

Cotati Historical Society Newsletter

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Preserving Cotati's Past
P.O. Box 7013 Cotati, CA 94931
E-mail chsinfo@sonic.net

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Prue Draper & Connie Martin, Editors

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Cotati Museum Hours:

Every Saturday 1 - 4 P.M.

2nd Wednesday of each
month 5:30 - 8 P.M.

Special times by appointment

Phone 707-794-0305

SOCIETY OFFICERS

President

Prue Draper
795-5510

V. President

Connie Martin
795-2772

Treasurer

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Outreach

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WHEN COTATI BECAME A CITY



History Night speakers included former Cotati residents who reminisced about how Cotati became a municipality. From left, Ben Oretsky, Dr. Bill Kortum and Louise Roberts Steacy.

Our Cotati History Night program attracted an enthusiastic audience of more than 60 people to the Cotati Room on Nov. 17. The topic was **“How, When and Why did Cotati Incorporate?”** Dr. Bill Kortum, who was chair of the incorporation boundary committee in 1962-3, recalled reasons why our small community felt the need to become an incorporated city.

Prue Draper, Cotati Historical Society president, introduced the speakers, which also included Ben Oretsky, Louise Roberts Steacy and Jennie Falletti.

Dr. Kortum remembered that Cotati was a very energetic little town, which had just succeeded in convincing the State of California that it was the ideal site for a proposed new state college. A group of local citizens of both communities were studying the feasibility of a combined city – Cotati and Rohnert Park – when Rohnert Park withdrew and held a successful incorporation election to become an independent city.

The contrasts between Cotati and Rohnert Park were too great, Kortum recalled: Cotati was an old town, and although it had a thriving business district, it had aging streets and some unusual zoning, where Rohnert Park was a planned community, still in its earliest stages of development in areas that had, for a century, been farm fields. Cotati had a Public Utility District, active Chamber of Commerce and many service and social organizations, all filled with rugged individualists with long family histories in Cotati. Rohnert Park had just over 1000 residents, mostly newcomers, and no businesses.

After Rohnert Park incorporated, realization struck Cotatians that the new little city would have jurisdiction over lands on its boundaries. That meant Cotati, and the residents feared what would become of their town. A new state law was also about to be enacted which would ef-



A crowd of more than 60 filled the Cotati Room for History Night program. (All History Night photos courtesy of Judy Pagnusat.)

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INCORPORATION HISTORY continued

fectively prohibit small communities such as Cotati from becoming municipalities.

There was only one week to act before Rohnert Park was officially incorporated.

Dr. Kortum appealed to Realtor Joe Dorfman for help in immediately drawing up the legal description of the land that was proposed for the City of Cotati. Since road maintenance would be a big expense of the fledgling city, the boundaries were drawn to exclude streets in the worst condition. Since law required that signers to the incorporation petition must represent a percentage of land value, properties of people who didn't favor incorporation were also excluded.

Joe Dorfman located a title company official who was qualified to draw the "meets and bounds" description, and managed to lure him in from a fishing trip to spend a very full weekend poring over maps. The city outline was drawn extending down East Cotati Avenue with a 50-foot corridor reaching to encircle the site of what was to become Sonoma State College (now University).

Beginning the same weekend, Aug. 25-26, 1962, a committee chaired by Lloyd Draper launched a drive to obtain property owner's signatures to qualify a petition for incorporation. The completed notice of incorporation petition was presented to the county board of supervisors early Monday morning, Nov. 20, 1962, one day before Rohnert Park was to be certified as an independent city. Cotati's petition was approved, but to Cotati's sorrow, state regulations had been changed, and the 50-foot extension to include the college campus was decreed unacceptable.

The supervisors granted Cotati's petition, and the campaign began that climaxed with a hugely successful election on July 2, 1963 with 278 citizens voting for incorporation and 47 "no" votes—a turnout of almost 84% of registered voters.

Prue Draper noted that receipts in a scrapbook in the museum collection show that campaign expenses were modest to say the least – totaling less than \$100 for buttons, balloons and bumper strips.

Ben Oretsky reminisced about the dramatic decision for Cotati to incorporate and about his family history in the chicken business here, hard work for him and all his siblings. He recalled how he went on to become a building contractor, constructing homes around the Cotati area for all his brothers and sister, and later building schools and other public buildings, including one of the first major buildings at Sonoma State. He had also been instrumental in encouraging the state to build the college here.

Louise Roberts Steacy, the first Cotati city clerk, recalled that the new little city was staffed mostly by volunteers,

had an office in a small residence on E. Cotati Avenue, and held city council meetings in the fire station.

Jennie Falletti also remarked about early days of the Cotati community, the hard work required for children of chicken ranchers, and the dedication of her late husband, Al Falletti, as a director of the Cotati Public Utility District and later as a city councilman.

