

Published June 26th, 2019

Orinda students learn a bit of local lore on history tour

Submitted by Kathy Barrett



Mrs. Leighty's third-graders from Sleepy Hollow outside the California and Nevada Railroad station. The OHS tour guides this year included: Kay Norman, Linnea Burnette, Laurie Smith, Kathy Barrett, Reg Barrett, and Teresa Long. Photo Kay Norman

While driving along Orinda Way last month, people wondered about the gatherings of children outside Susan Leech's Orinda Village Antiques. Many locals don't know that this was the site of Orinda's first firehouse. Across from where the white bridge now stands, the White Swan, built in 1921, was the first building in what is now called the Orinda Village.

Every spring the Orinda Historical Society leads groups of third-grade students on walking history tours of the Village and Theater districts as part of their school curriculum. Before school finished up for the summer, children from Wagner Ranch and Sleepy Hollow elementary schools explored the history of Orinda.

The tour began in the Orinda Historical Society Museum, below the library. Students viewed clay models of early structures such as the Moraga Adobe, and held a Spanish cannonball unearthed in the backyard of a local family. They visited the Eagle Scout display in the park documenting the site of the narrow gauge railroad trestle that carried the trains to the Bryant station, where Highway 24 now runs.

Standing on the 1920 white bridge, the youngsters were surprised to learn that the post office and first library were housed in the little building attached to the firehouse - there were two shelves of books for locals to borrow. A siren on top of the building summoned the volunteer firemen.

Nearby, the first Orinda store was built in 1924 by Edward de Laveaga as part of a planned town site. This country store sold everything from bread and buckets, to candy and pharmacy supplies. Mr. Phair renovated the store in 1941 and sold high-end china and glassware and clothing until the store closed in the 1990s. A Native American village existed across the street where the Orinda Country Club's golf course is now located.

This step back in time allowed the children to ponder the transformation of a small way station on the California and Nevada Railroad to the city of today. Standing in front of Orinda Motors, the students looked at photographs of Miss Graham's Riding Academy, and learned that the Safeway parking lot was once a field with corrals and rodeos. The hills all around were mostly covered with grass, because the Native Americans periodically burned the area to promote the bunch grasses which they collected for food, and which attracted game and Tule Elk.

After a snack break, the third graders walked to the crossroads to visit the commemorative boulder near the site where Pony Express riders occasionally came through Orinda. From 1860 to 1861, relays of brave horsemen rode 70-mile stretches from St. Louis to San Francisco, through wild country to deliver the mail and money (see story Page B5). Many riders were killed by robbers and hostile tribes, therefore orphans who were expert riders and handy with a gun were the preferred job applicants.

The Orinda Theatre, built in 1941, was a welcomed next stop, as students learned about the "crying room" and the community's efforts to save the beautiful old theatre from the wrecking ball. The tour ends at the California and Nevada Railroad station adjacent to the freeway entrance at Bryant Road. The de Laveaga family donated the historic structure, originally located at Miner Road, to the city. Students observed the antique furnishings, train schedules, and historic photographs of a bygone era.

If you are interested in Orinda's historical sites, visit the beautiful mural along the wall of the restrooms near the entrance to the Community Park. The OHS Museum is open to the public Wednesdays from 2 to 4 p.m. and by appointment at (925) 254-1353. The Orinda Historical Society, located at 26 Orinda Way underneath the Orinda Library, meets on the fourth Tuesday of the month at 4 p.m. and is recruiting board members. Students are invited to use the museum for their history projects.

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA