

Elk Grove Citizen
History Happened Here
By Elizabeth Pinkerton
September 12, 2008
Elk Grove Unified –The Beginning, part 1

The unification of the Elk Grove school district became a reality on July 1, 1959. The 50th anniversary will be celebrated during the entire 2008-09 school year with a variety of activities taking place from now until July 1, 2009.

Elk Grove and south Sacramento County were growing in the years after World War II, and the schools were getting overcrowded. The unifying of elementary and secondary school districts became a popular procedure in the California of the 1950s as evidenced by the many districts throughout the state that joined with their neighbors to make better use of their resources. Elk Grove's unification took place under the supervision of Sacramento County Superintendent T.R. Smedberg. It is interesting to note that Mr. Smedberg had been the principal of Elk Grove High in the 1940s, and in his new role, he became a key player in unifying eight elementary districts with their high school.

In order for a district to unify, the voters of the proposed area had to have an election and voted yes or no. It is interesting to note that the 1959 election in Elk Grove was very close. A total of 1,154 people voted in the 320 square mile region. A total of 565 voted NO. A total of 589 voted YES. Unification of these south Sacramento County districts won by only 24 votes!

Of the eight districts, five said no to unification. Elk Grove, one of the largest, voted yes, and so did Sierra Enterprise and Lee although Lee closed its school and joined Dillard. Franklin, Cosumnes, Dillard, Florin, and Pleasant Grove all voted no. The close election resulted in a fair amount of bitterness and a definite lack of trust that lasted for some time in the newly unified district.

So what was it like here in Elk Grove at that time? I invite readers to share their stories of the 1950s with us. This afternoon, Friday, September 12, I will be interviewing a group of folks who were residents here at the time. They will share with us their views of how unification came about and what it was like to live here at that time in Elk Grove and the surrounding communities.

We know that many families moved into Elk Grove and Florin in the late 1940s and the 1950s, and the overcrowding of the schools was a key factor in the unification efforts. What accounted for the increase in population? There are many reasons, but a key factor was the return of servicemen from the war. They got married and started families, and with the GI bill and veteran's loans, they were able to go to college and buy houses. Many had been stationed at California military bases before they went overseas. Others had come to work in ship yards and aircraft factories during the wartime, and they too were enjoying life in California. Entering a new phase of their lives, they were reluctant to go back to life on the farm or the small towns they had come from. Some were ready to say goodbye to sub zero temperatures and shoveling snow in the winter. California intrigued them, and they came back.

I can best describe how it was for some by sharing my personal experiences in coming to Elk Grove. My husband Tom joined the Navy as soon as he graduated from high school in 1943 (and yes, I really was still in grade school). He spent the rest of the war years in a submarine in the Pacific, went back home when the war was over, but somewhere along the way, he knew he would return to California.

And, we did.....

It was a very hot August day in June of 1962 – not unusual for South Sacramento, but for about-to-be transplants from northern Wisconsin, Tom and I found it very, very HOT. We drove southward from Sacramento on the new Highway 99 to the little town of Elk Grove. We passed the brand new shopping center west of the freeway, the beautiful Southgate, and we found out later that it was there because of the new 1957 freeway and the growing region to the east around Florin. Another big change was that the new highway did not enter Sacramento on Stockton Road. It veered to the west near Florin Road, and that entire area was growing and growing. The years after World War II were a time of great growth in the Sacramento region, and the new houses were filling the fields around Stockton Road.

We found the Elk Grove exit, and we entered on the two lane road that had trees on both sides. There were farms at the intersection, and there was a huge sign that said WELCOME TO ELK GROVE right by the cemetery. On south side of that main road (*where the shopping center is now*) were apple and pear orchards, and it was a beautiful entrance to Elk Grove. I remember thinking that it was odd to have a cemetery at the entrance to the town—or at least, I assumed that Elk Grove was a town.

My interview for a teaching position was at the office of the Elk Grove Unified School District, a beautiful brick building at the center of the campus of Elk Grove High School. (*Newcomers - this is the site now of the Joseph Kerr Middle School, and that brick building has been gone for 40 years.*) We were early for the interview, so we stopped at the A & W that was just down the street. It was not called Elk Grove Boulevard at that time, but it was an extension of Main Street.

It was SO HOT! Cars did not have air conditioning in those days, so thinking back, it really WAS hot! But, I remember the coldness of that root beer and how refreshing it was. Maybe that is why we later decided to make Elk Grove our home.

The Elk Grove of 1962 was very different from the Elk Grove of today. About the only things that are the same are the basic structure and the 320 square miles served by Elk Grove Unified. Dr. George Kibby was the superintendent of the new unified district, and the Board members in those early years were as follows:

Elk Grove - James R. Guttridge, 1959-1971

Elk Grove - Dr. Wyland Cripe, 1959-1963; Olga Batey, 1963-1968

Florin - Alfred Schopf, 1959-1963; Philip Elliot – 1963-1970

Sierra Enterprise - Robert Walker, 1959-1961; Bill Kashiwagi, 1961-1968

Franklin - E. Henry Kloss, 1959-1963; Richard Deller, 1963-1964; Ben Howard – 1964-1969

Pleasant Grove - Robert S. Mackey, 1959-1965; George Haas, 1965-1977

Cosumnes and Dillard - Jake Schneider, 1959-1961; Fred Anderson – 1961-1967

Those were the seven elementary schools in the newly unified district. There had been eight, but Lee joined with Dillard. Five districts each had one school, but Florin and Elk Grove each had two. They had each built a school in 1957 (prior to unification) because of overcrowding. The Florin district built the Isabelle Jackson School on the west side of Stockton Road at the site that is known now as William Daylor High School. The Elk Grove district built Anna Kirchgater Elementary School just a little farther south at Power Inn where it still is today.

To be continued.....

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