The view south along San Pablo Avenue from about Hill Street. The “Flying A” station is on the right and the well-known “Louie’s Club,” run by Louie Nicoli and Lou Favero, is on the left.

El Cerrito Historical Society
CHAPTER 1

A Million-Dollar Headache

It was an exciting time along San Francisco Bay. The convulsion caused by World War II was over. The shipyards were closing. GIs were back home, including such local heroes as Ernest Navellier, a ball gunner on a B 24 Liberator, a veteran of 50 combat missions over enemy territory in Europe.¹

No longer was the El Cerrito Journal reporting local boys killed or missing in action — flyer Bill Tom, “one of the beloved older boys” from El Cerrito’s Chung Mei Chinese orphanage, missing in action over Austria, merchant seaman Robert Weir, a well-liked painting contractor, manacled and tortured on the deck of an enemy sub after his ship was torpedoed in the Pacific.²

The war workers who’d built ships and tanks in Richmond were moving out of temporary war housing, freeing up land for development—including the sprawling tract that had formerly housed Black Jack Jerome’s dog racing track in El Cerrito.

Developers had their eyes on San Francisco Bay itself. Henry Kaiser, who hoped to keep running his Kaiser Shipyards in Richmond, proposed giving the shipyards a new neighbor—an international airport built on fill that would replace much of the bay between Berkeley and Richmond.

If the Second World War had rocked the Berkeley-West Contra Costa County area, and it had, sending the population soaring and converting marshland to shipyards, the post-war boom was expected to do the same, and then some.

The area served since 1913 by Stege Sanitary District, directly across the bay from San Francisco and just north of Berkeley, still retained a touch of country. The city of El Cerrito, the heart of the district, had 6,100 people in 1940 and 16,600 in 1944—its greatest growth spurt ever, an increase of 160 percent. (Though some people departed right after the war, as war housing closed).

Still, even as the war ended, its hills were largely barren of homes and it still had remnant dairies and farms, many “without proper sanitary precautions.”

“Cows,” one neighbor complained, “were tethered in any vacant lot and so near sidewalks that pedestrians must go around them to get by.”³

In other territory served by Stege, the Richmond Annex, which was part of the neighboring city of Richmond, and No Man’s Land, an unincorporated wedge between El Cerrito and the Annex, winter rains brought devastating flooding from creeks, storm drains—and sewers. Although liberally dotted with houses dating to the Teens, No Man’s Land still had marshes, empty lots, and rowdy
roadhouses that housed gamblers and prostitutes.

In the year after the war, Kensington, then and now an upscale enclave of hillside homes along with two small shopping districts, retained hillsides and ridges that were windswept and barren.

But local leaders didn’t expect, or want, the area to retain its rural, outlaw atmosphere for long. Depression or no, El Cerrito boomed through the mid and late 1930s, 166 new homes in 1938, an all-time high, followed by 240 in 1939. Most of the homes were in small tracts in the more-or-less flatlands, though builders began moving up slope.

“…if you don’t believe El Cerrito has some excellent hill lots too, you should stroll up on the hillsides overlooking the bay sometimes,” the El Cerrito Journal advised.4 Then came the war, and homebuilding increased.

As the war neared its end, boosters expected growth to accelerate even more. New tracts were proposed with homes not in the dozens but the hundreds.

At the start of 1946, the city’s building inspector “stated today that home building in El Cerrito is bound to reach amazing figures during the coming year.”5

Then there were the really big plans.

From the mid-1940s through the early 1960s, several schemes surfaced for major waterfront developments in areas served by Stege or potentially served by Stege. Offices, shopping centers and housing developments were proposed to be built on bay fill—despite the airplanes that would be buzzing in for a landing just overhead.

And by the early 1950s, plans were underway to create a mini-city in the oak-dotted hills and valleys of Wildcat Canyon just east of El Cerrito and Kensington. Portions of a parkway to serve that town were actually constructed—though the land itself became a regional park in the 1960s.

In 1946, Stege officials, facing their ever-present challenge of providing sufficient sewers for anticipated growth, predicted just how big that growth would be. By 1975, they determined, Stege Sanitary would be serving a population of 110,000.6

If that had happened, El Cerrito, which had taken to calling itself the “City of Homes” at least by 1939, would instead have become the “City of Highrises.” Kensington, ensconced as it is on steep hillsides, would probably have remained a bucolic spot. The Annex and No Man’s Land? They’d be filled with parking structures and hotels serving the airport.7

In fact, the population of Stege in 2013—as it celebrated its centenary—was 33,000, and was remaining fairly stable.

What blocked this growth was the democratic process. People in the Bay Area, tired of top-down control of land use and development by politicians working closely with developers, revolted, creating such pioneering groups as Save the Bay and, later, the Greenbelt Alliance, Citizens for East Shore Parks and a host of others to preserve shoreline public access and open space.

But during the heady days right after World War II, it wasn’t Kay Kerr, Sylvia McLaughlin, and Esther Gulick, who formed Save the Bay in Kerr’s El Cerrito hillside home, whom developers feared.

They thought something else could block plans for the projected development of the Bay Area—the lack of sewage facilities.

From its formation, Stege was in the business of laying sewer pipes just a step ahead of development.

It occasionally fell behind, as in 1923 when, lacking the funds, Stege couldn’t put in sewers fast enough for developer C.W. Boden, who was filling “Cerrito Park” (today a neighborhood of stucco bungalows south of St. Jerome Catholic Church). Boden, stymied until the “sewer question is settled,” decided to pay for the sewers himself.8

But the “sewer question” that arose after the war was qualitatively different—perhaps qualitatively too. It was, the Berkeley Daily Gazette wrote, “a million-dollar headache.”9

The headache came to the Stege Sanitary District board in the form of a May 21, 1946 letter from the chief engineer of the California Bureau of Sanitary Engineering “advising that all permits for raw sewage disposal into the San Francisco Bay area would be revoked as of January 1, 1947.”10

The population boom, plus the state mandate, meant Stege needed to spend $1 million or more, the Gazette reported, $800,000 for a treatment plant, $200,000 for new and improved sewer lines.

“Last year alone the district spent $400,000 in five sewer projects in the hills in north-east El Cerrito,” reporter Tom Wheeler wrote.11

Without adequate sewers, development would halt.

Stege board members weren’t sur-
prised, of course. They knew what the Bay looked like—and what it smelled like. “The Big Stench,” some called it.

Stege, which built its first sewers in 1914, sent effluent from toilets, sinks and commercial enterprises directly into the Bay without any treatment. This was how every city and every sanitary district handled sewage at the time—and the Bay seemed big enough, the population small enough, that no one minded.

Andy Hansen, who was born circa 1906 and grew up on his family’s pig farm on what is now Schmidt Lane in El Cerrito, recalled how large a role the bay played in the lives of boys during Stege’s earliest days.

Andy and his friends would shoot ducks from blinds they built themselves. “Clams were available for the picking in the isolated areas,” he told reporter Marilee Smeder.

“Their favorite sport in summer was skinny dipping,” Smeder recounted, “for which they headed towards the bay. There was a muddy pond on the east side of the railroad tracks, and there was San Francisco Bay itself, where they swim with blissful disregard to the sewer outfall a block and a half away.”

Stege Sanitary District did make major improvements over the years to protect public health, as sewer outfalls were lengthened to dump effluent further from shore and in deeper water, and outfalls were raised, to prevent backflows during high tides.

It wasn’t until the 1940s that serious thought was given to treating sewage before pouring it into the bay. The war helped bring the matter to people’s attention.

Richmond and El Cerrito may have been boomtowns of a sort in the 1930s, the two fastest growing cities in the otherwise mostly agricultural Contra Costa County. But the war removed the qualifying “of a sort.”

In Richmond, the Kaiser shipyards employed 100,000 people at their peak, turning out 747 ships during the war. Nearby, a former Ford auto plant was churning out tanks. To the other side of El Cerrito, a thoroughbred track was being used by the Navy to outfit landing craft. Richmond’s wartime population zoomed from 23,000 to 100,000.

Suddenly, sewers became not just a local amenity, but a war priority.

