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# THE LEFTOVERS

Issue #31 (Amended)

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## SAVING EL SOBRANTE'S ADACHI NURSERY BUILDING

*Maurice Abraham*



*The nursery prior to its closing on June 21, 2017.*

### BACKGROUND

Since 1967 the Adachi Florist and Nursery had been an integral part of the El Sobrante community, and a favorite place to purchase flowers, plants, and gardening supplies. Located on Sobrante Avenue at Valley View Road, Adachi family members were always on hand to offer advice and tips on growing flowers and vegetables in our challenging local soils.

That is now all in the past. The Adachi's sold the property to an investor/developer, Ross Hillesheim, who planned to demolish the existing building and replace it with an ARCO service station and an AM/PM convenience store. On June 21, 2017 Adachi closed the business for good.

The closing of the El Sobrante outlet represented the end of an era for the Adachi

family, one of the early Japanese American families in the floricultural business. Brothers Isaburo and Sadajiro Adachi started the business in 1905, with a greenhouse in El Cerrito that later became a large garden center on San Pablo Avenue. That business, located near where the El Cerrito Home Depot is today, closed in 1992.

In time, the children of the original founders took over the El Sobrante business. As often happens, their children were not interested in carrying on in the same family tradition. But without anyone to take over again, Paul Adachi had no choice but to sell the nursery when he was ready to retire. Of course, there were strong economic reasons for closure too; flower growers and nurseries have a hard time in this climate of skyrocketing land prices and overseas competition.

The existing Adachi building, though not a registered historic landmark, is nevertheless a notable community landmark that deserved to be preserved and repurposed in any future development. It is considered by many to be an architectural treasure, not only representative of the Adachi family heritage, but also the work of the award-winning Richmond firm, Hardison and Komatsu (Donald Hardison and S. Richard Komatsu), now HKIT Architecture in Oakland. Donald Hardison was a local architect who was heavily influenced by Japanese design. Richard Komatsu was a fellow graduate of UC Berkeley.

Hardison achieved national recognition with his design of the Easter Hill housing project in Richmond (constructed in 1954). This was one of the few housing projects built in Richmond following World War II to accommodate the workers drawn to the Kaiser Shipyards. The Hardison and Komatsu firm also won an American Institute of Architects (AIA) award for their design of the Student Center Complex at the University of California, Berkeley.

### **COMMUNITY OPPOSITION TO SERVICE STATION**

The Adachi Nursery property, already zoned for commercial/residential mixed-use, could have been developed with variety of commercial uses and as many as 10 residential units. However, a gasoline service station is not allowed outright; it requires that a Conditional Use Permit be granted by the County, a fact which gave the community some leverage. An on-line petition opposing the service station/convenience store project was created, and nearly 1,000 El Sobrante Valley residents signed the petition by early August 2017. Due to the proximity of nearby schools, two major issues were identified that would potentially sink the proposed project; no liquor or tobacco sales would be permitted by the County. These factors raised serious questions about the project's financial feasibility since liquor and tobacco sales are a significant revenue source for service station/convenience store developments. This resulted in the ARCO corporation canceling their lease agreement with Mr. Hillesheim.

In the Spring of 2018, determined to develop the property, Mr. Hillesheim initiated an outreach effort to get community feedback about how best to develop the property. In the end, he remained determined to construct the service station, convenience store and carwash, despite the prohibition of alcohol and liquor sales.

### **ENTER PLANTING JUSTICE**

Almost immediately after Mr. Hillesheim acquired the property, an east bay nonprofit, Planting Justice, contacted him and expressed interest in acquiring the property for use as a retail nursery in support of their Oakland wholesale nursery. They were supported by a small group of residents interested in helping them and in housing other community-oriented businesses and nonprofits on the property. This group met periodically with Planting Justice to formulate a vision and strategize how to make this happen. Planting Justice representatives continued to meet with Mr. Hillesheim to discuss the possible acquisition and/or lease of the property.

