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# La Peninsula

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If These Walls Could Talk...  
1910 Courthouse Centennial

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To discover the past and  
imagine the future.

## Our Mission

To enrich, excite and  
educate through  
understanding, preserving  
and interpreting the history  
of San Mateo County.

## Accredited by the

American Association of  
Museums



**The San Mateo County Historical Association** operates the San Mateo County History Museum and research archives at the old San Mateo County Courthouse located in Redwood City, California, and administers two county historical sites, the Sanchez Adobe in Pacifica and the Woodside Store in Woodside.

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**Front Cover: The fourth county courthouse known as the Temple of Justice, c. 1915.**

# A Box of Old Documents:

Records of Building the 1910 Courthouse

Joan Levy



The newly-completed third courthouse behind the second courthouse after the 1906 San Francisco Earthquake. The destruction caused by the earthquake necessitated the building of the 1910 Courthouse.

## Joan Levy

Joan Levy is the chairwoman of the Publications Committee at the San Mateo County Historical Association. She served on the Board of Directors and as a volunteer docent at the Sanchez Adobe. A third generation Californian, Joan has always been interested in California history. After retiring in 1989, she returned to college to complete her B.A. in American History with an emphasis on California and Latin America. Using 1846 Northern California as her focus, she digresses in many directions. For five years she contributed local history articles for the *San Mateo Daily Journal*.

In 2007, the County turned over to the San Mateo County Historical Association Archives a metal box of old documents. As a volunteer, my job was to go through the box and determine what the papers were. I found that this box contained original contracts, letters and paperwork minutia surrounding the building of the Courthouse as well as other matters of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

We are celebrating the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the completion of this Courthouse building. The story of this Courthouse really begins with the previous one. As you may know, the County had built a new building that was complete, but not yet occupied, when the 1906 San Francisco Earthquake demolished it. This necessitated the construction of yet another building. So.... the story told by my box goes like this....

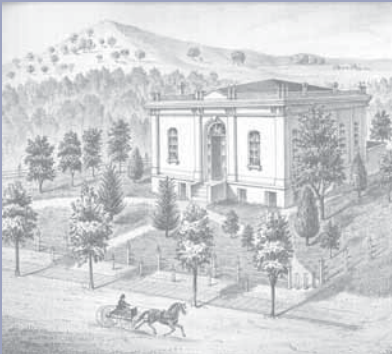
Questionnaires dated January 1, 1902, were sent to other counties in California asking for their experiences, if any, in building new courthouses. At least 14 counties responded, with Santa Cruz even sending along a picture of their building. There must have been some field visits done by members of the Board of Supervisors, because the box contains a note with instructions on how to reach Sonora (Go to Stockton and turn east). Also, an audit showed \$262 was paid to



Box of documents detailing the construction of the third and fourth courthouses in San Mateo County.

## Early Courthouses of San Mateo County

After the formation of San Mateo County in 1856, Soledad de Arguello, Jose Ramon Arguello and Simon Mezes donated a block of land in Redwood City to build a courthouse. The 1910 Courthouse was the fourth courthouse built on the block.



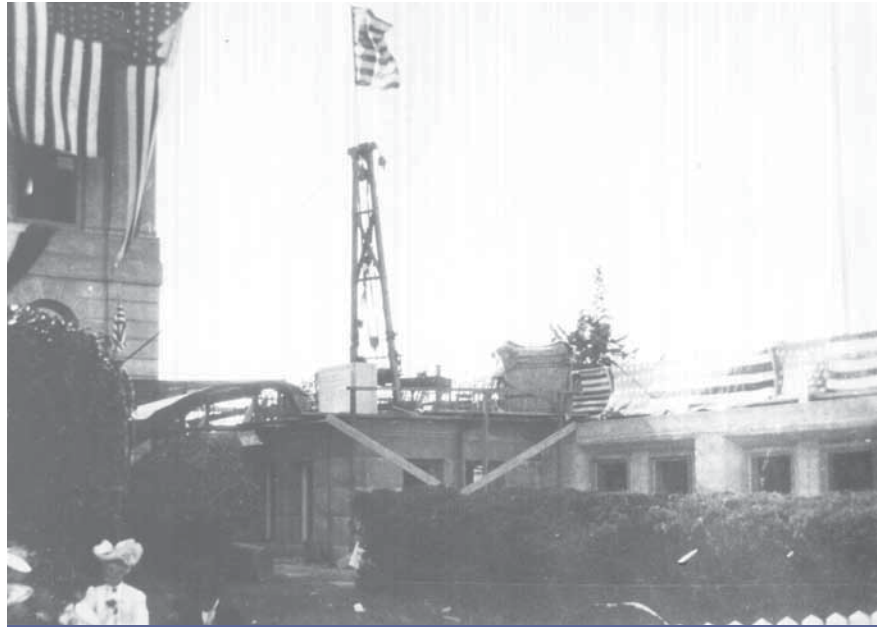
The first courthouse was completed in 1858. Though an earthquake destroyed the second floor in 1868, it was still used. Drawing from Moore and DePue, 1878.



Known as the Lady Justice Courthouse for the statue on top, the second courthouse was completed in 1882. Photo by O.V. Lange.



Before the third courthouse could be used, it was destroyed by the 1906 San Francisco Earthquake. The second courthouse (r) was also destroyed.



Derrick and cornerstone for the third courthouse, May 1903. The second courthouse is visible on the left.

### Supervisors for “visiting courthouses.”

On February 16, 1903, a notice to architects was published, soliciting designs to be submitted for the new courthouse. The design submitted by Dodge and Dolliver was accepted April 8, 1903. Plans were drawn up and a notice for bids by contractors for construction of the building was issued July 20, 1903. The winning bid was made by the American-Hawaiian Engineering and Construction Company on September 7, 1903. The Board accepted that bid of \$132,845 on September 22.

While work was getting under way, letters started arriving that solicited for other aspects of the new building. Companies wrote offering safes, revolving doors, fireproof filing cabinets, carpets and office furniture. One company suggested using slate instead of tar and gravel for the roof. This suggestion was adopted, although it isn't clear whether that company got the sale. Another offered jail cells and still another suggested an intercom system for the building.