“The health and welfare of the war workers employed in this vital industry is most important,” an attorney for the federal government wrote, regarding a federally funded “war urgency” sewer project Stege was building in Richmond. “We consider it our duty to be conservative in providing proper sanitary sewage facilities to protect the health and welfare of war workers.”

The goal of Stege’s Meeker Avenue Interceptor was to take sewage to “the deep water of the Richmond Inner Harbor at minus 27 foot elevation where there is excellent dispersion and dilution.”

The federal report cited serious health hazards caused by “contaminated solids, scums and rubbish” floating in the shipways of Kaiser’s Permanente Metals Corporation Shipyard. “The men laying in the aft end of the keel and the scaffolding work in these drifting deposits and contaminated water when the tide is high.”

Inland residents were affected as well. “The waters of the launching basin … are undoubtedly polluted to some extent by the outfall, as are the drainage ditches which pass back into the town during high tide.” The report described “sludge beds on the tidal flats, human excreta in the drainage ditches which pass less than 100 feet from inhabited buildings, floating solids in the shipways and sewage in the streets during stormy weather.”

By the start of 1945 it was clear, at least to C.C. Gillespie, chief of the Bureau of Sanitary Engineering for the state’s Department of Public Health, that simply building longer and longer sewer outfall pipes was no longer good enough. The sewage would have to be treated.

Surveying the Albany-to-Richmond waterfront, Gillespie described the flow from Stege’s Point Isabel outfall.

“Sewage is decidedly strong and it is a large stream.” Currents were “evidently sufficiently strong to sweep clean the outer point of Point Isabel,” he wrote. But “sewage solids swing strongly into” the shallow cove between Point Isabel and what is today Golden Gate Fields racetrack.

“A thick gravy-like sludge covering thousands of square feet is left by each tide and it is gradually filling the cove. Odors were not especially noticeable at the time, but it is unlikely that this will continue indefinitely.”

“Looking to the future,” the report continued, “there are strong signs that San Francisco Bay is coming on for a cleanup of sewage disposal conditions and the Stege outfall is bound to come in for complaints. To meet them in the current location, even in the absence of a change in waterfront
developments, would require sewage clarification and digestion with the drying of the sludge, supplemented by a longer outfall."

“If the much discussed transcontinental airport between Berkeley and Richmond should develop, this would immediately precipitate serious requirements on the Stege Sanitary District,” the report went on.\(^\text{14}\)

In 1947 a State Water Resources Control Board ruling, which essentially ordered Stege and sewer operators throughout the Bay Area to build treatment plants, presented the biggest challenge Stege had ever faced.

It was, moreover, a challenge that never seemed to go away as, over succeeding decades, state and federal agencies set increasingly strict mandates on water quality, prodded by public health advocates, fishermen increasingly anxious about the loss of their prey, the handful of thick-skin souls who still swam the bay, Save the Bay and other assorted environmentalists.

How Stege met that challenge, and continues to meet it is, in many ways, the story of the modern environmental movement.

Remarkably enough, for a minuscule district, Stege emerged as a leader in the fight to control pollution. Starting in the early 1980s Stege created a widely copied method of preventing stormwater from washing raw sewage through treatment plants before it could get treated. Stege pioneered the use of computers and geographical information systems to manage sewer maintenance and replacement.

Today, Stege is known throughout the industry as a sanitary agency whose board is quick and nimble, willing to try new things, with managers who are “real leadership types, out in front in terms of looking at the broader issues.”\(^\text{15}\)

The tale of Stege Sanitary District, “the little district that could,” you might call it, also tells much of the tale of El Cerrito and its hinterlands.

Nothing that happened here escaped the attention of Stege. Stege people served as mayors and on the El Cerrito City Council. They served on committees overseeing affairs in unincorporated Kensington and on the Richmond Annex Neighborhood Council. They ran the area’s garages, stores, and several of its raucous nightclubs and bars. Some worked for the El Cerrito Kennel Club, a greyhound racetrack, and some for the University of California, Berkeley.

Stege played a particularly large role in real estate development, of course, not only because for every residential tract opened, for every street laid, Stege had to be there pipes in hand. Stege did more than accommodate development, however. It promoted it, its formation guided by real estate investors and developers, and many of its members working in real estate or related fields.

Throughout El Cerrito and the surrounding area’s building boom, which began shortly after World War I and lasted through the early 1960s, Stege hustled to annex more land to its district, lay sewer mains, increase their capacity, and ensure that homeowners and businesses connected to their mains, and did so properly.

The first local government in the area, Stege incorporated four years before El Cerrito incorporated in 1917—both incorporations spearheaded by some of the same people.

But there was a difference between the incorporations. At its founding, Stege encompassed more than 3,000 acres. At its founding, El Cerrito covered just about 2,300. (Both have expanded since.) By rights, backers of the new city thought, to create an entity that could be efficiently run and provided with services, the Stege borders should have become the borders of the city.

But they didn’t, and people today still see that as an opportunity lost. Still, as events will show, it’s likely that if Kensington and the Richmond Annex had become part of the city of El Cerrito, Stege Sanitary District would probably have been voted out of existence in the 1970s—if not much earlier.

Stege’s history tracks both the development of the area and its social life.

The people who ran Stege, both elected officials and employees, mostly men but some significant women too, represented some of the area’s best and brightest—and sometimes most colorful.

Among the earliest people of Stege are the man often regarded as El Cerrito’s founder, William Rust, for whom part of the town was originally named; the man who probably named the city “El Cerrito,” William Huber, a justice of the peace, judge, mayor, and owner of the gathering spot Huber Hall; and Ernest Navelier, laundryman, worker at a dynamite factory, city councilman, school trustee, owner of a picnicking and drinking establishment, and grandfather of a war hero.
There wasn’t much in El Cerrito when Stege Sanitary District got its start—not even the name “El Cerrito.” The area north of the Alameda-Contra Costa county line developed more slowly than its neighbors to the south, Berkeley and Albany, and its neighbor to the north, Richmond, because it took so long to sort out who owned the land.

Before the matter was settled, only a handful of residents and businesses moved to town, most of them leasing land from, or serving as tenants to Victor Castro, whose Rancho San Pablo originally made up the entire area.

It was only in 1894, after the case Emeric vs. Alvarado was settled, that it was possible for buyers to secure clear title to land—finally allowing real development to proceed. It proceeded slowly.
10 WHERE THE SEWAGE MEETS THE SEA

Louis Rodini and Ernest Rodini circa 1913 El Cerrito Historical Society, courtesy Arline Rodini
Fay Breneman, who founded the area’s first library in 1913, the same year Stege was founded, described the area in that year. “When you got off the street car at the county line in 1913 you found a saloon on each side.”

“Some other old buildings housed some lunch rooms on the east side. Blind Jim had a peanut and cigar stand there.”

She was describing the area at the city’s southern border known as “Rust,” named for William Rust, resident from the 1880s, a German immigrant and wagon-maker, whose hardware shop at county line served as the post office from 1909.

Rust’s neighbor, John H. Davis, had arrived at County Line, as it was also called, a few years earlier and established what was probably El Cerrito’s first business, after Castro’s ranch that is—a tavern.

“...after a big forge job,” Rust’s son later recalled, “(Rust) would call across the street to John Davis at the Seven Mile House and tell him to start drawing the steam beer for his helpers.” Rust himself would not imbibe, being a teetotaler.

Two miles further north along Contra Costa Road (today, San Pablo Avenue), El Cerrito had a second commercial district, Stege Junction, where the Oakland Traction Co. streetcars swung left to head for the hamlet of Stege, in what is today Richmond. “At Stege Junction,” Breneman wrote, “there were stores and a blacksmith shop. Mr. Moro had a plumbing shop there.”

On the whole, El Cerrito was a quiet, rural redoubt, marshes, fields of grass and wildflowers, hills sparsely dotted with live oaks, bay trees alongside the creeks. Murietta Rock, named for the legendary bandit Joaquin Murietta, was a ridge top landmark visible for miles. In 1963 Roy Dahlen, who was a boy in 1913, “remembered when he could stand on San Pablo Avenue and look west to the bay and see nothing but rippling hay fields.”

