Journal of Local History

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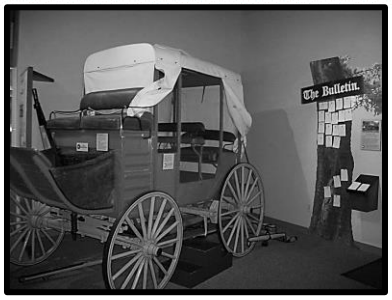
Redwood City Ghost Signs



Simon Knight and his Team of Six

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President's Message

Redwood City Ghost Signs… And Then There Was One

By Nicholas A. Veronico

Wikipedia defines a "Ghost Sign" as an "old, hand-painted advertising sign that has been preserved on a building for an extended period of time. The sign may be kept for its nostalgic appeal, or simply indifference by the owner."

Redwood City has had a number of ghost signs through the years, however, in the past five years two signs were lost and today only one remains.

One of the city's most colorful ghost signs was lost during the early months of 2015, when the structure that housed the Joy Meadow Restaurant and Charm's Chocolate Chip Cookies was converted into an upmarket office building. It was a bright red "Drink Coca-Cola" sign nearly seven-feet tall on the rear of 701 El Camino Real at the corner of Brewster Ave. and the alley that is Commercial Way. This sign was hidden from view when additional square footage was added to 701 El Camino in the late 1950s or early '60s. It was finally uncovered in 2014, when the rear addition was removed to make way for six, on-site parking spaces with handicapped access.

(photo by Betty S. Veronico)

Behind the former Young's Auto Parts at 925 and 929 Main St. was a ghost sign advertising the business. This address began life as Sunshine Grocery Stores in 1922. The location was sold to Purity Market, Inc., which operated the location from 1927 to 1946, before moving to 2629 Broadway.

The property was sold to E.W. Young who opened an auto parts store in one half of the building and an automotive machine shop in the other. Young painted an advertising sign on a rear addition to the building, which could be seen from Maple St. After more than 70 years in

downtown Redwood City, in April 2016, Young's moved to a new location at 1669 Industrial Road in San Carlos. This sign was recently lost when nearly 4,200-square feet was added to the rear of the building. Note that the original 1922 front façade of 925 and 929 Main St. was not modified, maintaining the historic character of that block.

(Street View image – 2020 Google Maps)

The sole survivor, the Holmquist Hardware sign, can be seen one door in from the corner of Main St. and Stambaugh St in downtown. The building at 114 Stambaugh St. was built around 1919 and is the former Holmquist Hardware machine shop, an annex to the family run business, then located around the corner at 838 Main St. Rudolph C. Holmquist acquired a plumbing business where he worked in 1895, changing the company's name to R.C. Holmquist Tinning and Plumbing. The business passed to H.E. Holmquist in 1940.

(photo by Betty S. Veronico)

After a fire at the business in 1956, Holmquist built a two-story, 24,000-square foot hardware retail shop at 875 Main St., which opened in 1963.

The building is now Savers Thrift Store (for the benefit of Partners and Advocates for Remarkable Children and Adults – PARCA). The machine shop was in business until 1962.

Because the former Holmquist Hardware machine shop is constructed of unreinforced masonry brick, updating the structure may be prohibitively expensive. Hopefully the building will be further protected by its inclusion in *the Expanded Main Street Historic District, which stretches from just below Broadway to Heller St. For now, we can enjoy the last remaining ghost sign, a tribute to a long-time Redwood City family.*

(photo by Reg McGovern)