Mr. Hillesheim also met with County District I Supervisor John Gioia and, at Mr. Gioia's recommendation, the El Sobrante Chamber of Commerce Board and the El Sobrante Municipal Advisory Council (MAC). Mr. Hillesheim listened to their ideas and suggestions, while also making it clear that a service station, convenience store and car wash was his main interest and that he could live with the prohibition of tobacco and alcohol sales. Mr. Hillesheim's willingness to accept that prohibition, in this writer's opinion, significantly increased the probability of the project being approved by the County.

### **ENTER MIRA VISTA UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

In the meantime, another potential buyer was out there, but not yet aware of the opportunity. In 2005, the Mira Vista United Church of Christ (MVUCC) sold its large campus on Cutting Boulevard, invested the proceeds, and began renting space from Christ Lutheran Church on Ashbury Ave. While "camping" with the Lutherans, the congregation solidified its identity as a community of believers and deepened their spiritual practice together. One previous student has even described MVUCC as being somewhat "monastic" in their

commitments to shared meals, contemplative practice, and serious spiritual inquiry.

MVUCC was a small congregation in the midst of giving birth to a big dream. As spirit-filled contemplatives, the congregation did a great job of “being” church right here and now but struggled with how to share this bounty more effectively to ensure a sustainable future. The congregation called on Rev. Dr. Melinda V. McLain in the Fall of 2014 with the express purpose of discerning and implementing a new, sustainable model of ministry. Since then, McLain and the congregation have come to understand that the congregation’s three passions: *food, justice, and the arts could be well-lived out by becoming a café church.*

In the Spring of 2016, the congregation participated in the New Business Law Practicum at U.C. Berkley’s Boalt Hall and learned how to be a non-profit running a business. Over the summer of 2015, a draft business plan for the GOOD TABLE came into being that envisions a pay-what-you-can coffee shop, gathering space for spiritual celebrations, and a venue for art and live music. The plan outlined a community café operating with a triple bottom-line of financial sustainability, social service benefits, and spiritual development.

## COMING TOGETHER

In 2017, MVUCC began earnestly looking for real estate and after looking at a variety of possible locations, began to wonder if they had enough capital and energy to enact this ambitious vision. But at every point when it seemed they would have to go back to the drawing board and rethink everything, something would happen that would move them forward.

After over a year of seeking a good real estate fit, MVUCC determined they were priced out of their first-choice location along San Pablo

Avenue in the El Cerrito/Richmond area. It was then that they became aware of the former Adachi Nursery property in El Sobrante, a location closer to where many members live. MVUCC made an unsuccessful offer to Mr. Hillesheim in September of 2018, but that led to Mr. Hillesheim introducing them to a potential non-profit partner, Planting Justice.

Planting Justice is a millennial-led organization that has been combining environmental stewardship with workforce development for nearly 10 years. Like San Francisco’s Delancey Street, they are also experts in developing a diversified funding model to achieve their goals and they currently operate a landscaping business and nursery. The organization has recently been featured in the New York Times with the headline: “Kale not Jail” and was named a California non-profit of the year in 2018. Most importantly, MVUCC felt a great synergy with the leaders of Planting Justice and their mission.

The two nonprofit organizations formed The Good Table, LLC to acquire and save the historic Adachi Nursery building from being razed and developed into another gas station. The former nursery would also provide a retail outlet for their organic tree and plant nursery. On April 25<sup>th</sup> 2019 they closed escrow on the acquisition and are proceeding to turn the historic 4700 square foot building and 1.3-acre grounds into a unique Bay Area place. The Good Table has three main goals for the space when it opens in early 2020. The goals align both with Planting Justice’s work and a plan that Mira Vista’s two dozen members started developing in 2014.

First, it will have a “pay-what-you-can” café that will offer coffee drinks and grab-and-go food options made by local food entrepreneurs. The Good Table has been learning how to establish such a café from One World Everybody Eats, a Texas-based nonprofit



dedicated to increasing food security that has built a pay-what-you-can nonprofit restaurant model.