Nearby Richmond was a working town, terminus for the Santa Fe Rail-
road since 1899, home to the Standard Oil refinery since 1905, and the Pullman Company’s railroad car repair shops since 1910, plus canneries and other industries.

The El Cerrito area was also home to two quarries, the Hutchinson, from 1903, and the Bates & Borland high in the hills, which sent its rock to the flatlands via rail.

“It was not uncommon for some of the cars to leave the hill in their downhill trek and the hillside was often littered with lost wheels, cables and rollers,” Mervin Belfils, a long-time Stege employee and the city’s unofficial historian, recounted in 1970. “In fact in August 1914, several gravel cars parked on the Stege spur up Moeser (Lane) broke loose and roared down the lane, jumped the track and piled up on the main line of Santa Fe railway. A youngster, Thurston Stark, heard the roar of the free-riding cars, dashed to the main line of Santa Fe and flagged down an approaching train.”

Also roaring along in the early Teens was residential development, which before had been restricted to a few small flatlands clusters of homes. “In 1912 the sale of lots in Richmond Annex was going merrily on,” Fay Breneman wrote. The sales office for the E.J. Henderson Company, which was subdividing some 350 acres, was next to Rust’s shop.

“The streets were well paved, trees were planted, and the parking strips were planted with petunias,” she said.

Development was also proceeding in the hills of Kensington, with several subdivisions including Berkeley Highlands, Berkeley Woods and Kensington Park.

As people moved onto the land they organized their own institutions. The closest real government, other than the local school and justice of the peace, was the county seat in Martinez, 25 miles away. Rust helped form a volunteer fire department in 1907, which lagged development—dangerously.

Breneman recalled a fire that broke out at a neighbor’s at 1 a.m. on July 4, 1917—shortly after El Cerrito incorporated. Firefighter Winfred Schmidt pulled up late with the city’s single fire engine. “He had found it with flat tires.”

“Soon the Albany fire engine was on the spot and had the fire out.”

In 1913, the largest public institution in town was the Mission-styled Fairmont School, built circa 1905. The town’s foremost attraction was Sunset View Cemetery, which opened in 1908 just up the hill from the Seven Mile House in what is today Kensington. A way station greeted visitors at
the streetcar stop, conveying them to the graveyard in a horse cart.

Clearly it was time to do something with sewage other than pour it into a cesspool or let it run in the gutter.

Forward-thinking folks knew that without sewers, homes couldn’t be built and industry couldn’t prosper.

“Great development ahead of the suburbs of Richmond,” the Richmond Independent headlined in March 1913, noting that Richmond had just “sewered” its Pullman district.

“The Stege and County Line district people are up and doing,” the article continued. “(They) will have an election shortly for the creation of a sanitary district for their rapidly developing territory.”

On May 14, hundreds of people gathered at the Alacosta Club near County Line for a “big mass meeting.” After listening to backers of the proposed district, the crowd repaired to Davis Hall, “where they danced until a late hour” to the music of the Zahnizer orchestra.

Next morning they took to the polls to approve formation of the district and elect its officers. Eighteen men sought five seats on the Stege “commission,” two sought to become the district’s sanitary assessor. One man, A.H. MacKinnon, sought both a commission seat and the assessor’s job.

“The voting was brisk throughout the entire day,” the Independent reported, “as was shown by the fact that 226 ballots were cast out of a total registration of 285 voters.”

Approval for creating Stege was overwhelming, 205 votes to eight.

The top vote getter for the commission, not surprisingly, was Stege’s chief backer, William Huber, with 170 votes, followed by Henry Best,
“Direct streetcar service to Kensington Park.” June 16, 1912 ad for a subdivision in what would later become the unincorporated community of Kensington, shows how development was getting underway in the area that a year later would be part of Stege Sanitary District.

Contra Costa County Historical Society

with 155, Constable H.F. Davis, with 138, Ernest Navellier, with 120, and George Barber, with 95.

MacKinnon came in near the bottom, with seven votes for commissioner—and 79 for assessor, trumped by George Scott, who was also serving as deputy county assessor.22

The board, meeting for the first time on May 28, 1913 at William Huber’s “Justice Court, Rust, Cal.,” named Huber their chairman, George Barber secretary. They set a tax rate of 15 cents per $100 of assessed valuation, the maximum allowed by state law. Each board member gallantly put up $5 for stationary and stamps.23

The organizers named the district Stege—after the place, it seems, and not after Richard Stege, one of the area’s true characters, a German immigrant who’d been a hotelier and fur trader, among other occupations, before marrying a wealthy woman, coming into possession of her ranch alongside San Francisco Bay and turning it into showplace gardens, complete with frog ponds whose denizens he sold to French restaurants in San Francisco.

The area, today part of Richmond, quickly took on the name “Stege.” Stege himself died in 1898, broke. The northern part of El Cerrito took on the name “Stege Junction” for its streetcar stop.24

First order of business? Raise funds to build sewers.

Working with the San Francisco law firm Reed, Black, Nusbaumer and Bingaman, and with the Oakland engineering firm Haviland, Dozier and Tibbits, Stege planned to raise $75,000 through a bond sale, the district’s longtime manager Al Baxter wrote in a short history, “Stege Sanitary District is Older than the City.”

“The purpose of the bond is the construction of a system of sewers and outfalls in and for Stege Sanitary District, consisting of main and lateral sewers and all rights-of-way, materials, accessories, appurtenances and appliances necessary for the construction and completion of said sewer system and outfalls.”

The bond vote, which came before the populace in a special election on September 27, 1913, at Davis Hall, near Rust’s shop on San Pablo Avenue at Fairmount Avenue, would both authorize the bond sale and “provide for the formation, government, and operation” of the sanitary district, under an 1891 state law providing for such formation. Approval was required from two-thirds of the voters.

The Oakland Tribune predicted passage, “as nearly everybody is in favor of the project and an active campaign has been carried on for several weeks on the subject.” But backers weren’t coasting. Huber, who “has been at work on the matter all week, day and night,” spoke passionately in favor of the bonds the day before the vote, his sentiments echoed by Dr. Joseph Breneman, the area’s first doctor and Fay’s father, who spoke “from a
It was a landslide, 202 for the bond sale, only nine opposed, with three ballots “illegally marked.” It’s not clear who opposed the bond sale or why.

“When the people of the Stege Sanitary District, in the southeastern part of Richmond, voted bonds for their new sewer system by 22-to-1,” the San Francisco Call observed, “they showed that they were rather enthusiastic for improvements. This is a fast developing factory, railroad and harbor part of the city, and its growth has made a modern sewer system imperative.”

The creation and funding of Stege Sanitary District was a major step for the area, and it foretold a battle that would erupt four years later, the drive for El Cerrito’s incorporation, which in a way can be seen as the dropping of the second shoe.

The borders of the sanitary district stretched from the county line on the south to Richmond’s city limits on the north, and from the Bay on the west to the rugged hills of Rancho El Sobrante to the east.

Stege accepted bids for sewer construction on May 22, 1914, insisting that workers be paid the minimum wage, “$2.50 per day for each day’s labor,” and the work was soon underway.

One main served Stege Junction, running towards the bay along Cypress Avenue. Another served Rust, running along Central Avenue. Both main lines carried untreated sewage to the Bay.

Over the next few years, as neighborhoods developed, Stege built a web of unglazed terra cotta sewer mains to serve them, hooking up with the lines that led to the Bay. The goal, Huber recounted some 40 years later, was to serve every house in the district—about 150 of them.

Older sewer systems in the Bay Area generally handled both sewage and storm water, but from the start Stege operated, or tried to operate, a system that handled sewage only—though oftentimes property owners would illegally channel storm water into the sewers.

Soon, homeowners and businesses began connecting to Stege’s sewers, paying for their own lateral connec-
tions.