Simon Knight and his team of Six

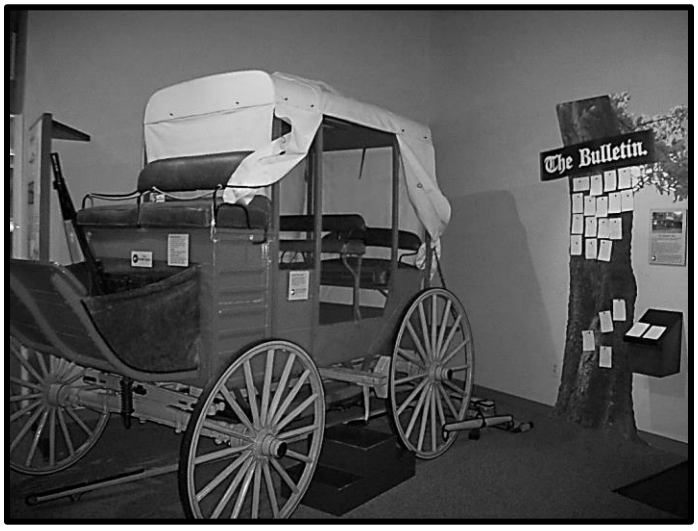
By Jim Clifford

Getting from Redwood City to the coast has never been easy. The rush-hour clogs on Highway 92 testify to that, but how about a six-hour – sometimes eight hour - bone-jarring trip cooped up in a wooden box with wheels? That is the time it took to reach Pescadero in the stagecoach days, still recalled by a few roads named "old stage" or "old stagecoach." It's possible to get a feel for those 32-mile treks with a visit to the San Mateo County Museum, where a stagecoach is a prominent exhibit. It's unlikely, however, that passengers felt anything but relief when they heard the driver yell the final "whoa."

Shakespeare wrote that "all the world's a stage," which entrepreneur extraordinaire Simon Knight took literally when he started a passenger and freight line between Redwood City and Woodside in 1869, a few

years after the railroad linked San Francisco and San Jose and points between. Knight then expanded his service to the mountains and La Honda and, eventually, over the mountains to the coastside.

Knight, who was born in Maine, came to California in the 1850s, probably seeking gold. Like many others who came up empty handed in the mines, he found wealth in other pursuits. Knight, who died in 1896 at the age of 68, is buried in Redwood City's Union Cemetery. According to his obituary in the Redwood City Democrat "few men were better known" than Knight, who seemed to belong to every fraternal group in the area.



The stagecoaches could hold 17 passengers, 9 inside and 8 who sat outside up top with the driver, according to the late local historian John Edmonds who gave lectures on "Simon Knight and his Team of Six." Edmonds said "four horses could pull the coach if there fewer passengers, but usually Knight used his six-horse team."

In 1873 Knight had two new stagecoaches built for his line, coaches that were 200 pounds lighter than the big, clumsy Concord stages used by Wells Fargo and thus familiar throughout California. Knight's new coaches were built of sturdy redwood and were designed to travel narrow, windy roads. The 32-mile trip from Redwood City to Pescadero could take up to eight hours with stops in Woodside, Searsville and La Honda.

"In the summer, the dirt road was hot and dusty," Edmonds said, approaching the poetic when he described the coach reaching the spot where today Highways 35 and 92 meet to offer still-stunning vistas. "As it climbed upwards into the mountains, passengers looked forward to reaching the beautiful, cool and shady redwoods. After the stage crested the mountains, the ocean breezes cooled off the passengers. Spectacular ocean views were a welcome sight."

Train Not the End of the line for Stage

The coming of the railroad was not the end of the line for stagecoaches, according to historian Alan Hynding. "Stagecoaches continued to furnish important freight, mail and passenger service within San Mateo until the end of the 19th century," Hynding wrote in his 1982 book "From Frontier to Suburb." As coastside and bayside communities grew, stage service across the mountains became "more, not less, important."

The end of horse-drawn stagecoaches came with the advent of the automobile. In the January 2023 issue of Climate magazine, "Snapshots Through Time" columnist John Shroyer took note of this when he reported that Knight's son Walter purchased a large auto that carried up to 20 people, including the driver. "But roads still had not been improved which made the ride just as long and precarious as it had been by stagecoach," Shroyer wrote.

According to Shroyer, The business office of the Knight Stage Coach Company was in the American House Hotel on Redwood City's Main Street. Ellen Crawford, a Union Cemetery historian, said the Knight family lived in a home near the Woodside elementary school.

What would a story on stagecoaches be without a yarn about robberies, particularly in a state famous for the legendary Black Bart, the holdup man who left behind poems? There were few stage robberies in San Mateo County, but they continued in to the 20th century, the last reported one taking place about two miles west of San Mateo in 1905, just two years before stage service between San Mateo and Half Moon Bay came to a halt. The robber got away with a paltry $4.30 gained by forcing passengers to pass the hat. At least two other holdups took place on the same line in 1883 and 1896, the latter leading to an arrest and conviction.