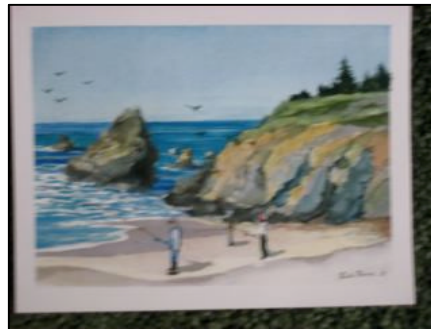
The successful evening ended with cookies, coffee and lots of conversation. We thank Oliver's Market and Starbuck's for providing the refreshments, and all the visitors who came to share our love of Cotati history.



After the program, Bill Kortum, center, and Jake Mackenzie, Rohnert Park city councilman, reminisced about the neighboring cities. Jennie Falletti, Marge Rosselli, Lisa Moore and Yvonne VanDyke chatted at right.

The Strange Ways Our Influence Spreads

A call came to us from a Sebastopol woman who was trying to reach Bob and Mabel Nelson. It seems she's an artist, and years ago she painted a picture of the Nelsons, fishing on a beach. She's always like the painting, and had



scanned a copy of it some time ago. The Nelsons had seen it and liked it too, and had bought it to hang in their home.

Now the artist had produced note cards using the same painting, and planned to

offer them for sale. She thought the Nelsons might like to buy some. But she wasn't able to locate a phone number or address for the Nelsons. So she Googled them, and found them listed as members of the Cotati Historical Society. She found Prue Draper listed as President, so she called to see if we could help.

We could, and contacted Mabel. Mabel remembered the painting well; in fact it's still hanging in their house, and is a favorite of them and their family.

It's a small world when you know how to Google.

PAST=CHICKEN RANCH; FUTURE=CITY

Newcomers to Cotati got their first news of the city’s treasured future park when a handsome sign was erected on the former Veronda-Falletti property at the corner of West Sierra Avenue and East School Street. Some of them saw the sign that says “This beautiful historic ranch”, and they said “I didn’t know that was a historic ranch!”

People who have lived here a bit longer remember when the sale went through: summer of 2008, when word came that the Sonoma County Open Space District had paid \$3.1 million to buy the 4.37-acre property across the street from Cotati City Hall. The City of Cotati will provide a portion of the purchase price, and the property will be preserved from development.

Dreams are that the small home on the ranch will become a museum depicting life in early Cotati, with a model chicken ranch where children can learn what it was like to live in Cotati in the last century – and take care of chickens that were the mainstay of the local economy.

Jennie Falletti remembers when that was her lifestyle too. Her family had come from Colorado, where her father, Pete Veronda, had worked in the coal mines. His brother, Tony Veronda, who had a ranch on Railroad Avenue, encouraged Pete to come to Sonoma County and go into a healthier kind of work – chickens.

The family first rented a house on Horn Avenue, Petaluma, then one on Bodega Avenue, then on Jewett Road. As was the story with many local citizens – they worked for others, then rented ranches of their own, saved their money and finally bought their own ranches.

In 1938, the Verondas achieved their dream: they bought their ranch from a family named Mattson. It had previously been owned by a family named Harr, who had bought it

from the Cotati Land Co. in 1913.

They had three large chicken houses, each with a high fence enclosing it. One was on El Rancho, one was in the middle and another was on the Olof Street side, where Jennie’s handsome residence is now. There was a brooder house where they raised the little chicks; a barn was home to their cow, which Jennie milked. They didn’t sell their milk – just drank it and skimmed the cream and churned butter in a big glass jar with a crank on top. There was no refrigeration then – just a cooler at the back of the house, with screen in the front to let the air circulate.

As was typical in early chicken ranching families, the children worked almost as hard as their parents. Jennie and her older sister Emma cleaned the chicken houses, fed the hens and collected their eggs, cleaned and weighed and packed them to be sold to Nye and Nissen in Petaluma. There was a large kale field where the family raised the kale that was part of a successful chicken diet, and they bought their chicken feed from Hunt & Behrens and Golden Eagle – well-known Petaluma feed producers. Emma later went to work with Nye and Nissen as an egg candler – an exotic skill at which women were better than men.

Emma had gone to school in Colorado, but after the family moved here, Jennie went to Cotati School from first grade through sixth, then to Petaluma for junior high and high school. After graduation, she worked part-time for Penhorwood Dodge auto agency in Santa Rosa, and then, in 1943, got a job with the County of Sonoma, filing tax stubs. She had expected it to be a part-time job....but she stayed for 44 years, working her way up through the Assessor’s Office. She went to work on the bus, usually, traveling with friends Angie Zamaroni, Dorothy Watt and Wilma Bravo, who worked in other county departments.