A revision was made to add a new jail as part of the structure. Letters between the architect, builders and the Board flew back and forth. Various revisions, changes and extras brought all sorts of revised estimates on costs.

In late 1905, work was nearing completion. In August a citizen's committee proposed a plan for the allocation of space to departments within the building. Adjustments were made to the heating system in late December. The American-Hawaiian Company submitted a statement of payment due December 31.

In January 1906 American-Hawaiian pleaded for a final inspection and acceptance, as their work was done as far as it could be. There would be a delay on installing the portico and some cement work pending the demolition of the old building on the property.

Minor flaws were fixed in February. The State of California sent a letter announcing the jail was not up to standard, and enclosed a copy of the statute covering this. Some suppliers wrote letters indicating that American-Hawaiian still owed them money and requesting the County's assistance in the matter. Other letters indicate when these matters were resolved.

February 26, 1906, the architects, Dodge and Dolliver, declared the building complete. The following day the Board of Supervisors officially accepted the building.

On March 12, 1906, W&J Sloan got a contract to install special battleship grey linoleum, promising completion within the next 60 days.

On February 1, 1906, Auditor George Barker issued his report on the Courthouse Fund covering November 29, 1899, through March 1, 1906. As of that date, \$221,089.35 had been collected in taxes earmarked for the project and \$181,974.43 had been spent. The amount still on hand was shown as \$39,114.92 with another \$23,542.68 expected from the second installment of 1905 property taxes. Only \$110 was shown still unpaid at that time. Of course the decorating and furnishings were still to come.

A letter from the builder, American-Hawaiian Construction Company, dated March 29, 1906, notified the Board of Supervisors that their final check for \$10,710 had been refused for insufficient funds. It was to be delayed until the second installment of property taxes were paid in about 45 days. The First National Bank of San Mateo agreed to cover the shortage and pay American-Hawaiian at a fee of \$100. American-Hawaiian made it clear that they expected to be reimbursed for this \$100 cost.

April 18, 1906, brought the earthquake, and we have all seen that picture of the courthouse rubble with only the dome still standing.

September 9, 1906, a letter was sent to W&J Sloan notifying them that debris was being cleared at the property, and quite a bit of their linoleum could be salvaged if they were interested.

Investigations were made over the next few years into the reason for the building's utter failure. Subpoenas were issued to the principals of the American-Hawaiian engineering and Construction Company. So far I haven't found in the box any substantive results of these inquiries. There is a letter from the architect of the new building dated May 4,

## Redwood City 1910

At the dedication of the 1910 Courthouse, Barzilla Hayward gave the following description of Redwood City:

"Here stands the stately court house, the fine school buildings thronged with happy children, the beautiful Carnegie library, the fine stores, beautiful home and smooth streets. The adjacent parks once an unfenced pasture for wild cattle, laid out with level streets and dotted with pretty homes. Where once there was a mere trail or pathway leading south now the trains thunder past almost incessantly."

Barzilla Hayward. "The Past of San Mateo County." San Mateo County Courthouse. July 4, 1910. SMCHA Archives.



After the earthquake debris had been removed, the dome still stood, c. 1907.



The design of the 1910 Courthouse included mosaic tile floors.



Chandelier and art glass chosen for Courtroom A. The San Mateo County History Museum restored the glass in 2004.



Glenn Allen selected a patriotic theme for the art glass in the windows below the dome.

1908, stating that upon inspecting the dome, he found that it was not anchored to the old foundation. In the event of an earthquake, the dome structure would have moved freely, contributing to the destruction. There is also an extract of a “Graham Report” giving an analysis of the failure of the dome.

Now a new building must be built. With the preliminary research having been done for the first building, by December 3, 1906, a notice to architects was published again calling for submission of designs. According to the notice, basement, foundation and dome were existing, and the new design was to incorporate these features, if possible. Other specifications were included. The terms offered to architects were the same as the previous building. The selected architect was to supervise the construction of the building and would be paid 5% of the total cost. Glenn Allen’s design was selected, and the notice to contractors to bid for construction was issued July 29, 1907. Specifications ran to over 47 pages.

American-Hawaiian Engineering and Construction Company was among the bidders, but this time J. J. O’Brien Construction Company got the contract. Their bid promised completion within 12 months at a cost of \$160,000. On December 14, 1907, a bid came from the Colusa Sandstone Company to provide the portico, as they pointed out, the stone had already been cut for the old building and was in storage at the time of the earthquake. They may have provided the stone, but they were not the contractors to do the stonework on the new building. That job went to the firm of Rainey & Phillips.

Again, many letters went back and forth between the Board of Supervisors and the architect and the builder on various changes and revisions. Approved changes, of course, increased costs over the original bids.

Additional contracts for stonework, cornice work and electrical wiring came into play. Metal doors were substituted for conventional wood. One major concern was the apparent need to raise the existing dome 20 feet. The reason is not clear as to why that was necessary or whether it related to the need to anchor it to the foundation.

While there are estimates from art glass companies to repair the dome in 1909, the box contained no mention of the glass in the dome from the original 1906 construction. The specifications for the 1910 building contain a provision that art glass for the ceiling and the lights of the courtroom and the windows below the dome was to be selected by the architect and paid for and installed by the contractor. The material cost was set at \$2.50 per square foot for the courtroom and \$1.50 per

square foot for the dome windows. There were no records of what company supplied this glass. Very few actual drawings or blueprints were in the box. They would have been too large to store there. Our archives already have many of them in our collection.

On May 21, 1909, in a letter to the Board of Supervisors, J.J. O'Brien Co. requested an extension of time on its contract. Prior delays, not the fault of O'Brien, had slowed construction, resulting in an April 19 letter to the Board from O'Brien pleading for an approval to proceed with work.

Again, there were the various letters soliciting business for furnishing other needs for the building. Vaults, furniture and burglar alarms would be needed. W&J Sloan offered that battleship grey linoleum at the same price as before the earthquake.