The Night the Ceiling Fell

By Jim Clifford

In 1950 the balcony ceiling collapsed at the Sequoia Theater in Redwood City, injuring 27 people. After a long hiatus, the theater reopened with a new interior and a new name – the Fox.

Without warning, at 11:30 p.m. on June 21, plaster fell on patrons watching The Gunfighter, a Western starring Gregory Peck. The most seriously injured was Evelin Case, who suffered a skull fracture when she either jumped or fell to the main floor, according to an article that appeared in 2005 in the Archives News, published by the history room at the Redwood City Library. Most of the injuries were minor wounds to the head, chest, back, arm or leg. Case was released from the hospital after a two-day stay. Fourteen lawsuits were filed against the theater owners but only four were awarded judgments. The others were dismissed.

Investigators concluded that nails, which were about an inch short of what they should have been, were loosened by vibrations of trains that passed nearby for decades. The cave-in closed the theater for three months.

Adding a touch of irony was the fact that the Sequoia was famous for the starry night experience it offered the audience. A machine projected moving clouds and twinkling skies across the ceiling, giving the customers the feeling that night skies were gazing down on them. That part of the ceiling was covered up during the restoration and in order to see what little is left it is necessary to climb ladders and walk across catwalks.

The 1929 opening of the Sequoia, which replaced the original and much smaller Sequoia cinema located nearby, was big news. The Redwood City Tribune reported every detail, including a ten-paragraph story on the show house organ alone. Patrons imagine "they are in a street in a town somewhere in Spain," the paper said in reporting on the 1,200-seat theater's Moorish interior. The walls consisted of a series of archways that resembled a courtyard in old Spain. An estimated 3,000 people attended the debut on January 5th to see "Three Week Ends" starring Clara Bow. The theater also had a stage along with dressing rooms for vaudeville acts. In addition to the movie, the opening night throng was entertained by a band as well as dancers.

The opening was "a big event in town," Louie DeMatteis, an usher who went on to become San Mateo County District Attorney, recalled in an interview in the 1990s. "They had searchlights. It was like a night at the opera in San Francisco." He added that some of the vaudeville acts were "terrible."

The reopening on Sept. 15, 1950 came after extensive remodeling by designer Carl Moeller, whose style was described as "Art Moderne meets Streamlined." The marquee, terrazzo tile in the foyer, a mirrored entrance and ornate gold leaf combined to form a near-classic example of 1950s art-deco. While Moeller covered up or replaced much of the interior, the lobby, with arches that line the walls, still has the feel of the original.

Reopening Night

More than 2,000 people turned out to see the renovated theater which was described as "completely remodeled and shinning from a giant-sized portion of gold paint." The film offering was "My Blue Heaven," starring Betty Grable. There was plenty of entertainment outside, a warmup for the first showing since the ceiling came down. Crowds began gathering in front of the Fox more than an hour before the outdoor entertainment. Temporary bleachers were packed as the throng watched dancers, heard singers and was introduced to visiting celebrities. The big names included George Jessel, Howard Keel and Roddy McDowell.

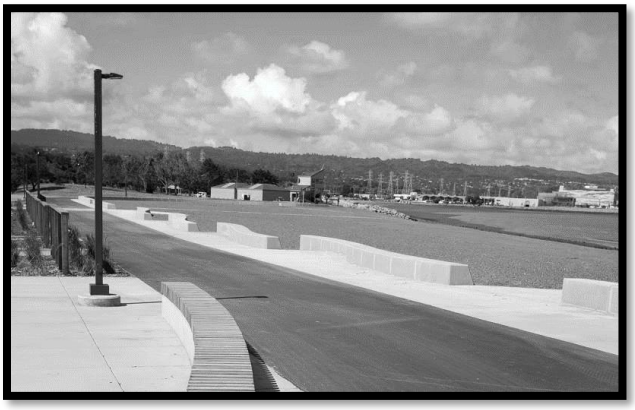
The show was a benefit for the Korean War effort so one had to buy a bond to get in. Patrons entered under a marquee assuring them that "Movie are Better Than Ever," a slogan Hollywood hoped would wean viewers off the new medium of television. Television wasn't the only

reason the Sequoia was a tough act to follow. A U.S. Supreme Court ruling in 1948 would lead to the breakup of big movie house chains. Many movie palaces built in the same era went under, but the Fox survived. Why? There's probably no one reason, but in 1995 a survey found that 96 percent of those interviewed felt the Fox should become a "social and cultural hub." Today it anchors one end of Courthouse Square, which, indeed, is a social "hub."

