

THE RECORD

Jessie Murphy's Legacy *by Jennifer Pfaff*

QUARTERLY
PROGRAM

*Lost Gas Stations
of SM County*

pg. 5



Jessie and James R. Murphy at the old Millbrae Station in 1899

We are fortunate in Burlingame to have had early pioneers who cared deeply about their community and wanted to improve it. Jessie Murphy, wife of James Murphy, the train station agent who succeeded George Gates and became the City's clerk in 1910, was one such pioneer. Jessie joined other residents, primarily women, in their efforts to ensure that Burlingame would eventually be a "City of Trees."

Justina (Jessie) Ethel Nichols was born in Loma Prieta in 1872, the daughter of Margaret Eliza Ward, and Benjamin Cahoon Nichols, an early settler of Santa Cruz who made his living logging redwoods in the 1860s. According to family members, her lifelong commitment to the planting of trees, specifically redwood trees, was said to be an attempt to right some of the damage her lumber baron father had wrought on the area's landscape.



In 1895, Jessie married James Russell Murphy, a telegraph operator for Southern Pacific, who worked as a station agent at Millbrae and later Burlingame. By 1903, the Murphys had constructed a shingled home at 1206 Burlingame Avenue (roughly the location of Maison Alysee in 2025), where they resided until the home was jacked up on rollers and moved about ten years later. Elected to Town Clerk in 1910, husband James Murphy occupied a number of civic positions for the next 30 years until his death in 1940. No doubt the direct contact to her husband's political sphere afforded Jessie more influence than most women in that early period.

The 1911 Improvement Act authorized cities to post bonds for a variety of public infrastructure improvements, such as streets and sidewalks. Burlingame got to work paving its first streets by 1912. By 1913, Jessie was an early Park Commissioner on a mission to ensure the newly-paved streets and sidewalks were not only functional, but beautiful. The state highway, El Camino Real (then known as the Old County Road), was no different. It was at Jessie's request that City Hall architect Charles P. Weeks donate his design for the stone entrance pillars (*shown at Mills Ave., at left*) that once adorned both ends of the City, bookending the already famous eucalyptus and elm trees planted by John McLaren some 35 years earlier.

In 1914, with the commercial nature of Burlingame Avenue expanding westward from the train station, the Murphys and their 3 young children became one of a handful of families who relocated their homes away from the Avenue. Their home was

rolled to Douglas Avenue where Jessie routinely planted redwood saplings she'd collected on the coastside for herself and others around town. A number of these still survive in private gardens in the downtown area, like Douglas Avenue (*shown at right*) and elsewhere, though many have been lost to development.

At a 1915 Park Commission meeting Jessie urged fellow town residents to become involved in selecting what type of tree should be planted on the newly paved streets and sidewalks in all unplanted districts: "The [Park] Commission wishes to impress upon the people the necessity of attending this meeting, otherwise the Commission must decide these matters to the best of its own judgement. We need the earnest co-operation of everybody."



"To beautify our city with gardens, trees and window plants means vastly more than passing attractions to visitors. It means strength of character. It means transformation of the whole life when we make our surroundings so full of charm that our souls turn from the gross and coarse things to higher ideals and levels. Thousands of trees have been planted by property owners and through the efforts of the Park Commission. Many more trees are yet to be planted ... The real benefit and beauty of tree-lined streets everywhere is yet to come, for it is only time that can grow trees. He who makes two blades of grass grow where but one grew before is a benefactor."

- Jessie Nichols Murphy, January 2, 1914

Today, century-old trees adorn our streets and community, thanks to Jessie and other early pioneers. According to the Parks Department, there are at present over 2,500 street-tree planting locations that still adhere to a "themed block" pattern, including some of the same species established by Jessie, the City's Park Commissioners and public members who cared about the beautification of Burlingame 110 years ago.



At left, Jessie Murphy with daughter Justina, circa 1916.

Described as "two peas in a pod" by relatives, Justina loved trees as much as her mother, and worked for the City's Water Dept. for much of her life.

At the City's 50th birthday in 1958, Jessie Murphy was feted as the resident who had lived in Burlingame the longest.



Justina (Jessie's daughter) lived in the Douglas Avenue home with one of her siblings, Russell Murphy, her entire life. Neither ever married. Family members recall many overnight visits and wonderful play days in the garden and the big, enchanting house full of antiques, and a huge built-in sideboard filled with various mementos. Evenings meant bath time in the upstairs bath. "*Jean Naté scent still reminds us of Aunt Jessie and the sudsy bath upstairs.*"

Close to midnight on September 17, 2020, the Murphys' old shingled bungalow, located at 1128 Douglas Avenue since 1914, was carted north-east along California Drive in two sections. The work, which required a dangerous move over the Caltrain tracks, was done late at night when trains run less frequently. Over the past 4 years, the gracious home has been reconstructed, enlarged and modernized for new owners at its new location at 524 Oak Grove (*shown above*) where the asking price is \$4,795,000.00.