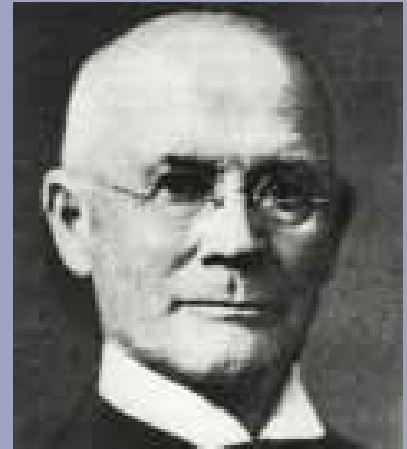
J.J.O'Brien found that the old plumbing pipes could not be reused, so replacements needed to be made. They complained to the Board that some reusable glass and other materials had been removed by County employees for use at other locations. They asked for the return of the items or reimbursement for their replacement.

The Pioneer Drug Store offered to provide toilets at no cost in return for a contract for the necessary paper products. Furniture was finally selected. Pacific Telephone and Telegraph contracted to provide a two line, 21 station Private Branch Exchange at \$33 per month for a minimum of five years.

Donald MacKenzie had been hired as superintendent of the construction. He made many written reports on the status of things over the construction years. Some expenditures for gymnasium equipment and renovation of a gymnasium show in his reports. It appears that the County had made temporary use of a gymnasium somewhere for offices and was responsible for returning it to its former condition. MacKenzie's letter of resignation upon completion of his job is also in the box.

Controversy surrounded this project, as it must with all major civic building projects. Testimony at a Board of Supervisor's meeting in 1909 ran to 64 pages covering the bidding process and the awarding of the contract to J. J. O'Brien Company to build the Courthouse. Apparently other builders felt that there had not been an even playing field in the matter.

As completion neared in 1910, letters of suggestion came in for the grounds surrounding the courthouse. The Redwood City Women's Club felt that a fountain with matching lighting standards was a must, while the local chapter of the Native Daughters of the Golden West advised that "beauty need not be costly." They suggested a neat lawn, hardy



Judge George Buck.

### Buck's Court

After moving to California, George Buck organized a law practice with an impressive clientele. He served as San Mateo County's district attorney from 1882-1890. Elected the county's sole judge in 1890, he was an influential leader in county business, government and social life.

After the 1906 San Francisco Earthquake, he held court in the Odd Fellow Temple on Main Street in Redwood City. On April 14, 1908, he expressed his dissatisfaction with the progress of the new courthouse. He told the grand jury that "over two years ago now, the county, very liberally, voted courthouse bonds to the amount of \$150,000; very little progress has been made on the building. The grand jury should make an investigation and place the blame where it belongs."

Judge Buck was the first to occupy the bench in Courtroom A. It continued to be his courtroom until 1932.

John G. Edmonds, *The Early Courts of San Mateo County* (Redwood City, CA: 1986), pp. 8-9.



Landscaping around the 1910 Courthouse.



Marble directory at the 1910 Courthouse.

flowers and small shrubs. A landscaper or two submitted bids, and Glenn Allen provided his own concept to compliment his building.

Niels Grouleff got the contract to put in sidewalks and curbs. The Vermont Marble Company was to provide the building directory on a plaque. A blueprint of this was enclosed. A resolution had been passed earlier in the construction to place a plaque on the exterior of the building recognizing the architect and contractor. Replicas of the original exterior plaques are in place today.

A May 2, 1910, letter from Glenn Allen announced that J. J. O'Brien Company had completed its contract. An itemized statement of account was included, showing that the O'Brien contract came to a final figure of \$174,177.81. Stonework, cornice work and electrical wiring brought the total cost to \$220,327.26. Allen's 5% came to \$11,016.36. On May 6, 1910, P. N. McAvoy, Chairman of the Board of Supervisors, issued a Certificate of Completion of the Courthouse building effective on May 4. On June 6, 1910, the Board of Supervisors issued an order to move in. Not all offices were completely finished, but they announced that the next board meeting would be held in their new Courthouse. Correspondence shows that the County had already included an image of the Courthouse on their letterhead stationery. On July 18, 1910, Inspector MacKenzie submitted a list of supplies needed for the new building. Included in the list were five dozen cuspidors.

Also on that date, Glenn Allen wrote to the Board explaining that he was going out of the architecture business to pursue other interests. He said they could have his plans for the grounds free of charge. He also mentioned that a man named O'Farrell had been trying to extort money from him over the landscaping bid.

In one of his final status reports on the new Courthouse, Inspector McKenzie reported to the Board of Supervisors on January 16, 1911, that the marble building directory had been installed in the main entrance. This is the same marble directory that can be seen there today.



# The Day We Celebrate:

Dedication of the San Mateo County Courthouse, July 4, 1910



Celebration on July 4, 1910. Courtesy of Redwood City Karl A. Vollmayer Local History Room.

The *San Mateo Leader* declared the celebration “the greatest in the history of San Mateo County.” Redwood City was finely decorated to celebrate the 134th anniversary of the nation’s independence and the dedication of the “magnificent new courthouse to the use of the people.”

The grand parade in the morning stretched for nearly two miles, ending at the courthouse. Featured in the parade was a battalion of the National Guard of California, four bands and floats from such organizations such as the Native Daughters of the Golden West and the United Ancient Order of Druids.

After the parade, attention turned to the courthouse for literary exercises. Then, the dignitaries from around the county participated in the dedication program.

The afternoon was given over to athletic programs. The firemen and the soldiers both conducted exhibition drills. The Redwood City and San Mateo baseball teams competed.

The day concluded with a grand ball. Thousands of electric lights made the night brilliant, including the lights outlining the dome of the new courthouse.

## Program at the Courthouse

Hail Columbia.....	Redwood City Band
Invocation.....	Rev. J. J. Sullivan
Call to Arms.....	Redwood City Choral Society
The Past of San Mateo County.....	B. Hayward
Cornet Solo.....	Prof. Carl Rietze
The Future of San Mateo County.....	W. J. Martin
Star Spangled Banner.....	Otis M. Carrington
Oration.....	Hon. Arthur M. Free
Battle Cry of Freedom.....	Redwood City Band
Hail to Our Flag.....	Redwood Choral Society
Benediction.....	Rev. Thomas Leak
When Johnny Comes Marching Home.....	Redwood City Band

“Program Arranged by the Committee for the Big Celebration,” *San Mateo Leader*, Jun. 30, 1910, p.1.  
 “Redwood Holds Big Celebration,” *San Mateo Leader*, Jul. 7, 1910, p. 5.