Lots of History at Coyote Point

By Jim Clifford

Coyote Point is one of my favorite spots to stroll, mainly because everywhere you look there are stories to be told. Now, with the recent upgrading of the area's promenade, there is more reason to visit the 670-acre county recreation area, located off Highway 101 on the border of San Mateo and Burlingame. More than 10,000 tons of sand were added to the eastern section of the promenade to raise the beachfront about 12 feet. In addition, new restrooms were built and sea walls were added to act as barriers during high tides.



"Having the opportunity to provide this type of facility and this type of experience is something that we're very proud of," San Mateo County Parks Department Director Nicholas Calderon told supporters during the May ceremonies celebrating the improvements that took a year to complete.

Coyote Point is known for big dreams, the biggest the one that hoped to make the bayside site "the Coney Island of the West." It wasn't long before the dream became a nightmare, financially speaking. An historic maker in the beach area tells the tale of the 1920s amusement park venture dubbed Pacific City, which featured "The Comet," a roller coaster ride promoters claimed was the fastest, highest and longest. There also was a 468-foot pier that pointed like a finger jutting into the Bay. The structure berthed vessels that cruised to San Francisco and other major cities. Adjacent to the pier and fronting the 3,200-foot boardwalk was a spacious dancefloor that was host to some of the best bands of the Roaring 20s. Along the boardwalk was a bathing beach created by trucking in tons of white sand from Monterey.

According to the Burlingame Historical Society, the grand opening of the amusement park was a four-day affair that started on July 1, 1922, and drew 17,000 fans who each paid a dime to pass through the gates. Crowds increased by the thousands and reached their attendance peak just three days later on July 4, 1922, when 100,000 people entered Pacific City.

One million people entered the park by the time it shut down temporarily in November 1922 in order to make additions for the next season scheduled to start in May 1923. By that time something had hit the fan: Due to rapid growth the city of Burlingame neglected to provide adequate sewage disposal, allowing raw sewage to flow into the bay.

"The undesirable odor of sewage cast a shadow over park attendance and, because of polluted water, the county health officials closed the beach for swimming," the historical society said on its website. "At the end of the 1923 season, the lights went out at Pacific City."

Long before Pacific City debuted, Coyote Point was a popular location for recreation, especially for bathing and picnicking. It still is today, with the added attraction of the CuriOdyssey environmental museum. In the past, Coyote Point was home to a World War II

merchant marine academy as well as the forerunner of the College of San Mateo. It also was, literally, home to "Indian Joe," perhaps the last of the indigenous people of San Mateo County.

Even if the beach stayed open, it is debatable how long Pacific City would have lasted. It faced strong competition from Neptune Beach in Alameda, and, in a few years, there would be Playland-at-the-Beach in San Francisco.

The late Bay area news reporter and historian Jerry Flamm said Neptune Beach, which closed in 1939, was the real "Coney Island of the West."

Flamm described Neptune Beach as 120-acre spread of "entertainment and recreation that has never been duplicated in the Bay Area."

"Neptune boasted two swimming pools with filtered salt water pumped from the Bay, and the largest and gaudiest set of rides and concessions on the Pacific Coast," Flamm wrote in "Good Life and Hard Times: San Francisco's '20s and '30s." He recounted that on weekends crowds of up to 30,000 were "funneled into Neptune Beach from ferryboats, electric trains, streetcars and buses, in private automobiles, and even on stream trains from Sacramento and other interior towns and cities." Pacific City, Neptune Beach and Playland are all gone, but for a taste of what it was like there's still Santa Cruz and the Boardwalk.

The Merchant Marine Academy

There is a monument at Coyote Point to the role the area played during World War II when it trained officers for the ships that carried weapons and other supplies needed to win the world conflict. The Maritime Commission hastily built 11 structures among the point's eucalyptus trees. Most things were "hastily" done because the merchant marine officers were being killed at an alarming rate. Even the course time was cut back.