The Good Table will also include a store that will sell farming tools and plants grown at Planting Justice's East Oakland nursery and its four-acre "mother farm" located near the Adachi property.

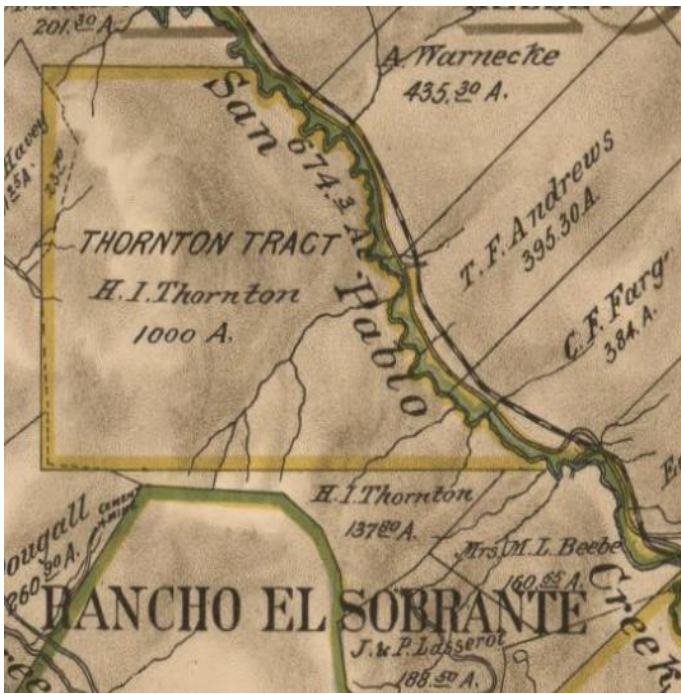
Planting Justice currently grows more than 1,100 varieties of fruiting trees and shrubs. The retail venture will also employ people with jobs that start at \$17.50 per hour and be an extension of its re-entry work program, hiring formerly incarcerated people who experience barriers to employment.

Thirdly, there will be spiritual center, gathering space, and arts venue offering yoga, meditation, spiritual ceremony, health and wellness education, arts and music programming. It will also be where Mira Vista members will meet for service and where other residents and community groups can host events, classes and a place where people can get to know each other.

## A HAPPY ENDING...MUCH TO BE DONE

## Who was Harry Innes Thornton?

*Roxy Miravalle*



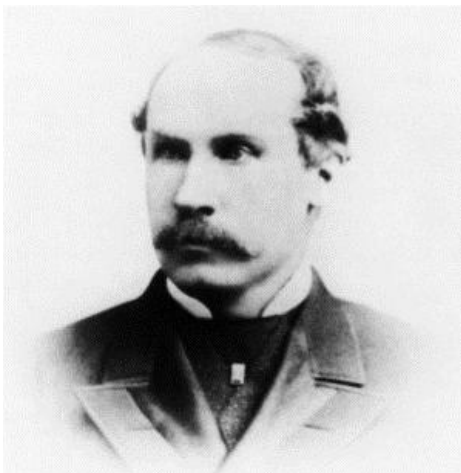
**Figure 1: County Map, Britton & Rey, 1894**

The Thornton Tract on Rancho El Sobrante was the third largest tract of land at 1,000 acres (the Ward & Smith League Tract and the Kelly League Tract being the largest). Thornton's tract also included an additional 137.80 acres, as seen on this map, located beneath it. Although it is not indicated on any map, he named his vast property "Rancho Resaca." So, who was H. I. Thornton and where did he come from?

Harry Innes Thornton Jr. (1834-1895) was a noted Attorney at Law and the son of a prominent family, the Honorable Judge Thornton, Sr. and Lucy Smith Crittenden of the Oak Hill Plantation in Fredericksburg, Virginia. His father was a Federal District Attorney, appointed by John Quincy Adams, elected to the Supreme Court Bench and was also State Senator of Alabama. By 1849 he was appointed a Commissioner of the Board to

Ascertain and Settle Private Land Claims for California by President Fillmore, under an Act of Congress and served in this capacity until 1862. He was also Judge of the Court of the Claims in San Francisco.