# If These Walls Could Talk...

## ...On the Way to the Wedding



June and Paul Jensen under the redwoods on their wedding day, July 24, 1947. Courtesy of June Jensen.

### First Sight

It was in the Old County Courthouse that I first lay eyes on my future husband. He was an inspector in the San Mateo County Sheriff's Office and I was a news reporter for Radio Station KVSM in San Mateo. He was testifying in an arson case that I was covering. It was the late 1940s.

We actually were introduced in the County Jail across Jefferson Street from the Old County Courthouse (that always drew a chuckle when we were asked how we met).

In 1953, my husband, the late Paul B. Jensen, was appointed Coroner - Public Administrator of San Mateo County by the Board of Supervisors meeting in the Old County Courthouse. He went on to serve 37 ½ years, winning nine four-year terms, retiring in January 1991. He died in February 1995 at age 88, leaving me (his widow), four sons, a daughter, and seven grandchildren.

For a time his office was in the Old County Courthouse (first floor). The Courthouse played an integral part in the 47 years we were married. Every four years on election night we would gather in the County Clerk's Office to hear the election returns. We were never disappointed even when he had several opponents.

I have warm and happy memories of the Old County Courthouse.

*June Jensen, Menlo Park, CA*

### Wedding Licenses

My intended had a pretty good sense of humor. After we had filled out the form at the County Courthouse for a marriage license the office clerk said, "That will be \$3.00, please." What a surprise when my groom to be reached in his pocket and said, "Here's my \$1.50!"

We were married on July 17, 1949. It was the first wedding performed by Reverend Murdoch at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Burlingame. We lived "happily ever after" until he passed in 1994.

I do still have "Home Makers Guide For the Bride - with suggested recipes, home building suggestions and furnishings by our local dealers" which the desk clerk presented me with at the time we took out our marriage license. Wm. H. Augustus was the Clerk of San Mateo County at that time.

*Louise Wade, Belmont, CA*

Our experience took place in December 1953. Our wedding date was planned for December 13, 1953. All the preparations were made - only one thing left to do. Run down to the County Courthouse and get our license.

On Saturday, December 12<sup>th</sup>, we drove down to Redwood City only to find that the Courthouse was closed on Saturday.

We sat on the steps of the Courthouse in disbelief. At that very moment a nice man who noticed how distressed we were asked if "he could help." We explained our dilemma. He smiled and said, "you're in luck." It turned out that he was Robert Duffy, the Deputy County Clerk, who decided to come in and decorate the Christmas tree that Saturday morning. He brought us into the Courthouse and proceeded to issue our marriage certificate.

We celebrated our 56th anniversary on December 13, 2009. We have seven children and eighteen grandchildren.

*Nancy and Tony Palladino, San Mateo, CA*

# ...Visits to the Courthouse

## Grandfather's Courtroom

I am the granddaughter of Judge Aylett R. Cotton, who presided over the Superior Court in Courtroom A for 25 years, until his retirement in 1961. I knew my grandfather well; my family lived a mile from his home on the old Borel Estate and he lived long enough to hold on his lap our oldest daughter, his first great-grandchild.

I have a vivid memory of the day that I sat in Courtroom A and watched him preside. He looked serious and austere (but also with a kindly twinkle), quite different from the warm grandfather I knew. He was sitting behind the same bench that still sits in the courtroom, elevated above the rest of us, and in the green chair that is in his portrait which was painted several years after my visit.

I have no memory of the kind of case I heard and I have only vague memories about a fully empaneled jury in the jury box. I remember having some difficulty following the arguments of the attorneys and I don't remember listening to any direct testimony from a witness.

I remember that the courtroom was very hot and considerably shabbier than it is now, after its wonderful restoration. The trial was much more convoluted and, if truth be known, boring than I had expected. I thought, if all trials were as tedious as this, I might have to rethink my ideas about becoming a lawyer.

I certainly remember Bill Schade, his bailiff who was also a constant presence in my grandfather's personal life since he drove my grandfather to and from the Courthouse every day and whom I also knew from seeing him at my grandfather's home.

Most of all, I was impressed with the solemnity of the trial, the courtroom setting and my grandfather, and I remember being very proud that he played such an important role in people's lives and in the justice system in San Mateo County.

*Kristi Cotton Spence, Attorney at Law, San Mateo, CA*



Judge Aylett R. Cotton in Courtroom A. This painting is on display in the restored courtroom.

## Class Assignment

It was a nice, warm October day in 1988, when my business law class at a local community college gave us the assignment to attend a local court. I chose the Old San Mateo County Courthouse because it was quite close to my home and I had always wanted to see what a courtroom looks like in person as I had never had the opportunity to see one.

This was a murder case and the County of San Mateo wanted to make it a First Degree Murder case. The Prosecuting Attorney used excellent words and terms to paint a clear vivid picture in all of our heads especially to the members that were serving on the jury. The Defense Attorney then had a chance at closing arguments to obviously try and help the accused defendant but in my point of view, he was not as convincing as the Prosecuting Attorney. The Defense Attorney said that the victim that was murdered by the defendant was a gang member and the defendant killed him because of territory, meaning that the defendant was defending and protecting his territory. I personally did not accept that theory. I believe they found the defendant guilty of murder, but I do not recall to what degree.

I took note of the Bailiff in the courtroom, he would sit there, wide awake and his full attention to the presiding judge. Can you imagine doing that for an entire day let alone an entire week, month, or year?

*Francisco Alfredo Lopez, Redwood City, CA*

# The Changing Courthouse





D



E



F



G

**A** Cutting down trees in front of the Courthouse, c. 1939. Still from film footage by Ernest H. Werder.

**B** Building the first annex, the 1939 Fiscal Building. Still from film footage by Ernest H. Werder.

**C** The dome barely visible behind the Fiscal Building, c. 1940s. Photograph by Keith Cole Studios.

**D** Courthouse with 1939 Fiscal Building and 1941 Rear Annex, 1990. Courtesy of Redwood City Karl A. Vollmayer Local History Room.