The academy site was dedicated on Aug. 29, 1942 and by November of 1944 there were 528 midshipmen enrolled at the Peninsula school. According to the U.S. Merchant Marine website, the school consisted of 14 barracks, classrooms, a gym and machine shop as well as a swimming pool and a tower were the cadets jumped feet first, a drill that taught them how to break debris from a sinking ship. In addition, the pool was used to teach the sailors how to survive in blazing oil fires, which many would soon experience.

"We learned important lessons but most of our training was on the job aboard ship," recalled former cadet John Cattermole of Atherton. "There was a lot about seamanship, standard rules of the road, things like that." Cattermole ended up in a ship's engine room, delivering supplies to Guadalcanal, Leyte, and Makin Island.

"Indian Joe"

There was some collateral damage at the Merchant Marine academy – the vanishing of "Indian Joe," possibly the last of the original natives who lived in the area. Little is known about Joe, whose full name was Jose Evencio. Pretty well living off the land at Coyote Point, Joe disappeared into the night when he was displaced by the academy. More is known about his father, the last full-blooded Native American on the Peninsula. Joe's mother was reportedly of Spanish heritage.

Joe was described as a "well known character" in an article in the Burlingame Advance on May 14, 1928. The newspaper said he "has been keeper of the yacht harbor on the east shores of Coyote Point for several years," adding that he lived in a shack at the point.

"It is assumed that he is now dead," historian Frank Stanger concluded about Joe in "South from San Francisco," which was published by the San Mateo County Historical Association in 1963. "It appears that with his passing, the race that first inhabited the Peninsula, the people whose rising smoke attracted the attention of the first white explorers, became extinct."

College Days

San Mateo Junior College had several locations during its history, which started in 1922 in a high school. Following the end of World War II, the college found a home at Coyote Point, a move that took advantage of the buildings emptied by the closure of the Merchant Marine

Academy. For example, the academy chapel became the college's library.

Class started in 1947 under a welcoming sign emblazoned with the words "Maritime Commission Academy," which stood until 1952 when it was replaced with "San Mateo Junior College," a name that lasted for two years until the school became College of San Mateo. The present CSM campus, located in the hills of San Mateo, was dedicated on December 8, 1963 with an enrollment of 5,000. The end of the Coyote Point campus came Sept. 6 when a Marine color guard lowered the flag in a farewell ceremony.

Where's the Coyote?

How did Coyote Point get its name? The origin of the name is "somewhat cloudy," says San Mateo County's history of the area. Initially an island completely surrounded by salt marsh, it is doubtful coyotes lived there. "It is probable" the name could be linked to Coyetana Arenas who was granted the land by Mexico before the United States took over.

Arenas sold the land to the firm of Mellus and Howard, according to the county's history. It remained in the Howard family until acquired by San Mateo County and the federal government in 1942. It was the Howard family who reclaimed the marsh between the island and the mainland in order to create a dairy pasture.

The county account doubts natives lived on the island, although small shell mounds "do exist, indicating that they at least used if for feasts and, perhaps, special ceremonies." Without fresh water, it notes, they could not have survived for long on the island itself.

When the Irish Invaded The Peninsula – and Canada!!!

By Jim Clifford

A new state law effective in 2030 mandates that high school students take ethnic study courses in order to graduate. I wonder what "ethnics" will be scrutinized. The usual suspects include, of course, "marginalized" people," understandable when America's celebrated melting pot of the past looks more like a tossed salad.

It won't hurt to remind high schoolers, however, that there was a time when just about everyone was marginalized. St. Patrick's Day on March 17th was a good time to start finding one's roots. It may come as a surprise but there was a time when Irish roots were strong and Irish lives mattered so much thousands of Immigrants from the Emerald Isle headed for picnics on the Peninsula.

The number of people is difficult to estimate but some reports say 15,000 people turned out for the events in Redwood City and San Mateo while a picnic in Belmont drew about 10,000.

One newspaper account estimated the train carrying passengers to Belmont Park in 1868 was a half mile long, "headed by three or four engines, puffing and blowing like so many thousand savage Fenians eager for the fray."