The first sewer connection permit went to Mr. A. Renwitz on July 22, 1915. The sixth went to one of the city’s signal businesses, the Seven Mile House, which by this time was owned by Huber.29

In the very early years, Stege would build a sewer to serve a single house. In 1915, Davis was named a “committee of one” to get bids for a sewer to the home of H. Eckman. In 1917, Stege provided a sewer to serve two nearby homes on Moeser Lane, providing 680 feet of six-inch pipe and two manholes.30

Stege also hired its first inspector, W.H. Best, who resigned from the Stege board in June 1914 to accept the job. This was the first of several instances of a Stege board member becoming an employee; when MacKinnon left the job two years later, he would be replaced by board member George Barber. The inspector’s job paid $4 a day, notably higher than minimum wage. Later, Stege revamped its method of compensation, paying per inspection.31

“We had a sanitary inspector as the only employee,” Huber recalled in the mid-1950s. “If we needed any maintenance on the main sewers or outfall lines it would be contracted out.”

“And the sanitary inspector charged $1 for connecting to the sewer. That was his pay for the job; he’d pocket the money.”32

To replace Best on the board, Stege turned to one of the area’s most eminent businessmen, none other than William Rust.

As the only government around, Stege took on matters that went beyond sewage.

“Prior to March 13, 1914, the district board devoted much of its time to issuance of liquor licenses until

EC Library at Breneman House. Fay Breneman started El Cerrito’s library in 1913 the year of Stege’s founding. El Cerrito Historical Society.
questioned by the (county) board of supervisors as to the District’s right in doing so. It also passed regulations prohibiting dogs from running loose without muzzles.  

Almost every meeting saw Stege issuing a liquor license or two, on October 24, 1913, for instance, awarding licenses to O. Ortiz at Lincoln and Liberty streets, and J. McClure, at Richmond and Fairmount.

A rabies outbreak in 1914 convinced the district to pass “an ordinance to guard against the spread of hydrophobia,” calling for the shooting of dogs running at large.

In 1915 Stege shifted its meeting spot from Huber’s office to an office in Rust’s building over his hardware store—for a rent of $5 a month. Rust and Huber provided chairs and a filing cabinet.

In 1915, Stege expanded its boundaries for the first time, taking in a portion of what later came to be called the Richmond Annex.

In 1916, after Best resigned, he was replaced by a man who would go on to play a leading role in civilizing the growing area, A.H. MacKinnon.

As El Cerrito marshal he led many a raid on gambling and drinking joints; when the jail opened in 1923 it was dubbed “Hotel MacKinnon.” “Mac” later served as city sanitary inspector and as a judge, ran a realty office and built houses, and in 1925 opened the Fairmount Service Station, the city’s largest and most modern.

One of Mac’s major tasks for Stege was keeping the lines flowing despite debris and other blockages. In mid 1915, Best declared the “flushing of sewers impracticable,” and a year later the board decided that “automatic flushers (were) too expensive.”

A deal was struck, first with Sunset View Cemetery, which irrigated its lawns using a pump house on San Pablo Avenue, then with the People’s Water Company, which owned reservoirs in the hills, for “7 loads of water donated by the cemetery, 9,000 from People’s Water Co at 30 cents per 1,000 gallons.”

In November 1916, in connection with the water company deal, Stege reported its first, and one of its few, recorded instances of corruption, involving F. Dunlay, who had joined the Stege board earlier in the year.

“Huber addressed board. Dunlay had received money from L.C. Farrell of People’s Water Co. Dunlay announced his resignation from the board. No action taken against People’s Water Co.”
Some of the men who created Stege Sanitary District in 1913 worked four years later to create yet another local institution—a city. Backers included George Barber, Stege’s first secretary, and William Huber, Stege’s first president.

The goal was to supply the rolling hillsides and plains with not just sewers, but with streets, sidewalks, fire and police protection, everything needed for a growing residential community, all overseen by local people, not distant bureaucrats in Martinez.

The city would have the same borders as Stege. William Huber helped
come up with a name for the proposed city—and it wasn’t “Rust.” “The people did not like the name,” he recounted, “because when it was mentioned it evoked remarks suggested by the word ‘rust’.”

But it didn’t prove as easy to found a city as it was to start a sewer district. The owners of Hutchinson quarry fought the plan, correctly foreseeing that as a city filled with residents, complaints would mount about the noise from blasting at rock. Dairymen were concerned that new neighbors would object to their cows.

Also opposed was an industry that had gotten its start the moment John H. Davis opened his Seven Mile House—the saloons.

Shortly before the August 1917 vote, one of the leaders of the incorporation effort, George W. Adams, heard that saloon owners and “brewery interests” planned to haul “a score of paid workers” to the polls to vote no. “We have not considered the saloon question one way or the other in this fight,” Adams retorted. “We have been anxious to get fire protection and lights and other necessities and have had no quarrel with the saloons. But if they want trouble we will not back away from it. If this election does not carry, we will try again and again.”

As it turns out, they did not have to try again and again. Incorporation passed by a tight vote of 158 to 131.

But incorporation only passed because backers of a city had agreed to drop areas where opposition was strong—including what is now known as Kensington and the Richmond Annex that even then was known for gambling and vice.

The city proposed for approval by voters did not even straddle San Pablo Avenue. Portions of the western side would remain unincorporated until the 1920s—when they would be swallowed up, not by El Cerrito, but by Richmond. “Even Dr. Breneman,” a strong backer of incorporation, “found himself outside the new city limits.”

Adams was on the first city council (called the Board of Trustees at the time). George Barber, a founder of Stege, was named city marshal. Also an original trustee was John Sandvick, who a year later would be elected to the Stege board, where he would serve for 28 years.

It took the new city government and Stege, the former de facto government, a bit of time to work out their new relationship. Much of the discussion had to do with how quickly Stege could provide sewers for new subdivisions and whether the city or Stege would enforce rules requiring homeowners to connect to the sewers.

Stege, as the older sister, was always willing to help out the new city. When the city in mid-1919 asked voters to back bonds to build storm sewers, they borrowed Stege’s voting booths.

In early 1922, the El Cerrito Journal reported, the “question of jurisdiction which has been troubling both city trustees and the members of the Stege Sanitary Board for the past several months seems to be at last settling in a manner” satisfactory to all.

Stege would oversee sewers outside private property lines. On private property, the city would exercise its police powers “over health and sanitary conditions.”

A few months later, Stege was asking the city to stop demanding large deposits from contractors building sewers, as that was making it hard to find contractors. By 1925, Stege was holding its board meetings in City Hall. Instead of rent, Stege simply paid for the building’s janitor.
The home city of the East Bay section

Folks motoring into town along San Pablo Avenue in early 1923 couldn’t help but smile at a charming mural, spotlighted at night, showing “the building of their nest by little birds.”

Atop the building sat “a large Magnavox” radio that broadcast radio concerts in the evening for young people.

“Going to Build?” a newspaper ad for the building’s owners asked. “If con-
temploting building a home or repairing your home, see Bigley & Walsh, contractors and builders. Mill and cabinet work of all kinds.” Sharing the building was a plumbing firm and the electricians MacDonald and Rude, who supplied the Magnavox.42

Yes, by the early 1920s, the housing boom was on.

“El Cerrito, the home city of the East Bay section, invites home-seekers’ attention to pertinent facts,” an ad from the El Cerrito Land and Improvement Co. trumpeted on Christmas day 1922. “Lowest tax rate in the State. Lowest assessed valuation. Located near industrial centers. Streetcar and railroad service. Excellent schools and churches. Unexcelled climate and scenery.”

Sewers were in, the developer bragged, water mains forthcoming, “cement walks laid, and beautiful Shade trees planted.” Also, “a beautiful new School House has just been completed by the Trustees of the Ocean View School District” in nearby Albany.

“All of these improvements absolutely without cost to the lot buyers.”43

El Cerrito was a city of high hopes and optimistic slogans. “A Bigger and Bigger El Cerrito” was the suggestion of the city’s marshal. “He says that if everyone in El Cerrito will adopt the slogan and preach it to everyone, that El Cerrito will double in size within the next five years.”44

“The beginning of a new era of prosperity in this section,” the Journal wrote in 1923, as C.W. Boden began building 200 stucco cottages in Cerrito Park. A week after the Berkeley Fire destroyed 584 buildings and one of the prettiest neighborhoods anywhere, just over a mile south of El Cerrito, Boden was saying that “the great North Berkeley fire will promote development rather than retard it in this section.”