**E** Tearing down the Fiscal Building, June 2005.

**F** Rebuilding the front portico, December 2005.

**G** The restored front and Courthouse Square, 2010.

# If These Walls Could Talk...

## ...Working at the Courthouse



Eleanor Bomberg's senior class picture, 1925.  
Courtesy of Patsy Padgett Webster.



Drafting room of the county engineer's office,  
c. 1915. Much of their work centered on roads  
approved by a 1913 county bond issue.

### Court Reporter

My mother, born in Redwood City in 1908, was named Eleanor Catherine Bomberg. She graduated from Sequoia High School in 1925 and one of her first jobs was as “court reporter” at the County Courthouse. In those days she took down everything in shorthand. She told me she was actually the first court reporter at the County Courthouse, but I can’t verify that...maybe the first in one of the newer courtrooms. I don’t know how long she was employed at the Courthouse, but she continued working in the field of law as a legal secretary, off and on, until the age of 70. At any rate, my mother loved Redwood City and her memories of working at the Courthouse and later in the law offices of Ross & Ross, located in the old First National Bank Building at the corner of Broadway and Main.

In 1995 at the age of 87, my mother had a stroke while living with us in Redwood City, and I needed legal advice. My husband having had business dealings in the past with Gerald Wagstaffe, suggested we go see him. When I did meet with him in his law offices, he was astonished to realize who my mother was. He remembered her from seeing her in court many years prior. When I next saw my mother in convalescent care I told her about my meeting with “Jerry” and she too remembered him, correcting me on his first name, which was Gerard. Sad to say, she passed away 4 months later of heart failure.

A few years ago while visiting friends in Redwood City, they took us downtown to see all the changes that have taken place since we left the area in 1997 when we retired to Lake Wildwood here in Nevada County. We had a tour of the old Courthouse and museum, and there in the courtroom was the chair my mother sat on many, many years ago. I was tempted to sit in it myself, just to see how it felt...and maybe have my picture taken there, but I didn’t think it was allowed, so I scrapped the idea. But maybe I should have done it anyway!

*Patsy Padgett Webster, Penn Valley, CA*



The crowded press room at the Courthouse, 1947. Photo by and courtesy of Reg McGovern. McGovern's photos can be seen in two recent books, *Redwood City* and *Redwood City Then & Now*.

## From the Press Room

I became a photographer for the *Redwood City Tribune* in 1945, working out of the newspaper office at Winklebleck and California streets. Frequently the city desk would send me to the Courthouse to cover court proceedings, which ranged from high-profile crimes to high-dollar divorces. Divorce laws in those days made divorces hard to get, and newspapers regularly covered the partings of the wealthy and the wronged.

Photographers were very free to take courtroom photos capturing the drama of cases that readers were avidly following. I could roam around, or squat under the judge's bench, with my Speed Graphic box camera to shoot pictures of a defendant conferring with his attorney, or get the expression when a verdict was read. The *Tribune* ran photo panels of witnesses on the stand, as well as photos of juries, names included.

The news business was intensely competitive, with four San Francisco papers, the *Oakland Tribune*, the *San Mateo Times* and the San Jose newspapers all vying with each other – and with us – for sensational stories and angles. Each paper had staff photographers, too, and we'd stake out positions in the courtroom. We spent a lot of time across the street at the jail, waiting for verdicts, getting pictures of prisoners in chains or their cells, and kibbutzing with each other.

Adding to the challenge for reporters trying to scoop each other was



Upset by her divorce trial, a woman hits Jack Gorman, a *San Francisco Examiner* photographer, c. 1940s. Courtesy of Reg McGovern.



In 1946, Vorhes Newton (seated) was charged with killing his two daughters and assaulting his wife with the intent to kill her. He hung himself in his jail cell. Photo by and courtesy of Reg McGovern.



Jurors picked in 1948 for a murder trial of a Colma woman charged with the fatal shooting of her husband. Photo by and courtesy of Reg McGovern.



In 1948, Polish war bride Jadwiga Curtin (standing) was convicted of manslaughter in Courtroom B. Photo by and courtesy of Reg McGovern.



Superior Court Judge Aylett Cotton moving into his new headquarters. He became the county's senior jurist on the death of Judge Maxwell McNutt in 1946. Photo by and courtesy of Reg McGovern.

the tiny press room – a former janitor’s closet. A 1947 photo I took to make the case for more space exaggerated the cramped conditions – but not much. The museum’s elevator entrance today is where the press room was.

Reporters would take calls from their sources or the city desk, and could usually rely on their fellow gentlemen of the press to deliver messages. *Usually*. Once a competing reporter took a call for reporter Don Allan -- but did not relay the message, and Don got chewed out by the city desk for missing an assignment. Don was a friend of mine, and we decided to teach our competitor a lesson.

We went across the street to the Highway Patrol office, where my mother worked. While Don clacked away on a typewriter for sound effects, I faked the voice of the city editor and placed a call to the press room.

“Is Don Allan there?” I asked the reporter.

“No he isn’t.”

“Well, would you give him a message?” I asked. “Tell him to get over to Gazos Creek and meet our photographer. They found the body. Will you give him that message?” I repeated.

“Yes,” the reporter said, “I sure will.”

A few minutes later, lurking at the window of the CHP office, we watched as the reporter came out the side door. He stopped on the top step, looked both ways, and then took off for his car . . . and a long wild goose chase to the Coast.

Nobody ever said a thing about it. He didn’t, and we didn’t either.

*Reg McGovern, Redwood City, CA*



Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor and Keith Sorenson during the dedication of the judge's bench in Courtroom A in her honor, September 3, 2004.

### First Law Job for a Future Supreme Court Justice

In October 1952, Sandra Day, a new Stanford Law School graduate, wrote San Mateo County District Attorney Louis Dematteis a letter “in hopes that you are presently badly overworked and in need of a young, capable employee who can help lift the heavy yoke of responsibility from your shoulders.”

Day went on to explain her qualifications. After earning an A.B. in economics in three years from Stanford, she entered law school her senior year. During law school, she served on the staff of the Stanford Law Review and worked as a secretary in a law office. She reported speaking knowledge of Spanish, but admitted her shorthand was poor.

In a day when many law firms refused to hire women, she reminded Dematteis that a “woman can be a valuable asset to a District Attorney’s office.” He had previously hired a women attorney.

Dematteis hired Sandra Day as a law clerk. When he was appointed a Superior Court judge in 1953, a position opened in the office. Keith Sorenson, the new district attorney, named her a deputy county attorney. She had no courtroom duties, but spent her time on civil cases advising county officials on codes.

Sandra Day. Letter to Louis Dematteis. Oct. 29, 1952. SMCHA Archives.  
Michael Svanevik and Shirley Burgett, “Ascent of a Woman,” *The Independent*, Oct. 9, 1999, p. 5A.



## Stories from the D.A.

I was the defending San Mateo County District Attorney on the civil side in the early 1950s, defending the County against all types of lawsuits. My office was not equipped with a copy machine, and so when a case came up I marked up the actual law books and brought them into the courtroom with me. During one case before Judge Aylett R. Cotton, I was carrying a stack so high, I could barely see over them as I walked into Courtroom A. The Judge called the proceedings to order. The plaintiff's attorney stated himself "ready your honor." I introduced myself and said "ready for the defense, your honor." The Judge looked at my stack of books and declared: "this case will be postponed 30 days" and indicated that there were simply too many books involved.

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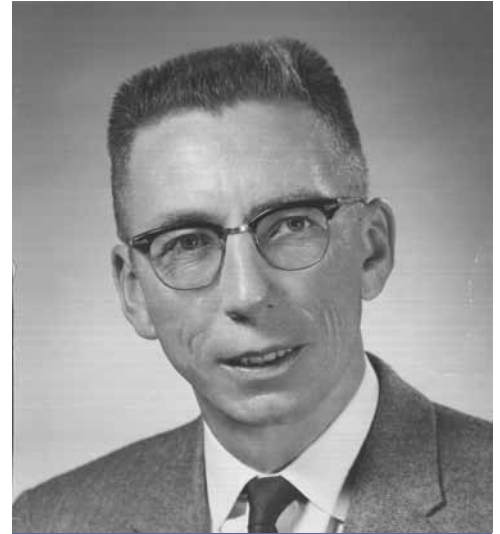
I was representing the County against a San Francisco plaintiff about the same time before the same judge, also in Courtroom A. A slip and fall accident had injured the plaintiff who claimed a pothole on County property caused his fall. County Engineer "Cap" Grant was called to the stand by me and testified that no pothole existed where the accident had taken place. The San Franciscan's attorney cross examined Grant and asked how big did a hole have to be to be a pothole in his opinion. Grant answered: "About as big as a pot."

\*\*\*\*\*

An attorney from San Francisco and I were engaged in a contested motion before Judge Cotton. The judge had a way of speaking which took some getting used to to hear. Besides, the acoustics in Courtroom A were always terrible. The San Franciscan whispered to me: "I can't understand the Judge." I told him the Judge had said that if he did not sit down and shut-up he'd throw him in jail. The attorney yelled: "But your honor!" and did feel he was on his way to the clink.

\*\*\*\*\*

An attorney before Judge Cotton in Courtroom A was arguing at length. The Judge was becoming visibly irritated, his face growing redder and redder. Bailiff Bill Schade, standing at the door, suddenly announced: "There will be a 15 minute recess. Everyone stand and leave the courtroom." The Judge demanded of Schade: "What did you say?" The bailiff sheepishly answered: "I just adjourned the case for 15 minutes." The Judge bellowed: "If you won't be quiet, you'll be on your way to County jail!"



District Attorney Keith Sorenson, June 1967. He served as district attorney from 1953-1983.



Judge Aylett Cotton swearing in Louis Dematteis as a judge, 1953. Dematteis had previously served as San Mateo County District Attorney. Courtesy of the Dematteis Family.



Coroner Paul Jensen presiding over a coroner's inquest, c. 1955. Courtesy of June Jensen.



Steeplejacks cleaning the dome, c. 1960s.



Waiting outside small claims, 1980. Photo by Gene Tupper.



Helen Collognon checking unpaid county fines, 1980. Photo by Reg McGovern.

## Electronic Data Processing

I worked in the Old Courthouse from 1970 until 1975. I was a Programmer-Analyst in Electronic Data Processing, which is what Information Services was called. The data entry section - known as “key punch” in those days - was in a room that used to be a storage vault of some kind, and had a heavy steel mezzanine along one side.

When I started at the County, it was spring, and the weather was pleasant. In a month or so, it started to get hot, and the lack of air conditioning in the building became painfully apparent! The building was also cold in winter - often the heat wouldn’t come on until around 9 AM, and we would sit with our coats on until it got warm.

The computer we had when I started there was an IBM 360/40, which had 1024K of storage! It had the DOS operating system, which had three partitions - this meant that we could run three jobs at the same time. In 1970, this was big stuff! It was the only room on that floor which was air conditioned. It had a “raised floor” to hide all the cables running to the tape and disk drives, and the card punch.

We always took a coffee break religiously, at 9:30 AM and 2:30 PM. We would all troop down to the little lunch room on the ground floor, just to the left of the front doors. It was managed by a sight-impaired man named Roy, who had help from his wife and son. The room was pretty small, and filled up fast. Roy served pastries and sandwiches.

I soon learned that there was a dress code, of sorts. Women whose jobs required them to meet the public could not wear trousers - they had to wear a dress or skirt and blouse. Men had to wear a dress shirt and tie, and either a suit, or slacks and a suitably matching sport coat. This rule was relaxed about 1972, where women could wear a pants suit to work. This quickly became a rule “observed more in the breach than the observance”, and women started to dress more informally. At some point, just about anything short of Levis and a T-shirt was allowed.

We saw many dramas being played out. There would be people waiting to go to court, and you could tell they were nervous and apprehensive. Many times we would see deputies bringing a long line of men in orange jump suits into the courtroom. They would come in the side door, up that long flight of stairs. They would be shackled together, and all of them looked mean, fearful, and just plain miserable. I guess what they disliked the most was having members of the public see them! We would always look away, and not say anything when they came by. It was an interesting place to work.

*Bruce Battles, Menlo Park, CA*

## Victim of Violent Crime

I was in the Adult Probation Department in 1977-1978, when it expanded to an additional department which was the Victim of Violent Crime. The first office was established in San Mateo in an old school. About six months later, I was sent to Redwood City to start an office. It was to cover all of south county. The Sheriff's Department, police departments and even the FBI referred victims to us.

