, from 2000 to 2024, after previously serving as Mayor of Pittsburg. During his last few years on the Board of Supervisors, he suffered from serious health problems and survived heart and kidney transplants in 2015. He died in 2025 at age 69.



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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, October 17: Open House & Tour for American Archives Month

10:00 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., History Center, 724 Escobar Street, Martinez

Saturday, October 17: Harvest Festival at Rodgers Ranch

9:00 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., Rodgers Ranch, 315 Cortsen Road, Pleasant Hill

Thursday, November 5: Delta Heritage Forum

9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., Brentwood Community Center, 35 Oak Street, Brentwood

Saturday, November 21: Author In The Archives: The Initial Point Atop Mt. Diablo by John Pettley

3:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m., 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.

We are closed for the last two weeks of December, reopening Tuesday, January 5, 2027

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