The Redwood City picnic of 1870 was front-page news in the San Mateo County Gazette, a veteran in reporting on Irish gatherings, having covered the San Mateo event in 1866, the year the worldwide Irish nationalist group called the Fenians invaded Canada. That's right, they invaded Canada. Seeking freedom for Ireland, the Fenians also produced the first true submarine in an attempt to end Britannia's rule of the waves.

Contemporary accounts of the Peninsula gatherings of Fenian supporters were a bit condescending, coming at a time when nativists warned of the Irish three Rs of "Rum, Romanism and Rebellion."

"To the credit of the Irish, they disappointed many who anticipated a disorderly riotous rabble," the Gazette said of the San Mateo picnic. The paper noted there were few drunks, "considering the amount of liquor" involved. There were a few arrests and some fistfights at the donnybrook in Redwood City, which had a population of only 1,000 at the time.

The Fenians, also called the Irish Republican Brotherhood, is one of those militant groups overlooked in American history. They certainly weren't ignored in Canada where some historians say the attack by Fenian soldiers, mainly veterans of America's Civil War, eventually would spur the drive for confederation north of the border.

The San Mateo picnic came a month after Fenians crossed the border at Niagara Falls and met a

Canadian force at Ridgeway. The disciplined fire of the 1,500 or so Irishmen was too much for the raw Canadian militia who retreated from the battlefield upon which nine were killed. The Irish fighters then went to Fort Erie and captured a small force whose officer in charge cut off his whiskers and fled in disguise, according to Canadian historian Edgar McInnis. McInnis wrote in his book, "The Unguarded Frontier," that the invaders became cut off when the United States sent a gunboat to prevent reinforcements. Most of the Fenians were arrested and released. The revolutionaries continued minor raids in Canada, the last in 1871. Why Canada? According to McInnis, the plan was to draw English troops out of Ireland and over to Canada.

The Fenians also had a navy, or at least hoped to have one. They raised enough money to back Irish born John Holland in his quest to build a submarine, which he did in 1881. The 14-foot long vessel dubbed "The Fenian Ram" never fired a shot in anger because the money ran out. Holland, however, kept building submarines. His final design was sold to the United States and commissioned in 1900 as the USS Holland. The Fenian Ram still exists and can be viewed at a museum in Paterson, New Jersey.
No Irish, No San Mateo County

Does San Mateo County owe its birth to the Irish? A stretch? Maybe not. Consider the year the county was founded – 1856, a year displayed prominently on the county seal. In San Francisco 1856 is known for something else: It was the year of the Committee of Vigilance. Vigilantes for short. It was a time when angry San Franciscans took the law into their own hands, hands that held guns and ropes, ropes as in hanging.

To this day historians debate if the main aim of the vigilantes was to crush crime or to rid San Francisco of a growing Democratic political machine run by Irish Catholics that was threatening the established power structure. Probably both.

"Anti-Catholic and anti-Irish feeling seethed through the Vigilantes," wrote esteemed California historian Kevin Starr in his "Americans and the California Dream. "According to Starr, the Vigilante movements of both 1851 and 1856 were fueled by "anti-foreign reformism on the part of outraged businessmen."

In 1856 the thinly populated Peninsula was part of San Francisco, which was approaching a population of 60,000. Some lawmakers felt that making San Francisco both a city and county under consolidation act would end jurisdictional disputes in the prosecution of so-called "toughs," who were mostly Irish. The "toughs," a term used in histories written during the era, viewed the Peninsula as a great place to spread their wicked, wicked ways, which included prize fighting, gambling, saloons, and other unsavory pastimes. Their friends in Sacramento agreed to make San Francisco a city and county with the understanding that San Mateo would be born.

So in 1856 San Francisco became a city and county, giving birth to an independent San Mateo County, an arrangement made to order for San Francisco's criminal element. The initial San Mateo County election to pick officials as well as the county seat was replete with stuffed ballot boxes and physical intimidation at the polls by what were called "shoulder strikers." The State Supreme Court invalidated the results of the first election that saw Belmont picked as the county seat. A second election was held and Redwood City became the county seat.