The Redwood City office was in the Old Courthouse. Entering on the Hamilton Street side of the building, I went down the staircase to the basement. To the left was the Sheriff's Department Training Office. To the right was the "office" for us. It was really more a storage room than office when I first arrived. The windows were below street level and looked out on dirt.

After we fixed it up, it was the perfect office for us. It would not have been good to be upstairs. That was where the defendants were. The victims could go down the side stairs without being seen. No one knew we were there. It was a place where victims could feel safe.

All of the victims first had to appear in municipal court before the case was sent on to superior court. At the Victim of Violent Crime Office, we were often requested to be with them when they testified. It was a safety feature for the victims to be able to slip up the stairs to testify and then come back unseen to the office. Some of the victims were older or disabled. In the days before all the disability laws, we had to carry people in wheelchairs up the stairs to testify.

In the privacy of the basement offices, victims could have counseling sessions. They got to know each other and had parties. The chance to talk to each other was the best therapy. Others also made use of our basement office. We even had judges coming down to make phone calls because it was private.

Right outside our office were big cases. On the top were county books with land records and minutes from the Board of Supervisors. I thought it was an invaluable treasure. One of the shooting victims who came in talked about a great-grandfather who was involved with the beginning of the county. I went to the books, and there was the great-grandfather's name. The man was thrilled.

The small office in the basement was the birthplace of today's Victim Center. It was the perfect place with the protection of the Sheriff's Department nearby and the short trip to the courtroom. It was a refuge for victims.

*Bud Andre, Half Moon Bay, CA*



Judge Frank Piombo. Photo by Reg McGovern.

### Humor

The Hon. Frank Piombo had a great sense of humor. For example, he occasionally said to an attorney appearing with the defendant..."Well, which one of you is the defendant?"

Paul Constantino, Attorney at Law, Burlingame



Volunteer at information desk, 1984. Photo courtesy Redwood City Karl A. Vollmayer History Room.

### Editor's Note

People have been sharing their tales of the building with staff since the San Mateo County History Museum moved into the 1910 Courthouse. For the centennial celebration, we wanted to share some of them. In addition to stories collected by the staff, *If These Walls Could Talk* includes memories submitted by residents and former residents throughout the centennial year.



For decades, Courtroom A had an air-conditioning unit in the middle of its stained glass ceiling.



Judge Judith Kozlosky administers oath of office to Judge James Ellis, 1988. Photo by Vern Fisher.

## Bailiff in Courtroom A

As a Deputy Sheriff and the Bailiff in Courtroom A from 1985-1991, I used to come into work at 7:45 AM to get ready for the day's activities. I would go to the Municipal Court office near where the archives are now and pick up the paperwork for Courtroom A, then go up the stairs.

The judge was Judith Kozlosky, the reporter was Pam Fisk and the clerk was Linda Fitzgibbon and I occupied the Bailiff's chair beside the jury box. We were a good team, we had been together in the Hall of Justice before we moved over to the Old Courthouse. We had developed a good working relationship, we all liked each other and we often had lunch together. These are good memories for me.

One morning upon my opening the door to the courtroom at about 8 AM I was greeted by two pigeons. Someone had left the window open overnight. I told them to leave the premises but they did not cooperate. I needed to call the pigeon police also known as the custodial crew, who responded with nets and other equipment to harness the intruders. They chased around the furniture and the intruders cleverly avoided capture. We began to worry as the hour of 9 AM was rapidly approaching and a substantial crowd was gathering for the morning arraignment session. At the last moment the pigeons were captured, the room was cleaned up and we were able to open on time.

It is not surprising that the window was left opened as the summer months were often stifling hot and Courtroom A was an oven. The air conditioner was poor at best and it was installed in the center of a beautiful glass dome ceiling. In the afternoon we could open a door or a window or two and get a bit of a breeze to cool off the room so we could function.

One of the memorable cases was one involving a fraudulent real estate scheme that occurred in Redwood City. There were a number of attorneys present and the case had been going on quite awhile. It was a summer day and it was dreadfully hot. One of the attorneys was sitting on the seats against the railing that divides the courtroom and he was very relaxed. As he was listening he was casually playing with a hockey puck and he placed it on the bridge of his nose. He was half asleep when it rolled off and across the floor toward the judge's bench. The event was just the thing to bring the whole courtroom back to life as the judge stated, "Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, would you please retrieve your puck?" When the laughter subsided everything returned to normal.

Courtroom A originally had wainscoting from the doorway all the way around the back to the other side where the railing stops. The theater-

style folding seats squeaked whenever someone pulled them to sit down. There was no carpet in the spectator area and when people, especially ladies in heels, walked across the floor the noise tended to echo throughout the room.

The earthquake in 1989 caused substantial damage as bookcases fell over spewing their contents in various directions. There was a great deal of damage to the glass in the dome in the rotunda which had just recently been restored.

Courtroom A always has been one of the most beautiful and historic courtrooms in the State of California. While I was there, there were good times and bad times, but my memories are of wonderful people, great attorneys and people I will always consider my friends.

*John G. Edmonds, San Carlos, CA*

## Jury Duty in Courtroom A

My first jury duty experience in San Mateo County was in Courtroom A. As usual in jury duty, prospective jurors waited in the basement until our names were called. Then a large number of us were sent to Courtroom A for the jury selection procedure. When I entered the courtroom it looked like something out of the movies back in the fifties. It still does for that matter, but when court is in session, the scene becomes alive.

I was selected to serve. The 12 chosen jurors went to the jury box to hear the case. It was a molestation case. The molestation of juveniles waiting for the bus on El Camino in Belmont. We listened to the defendant justify his behavior - he was drunk. We listened to the arresting officer explain what had happened, and we listened to the lawyers explain why we should find him guilty and why he should be found innocent. A couple of times we left the courtroom to wait in the hall way while the judges spoke privately with the lawyers. After three days of testimony we were sent to a small room to deliberate the evidence we had heard. We came back with a finding of guilty and he was sentenced.