Young Harry spent his boyhood days in Huntsville, Alabama and after graduating from the schools there went to the college at Princeton, New Jersey, and afterwards graduated from the University of Virginia. Not long after graduating he determined, like many other young men, to go to the "land of gold" in California and arrived here in 1854. He saw at once that there was an excellent field for the practice of law, and immediately completed the studies he had commenced in his far away Southern home. He was admitted to the Bar for Nevada County in 1855. He was elected as District Attorney in 1857 and elected California State Senator in Sacramento in 1858.



**Figure 2: Harry Innes Thornton**  
(Courtesy California Historical Society)

With anti-slavery agitation in the East and the low mutterings heard from time to time by the people on the Pacific Coast, it proved that a great civil war was inevitable, so Senator Thornton at once resigned his position, and with a number of followers proceeded to the sunny South and enlisted in the Army of the Gray as Captain in the 37th Alabama Infantry, and was speedily promoted. He was later made Lieutenant Colonel of the 58th Alabama Infantry. He was wounded at the battles of Chickamauga and Resaca, and after so many charges and battles, he was tired and shattered in health, and returned to California. He soon moved back to Nevada, where he became partners with John Garber, another prominent attorney of a local Nevada mining area. He took for his specialty mining litigation and became so successful in this line of practice that his leadership was at once acknowledged.



In nearly every litigation of note he was engaged as one of the leading counsels. After several years of practice in Nevada, Colonel Thornton moved to San Francisco and became partners of the law firm of Garber, Thornton & Bishop. With all this going on, he found time to marry. In June of 1868, he married his first cousin, Catherine Marshall Thornton. Unfortunately, the two children born to them, a daughter in 1869, and a son in 1870, died soon after birth. His wife, Catherine also died within a week after the birth of their second child.

To add to his tragedy, just as he had achieved the crowning triumph of his career, he was struck by sickness and was compelled to retire [1884]. He journeyed to Europe in search of health, only to learn he would never be able to resume the practice of his profession and work as hard or as constantly as he formally did.

It is about this time he became a prominent trotting horse breeder, and soon stocked his vast property, then known as Rancho Resaca at Contra Costa, with the finest breeds. Being an ardent lover of a good horse, when feeling well, he would speak of the horses he rode in the rebellion. He purchased some of the best-bred mares and mated them with the best stallions. However, he enjoyed the thoroughbreds more, so he sold all of his trotters and engaged more extensively in the breeding of thoroughbreds. He was one of the very best-informed men in America on the pedigrees and performances of race horses in all parts of the world. He was elected president of the Pacific Blood-Horse Association in 1892.

Harry Innes Thornton, Jr. had such a very eventful and prosperous life, his professional, and political career would fill more than these mere pages could possibly describe. His military career alone would fill volumes! His death in 1895 from complications of pneumonia came as a shock to many and was mourned by thousands. He had recently purchased a farm of 400 acres ten miles north of Fresno and had a number of thoroughbreds and trotters at Bakersfield. At the time of his death he was president of the Fresno Irrigation and Canal Company.

He was surrounded by members of his family, who had been at his bed side. His estate at the time was valued at \$100,000. Since he had no living heirs, he left most of his estate to his three sisters and nephews. He was known to all as a brilliant lawyer, warm friend, able horseman, and a brave and courteous gentleman.

Despite all his popularity and wealth, I was most impressed with his genealogy. Harry I. Thornton, Jr. is a descendant of what I consider American Royalty. On his mother, Lucy's side, there is a maternal link to Thomas Jefferson, through his G-G-Grandmother Mary Jefferson's brother, Peter Jefferson.

But wait, there's more! On his wife's Paternal side, there is a connection to George Washington, via Frances Gregory, whose mother, Mildred's parents had a son, Augustine Washington. Their son, Augustine married Mary Ball, and their first born, George, would become our first President!