“The growth of the East Bay section has got to be northward. There is no other direction for growth.”45

A few blocks away, J.J. Moran was building 30 “cottages of which any city would be proud,” while lobbying the Key Route system to run streetcars down what is now Ashbury Avenue.46

Elsewhere in town, Stege’s former inspector, now city marshal, A.H. MacKinnon was planning 40 to 50 houses “for a nominal cost,” of $2,750 and $2,950. “Easy terms will be the watchword so that every man of small income will be enabled to own his own home.”47

Homes were also being built in the hillside tract called Berkeley Country Club Terrace, around Stockton and Terrace Avenues.

In El Cerrito, the Roaring Twenties really did roar. Prohibition banned booze, but the city was awash with “soft drink places” that won city permits to sell “soft drinks” but were often “not conducted in a manner which would be a credit to the city of El Cerrito.”48

Nor were the drinks always so soft.

Enforcing the city’s “new soft drink law” was none other than A.H. MacKinnon, who had his hands full with related matters.


“The raid was carefully planned by Marshal MacKinnon and at the agreed time the two officers entered the place from opposite doors barring all chance of escape with the exception of the trap door which was not known of by the officers.”49

And there was worse. “Hell Holes Along Avenue Must be Closed,” the Journal urged, citing an undercover investigation recently completed by Mayor Phil Lee. “It showed that young girls of tender years are permitted to disgrace themselves, after being plied with liquor on the dance floor of at least one of these places.”

The city developed such a bad reputation Lee felt repeatedly called upon to offer a defense. “El Cerrito has been pictured as the home of vice and the center of a hideous vice ring,” he said.

“The fact is that El Cerrito is a city of average Americans—responsible, home-loving people, who work in the industries of the East Bay section.”

It got so bad, the Journal reported, that “Conductors on the electric road between Oakland and Richmond displayed considerable brilliancy by designating the first stop (in El Cerrito) as ‘Tia Juana’ and the second stop as ‘Grampo Junction’.”50

But El Cerrito and hinterlands offered innocent pleasures as well. Huber Hall hosted weekly dances by the Pollyanna Girls and the Foresters Lodge, which also fielded its own baseball team.

In 1922 respectable El Cerritans founded the Community Service Club, “an organization which can give the city the proper kind of publicity,” which in turn gave birth to the town’s Boy Scout troop.51

And in the spring of 1923 the city
Maria Mayeda, daughter of one of the many Japanese nurserymen in the El Cerrito and Richmond area, stands in a field near her house on Wall Avenue. El Cerrito Historical Society, photo courtesy of the Maida family
saw its first regular showings of motion pictures. “Picture machine to be installed” at Fairmont school, the Journal reported, thanks to the PTA, which raised the funds through whist parties. Movies were soon being shown every week. A year and a half later, when the school burned down, a handful of cineastes cut through a wall to save the precious projector.52

By 1925, El Cerrito was maturing as a community, with a new library, that was promoted by the El Cerrito Improvement Association, and by a fire department upgrade and installation of hydrants, thanks to a bond issue that squeaked through on a vote of 231 to 104—only nine more votes than needed for the two-thirds requirement.

There were even clubs and restaurants that did not conceal roulette wheels in back rooms, or operate as speakeasies—at least not all the time—including Sullivans Café, known for its “famous chicken and squab dinners.”

The El Cerrito Athletic Club, owned by Ed Wuelzer, who was elected to the Stege Board in 1924, featured prize-fighting and dancing to Armando Girola and his accordion jazz orchestra—and sometimes activities that warranted a visit from Marshal MacKinnon. Wuelzer would go on to run Paradise Gardens, a popular nightclub in the 1930s.54

El Cerrito also made its mark in the Twenties among fans of motorcycles and airplanes. Aviation pioneer Pierre Allinio built several aircraft that flew from airfields in Oakland and Richmond—and from one in El Cerrito just south of Harding School.

“The plane is about as perfect as planes are being made now, having a wingspread of 39.8 feet,” the Journal reported of one, in 1923, adding that it was “painted in a Bellessa blue, which is Italian for very beautiful, and has gold trimmings.”

Crowds ooh-ed and ah-ed over the plane when it was parked in Richmond. But the real crowds—50,000, according to the Journal—turned out for the annual Oakland Motorcycle Club “hill climbing contest” at the end of Blake Street, “over the top of the steepest hill in the East Bay section.”

Not one to let an opportunity slip by, the city mounted a billboard at the race site. “El Cerrito,” it proclaimed. “Watch us grow.”

Stege was just one of the organizations seeing to that growth. The Fire Department, still volunteer, bought the latest in fire engines, an American La France. Trustees were pressuring the Post Office to establish a branch in El Cerrito, the Rust station having long since disappeared.55

The city’s building inspector, A.I. Bigley, began cracking down on “shacks,” and Mayor Phil Lee pushed for street lighting in the hills. City trustees, meanwhile, were worried that “Kensington Park may annex to city of Berkeley soon.” This was part of the Stege district, and an area El Cerrito desperately wanted within its own borders.56

The question of annexing nearby territory to the city of El Cerrito—No Man’s Land, the Richmond Annex, the various neighborhoods that would soon make up Kensington, repeatedly arose throughout the Twenties and Thirties—with El Cerrito at one point threatened by annexation itself.

“Richmond would annex us,” the headline ran. The proposal from the Richmond Chamber of Commerce never went anywhere.57

Richmond tried to annex the “Annex” and No Man’s Land in 1925 but voters said no. El Cerrito tried a year later. Again no. Richmond succeeded in annexing the Annex just a few years later—but El Cerrito would have no such luck with No Man’s Land until decades later.

During this period, Stege Sanitary kept expanding its service area, creating assessment districts to raise funds in Kensington as housing developers subdivided the land.

Throughout the 1920s, Stege hustled to build sewers to accommodate residential growth, sometimes falling behind due to lack of funds. J.J. Moran, who was building bungalows near Cerrito Park, complained that “populating this tract will be practically impossible unless sewers are installed.”58

Building sewers and other public improvements was a bit of a chicken-or-the-egg-game. A neighborhood couldn’t develop until it had sewers and streets, but sewers and streets couldn’t be built before the neighborhood developed because they were funded by assessments on property in the neighborhood.

At one point, the Stege board ruled, the “extension program” to serve Kensington Park “will have to be somewhat curtailed for a short time on account of the shortage of funds.”

The developer Boden explored tying his Cerrito Park tract into Albany sewers rather than waiting for Stege—but Albany wouldn’t have him. “Sewer question is troubling
Boden,” the Journal observed, forcing a construction halt until the “sewer question is settled.”

Stege finally sewer the tract, connecting to a temporary septic tank until funds could be obtained to connect to the district’s main lines. Later in the year, Stege and the city agreed to jointly fund sewers for Boden’s Cerrito Park and for Kensington Park, the city raising its funds through assessments on property owners.59

And, though they were working towards the same end, the city and Stege didn’t always cooperate. Stege said it was easier to put in sewers outside of the city limits than within, because within they needed to reach agreement with the city’s engineer.60

It also wasn’t enough to build sewers. Homeowners had to tie into them by putting in their own laterals. Many did not, using “privies” instead. This was a job for both the city and Stege. “Sewers must be connected with mains at once,” city trustees ordered in 1922, or property owners would face arrest. “Many complaints have been made to the board by residents of various sections of the city of the stench arising from cesspools.”

“The health of the city is in danger.”

The Journal chimed in: “There are property owners in every community, and El Cerrito is not without them, who would be willing to sacrifice the health of the entire community rather than spend a few dollars.”

It wasn’t always easy to acquire right of ways for sewer lines. Stege could force property owners to provide right of ways outside the city—but not within city limits. Inside city limits, acquiring right of ways required action by both Stege and the city.

There also were neighborhoods that didn’t want sewers at all—not if they had to pay assessments for them.61

Sewer lines weren’t the only bit of infrastructure going in during the bustling Twenties. Sidewalks and streets were being paved, as the city entered what the Journal called its “street improvement era.” The city was also building storm sewers and the privately owned East Bay Water Company was laying water mains.