In the meantime, Jennie enjoyed the American Legion dances at the old Cotati Women’s Clubhouse (now Ner Shalom Synagogue), going with girl friends Julie and Mary Kennedy. She remembers that they would think nothing of walking home across the plaza, unescorted at 2 a.m.

One of Jennie’s favorite dancing partners was Al Falletti, who had grown up on a chicken ranch on Minnesota Avenue, the son of Claudio and Angela Falletti. He joined the Army during World War II, and served in Alaska most of the war. Afterward, he went to work for Petaluma Co-op Creamery, where he was in charge of maintenance of all the equipment and was destined to continue for 33 years.

Continued page 4

FUTURE PARK continued

After they were married in 1948, Al bought a Chrysler, and later a Ford, and he and Jennie enjoyed going to dances at the Russian River. She has fond memories of dancing at Mirabel to the music of Harry James and Tommy Dorsey, among others. Al later bought a 1986 Mercedes, which was the apple of his eye. Jennie just sold it last year.

Al became active in Cotati's public life in 1953 when he was appointed a director of the Cotati Public Utility district – a forerunner of the City of Cotati. In 1963, when Cotati incorporated, Al Falletti was elected to the first City Council. In 1995 the City of Cotati named a park on Gravenstein Way Falletti Park in recognition of the couple's ongoing contributions to life in Cotati. Al continued his active interest in Cotati public life until his death in 2002 and Jennie still remains vitally interested in affairs in her community.

Jennie's father, Pete Veronda died in 1953, and the family decided to get rid of the chickens. Soon afterward, they fenced the whole ranch and introduced sheep, who ate the grass and entertained passersby. The field and sheep, across from Cotati City Hall, were listed as a favorite feature of the city years ago when Cotati was undergoing one its periodic self-examinations.

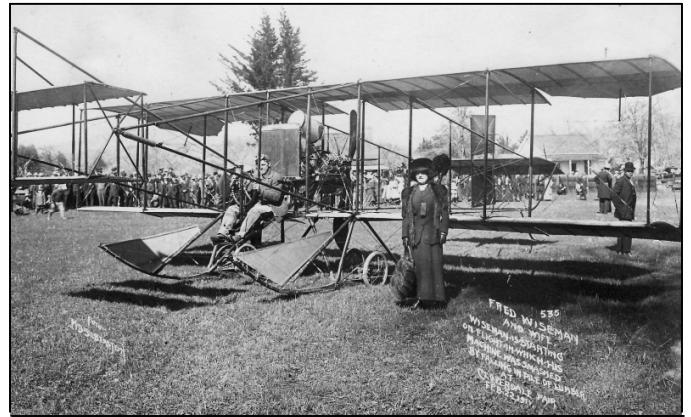
Three sheep are still there, but they now are city property, and they're well-tended by Al Martinoni and his team from Cotati Public Works. Jennie admits that they still love to have her venture out into what used to be her field, pat them and give them some lettuce leaves and apple peelings. However, as signs on the fence remind, nobody else should feed the sheep!

So.....was it a historic ranch? It certainly was. And still is. But now it's also a Cotati city park, and someday it will be developed as a public treasure.



Future museum depicting life on a typical early Cotati chicken ranch is a vision for this house on the Veronda-Falletti property, now a city park. The property was bought from the Cotati Land Co. in 1913, and owned by the Harr family, then the Mattson family, before the Verondas bought it in 1938.

First Air Mail Flight Will Be Re-enacted ...on Foot Feb. 18



Fred Wiseman and wife

Wiseman is starting on flight in which his machine was smashed by falling in pile of lumber at Cloverdale Fair, Feb. 22, 1911

Photo courtesy of Lee Torliatt

Back in February, 1911, a young aviation buff named Fred Wiseman, made history by flying the first air mail in a plane he had built himself in his Windsor bike shop. Leaving Kenilworth Park in Petaluma, he headed north, and after a brief overnight emergency stop in Denman Flat, flew over Cotati and made it almost to his Santa Rosa goal destination at the county fairgrounds.

Sonoma County historical organizations are enthusiastically preparing to celebrate the centennial of Wiseman's feat, with special events on Feb. 17, 18 and 19, 2011. On Friday, Feb. 18, a walking delegation led by Jeff Tobes of the Sonoma County Historical Society, will stride out from the Petaluma Library parking lot at 6 a.m., heading north. They'll tramp through Denman Flat, stopping at what was the Denman Creamery, and proceed through Penngrove to Cotati, where they will visit our museum and be treated to brunch at the Church of the Oaks, courtesy of Sally Tomatoes.

News stories of Wiseman's flight say Cotati housewives were out waving their aprons at him as he soared over, dropping mail and copies of the Press Democrat. We are thinking seriously of getting aprons and re-enacting that greeting as the walkers stride through.