Figure 3: San Francisco Call 1892

## Thank You!

The following is a list of the folks or groups who have made cash donations to the ESHS, to support our efforts to preserve the history of the community of El Sobrante. We apologize for taking so long to get around to this, and we doubly apologize if we have overlooked your donation.

**Super-Patron: \$7500 +**  
Maurice & Jeanne Abraham

**Patron: \$5000 +**  
Robert Bettencourt

**Benefactor: \$500 +**  
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**Buddy: \$100 +**  
Kenyon Chan  
Elks Lodge  
Anita Diaz-Meltzer  
Roxanne Mirav lle

**Friend: \$50 +**  
Elizabeth O'Shea  
Lyle Miller

**A big thanks too, to all the anonymous donors who have contributed \$10 or \$20 at the annual stroll, or who have contributed to the Network for Good donation page on Facebook! With your help, our new museum, opening later this year, will be a history center we can all be proud of.**

## 70 Years Ago

The ESHS has a reasonably complete collection of the El Sobrante Herald (a weekly newspaper) but, unfortunately, some years are missing. The first issue that we have is dated July 7, 1949, almost exactly 70 years ago. However, information on the front page indicates that this was the fourth year of publication, meaning that the paper must have had its beginnings around 1946. Nonetheless, the summer of 1949 was a happening time for our community, with the big news being the opening of a brand-new fire station on Appian Way. Over the years, that station has grown in size, but it remains in the same location.

We learn from this initial issue that the fire department, called the "Sobrito Rancho Volunteer Fire Department", was an all-volunteer affair, and that until 1938, the equipment was stored at the Skow Dairy along Clark Road. In that year the volunteers erected a "rustic building" on Appian Way, across from



the new station. Above, we see the old structure behind the spectators attending the opening ceremonies of the new building, July 10, 1949.

The name was officially changed to the El Sobrante Fire Department with the formation of the El Sobrante Fire Protection District in 1944. Cost of the new station, which was "privately financed," was "approximately \$30,000." How times have changed.

## New Acquisitions:



These brass identity tags once belonged to Thomas James, grandfather of our treasurer, (and donor) Steve James. Thomas was a worker at the Kaiser Shipyards in Richmond. These tags were used whenever a tool was checked in or out of the yard tool warehouse. “Brass in, brass out” was the motto. The number is unique, and identifies Thomas as the 6,105<sup>th</sup> employee at the yards in Richmond.



This match cover is from “The Pub,” located at 449 Valley View Rd., in El Sobrante. “Gladys” is identified as “Your Hostess.” This is a bit of a mystery. The only bar we are aware of in this area was the “Horseshoe Tavern” across the street, at 440 Valley View Road. In December of 1960, the annual New Year’s greeting from the Horseshoe lists “Frank and Gladys” as the hosts. Interestingly, no greeting for the Horseshoe shows up in the New Year’s issue for 1961, and in 1962 only Frank is listed as the host. So we are left to speculate that “The Pub” was a short-lived affair, opened perhaps in the early 1960s by Frank’s disgruntled partner(?). The address actually places the new bar in the old site of the El Sobrante Library, which moved to its current location in 1961. In any case, perhaps someone out there can offer some light on this mystery. Thanks to Emil Munkres for this rare bit of ephemera.

*The Leftovers* is published quarterly. Articles for publication are encouraged, as are comments. See e-mail address below.

*The El Sobrante Historical Society is a formal nonprofit organization, and donations may be tax-deductible. We are dedicated to the preservation and display of the history of the community of El Sobrante. We depend on our members and local residents for the information, artifacts, and photographs that make up the society’s collection. Become a member and help out! It’s free and simple. Just visit the website, at [eshist.org](http://eshist.org).*

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### Mission Statement

*To promote the awareness and appreciation of El Sobrante Valley history through preservation and education, and chronicling of the community’s heritage for current and future generations.*

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