Zealous and Zestful Zona *by Joanne Garrison*

If you participated in our summer walking tour last August, you may remember when we stopped at the end of Hatch Alley to point out a curb cut. We noted that conveniences like curb cuts for those who are wheelchair bound are now ubiquitous thanks to one of Burlingame's native sons, Ed Roberts. In 1953, when Ed was 14 years-old he contracted polio, rendering him a quadriplegic. However, this boy with the indomitable spirit persevered, graduating from Burlingame High in 1959. He became the first severely disabled student to attend UC Berkeley and graduated with his BA in 1964 and with a Master's degree in 1966. His life was dedicated to advocacy for the disabled.

In 1972, at the age of 33 he formed the Center for Independent Living. In 1976, Governor Jerry Brown appointed Roberts the Director of the CA Department of Vocational Rehabilitation. Behind him the whole way was his mother, Zona Roberts, who recently died on January 10, at the age of "104 and 2/3". Her son quipped that she probably would have made it to 105, if she had not fallen and broken her leg while trying to straighten out a rug.

Ed attended Burlingame High from his parents' home with the help of home tutors and a telephone hook-up that allowed him to listen to the teaching in the classroom and respond. However, at the age of 20, when he thought he had completed the

requirements for high school graduation so he could graduate with the Class of 1959, he was told that he was not eligible as he had not completed the physical education and driver's education requirements. A furious Zona went to bat for her eldest son and the school district backed down. Zona later reflected that this early push to stand up for her son probably influenced him to see that advocacy could make a difference for himself and others.

Zona's life was not an easy one. Her mother was married five times and they moved frequently.

Zona became a teenage mother, pregnant with Ed by the time she graduated from Burlingame High in 1938. She was widowed by the age of 44, with four boys, Ed being the eldest. Nonetheless, Zona pressed on, meeting life's challenges and finding fun along the way. After she went back to school and got her own B.A. from UC Berkeley in 1969, she took a three-month trip to Europe with her third son, Mark, which included a seven-day Black Forest trip on the back of a Norton motorbike they dubbed "Big Nort." In 1981, her youngest son Randy was murdered. Ed died in 1995. Ron, her second son, also passed away. At her 100th birthday, celebrated on April 1, 2020 during the height of the pandemic, she rhetorically asked her neighbors, "How do you get through one of these? Same way you get through every day of your life. By living carefully and thoughtfully and sometimes angrily, when it's called for, and always lovingly. And, a big box of pastry helps."

Rest in peace, Zona. And thank you – and Ed – for the difference you have made in the lives of others. Now go have a pastry!



Photo of Zona Roberts by Ina Maria Bagne



Edward V. Roberts

50 Years of Collecting

A nice big crowd showed up in the Lane Room in February to help us celebrate our 50th, and to show off some of the items we've collected in as many years. Some of our visitors asked if we collect this or that item, and how we decide what to take and what to "let go." Our founder, Martha May, a self-professed "pack-rat," once confessed that had she to start over from scratch, she probably could have been "more selective" about what landed in our archive. For example, we unfortunately can no longer accommodate items not directly related to Burlingame or Hillsborough, no matter how interesting they may be; we work well with our counterparts at other historical associations to make sure worthwhile artifacts end up with the right facility. We are currently going through a number of lovely books and periodicals covering California's early history, and historical sites around our State, but with little to no information related to our community. These and other items will (at some future date) be part of a fundraiser garage sale. Martha made a point not to neglect the lives and artifacts of "regular folks," when the natural inclination in this area would be to focus on the well-to-do of yore. It can often be difficult to decide what could yield valuable information. Many of our most useful items were "throw-aways" discarded in dumpsters when old 1914 City Hall on Park Road was demolished, and it was determined that they

wouldn't be needed in the "new" 1970 City Hall on Primrose. Though nowadays much is scanned and stored offsite, there is simply nothing like an original. We have municipal water and property ownership cards, originally bound for the dumpster. These are a valuable source of information when we try to unravel and piece together various stories.

Some items shared at our Annual presentation include interiors of downtown businesses over a century ago, pioneer families enjoying leisure time in their

opulent gardens, gone for well over a century, since the commercial district grew to displace the residential district. We have a multipage petition to Council and the "Highway Commissioner" protesting the 1940s proposed Eucalyptus Tree removals and highway widening," signed by hundreds in the community. Newer artifacts document the Covid-19 pandemic and include creative masks, shutdown orders and street closures. We also have *Sam Sandwiches* original sandwich board with prices (a "large Combo" for 90 cents in the 1970s), and much, much more.

