

THE RECORD

Overlooked Gems of El Camino Real

BY JENNIFER PFAFF

SUMMER
QUARTERLY:

Walking Tour:
“A Bit of England “

See page 5

Burlingame’s stretch of El Camino Real is best known for its tall, majestic canopy of eucalyptus and elm trees. What is lesser known is the breadth and variety of structures that have lined the highway since the early 1900s. This recently came to light in a historical survey of hundreds of parcels between East Santa Inez, in San Mateo, and Murchison Drive, in Millbrae. A team of architectural historians from AECOM produced a Historic Resource Evaluation Report (HRER) at the request of Caltrans as part of their compliance under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act for the upcoming *El Camino Real Roadway Renewal Project*.

Nearly 180 structures more than 45 years old were professionally assessed. Many months of *boots on the ground*, including the consultants’ exhaustive sessions in the Burlingame Historical Society’s archives, turned up nearly 30 significant resources, including 2 dozen National Register *eligible* historic structures in Burlingame and Hillsborough alone, representing a wide array of styles built between the 1890s and 1974.

It probably comes as no surprise that two of these structures eligible for listing are the Arthur Page Brown Burlingame Country Club Cottages at Floribunda Avenue and Kammerer Court that we discussed on our walking tour last summer. What is more striking perhaps is that 17 apartment buildings of various sizes are included on the list, five

of which were designed by the Danish architect Mogens Mogensen along with one of his office buildings. Another building is an auto repair shop. Other structures include four Burlingame churches: the United Methodist Church, St. Paul’s Episcopal and the New Life Community Church (whose structure is attributed to the offices of Willis Polk), and the Russian Church of All Saints. In San Mateo, the Saint Joseph Anglican Church, originally built in Fremont in 1870, moved and rebuilt in 1986 to the former site of a gas station on El Camino Real in San Mateo, was also deemed historically significant and eligible for listing.

Living on the Highway

Still a quiet country road before 1910 when El Camino Real was adopted as a state highway, its 1912 paving anticipated its use as a major transportation

corridor. By the 1920s the proliferation of car ownership led to a substantial increase in migration to the SF Peninsula suburbs. As communities around Burlingame allowed commercial properties to proliferate leading to highway widening and loss of trees, Burlingame residents and politicians waged a decade-long battle centered on the future of the city’s iconic Tree Rows.

Per the historian’s report, the modest bungalow in a grove of redwoods behind a white picket fence at 1041 El Camino Real (*pictured at center*) is a rare, surviving example of early single-family home ownership on the highway during the decade-long debate to preserve the suburban character of Burlingame. It was built in 1924 by H. J. Hughes, a real estate developer, for \$6,000.





Early Commercial Presence – pre-1930

A particularly interesting example of early commercial buildings along the highway is 120 El Camino Real, shown currently (*above*) and in the 1970s (*at right*). The automotive garage was built around 1913 and largely rebuilt in 1929, immediately prior to the zoning restrictions adopted the following year that precluded new commercial buildings. According to the historical survey, the structure is notable as having distinctive characteristics of 1920s Mission Revival commercial automotive architecture and retains a high level of integrity, still retaining its metal windows in the ground level façade.

Early Apartment Structures – mid 1920s - late 1930s

By the mid-1920s, uniform zoning ordinances were being created in Burlingame along major traffic corridors to allow for small-scale apartment houses. The narrow, albeit typically deep-set parcels along the highway could easily accommodate needed parking both hidden at ground level, but also behind buildings. Constructed of high-quality materials, the designs were typically oriented towards El Camino Real and strived to emulate architecture of adjacent,

neighboring single-family homes by incorporating similar details. They were often marketed to meet the demands of single, childless, white-collar professionals who commuted to San Francisco, or worked locally as salespersons, teachers, secretaries or service-based jobs.

The Great Depression slowed construction considerably. Nonetheless, a 3-story European Eclectic Revival style apartment house, located at 1045 El Camino Real (*pictured below*) was constructed in 1936 and is referenced in the report as “*the only extant example of the pre-WWII period that fully embodies the high-quality, European Revival style apartment house...featuring materials and decoration, including arched windows and Flemish parapet end walls.*”

Owned by a dancer who designed part of the structure to instruct dance classes, the structure deftly incorporated a ground-floor studio accessed at the rear of the property, as home businesses were only allowed by special permit, and were not



permitted to front on El Camino Real.

Most projects came to a halt during WWII. In the immediate post-war period, however, all types of construction quickly resumed to meet the demands

of a growing population. In the 1950s conversions from original single-family residences that were enlarged and repurposed as duplexes and triplexes were not uncommon; garages were often added at a later date.