El Cerrito begged East Bay Water to lay its mains, and Stege to lay its sewers, in advance of street paving, to avoid having to rip up brand new streets later. Unpaved streets and dangerous walks to school on dirt paths had neighbors up in arms. But neighbors could also get “extremely indignant” about high assessments for such improvements.62
The chicken business is rapidly growing

By the mid 1940s, El Cerrito had adopted what remains its semiofficial nickname, the “City of Homes.” This came about through gradual evolution. Back in 1922, a certain Mr. Schaefer had proposed another boosterish moniker, “The Gateway to Contra Costa.”

“Not a bad title, is it?” the El Cerrito Journal wrote.

“But let’s make it a real gateway,” the Journal went on, “one that we will not be ashamed to have company come through. One that we can point to with pride. Clean up your yard leading from the gate to the backyard. How about a few flowers along the way? Other cities have planted California poppies in their vacant lots, why not El Cerrito?”

Later that year, as we have seen, city boosters were calling it “the home city of the East Bay section.” By 1939, Chamber of Commerce ads were focusing on its hills and its views, dubbing the town “Panoramic City.”

But a year later, the Journal was dropping views for homes, in an editorial that celebrated the lowering of commuter charges to San Francisco from 60
cents a day to 27 cents. Now it would be cheap as well as easy to live in El Cerrito while working in the city. “The momentum of our PROGRESS continues! Watch El Cerrito, the CITY OF HOMES, continue to grow.”  

City of Homes! Nice sound! But it might not have turned out that way, not if the chicken farmers, dairymen, and quarrymen had had their way.

From the early days, El Cerrito’s handful of straggling homes had contended with neighboring uses that weren’t always neighborly, from the powder works that blew up a portion of Albany Hill at the start of the 20th century to the Hutchinson and Bates & Borland quarries.

Dairies had long operated in town, and flower growers, many of Japanese or Italian descent, filled a swath of the northern end of town with greenhouses. In 1922, city boosters were proud their town had been chosen by the Great Western Power Co. as the site for its “Great Western Sub-station,” which was “to be one of the largest in the world.”

“The El Cerrito is lucky to land this station,” the Journal wrote. “While the number of men employed after the completion of the station will be small, the advertisement of having one of the largest sub-stations in the state is worthwhile.”

The power station, which remains a landmark today as the PG&E sub-station on Schmidt Lane, was quiet. Not so some of the city’s existing industries. Hutchinson Quarry, which was much closer to homes than its uphill neighbor, Bates & Borland, frequently came in for criticism.

In 1925, after people reported windows breaking from post-midnight blasting, the city intervened, cutting back on night hours. Among the complainants was Harry Kalis, the city’s “poundman.” Stege too issued its complaints, as Hutchinson rock trucks crushed the district’s manhole covers, leading to “great danger of open manholes.”

To make matters worse, a third quarry was planned for the northern end of town, one that was just being settled as the Berkeley Country Club Tract, an upscale development near the new Berkeley Country Club (today, Mira Vista Golf and Country Club). New homeowners presented city trustees with a petition, and the city fought back.

“Law aimed at quarry passes first reading,” the Journal reported in May 1923. The Trustees ruled the land should remain residential. MacKin non delivered word to the quarry owners—who refused to stop excavating. The El Cerrito Quarry Company said the ordinance had no effect since the city passed it after work had started. They promised to improve the area after quarrying, and said the material they were removing from the hillside, the “best grade rock to be found in this section of the state,” was needed.

The battle went on for more than a year, with several quarry workers being arrested for violating the city’s stop-work order, before the quarry ceased operations.

The city’s battle against livestock took several decades longer to resolve. “Andy Shevlin in Chicken Business,” the Journal reported in 1922. This “well known Stockton Street resident … has decided to cast his lot in the chicken business,” with the recent purchase of 500 chicks.

A month later the paper reported that “Brensel and Navellier have purchased 3,000 baby chicks with which they intend stocking their poultry ranch and Mr. Kayser of Potrero Street has also purchased 3,000 for his chicken ranch. There are many residents of the Stege section planning on entering the chicken business and erelong El Cerrito will be a little Petaluma.”

Within a year, though, chickens were proving too much of a good thing. Both Stege and city officials grew concerned about the impact of poultry and other livestock on public health—as did neighbors.

“The stench arising (from dairies) is unbearable,” residents complained, “and … the unsightly condition of the lots where the cows are kept prevented the sale of many home lots in the vicinity.” And in the northern part of town, goats were “the nightmare of residents.”

City trustees proposed an ordinance that would ban diaries and goat raising in town, and another insisting on sanitary conditions.

They finally passed a plan restricting families to two cows or two goats. To have a larger herd required an acre for each additional animal. And no bulls were allowed, unless within a barn.

The city also focused on chickens. One trustee proposed an ordinance to “cover every kind of a chicken, and every act that a chicken is capable of.” He urged that owners keep their chickens penned, saying no one could plant a garden without chickens immediately pecking it apart.
Efficiency and economy candidates are receiving offers of support everywhere

Throughout its history Stege has been a bit of a mystery to most people, overseen and often run by people well known in the community, but the district itself rarely attracting much attention. Few of its public meetings have attracted the public, and many elections have failed to attract challengers.

Not so, however, a pair of elections in the mid 1920s—though exactly what attracted a relative horde of candidates remains hard to fathom today.

By this time, Stege wasn’t even awarding “soft drink” permits, which might have generated a bit of cash under the table. The city’s trustees and county supervisors were now in charge of such permits.

Do Not Exchange Performance for Promises

RE-ELECT

EUGENE K. STURGIS

COMMISSIONER No. 2

ELECTION, MAY 7, 1929

Eugene Sturgis, for many years Stege’s attorney, also served as elected commissioner for the City of Oakland.
“Much interest being shown in Stege Sanitary Board election on March 11,” the Journal reported in February 1924. “… much talk is to be heard concerning the various candidates.”

Charles H. Schwake, a local plumber, and W.F. (Tom) Talmadge were running for the board on a “platform of efficiency and economy.” Ernest “Babe” Brensel, long associated with Stege Lumber Co. and “well equipped with business ability,” was running on the ticket for sanitary assessor, an elected position at the time.

“Contrary to the belief of many, there are other things to be done by a Sanitary Board aside from the mere installation of sewers and their maintenance,” the Journal explained, “and these three men are pledged to look after the interests of the District in all matters pertaining to the deeds of the District in reference to clean and sanitary conditions within the district as well as the maintenance of healthy and sanitary conditions of the streets and thoroughfares.”

Also in the race was Edward Wuelzer, president of one of the city’s volunteer fire departments, with “a large following in northern section where he lives,” H. Van Fleet, and Mrs. George C. Carrick. Mrs. Carrick’s husband, who had served on the Stege board for two years, had just resigned to take the job of sanitary inspector.

But it was Schwake-Talmadge-Brensel ticket that garnered most of the paper’s attention. “Efficiency and Economy candidates are receiving offers of support everywhere,” it reported.

Election day lived up to expectations.

“. . .the voting continued steady all day until the last hour when voters stood in line waiting their turn to cast their ballot. There was considerable excitement all day and many workers were out early working hard for their favorite candidates.

“Many automobiles were scouting for voters all during the day and if any voter walked to the polls it was his or her own fault as there were enough machines to carry all to the voting places.”

In “the most spirited election ever held by the Stege Sanitary District Board,” the victors were Schwake, Brensel, as sanitary assessor, and Wuelzer, who “nosed Talmadge out by 11 votes.”

“In justice to Mrs. George Carrick, who received a nice complimentary vote, it should be mentioned that she asked her friends throughout the district to disregard her name on the ballot, as she was not desirous of being elected.”

Compared to the ’24 race the ‘25 was a snoozer—though it did attract six candidates for five spots, with only one incumbent seeking re-election.

“Some lively politics has developed over the past week,” the Journal reported, with the candidates divided into two opposing slates.

The winners were John Sandvick, who would go on to serve 28 years on the board, Elmer Christensen, a Richmond Annex resident who worked for Standard Oil who would serve on the board till 1948, when he died in office, and Clifford Hinds.