We pride ourselves in staying "current" rather than being mothballed; as such, we remain eternally grateful to our remaining local newspapers: *San Mateo Daily Journal*, and *The PA Post*, clippings of which we continue to collect. In the future, when people wonder about these "old days," such tidbits will provide a much needed window into the past.



Volunteers (left to right): Donna Lema-Cerna, Lee Ebbert, and Linda Field

The Burlingame Historical Society welcomes:

Bruce Cumming
and Nick Veronico,
authors of the new
Arcadia book

***Lost Gas Stations
of San Mateo County***

Thursday, May 22, 2025 at 6:30 pm.

Burlingame Public Library, Lane Room



“The years following the 1906 earthquake saw a migration from the City of San Francisco to the suburbs, farms and orchards of San Mateo County. Early mobility on the Peninsula came in the form of streetcars and trains but was soon dominated by the automobile. Beginning in the teens and 1920s, the Peninsula was inundated with automobile service stations, or gas stations, where smartly dressed attendants practically ran to one’s car to fill the tank, check oil and tire pressures and clean the windshield. The small city of Burlingame was no different.”

**Thank you everyone for your prompt membership renewals!
Welcome new (and upgraded members):**

- Huina Zhu (new)
- Dennis Fong (new)
- Andrew Su (new)
- Leanna Giannini (new)
- Gordon Foster (new)
- Ann Reinhart (new)
- Brendan Galloway (new)
- Anonymous - (History Buff – new)
- David Steil - BHS Alumni Assoc. (new)
- Audrey D. Bojack - (Charles Seabiscuit Howard)
- Julie Allen - (History Buff)
- John Root - (History Buff)
- John Ward - (History Buff)
- Walter Sorensen - (History Buff)
- William Schmid - (History Buff)
- Michael Gaul - (History Buff)
- Vicki Jacobs - (History Buff)
- Hal Schuette - (History Buff)
- John Catania - (History Buff)
- Wallace D. Mersereau - (History Buff)

In Memoriam: Norton D. Pearl, Doris Harvey, and Betsy Bogel

Big thank you to our generous donors: Charlotte and Jeff McFadden, Shauna Rose, David Steil (on behalf of the Burlingame High School Alumni Association), John Elfving, Clare Cavanaugh, John and Carolyn Root, Fred and JoAnn Hawley, Anonymous *in Memory of Nick Baylock*, Audrey D. Bojack, Jane Behrens, Don Donoughe and Beth Concoby, Michael Wiebracht, Catherine Wilkinson, Rocky and Julie Allen, Bill and Susan Walsh, Ann Reinhart, Jill Wakeman-Goodman, Dennis Fong, Lana Johnson, Wallace D. Mersereau, and Dewey Land Co. (for their ongoing support).

And to those additional donors who have contributed to the refurbishment of Old City Hall Cupola since January 2025, towards our \$15,000 goal, a huge thank you! This project is fully funded and should be in progress shortly:

- Burlingame Parks Forever Foundation
- City of Burlingame
- Cathy and Joe Baylock
- Rich Kelly
- Leslie Reisfeld

Acquisitions with thanks to:

Daniel Shea for numerous photos belonging to his grandmother, Mrs. Garcia, related to her involvement with the Sister City relationship and events between Burlingame and Cuernavaca, Mexico in the 1960s and '70s (see 1969 photo at Cuernavaca Park in Burlingame, at right); **Sam and Susie Lahey** for a vintage colored postcard entitled: "Burlingame Hunt Club, San Mateo County, California" (below); **Burlingame Police Dept. kindness of Daniel Thompson** for various vintage badges of Councilmembers acting in their capacity as representatives of the City;



Linda Field for images of Plucky's Cafe at 1352 Broadway; **Jennifer Pfaff** for photos of Burlingame Town Square currently under construction in 2024;

Russ Cohen for numerous items from his personal collection on display in the Burlingame Hillsborough History Museum; **Howard Wettan** for two digital images (2020 and 2024) of the enormous eucalyptus tree at the corner of Sherman Avenue and El Camino Real, slated for removal as part of the El Camino Real Renewal project due to conflicts with the drainage infrastructure; **Mark Lucchesi and Ray Tyler** for multiple podcast interviews and DVDs of local business owners and personalities and **Leslie McQuaide** for transcriptions thereof; **Gordon Foster** for a digital image of an 1878 SM County map (reproduction); and **Cathy Baylock and Mary Griffith** for various Burlingame and Hillsborough-related real estate ads and clippings.

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Two New Didactic Panels installed!

Many thanks to the **Burlingame City Council** for Community Grant funding, to the **Burlingame Beautification Commission** for approving, and to the **Burlingame Parks Department staff** for installing these beautiful didactic panels overlooking Washington Park Field (below left) and at the old Burlingame Railway Co. shelter at Hillside Drive and Alvarado Avenue (below).



