

Kentfield Greenbrae Historical Society Historian

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President's Message

Where can one find pumpkins, Christmas trees, stacks of watermelons, a photo with Santa and, if need be, cough medicine available 24 hours a day? Depending on the season, all that and more can be found in Greenbrae's Bon Air Center. Since the opening of Bon Air Super in 1952, the center has served as the community hub of Greenbrae. Going to the store for bread, milk and a few things for dinner has often morphed into an hour-long conversation with neighbors and community members, catching up with the news and hashing out neighborhood dilemmas!

Now, over 60 years later, Bon Air Center is getting a face-lift with more spaces for neighbors to meet and mingle, and maybe even get in a game of bocce ball!

I'm no longer grabbing an armload of pizzas for the soccer team dinners or searching for that necessary first-day-of-school accessory--a new lunch box-- but, given a little sunshine, I now have time to sit under one of the new umbrellas and sip a cup of coffee! Join me ---we can talk a little neighborhood history!

Happy holidays to all,
Susan Morrow

President, Kentfield-Greenbrae Historical Society 2016-17

George Demont Otis Exhibit a Huge Success

Hundreds of visitors came to the "Visions of Marin" opening and to see the Otis Exhibit during the month of October. The College of Marin said that it was one of their most successful shows ever. Third Grade students from Bacich had docent tours as did Michele Montgomery's Art classes from Kent. Their delightful thank you notes are treasured reminders of why this is so important.



Linda Frank (COM), Dr. David Coon (COM),
Mary Gilardi (KGHS), Chris West (Gallery Class COM)

This exhibit was made possible by the collaboration of the College of Marin, Chris West and his gallery class, the Otis Collections of Jessie Hartley and Aurel Keck, and members of the KGHS. Special thanks to Mary Gilardi and Rebecca Sylla who created the George Demont Otis documentary "Visions of Marin.". If you have not yet seen this documentary, please go to this link: vimeo.com/188102799. Thank you everyone!

Renewal time!

If your KGHS renewal is due, you should have received a recent letter and remittance envelope asking for your continued support. It's also a good time to invite friends and neighbors to join. You can DO IT **ONLINE** NOW before you forget!

- \$20 - Students & Seniors
- \$30 - Individuals & Families
- \$50 - Business Membership
- \$100 - Patron
- \$250 - Benefactor *
- \$500 - Historian *
- \$500- Business Partner *
- \$1000 + - Lifetime Membership*
- \$1000+- Lifetime Business Partner *

Or you can send a check: KGHS Membership, Box 236, Kentfield, CA 94914. Please include your name, level of membership, address, email and phone number. Included with your membership is the quarterly newsletter, special invitations to member events and an invitation to volunteer on one of our committees.

“Refreshing” Bon Air Center

The Bon Air Shopping Center has been working hard on a major revitalization project called Bon Air Refresh. In a recent Marin IJ article, Andrea Schultz, President and CEO of Greenbrae Management, said that when the center was first built, retail was really about function. Now, it's really about community.



The project began as a modest proposal to repaint the shopping center but it really blossomed into a full renovation. Overall, the plan is to reinforce the center as a community hub. The project will refresh the common areas with a park-like atmosphere, including wider pedestrian paths, new landscaping and outdoor seating areas.



The plans will include the use of drought tolerant landscaping, storm water planters, new LED parking lot lights and other environmentally-friendly features. The bocce ball court and fire pit behind Peet's Coffee & Tea should open soon. There are two children's play areas, including one near Road Runner Burrito. New businesses have recently signed up and more are expected in the coming months.

The History of Bon Air Center from "In the Heart of Marin" by Dewey Livingston p.

A 32-acre site across from the residential areas of Greenbrae was originally planned for more residential development, but the Schultz Co. changed its mind and had the area rezoned from residential to commercial in 1948. On this combination of marshland and low ground,

the Schultzes created a shopping center designed to serve the residents of not only Greenbrae but nearby towns along the 101 corridor.



Aerial View of Greenbrae 1947
(Marin History Museum)

After initial site work that included filling about five acres of marshland with rock and dirt from road building, the Schultz Co. released plans for the shopping center in early 1951, marking completion of a general plan for Greenbrae after careful consideration of the sites involved. Planned to be "one of the finest" shopping centers in the Bay Area, the commercial buildings would be designed with "a Marin type of architecture." The center was initially designed by Gruen and Kummeck, a Los Angeles architectural firm specializing in modern shopping centers, with the participation of nationally recognized land planner Seward Mott of Washington, D.C. Buffered from Sir Francis Drake Boulevard by a 1,500-2,000-car parking lot, the center would be accessed by a new road opposite the entrance to Greenbrae homes at La Cuesta Drive, where a traffic light had been recently installed. Plans included a grocery super market and six other stores for a combined floor space of 20,200

square feet, all fronted by a covered sidewalk.

Also in 1951, a competing plan surfaced with a proposed 12-acre shopping center at the foot of Wolfe Grade. Property owner and builder Robert E. Hall attempted to change the zoning in the undeveloped Kenbrae tract. The Schultz Co. objected to this plan as a "serious mistake," stating that with their new Greenbrae shopping center and good stores already existing in Kentfield, the Wolfe Grade center "would be contrary to good planning, established by the planning commission over former years." Hall's plans never came into being; the Kentfield School District built Wolfe Grade (now Bacich) School on the site in 1959.