The walk is slated to end at about 1 p.m. at 3361 Petaluma Hill Road, the former Enz Dairy where Wiseman crashed-landed. A bus will be waiting to take the walkers on a round of visits to historical groups all over the county, ending that evening in Petaluma.

Full details are available at www.sonomacountyhistory.org or from Jeff Tobes at jefftobes@hotmail.com.

Anyone who would like to help welcome the walkers by waving an apron is invited to contact us at : chsinfo@sonic.net

THESE SUPPORTERS ARE MISSED

The Cotati Historical Society has lost several loyal and hard-working members in the past year.



Evelin Santero was one of the most ardent supporters of our efforts to save Cotati's history; she was liberal in donating items from her large collection of memorabilia and was instrumental in arranging for the relics of Cotati Post 103 American Legion to be donated to the museum. Her sons, Gary and Barry Santero have donated \$1000 in memory of Evelin and her late husband, Barney Santero. It will help finance our ongoing project of cataloging and printing Lloyd Draper's large collection of historic local photos for museum displays.

Lloyd Draper was our vice president, leader in the effort to establish the Cotati Historical Society as a non-profit corporation and to recruit workers in the two-year project of producing the museum. He also spent untold hours talking to old-timers about local history, printing photos for our displays and he contributed for museum exhibits many large photo panels that he had produced over the past 20 years. In his memory, his family has donated a swinging display frame that will make his photos more accessible to all visitors.



Dave Thomas was always ready to help with whatever needed to be done to get the museum open and furnished. He was in on our very first project – a trip to Geyserville to bring home donated display cases and subsequently he spent unnumbered hours, days, and weeks in a cold warehouse, sanding, scraping, varnishing and polishing large and small pieces of furniture. He donated a family heirloom desk chair,

and inspired his son Dennis Thomas to provide all the sheetrock and labor to make the museum the showplace it is today. Dave and his family were the first donors to our Memorial Fund three years ago when Elaine Thomas died, and the family donated \$500 last month in memory of both of them.

We miss the love, guidance and inspiration of all these members and strive to continue the work that they helped us launch.

Memorial fund grows

Our Memorial Fund, which will provide cash prizes for Cotati historic essays by local students, has now grown to \$7119. Donors in memory of **Dave Thomas** were Eleanor Miller, Jane Ferina, Prue Draper, John and Lisa Moore, the Thomas Family and Jennie Falletti, who also sent a donation in memory of **Henry Fuhs**.

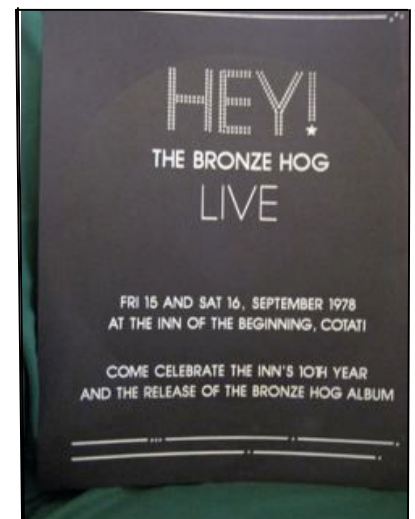
We love to get donations

We always have a container for donations displayed in the museum and at our public events to remind visitors that we are dependent on our small dues and gifts for our operating expenses. We appreciate them all, and give special thanks to extra-generous donors – Jennie Falletti who has donated \$100 several times; Mike Sheehan, who was our “angel” in buying our cataloging software and last month sent us a check for \$500, just to help out.

We thank all our donors and remind everyone that since Cotati Historical Society is a 501c(3) non-profit corporation, donations are tax-deductible.

We welcome donations of all kinds of Cotati memorabilia for our displays.

A donation by Carol Williams and her son Alex Jordan brought these handsome posters to our museum collection, highlighting the heyday of the Inn of the Beginning in the 1970's.



IT'S TIME TO PAY YOUR DUES!

We now collect dues every January and you, too, can help preserve Cotati's history. **Dues are still only \$10 per person per year.** Please complete this form and send with your check to: Cotati Historical Society

P.O. Box 7013
Cotati, CA 94931

Yes I want to renew my membership for 2011

Name/s _____

Address _____

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*Happy Holidays to Everyone
From all of us at the
Cotati Historical Society*

Cotati Historical Society
P.O. Box 7013
Cotati, CA 94931

YES! The museum is open now!

Come visit!

Hours: Every Saturday 1 - 4 P.M.

Second Wednesday 5:30 - 8 P.M.



In a project sponsored jointly by the City of Cotati and the Cotati Historical Society, Jake Page of Hines Signs has produced this handsome sign which will be attached to the corner of city hall on West Sierra Avenue to help direct visitors to the museum.