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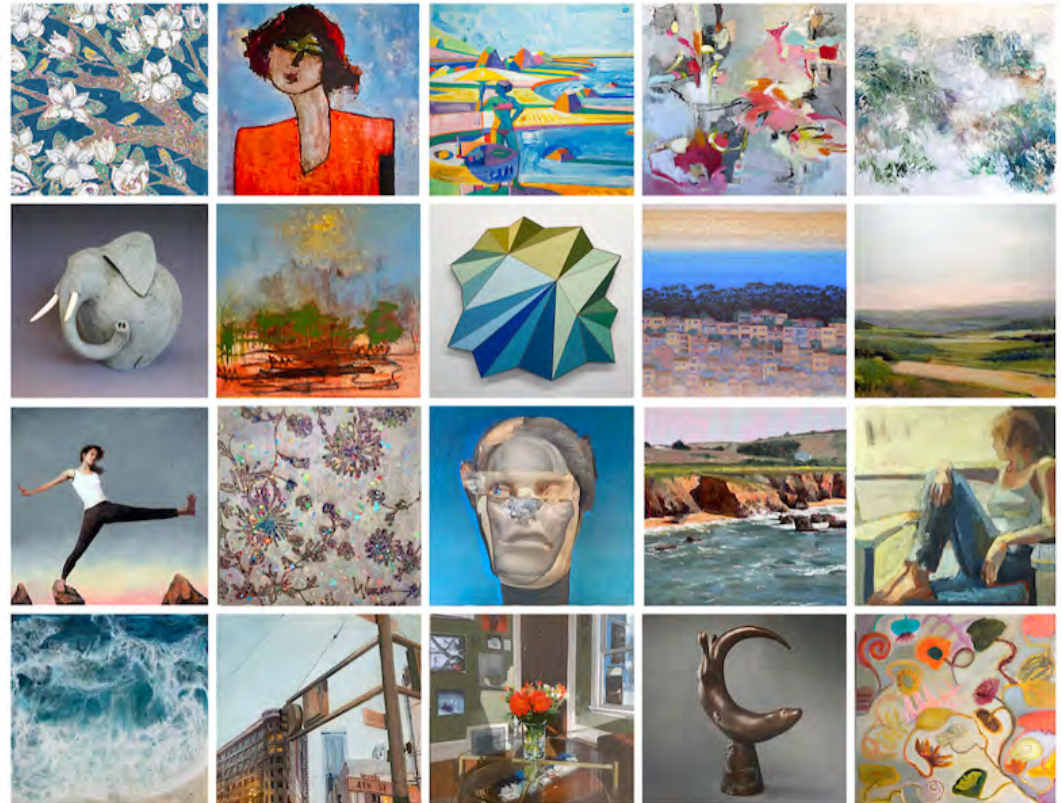
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Calendar:
 Burlingame Hillsborough History Museum has reopened!
First Sundays of the month 1-4 pm:
 Sunday, May 4th and June 1, 2025
Closed in July
NEXT EVENT:
Thurs., May 22nd, 2025, 6:30 pm
“Lost Gas Stations of San Mateo County”
Lane Room of the Burlingame Public Library (see p. 5 for details)

Please remember us in your trust or will!



President’s Message:

Thank you for your confidence in our Executive Board of Officers, re-elected in February. It’s just early spring, and there is already a lot happening at the Historical Society. We had a few “surprise” events, beginning earlier this month when we hosted the Mendelson family as they introduced “new” Charlie Brown music to the community in the Lane Room. Two more of our didactic panels were installed, and we’ve included photos in this edition. In addition to the May 22nd presentation highlighted in this issue, we are also presenting a free trivia game night at the Burlingame Woman’s Club on June 11th, from 7-8:30pm. If you are getting e-mail notifications from us, you may already know about these events. If not, and you’d

like to add your name, you can go to our website: burlingamehistoricalsociety.org to sign up! Or stay informed by signing up for BHS eNews using the QR code at right. By the time this newsletter is printed, the cupola restoration project is either well-underway, or finished. The cupola, located in Parking Lot “J” is all that remains of what used to be located on that spot— Burlingame’s first purpose-built city hall which was demolished around 1970 and replaced with the parking lot directly adjacent to the cupola ornament. Thank you to all who have made this restoration possible.



Sign Up for BHS eNews

- Jennifer Pfaff

Current Officers 2025:
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 VP - Museum - Russ Cohen
 VP Technology and Education - Diane Condon-Wirgler
 Treasurer - Mary Griffith
 Secretary - Leslie McQuaide
 Corresponding Secretary - Mary Packard
 Newsletter - Joanne Garrison
 Social Media - Cathy Baylock
 Membership Chair - Carl Martin
 Oral Histories & Podcasts - Mark Lucchesi