Construction started on the first unit, a Standard Oil station on the eastern side of the proposed center, in late 1951. Responding to demands of the Schultz Co., Standard company architects designed a station featuring redwood siding, tall windows, tiled bathrooms and outdoor landscaping. "This is not a prefabricated steel station like the others," said a representative of Standard Stations, "It is unusual for Standard to deviate from the established type." One problem was that the buried tanks were compromised by Corte Madera Creek water level on the filled land: "there was such terrific pressure, that tanks finally had to be lashed to piles." The Standard Station, beckoning drivers from Highway 101, opened in February of 1952 under the management of Lester Lahmann. Later, a Shell station opened on the opposite corner. Both Shell and Chevron (the former Standard Station) remain at the entrance to Greenbrae.

Construction started on the super market in September of 1951. Niels Schultz Sr. asked James T. "Scotty" Kilpatrick to lease and manage the market, to be called Bon Air Super. Kilpatrick was no stranger to Marin: he had been a bread distributor here in the 1930s before he opened a successful grocery store in Schultz's Millbrae. ...Prominent architect Victor Gruen worked with Schultz and Kilpatrick to build "the most modern super market" of the time in a location across Sir Francis Drake Boulevard from the fast-growing community of Greenbrae. The 125,000 square foot market being built was considered "tremendous" at the time.



Building Bon Air Center 1950's (Greenbrae Management Inc)

Bon Air Super opened on November 20, 1952 with a ceremony "rivaling a Hollywood premiere" that drew 5,000 people and featured searchlights, contests, and the debut of "mechanical check-out stands" that sped purchasing. Employees wore white uniforms, emblazoned on the back with "Bon Air SUPER," and garrison-type white caps. A lucky person won a whole dressed pig by guessing its weight. Kirkpatrick sold 2,800 quarts of ice cream that day...



*Opening Day November 1952
(Greenbrae Management Inc.)*

Kilpatrick and the Schultz family joined in the holiday spirit by providing support and a location for Boy Scout Troop 11's (later Troop 59) Christmas tree lot next to the store in 1952. The Kentfield-Greenbrae Dad's Club loaned money to buy the trees for sale. The tree sales continued for many years, and remain today after more than 50 years operated by the Pronzini family. In 1953 an "Art in Action" exhibit at the Super brought artists and shoppers together, including demonstrations by students in weaving and ceramics... Later the market moved east to a larger space in the center and eventually went out of business; the old supermarket building is now David M. Brian. The Schultz Co. entertained an offer

from a large chain for the empty store when Frank Petrini heard about the opportunity at Bon Air. Petrini, an Italian immigrant who had found success operating meat markets in San Francisco, approached the Schultz Co. and convinced them that he could bring in plenty of business; in a short time after opening in 1964, he built up a popular full-service supermarket, used by people all over Marin, that grossed \$16 million. Petrini's served a new generation of Marinites for more than 30 years, and during that time grew into a highly successful regional chain. Mollie Stone's, opened in 1996, keeps up with the local demand today just as Jim Kilpatrick did over 60 years ago...

Bon Air Hardware opened in 1955 with 2,700 square feet of floor space. Floyd Hilty and his son Murray had operated a hardware store in Berkeley before becoming one of the pioneer merchants at the shopping center. Grant Gildroy remembered the father-and-son operation. "They were super helpful, very paternal-that was true for most of the storeowners-they didn't treat you like an irritation. They had a gumball machine outside that had a striped ball in it, which had a lot of magic for a child," Gildroy recalled. "If you got the striped ball you got a rabbit's foot on a chain; I can remember Dale Herrero had three or four of them on his belt, and that was a big deal." The Hiltys' success led to a move into bigger quarters of 4,000 square feet in the center in 1959, which included an outdoor garden center...

The Greenbrae Pharmacy held a grand opening in November of 1958 with pony rides, a clown, free Christmas trees and gifts, and a drawing for prizes. Husband-and-wife pharmacists Henry and Lorraine Brocco of Corte Madera both graduated from the University of California College of Pharmacy, and called their new store at 160 Bon Air "a handy, enjoyable place to shop." They were immediately busy in Greenbrae, with a staff that also handled cosmetics, greeting cards, stationery and photo supplies. Soon after commencing business, a branch of the San Rafael post office opened in the pharmacy with Henry Brocco acting as an unofficial postmaster. Curiously, the branch was legally located in Larkspur, but Greenbrae as a community fell within the San Rafael mail service area. More than 4,500 people lived within a mile of the new branch, justifying its creation. When Petrini's opened in a larger building down the way, the pharmacy moved into the old Bon Air Super building, greatly increasing its floor space.

Also in 1958, the Larkspur Fire Department built a two-truck station on Sir Francis Drake which has served Greenbrae ever since. That fire station, having barely survived the 1982 flood and not seismically sound or handicapped-accessible, was torn down and replaced in 1991...

By 1960 the Bon Air Shopping Center (now named Bon Air Center) provided the community with a grocery store, pharmacy, hardware store, barber shop and beauty salon, furniture and decorating showroom, laundry and dry cleaning, shoe repair, two gas and service stations and a car wash, in addition to a branch post office. The center became not only a hub for Greenbrae residents but also an important shopping area for central Marin County's growing population. More additions,

including an expansion in 1985 that included a Long's Drugs (now CVS) and remodeling of the older stores, cemented Bon Air Center as an important commercial center in the heart of Marin.

KGHS What's ahead?

KGHS plans for the remainder of the school year...

- **Pop-Up Store Saturdays December 3, 10 and 17...visit us!**
- "Then and Now" slide show with the Third Grade
- Expanding the History Club at Kent Middle School to include tours of Kentfield, Greenbrae and other neighborhoods
- Archival work and education for everyone wanting to document family and local history

Please pass this newsletter on to your friends and encourage them to join the KGHS. Your support will allow us to continue to enrich the lives of students and the community. This all can be done on our website www.kghs.org.

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