The attempted coup came at a time when Peninsula residents, including many Irish, were trying to live off the land, mainly with farming, dairy and logging, all ventures needed to feed and house the giant city to the north. Eventually, both Redwood City's police chief and fire chief would have Irish names, but it was the ordinary men and women who formed families of strong faith that wrote the real success story. The faith was so strong that what they started more than a century ago is still a household name in Redwood City – Mount Carmel, as in Mount Carmel area, a name beloved by real estate agents. Virtually all the pastors of the early church – first located east of El Camino and originally named St. Mary's – were Irish. Today the church and school are located on – as the old saying about upper mobility goes – the other side of the tracks, literally. A strong indication that the Irish made it into the great melting pot of America.

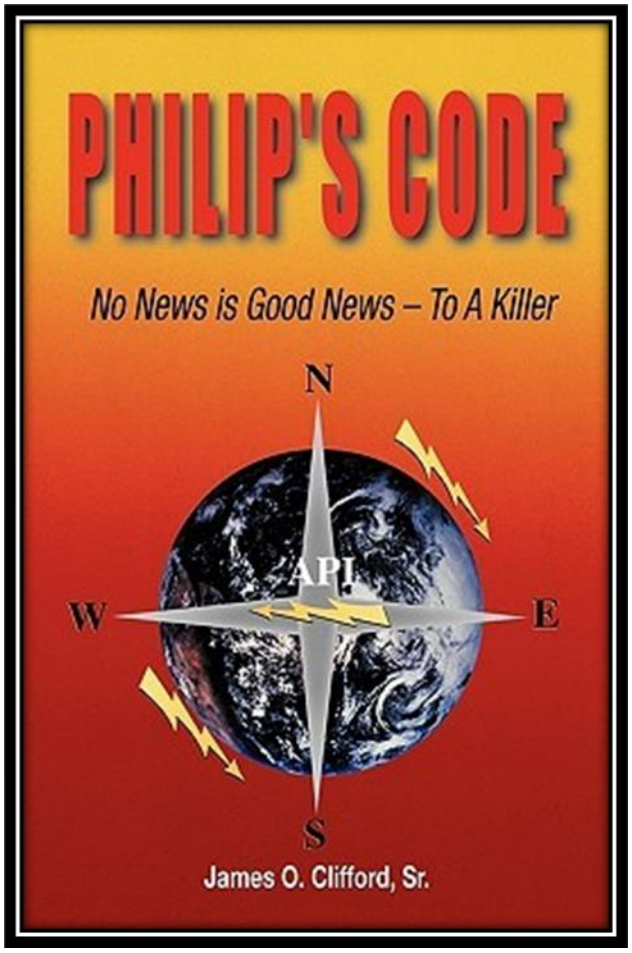
What's in a Name?

The melting pot gets stirred every St. Patrick's Day at St. Francis of Assisi Church in East Palo Alto with a dinner that recalls the area's Irish heritage. Father Larry Goode said that today the parish is a mix of cultures, including African-American, European-American, Hispanic and Tongan. You can't miss the area's Irish roots. Many of the streets bear Irish names. One is Kavanaugh, the family that donated the land for the church.

Menlo Park has several streets named for Irish people, according to Bo Crane, an historian who specializes in all things Menlo Park. Crane said the city was founded in the 1850s by Irish pioneers Denis Oliver and Daniel McGlynn, who both hailed from Menlough, a village in County Galway. How did Menlough get shortened to Menlo? The best bet is that something got

lost in translation. There is also the matter of that other Menlo Park, the one in New Jersey that was the home of inventor Thomas Edison. According to a 1941 program marking the dedication of a fire station in the New Jersey town, that Menlo Park was named "for a village in the County of San Mateo" in California. A welcoming gate with Menlo Park arched over the top was dedicated in the "village' in 2019 on the library corner of Ravenswood Avenue and Alma Street. The ceremony, of course, was held on St. Patrick's Day.

A few Menlo Park citizens have visited Galway, Menlo Park's sister city, returning with stories about the ties between the two cities and the tracers left by Oliver and McGlynn. There is even a Menlo Park Hotel in Galway that features a restaurant named "Oliver and McGlynn."



Philip's Code:

No News is Good News – To a Killer

by James O. Clifford

'A hard-edge novel of murder, manipulation and media. While the loss of integrity in news reporting is a dominant theme, Clifford doesn't let this criticism overshadow this tale of murder and betrayal. The book remains entertaining at many levels.'

Catholic - San Francisco

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