“The defeated candidates as well as the successful ones are satisfied that a clean campaign was made and none have any ill feeling over the result,” the Journal concluded.
CHAPTER 7

Speed! Action! Sparkle! Eleven races every night except Sunday

Shortly after its formation, in a burst of activity, Stege directors issued six resolutions pertaining to the bond election and sewer construction. By 1929, resolutions were appearing almost regularly, most dealing with important but mundane matters, agreements with the bank, the Berkeley Water Front Co., a request from Albany to connect with Stege pipes, and setting pay scales.

Then, in October 1932, came Resolution 27, one that would turn a raucous town filled with speakeasies and gambling dens into... well, a town that had gone to the dogs.

“Resolution to grant permission to Albany to allow Wembly Amusement Corp. to connect their sewer system to Albany and in effect Stege Sanitary” made it possible for John Jerome, “the kind of man who is either liked or detested by those he comes in contact with,” called “Jack” by his friends and “Black Jack” by others, to open his El Cerrito Kennel Club.

The racetrack, on the site of today’s El Cerrito Plaza, featured “greyhound racing under the option system,” meaning that a bettor—no, don’t call him a “bettor,” as betting on dogs was illegal—bought an option to buy a dog before the race, then sold the option for a profit if the dog won.

And win they did, some of them, dogs like Flying Warrior, Rough Mac, Tara Hill, Dangerous Dan, Susie the Warrior, Laddie Footsteps. A good bet was Blue Rabbit, the classiest dog at hurdles, according to Kennel Club Notes, a weekly column in the El Cerrito Journal. “Blue Rabbit takes the jumps so cleanly that fans are amazed at his skill.”

“You get two looks at the El Cerrito dogs before each race, under the new system in effect at this popular track,” the Journal reported.

“First the greyhounds stand on the indoor platform, close to the option booths. After being given a good inspection by the fans there, the dogs parade on the track and then fall into review again before the starting box. On the track the dogs line up parallel with the grandstand, and facing the crowd, being but a few feet away from the railbirds. By this method a fan has a good
The grandstand and track at the El Cerrito Kennel Club. This picture is believed to have been taken before the track opened to the public. Harding School can be seen near the center of the photo and the Sunset View Cemetery and the Sunset Mausoleum building are directly above it.

El Cerrito Historical Society
chance to size up the alertness of his dog or to make up his mind which is his choice.”

And the Kennel Club offered more than dogs. “Gorgeous girls will parade in Bathing Beauty revue tonight,” one ad read. New cars were awarded in prizes. Neighbors brought their house pets by for mutt races. And there was more.

“Talk about real fun! The ostrich race, with Negro boy jockeys, as staged Tuesday night, is one of the best bits of entertainment of the sea-son,” the Journal reported.

“These boys did their derndest to ride like real jockeys, but staying on a bouncing ostrich is something of a task and the comical tumbles these boys took during the race last night produced a barrel of fun. And when the policemen fired blank cartridges you should have seen the ostriches fly. They literally flew along the track, with the jockeys hanging on and whooping.”

City policemen worked at the track during their off hours, as did Mayor Phil Lee. Many Cerritans took to raising dogs in their homes, and it was estimated that 700 greyhounds called El Cerrito home. Many toured to other dog tracks in the Bay Area and nationwide.

For those who didn’t care for dogs, El Cerrito and No Man’s Land offered dozens of other venues for fun.

Gambler Big Bill Pechart’s Rancho San Pablo, Castro’s former adobe, was next to the track, and his Wagon Wheel within shouting distance. At the Southern Club, Sexy Sax led “one of the best known groups of colored entertainers in the region.” Folks flocked to the Hollywood Inn, “where bohemian life blazes in an atmosphere of chivalry.”

Still, when the Kennel Club shut for the season, as it did several months every year, El Cerrito quieted down considerably.

Besides any moral turpitude the Kennel Club brought to town—and District Attorney Francis Healey, who raided the track on occasion, repeatedly accused city officials of ignoring “morals laws”—the track brought more down-to-earth problems, including a citywide outbreak of fleas.

El Cerrito’s defenders included Mayor Hans Nissen. “Why anyone can feel El Cerrito is a sink of iniquity is a mystery to me,” he said. “El Cerrito is a law abiding community.”

“The dog track can be called a nuisance,” one neighborhood opponent argued, “because barking dogs and the loudspeaker system disturbs the residents, it breeds rats and fleas, it is a fire hazard, and it attracts an undesirable element.”

Earl Warren, known today for his role as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, and before that as California attorney general and governor, gets much of the credit for shutting down the track, along with many other gambling joints in and around El Cerrito. But really it’s the neighbors who deserve much of the credit.

By the mid 1930s, several neighborhood associations were fighting the track, not surprisingly, mostly those that abutted it.

“I am interested chiefly in El Cerrito as a home city,” Frank Aiman told the Cerrito Park Improvement Club. “I have no desire to have this city known as the gambling center of Northern California.” The dog track, he said, “diminishes the desirability of El Cerrito is the eyes of homeowners.”

Aiman, formerly a seller of “options” at the track, said he was “familiar with its operations and management. I find nothing to commend in either.”

“Contrary to what you are asked to believe, only a small portion of the salaries and wages at the dog track go to local residents. Only a few local people are employed in any but the lowest paid jobs, option sellers in particular being paid less than at any track within my knowledge...”

“Kennel Club will close this Friday,” the Journal announced on March 16, 1939—and not just, as usual, for the season. Jerome made the decision after “receipt of formal notice from Attorney General Earl Warren that he believes dog racing as practiced in California is illegal and that he plans to take action to close the seven tracks in the state.”

“I have always believed operation to be legal,” Jerome said. “If, however, the attorney general says it is illegal, I am not disposed to disagree with his opinion.”
A very grave menace to public health

By the mid- to late-1930s, Depression or no, El Cerrito had again become a residential boom town.

“It is generally assumed that the East Bay will experience a building boom with the completion of the Oakland-San Francisco Bay Bridge,” the El Cerrito Journal wrote in 1934, urging Cerritans, “Let’s not get caught napping.”

Stege was not napping. The district had re-organized in 1923, under that year’s state Sanitary District Act. In 1929, with some of its sewers already 15 years old, it began a program to rebuild and improve its system.

The $75,000 in bonds, sold in 1914 to finance the original system, still had $15,000 due, and would mature in 1934.

According to a 1929 report from Stege engineer Ross Calfee, population growth in the sanitary district—it doubled in a decade, plus began serving 300 acres in Albany—required that major improvements be made.

He warned that the current southerly outfall into the bay had become obstructed as the bay silted up. When built in 1914, both north and south outfalls were “1.4 feet above ordinary low tide,” Calfee wrote.

“The outlets had no obstructions and sewerage had free flow,” he wrote. But now, because of “westerly winds and tide action… silt, sand and debris… has completely covered the existing pipe to a depth of about one foot. In other words, in the last 16 years, the tidelands have filled in over four feet.”

In a report a year later, Calfee described what happened at Albany’s northern sewage outfall, which entered a slough north of Albany Hill, just south of the county line.

“Discharging into a very small and narrow slough, it is impossible for diffusion and dilution of the sewage to properly take place under these conditions.”

“Through the action of the ebb tide, part of the sewage is carried out into the shallow water over the mud flats. There being no current here, again through the action of the flood tide and the prevailing westerly winds it is carried back in again and deposited on the shores and mud flats in the immediate vicinity east of the Southern Pacific Railroad, thus creating a very obnoxious odor and resulting in a very grave menace to public health.”

By the mid 1930s, it was becoming increasingly apparent that the bay was in danger, as were the people who used it.

“Cerrito shore clams barred,” the Journal reported in 1934. The state Board
of Health ruled that this and other areas were “grossly polluted and the consumption of clams taken there highly dangerous.”

Calfee’s proposed solution, seconded by the chief of the state Department of Public Health, was to abandon both the original north and south Stege outfalls, replacing them with a new line that “carries the sewage out farther into the Bay and to a place where sanitary conditions are more favorable.”

For Albany he proposed abandoning the outfall and connecting Albany’s mains with a 36-inch Stege interceptor line. Pile and timber foundations would be built in the swamp to support the new lines.