Post-War Construction:

The majority of multi-unit apartment houses along El Camino Real are post-war, flat roofed Stucco Box apartment buildings, and Podium type apartment buildings, constructed between 1955-1974.

Stucco Box buildings were generally 2-3 stories, plain, with parking tucked at ground level under the building. These were designed to use the maximum footprint on the parcel, and reflected developers' attempts to capitalize on widespread demand for housing with minimal investment and maximum return.

Podium style apartments like Mogensen's "Viking" at 500 El Camino Real (*above*) were typically larger. The required tenant parking spaces were accommodated by either constructing the building on stilts or pillars, (thereby freeing up the ground surface for parking), or by partially, or completely excavating a parking area underneath the foundation.

Burlingame High-Rise:

During the 1950s in response to increased demand for housing and improved building

techniques, building heights beyond the allowable 4 stories were approved on a case-by-case basis.

In 1959 the 8-story *Burlingame Towers* at 1469 Bellevue and El Camino Real was approved with a special height variance of 85 ft.

Designed by LA architect J. Richard Shelley in the *International Style*, it is significant as a rare example of *high-rise apartment tower* construction. The developer touted a then novel technology using pre-stressed concrete lift slab construction, developed by Western Concrete Structures Co., of Los Angeles.

In the same period, a 10-story apartment project "ArcaminoWest" was submitted for 1515 Arc Way and El Camino Real (in the *New Formalism Style*). Neighborhood opposition to the project gave rise to the *Suburban Protective Association of Burlingame* –a group that at its peak boasted 1,500 members who successfully rallied to get the height reduced to 4-stories. After 1962, no other high-rise apartment towers were constructed on El Camino Real.





Finally, amongst the 4 church complexes along El Camino Real in Burlingame found to be historically significant is St. Paul's Church, designed in the late 1920s by English artist and architect William C. F. Gillam. Mr. Gillam lived on Palm Drive, not far from the quaint Willborough neighborhood he designed together with architect Russell B. Coleman in the 1930s.

We hope you will be able to join us on August 6th at 1 pm to learn more about the Willborough neighborhood (*see pg. 5*).

MOGENS MOGENSEN (1929-1997):

A MID-CENTURY MASTER ARCHITECT FOR THE MID-PENINSULA

The historic evaluation referenced in our lead story identified and highlighted the work of architect Mogen "Mogie" Mogensen. In 1946, Mogensen moved to the Bay Area from his native Copenhagen and began to make his mark with designs he provided for local developers like David Bohannon who worked on the Hillsdale Mall and numerous single-family home developments, like the San M a t e o

Highlands, as well as for T. Jack Foster, who developed Foster City. Another client was Douglas Pringle for whom Mogensen designed The Pringle Building—a 1963 office building at 90 El Camino Real built by Burlingame's Moskowitz twins of the Burlingame Investment Company. The office housed The Pringle Construction Company for decades and was also the real estate office of Stan W. Gates, a scion of the George Gates family, Burlingame's first train stationmaster and early businessman. Other Mogensen projects by local developers and builders were the Skyline Terrace apartments in 1966 (at top

of Trousdale). As land became more expensive, Mogensen shunned the horizontal



silhouettes of the classic California ranch, and introduced verticality into his designs with taller buildings and raised foundations that "floated" over underground parking. To enhance the sense of space in compact housing, Mogensen employed "curtain walls" or large wall-sized windows that could bring the outside in, often incorporating plastic laminate colored panels for visual interest. Interior courtyards with pools and lush landscaping softened

the harshness of the vertical lines and aluminum window frames.

Pictured above is Mogensen's *The Carol*—an iconic structure at 55 El Camino Real in Burlingame. The pie-shaped podium style apartment building makes the most efficient use of an unusually shaped parcel; parking is accommodated below.

Two Mogensen apartment buildings in San Mateo were also determined to be eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places: Two Clark Drive Apartments, and Royal Pines Apartments at 525 El Camino Real.

Dingbats

Occasionally more decorative elements were added to *Stucco Box* and *Podium* style buildings, including applied artwork such as mosaics (*at right*), fanciful names, shapes, and other motifs, often influenced by Polynesian or Tiki themes.



These are collectively referred to as “Dingbats”. The Viking, 500 El Camino Real at Bellevue Avenue (*see pg.3*) is a podium style structure in *Contemporary* style, designed by Mogens Mogensen (*see insert on pg. 4*) in 1958. Until fairly recently, the Bellevue Avenue face sported the dingbat shown at left.