All this happened about 20 years ago, and many of the details I can no longer remember, but this I do remember that the bailiff was a man I knew as a citizen of the community. A few weeks after it was all over, he told me that the man knew he was guilty, and thought that if he went to trial the jurors would find him not guilty. I am proud to say we saw that justice was done that day.

*Anita Jarvis, Redwood City, CA*



John Morgan (r) on the courthouse roof after the 1989 earthquake. Courtesy of the *San Mateo County Times*.

## After the Quake

I worked for the County of San Mateo in the General Services Department out of Redwood City for 30 years and retired 2001. In October 1989, an earthquake occurred and took its toll not only on the Bay Bridge and the Bay Area, but the County Courthouse in Redwood City and, especially, its dome. Myself and another employee, volunteered to go onto the top of the dome and help repair the broken stained glass which the dome is made of and also the walls surrounding the roof which had been badly damaged. A stone carving of an eagle was taken off the dome area and placed in the lobby of the Hall of Justice. The *San Mateo Times* took a photograph of us repairing the dome and put it in the newspaper. Believe me when I say there was quite a clean-up to do. However, the beautiful dome was restored back to its original state and still stands in its glory today.

My other experiences with regard to the Old Courthouse was the many hours I spent restoring the judge's desks in the chambers which dated back to the 1900s. These desks, chairs, and bookcases were well worn throughout the years and seeing them restored back to their original state was very rewarding. One of my qualifications was refinishing furniture and antiques. Also, the courtroom doors were not made of wood, but metal and stood 10 feet high. These doors were damaged when they were sent away to be cut at the bottom to allow them to fit properly. I was allowed to work on the doors and make them look like real oak wood with all the features of grain running through them. Comments from the judges and various people could not believe the transformation. This saved the county a lot of money at the time because of the condition of the doors and furniture and made the courthouse look beautiful.

I intend to visit the courthouse for the 100th year celebration soon and wonder what it looks like now, 11 years later.

*John G. Morgan, Belmont, CA*



When the museum opened at the Courthouse, this stuffed grizzly bear welcomed visitors to the exhibit *Explore the Past: California's Many Cultures*, 1999.

### Education

I remember being a child in the early 80s and coming to the Old Courthouse and seeing the sauvistika symbol on the tiles and thinking, "Why are these (bad) symbols here?" I didn't know that they weren't swastikas, but the mirror image...the sauvistika. At the History Museum I learned that for thousands of years the symbol has been used as a symbol of good fortune.

*Elizabeth T. Silva, Redwood City, CA*



1956 Chrysler Imperial entering the building, February 2002.

## Courthouse Becomes a Museum

The County of San Mateo made the Old Courthouse available to our San Mateo County Historical Association for conversion into its museum in March of 1998. While our contractors, Gonsalves & Stronck, diligently went to work, construction was not completed in October, when we were scheduled to move in. Our curator at the time, Amie Heath, was a good project manager who believed in maintaining strict timelines and had us move in, even though the workmen and dust were still everywhere in the building. We prevailed and even opened to the public only four months later, in February, 1999.

Our attractions consisted of a few temporary displays which included an unfinished room full of our carriages and some stuffed animals we borrowed from a taxidermy museum in Stockton. We also had Courtroom A on display, before the restoration, and while it was not close to being as beautiful as it is today, it, with its partial stained glass ceiling, still was a handsome site to behold.

Not long after that initial opening, I noticed a visitor at the entrance to Courtroom A, very entranced by it. I approached him, and he declared, "this room is really beautiful!" I replied sure it is, or something to that effect, and then he continued, "well it wasn't beautiful ten years ago." I asked, no, why not? And, he responded, "that's when I was sentenced!"

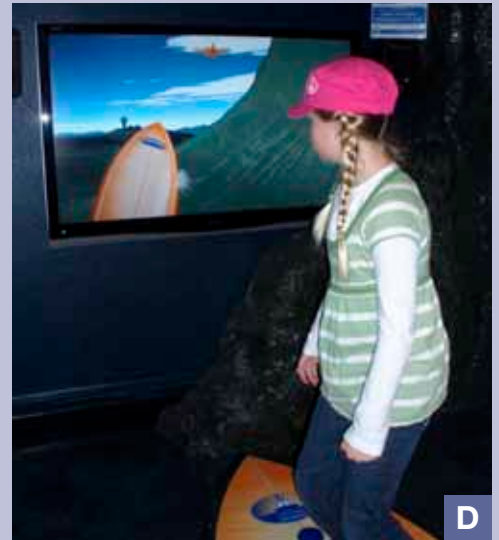
*Mitch Postel, President, San Mateo County Historical Association*

In 1910, Glenn Allen couldn't have imagined the logistical needs of a museum in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Although the design of Courtroom A included a multitude of lights, when we moved in the building lacked the electrical wiring to support high-tech interactives and the temperature controls needed for fragile artifacts.

While we could retrofit former courtrooms to support interactive exhibits, getting large artifacts into the History Museum has proved to be a challenge. When we installed the *Journey to Work* exhibit in 2002, Curator Matt Woodside needed to move a 1956 Chrysler Imperial into the building. A large crane lifted the car up, and workers spent hours maneuvering it through one of the windows.

A third grade class visited the History Museum the day the Chrysler came into the building. When I received the thank you notes from the students, it was clear the car was their field trip memory. They thought it had gotten stuck in the window during a car chase!

*Carmen Blair, Deputy Director, San Mateo County Historical Association*



**A** Exploring Ohlone house in *Nature's Bounty*, 2000.

**B** Riding the mudwagon in *Journey to Work*, 2002.

**C** Celebrating the opening of *Land of Opportunity: The Immigrant Experience in San Mateo County*, 2006.

**D** Experiencing *Maverick's* on the WaveRider, 2008.



SAN MATEO COUNTY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION 

# DR. STANGER

LEGACY SOCIETY

Dr. Stanger was an early president of the Association and a Museum founder. He served as its first executive secretary (director) from 1941 to 1966. He remained active with the Association until 1971. Your gift when received will be placed in the Association's endowment where it will help future generations forever. For more information on making a legacy gift, please contact the Association's planned giving specialist, Greg Lassonde, at (510) 482-1502 or [greg@greglassonde.com](mailto:greg@greglassonde.com).



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