In early 1930, the state Board of Health granted Stege a permit to extend its outfall line onto a wooded knoll, Point Isabel, named in the mid-1800s for Victor Castro’s daughter. From this moment on, until the early 1970s, when sewage treatment was taken over by a regional agency and shifted to a plant in Oakland, Point Isabel would be central to Stege’s operations.

The next step for Stege was financing the project, made complicated because the district, which totaled 3,300 acres, covered three political jurisdictions, El Cerrito, 2,320 acres, Richmond, 320 acres, and unincorporated territory, No Man’s Land and Kensington, 660 acres. Stege was also serving a small portion of Albany, under contract to the city, but Albany couldn’t become part of the district because, under the 1923 sanitary district law, districts could not serve towns in different counties.

Funding was provided through an assessment, which required voter approval.

Already by the start of the 1930s Stege knew that eventually it would be required to treat its effluent before releasing it.

When designed in 1930, the district later wrote, “provision was made for future construction of primary treatment plant when and if required, near Point Isabel.”

Looking east from Albany Hill up Brighton Avenue in Albany. Cerrito Creek comes down from the hills to the left of Brighton. The original building at Sunset View Cemetery is at the top of Fairmount Avenue and the buildings of John Babra’s dairy are north of the cemetery. El Cerrito Historical Society
By the mid 1930s, small housing tracts were sprouting throughout El Cerrito and the Richmond Annex. The San Pablo Land Co. was hard at work in the Annex, and A.H. Hammarberg was planning a subdivision near the brand new El Cerrito High.

“Few people realize that, in point of population, El Cerrito is the second city in Contra Costa County, exceeded only by Richmond.”

The city’s population was 5,500 in 1938, when it was the fastest growing city in the county, with 166 homes built that year, an all-time high. And it just got better. By March 1939, the Journal estimated that a house a day was being built. The pace evidently slackened as the year went on; the total for 1939 came to only 240.79

Stege was growing along with the city and its hinterlands. Mason McDuffie, the Berkeley realty and development firm run by the Sierra hiker Duncan McDuffie, planned one of its boldest moves yet—a quasi-suburban neighborhood in what was then a wilderness, a windy unincorporated ridge in Kensington overlooking Wildcat Canyon.

The area had no services at all. McDuffie needed 30,000 linear feet of sewer lines for a cost of about $40,000. Stege expanded its boundaries to accommodate the subdivision.

By mid 1939, Stege was hustling to put in $16,000 worth of new sewers for several other hillside tracts, Mira Vista (the former Berkeley Country Club tract), Arlington Estates and Richmond Junction Heights. Homes in Arlington Estates were still using septic tanks.

It proved something of a rush to get the streets, sidewalks, sewers and storm drains in place quickly enough to meet the demand for houses. The City Council, which was handling the assessments to fund the work, authorized the city engineer “to secure the services of any man for the job to secure the plans at the earliest possible date.”

Federal job creation funds were helping, with the WPA (Works Progress Administration) spending $161,190 on Mira Vista streets.

Depression-era alphabet soup programs were helping Stege in other ways too, with the federal Civil Works Administration paying for Stege to clean debris from Cerrito Creek to prevent flooding in No Man’s Land.
The rapid development in the hills was putting pressure on Stege’s sewers, as grading and paving increased the flow of storm water, which flooded into Stege’s lines. Manholes began popping. Stege urged the city council to speed up construction of storm sewers to handle the flow.

Stege also put in sewers for the Gill Tract, west of San Pablo Avenue and south of Cutting, where an automobile trailer camp won approval to use a septic system until sewers could be built.80

Stege and city staff were working very closely by the late 1930s, in part no doubt because they’d been sharing a building since late 1937. Stege had taken over a desk in city hall, with Lillian Chase serving as Stege assessor and office clerk. Gone were the days of running the district from the home of the chairman of the board.81

A landmark event for Stege occurred in 1938, when a young man who sold truck engines at Hall-Scott Motors in Berkeley was first elected to the sanitary board. It was an unusually large turnout for a Stege election, 1,012 voters, almost double the vote in any previous year. Alfred G. Baxter, known to all as Al, came in second, with 496 votes.82

Baxter, Denver born but El Cerrito bred, made his mark quickly, in 1939 becoming chairman. He held leadership positions on the board off and on until 1957, when he quit to become the district’s manager, serving in that role to 1984. Baxter stayed with Stege a total of 47 years. No one, not even the founder William Huber, would play a larger role in Stege’s history than Al Baxter.

Throughout the 1930s, Stege was issuing slews of resolutions and occasional regulation, which suggest the range of activities that was keeping the district busy.

In 1934, a resolution granted exclusive rights to pick up garbage in the area to Oakland Scavenger Co., and in 1935, a regulation required homeowners to place their garbage in cans, not in alleys or ditches, and “placed so as not to be upset by dogs or unauthorized scavengers.”

The regulation also banned anyone from keeping “upon his premises in an unsanitary condition or improperly ventilated, any barn, stable or huts for dogs.” Floors in barns were required to have gutters and be connected to Stege’s sewers.83

Resolution 41 was a “resolution of protest” against “keeping of animals in excess of family need in the Richmond Annex area.”

The Annex and No Man’s Land had long been plagued by unsanitary conditions. Besides a slaughter house, which Stege began serving in 1919, empty lots throughout the area were used as informal dumps. Later, Stege gave the city of El Cerrito permission to create a dump for household waste.

By the mid-1920s, residents of the low-lying neighborhoods were up in arms about both the illegal dumping and El Cerrito’s official dump—which had been placed, conveniently enough for the city, outside of its borders.

The Annex Improvement Club complained that the official dump was so poorly marked, folks just dumped anywhere. George Carrick, a former Stege board member who was now the district’s sanitary inspector, staked out the border of the official dump, hoping that would solve the problem. It did not.

It’s rare that Stege and the city ever came to blows, but they did in mid-1925 when Stege, responding to a petition from the Annex Improvement Club to close the city dump, declared it a public nuisance.

“The condemning of the garbage dump in the Annex brings a situation whereby Annex residents and El Cerrito residents now have no place to dump their garbage, and they will be in violation of the law unless some remedy is found immediately,” city trustees announced.

The stalemate continued for several months until the city worked out a deal with a Richmond hauler to take the trash.

Garbage, alas, proved to be a problem that lasted for years. The city later established dumps for household trash at Gladys and Norvell, at today’s Castro Park and, at the Hutchinson Quarry, after the quarry shut following World War II.84

Another perennial problem that came to the fore in the 1930s was flooding. While floods could occur at several places in town, in the hills, along rushing creeks, in commercial districts, by far the deepest problems arose in the lowest lying portions of the district, including portions of the Richmond Annex and No Man’s Land.

Epicenter for the floods that sent stormwater through basements and the first floors of some homes, and that caused manholes to pop and spew raw sewage, was the corner of Central and Belmont Avenues.

Only seven feet and a few inches above sea level, the corner, the lowest
street elevation in the Stege district, was only three feet above the average highest tide of the year and less than one foot above the 100-year storm tide.

As the area developed, small houses were built on land that regularly turned into marsh during winter storms. Meanwhile, development further inland caused increased runoff, making matters worse. Cerrito Creek and its tributaries, increasingly hemmed in, had less room to wander. When the creek filled, water had no place to go but into the streets and into Stege’s sewers.

“El Cerrito storm damages are heaviest in history,” the Journal reported in February 1939. Flooding hit areas well east of San Pablo Avenue as well as the Annex and No Man’s Land. Homes and businesses flooded in the heart of the commercial strip, San Pablo and Fairmount avenues, and a garage further uphill on Pomona Street collapsed.

Stormwater got into the sewers, overwhelming capacity and causing them to overflow, sending sewage mixed with rainwater into people’s homes.

When the flooding repeated itself a year later, only worse, with floods on the Arlington, along Poinsett Creek on Rosalind Avenue, and again on Pomona, residents flooded City Council meetings.

A “city wide mass meeting” was held at Harding School, attracting 70 people and a “flood survey committee” formed. City attorney Homer Patterson put part of the blame on developers for diverting creeks, building on top of them, and failing to culvert their waters. The council prepared an ordinance. Flooding and associated sewage overflows would plague the city for years to come.

Red Cross volunteers played an important role during World War II. El Cerrito Historical Society