The exterior add-on was incorporated into the design to give some character to otherwise plain indistinguishable buildings. Critics have claimed that the apartments “wear their accessories—star-shaped wrought iron, carriage lamps, decorative tile, coat-of-arms—like clip-on jewelry. Baubles and brooches designed to emulate a glamour just beyond reach.” Fans of Dingbats beg to differ: “Grandiose names—manors, arms, Chezs, Chateaus—abound. **How charming is that?**”



1125 Palm Drive - mid 1930s

A Bit of England in Burlingame

Join us on Sunday, August 6th at 1 pm when we will walk the quaint Burlingame neighborhood known as Willborough.

Built during the Depression by George Williams and Frank Burrows, two prolific Peninsula developers and building contractors, the neighborhood takes its name from a combination of their two last names. The grouping of 22 Tudor styled homes, all of which were designed by Burlingame architects Russell B. Coleman and W.C.F. Gillam, sought to replicate the close hamlets of Gillam’s native England.

Meet at 1 pm at Palm Drive and Willborough Road. Tour lasts approx. 1 hour. Wear comfortable shoes, and bring a hat and water.

Note: This annual event is sponsored by the San Mateo County Historical Association’s Victorian Days Walking Tours. The full list of tours is available at: <https://historysmc.org/victorian-days-walking-tours/>

Acquisitions:

Many thanks to Russ Cohen for misc. items including an April 2023 digital image of the former Hyatt Music Theatre and marquee that now says "BE GAME" in large degraded lettering (*shown at right*), at 1300 Old Bayshore Blvd., **Mark Lucchesi and Ray Tyler** the podcast of Fethah Aydin (Embassy Suites Manager), Col. Carol Cunningham, Michael Brownrigg, Jackie Speier, Jack Van Etten, SolMateo, Christine Krolik, and Annie Appleby; **Paul O'Neil** for a Burlingame Chamber of Commerce Map circa 1970s; **Jim**

**Welcome New Members:**

Tom Larsen – History Buff
Janet Moody – History Buff
Allison Johnson – History Buff
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Kevin Gould – Individual
Cecilie Klaumann – Individual
Chris Voon – Individual
Wade Aubry – Individual
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Matthew Connolly – Individual

Many thanks for donations from:
Chris Voon, Jim Shypertt, Linda Milliken, JoAnn Quadt and Jason Yap

In Memoriam
- Walter Vielbaum

Shypertt for several digital photographic essays, including those related to Burlingame Rotarians and a Celebration of Life event for Charles Voltz (April 16, 2023), and our presentation on the local work of Gabriel Moulin; **Jim Evans** for 4 images of various Southern Pacific freight and passenger trains photographed by former Burlingame resident Tom Eikerenkotter between 1959-1973; **Linda and Ron Field** for a filing cabinet and other misc. items; **Dan Dower** for misc. letters, brochures and other items related to Burlingame High School, (1930s-1970s) including of the building shortly after construction; **Amy Fearn, Jon Mays (San Mateo Daily Journal), Teresa Colone and others** for several images of fallen trees in Burlingame, following a windstorm event in March 2023; **Mollie Ricker of DoStart and others** for photos of the Post Office Structure back in its original position at 220 Park Road, now flanking the new structure; and **Jim Kelly** for 117 digital images related to city infrastructure work, including many related to the installation of conduits for streetlights on Howard Avenue (2011) between El Camino Real and California Drive, and other images related to Burlingame Avenue upgraded streetscape project (2013-14), including a March 2011 image of the vacant fenced lot at the corner of Primrose and Howard Avenue, announcing "Safeway Coming Soon" (*shown at right*).



Cradle of Champions:
A Selected History of San Mateo County Sports
 by John Horgan



Available for purchase at the San Mateo County
 History Museum beginning July 10th
 75 stories, 135 photos - \$19.99

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Calendar:

**Burlingame Hillsborough
History Museum 1-4 pm 1st
Sunday of the month***

***Note: Currently Closed.**

We are reconfiguring our display
area. Please check our website for
updates.

NEXT EVENT

Sunday, August 6 1 to 2 pm
"A Bit of England" Walking Tour
(see p. 5)

Meet at Palm Drive and
Willborough Road

**Please remember us
in your trust or will!**

President's Message:

In June I had the opportunity to lead a 3rd grade Passport to History field trip with eager Washington Elementary School students, parents and teachers. The program has been the primary focus of its brainchild, **Board VP Diane Condon-Wirgler** for nearly 25 years. With all that has changed in our city over as many years, it's easy to forget that history DOES matter to our youngest community members. They are like sponges with curiosity and enthusiasm that makes it all worthwhile. What is "new" to us, will be part of their history before long.



Finally, we are extremely grateful to the team of Chandra and Heather Miller, architectural historians (AECOM) working at the behest of Caltrans. Their extensive and very informative report reflecting the history, styles, and various architects who have all contributed to the growth of the built-environment along our unique highway over the past century is a real treasure now and for the future.

-Jennifer Pfaff

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