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Saranap Nostalgia: Digging into the past

By John T. Miller



Leo's Mobil Service Station opened in 1958.
Photos John T. Miller

With Hall Equities Group set to begin work on the new Saranap Village, we take another nostalgic look back to dig up old memories before the backhoes arrive.

Last issue recalled the old LaRossa Market site, which went from chicken ranch to batting cages. This issue looks at the old Sufism Reoriented Center - with an equally multifaceted existence - and the lot across the street where Leo's Mobil Service Station once sat. Off to the side, we visit Danny Van Allen's bar, where most of the folks who worked in the area gathered after work.

Beginning in 1895, according to Dorothy M. Ligda's book, "Saranap Then and Now" (2006), many Portuguese from the Azores jumped ship in San Francisco and made their way to the area. With them they brought a fraternal and beneficial society, which translated to the Holy Ghost Association.

Each year they held Festas do Espirito Santo (Festivals of the Holy Spirit), which involved a parade with participants carrying baskets of bread on their

heads, the crownings of queens and a community meal.

In the 1950s, they purchased land for their building and used it for their celebrations. David Dacus, president of the Saranap Community Association, recalls hearing that they would often slaughter bulls in the parking lot. They rented it out for functions such as weddings, dances, the Kiwanis, and to a local Sunday School class.

Beginning in the mid-60s, a group called Golden Records rented the Hall to feature the many rock bands in the area, often in a Battle of the Bands with a \$50 prize.

Members of Beggars' Opera, a local group, recall the HGH as a desirable place to play. Dave McCullough, a Saranap resident who played lead guitar, says, "If you got to play at Holy Ghost, it meant you were good."

People came from as far as Antioch and Pittsburg, and there were often skirmishes in the parking lot. "Once," recalls their organist, Bret Smith, "there was trouble starting and someone shot a hole in a car with a .35-caliber pistol."

Smith's girlfriend fancied herself as the band's go-go dancer and would dance with anyone in exchange for the ticket, which she would then use to stuff the ballot box to help Beggars' win the Battle.

Their drummer Mike Greene, who also resides in Saranap, once had to flee from members of another band who were mad at the methods employed to win the contest, and went on a zigzag tour of the county in his Volkswagen van to outrun his pursuers.

Residents recall that the Grateful Dead and Sonny and Cher each played there.

After the concerts died out, the Hall was made over into the Iron Gate Restaurant. Dacus reports that it was decorated with chandeliers made from old wagon wheels, with a dark bar and a dance floor.

Sufism Reoriented bought the Iron Gate Restaurant in December, 1974, gutted the inside and made it over into their temporary meeting hall.

Across the street is a vacant lot that was once a gas station run by Leo Frank. The Franks opened Leo's Mobile Service in 1958.

Frank's son, Dave, recalls the details of buying the station: "The previous owner got tired of running the business and just wanted out, so he told my dad he could have it. My father wanted a legal contract, though, so he arranged to buy it for one dollar!"

Dave Frank started working at the station as a freshman while at Las Lomas High school, pumping gas and washing cars, and was soon joined by his brother, Brian.

Dave recalls going with his father to fix Stanley Dollar's tractor at his large ranch (pre-Rossmoor). "One of our customers rode horses with Stanley's daughter," he said. "They'd ride way out Ygnacio Valley Road, before there was anything there."

In 1988, the Franks sold the property to a developer, who wanted to build medical offices, but a lack of parking and other issues forced them to sell back to the bank.

Leo Frank moved their car repair business to the Texaco station run by Norm Borgwardt at the corner of Tice Valley Boulevard and Olympic Drive, where they leased space for 15 years. Now, Frank's Auto Repair is back on Boulevard Way next door to the Saranap Village site.

The business, nearing its 60th year, will pass down to Douglas Frank, who currently lives in his grandfather's old house, just around the corner from the new development. In May of 2002, Sufism bought the empty lot from Nazari Trust.

While Danny Van Allen's bar was just to the side of the Saranap Village site, nestled below what is now Belmont Hardware, some of the residue from when it burned down in the late-70s may be removed with the new construction.

Dacus recalls that it was like an urban corner bar stuck in a suburban setting, and Valley Glass office manager Sherry Elliott says it was known as The Social Club: "All the merchants in the area would go there

after work to unwind."

The owner had caricatures drawn of each of the local business owners and hung them on the walls, much like a downtown bar might feature famous celebrities on theirs.

According to an HEG spokesperson, the company hopes to begin grading work by mid-2018 or Spring 2019, depending on county permits and the weather, and Saranap will enter a new era.



A flyer from the famed Holy Ghost Hall

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