

***The San Juan Record:
Journalism in Fair Oaks, 1933-1980***

A Presentation to the Fair Oaks Historical Society

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By Kim Huggett

Note: This was a Power Point Presentation

Thank you for your invitation to speak back at my hometown this evening. My parents were longtime members of the Fair Oaks Historical Society, and this presentation is part of my way to honor them for owning the 1930's era home on the property of Shelton's Store in Fair Oaks Village, at the southeast corner of Main and California, for 51 years.

This also is the story of four Huggett brothers growing up in Fair Oaks Village. So, I need to get something off my chest at the start.

You may recognize the photo of this house as being just across the lawn of Community Clubhouse Park, just outside. I'm going to say it was 1968, or so,

that my brothers and I were out there with maybe a few of the neighbor boys, playing a game called “three flies up,” meaning one of us batted a ball in the air and the first person to catch three flies got to take their turn as the batter.

During my turn I hit the ball too hard while showing off and it smashed through the window right here at the bottom left of the photo. Unlike the movie ‘Sandlot,’ we didn’t confess to the crime and decided to find another ball elsewhere. But I can’t help but noticing that the window is still boarded up almost 60 years later. I’d kind of like to get our ball back, so maybe I’ll go over there and fess up during this trip.

Huggetts Move to Fair Oaks Village

The Huggetts moved to Fair Oaks Village in 1965 so my father, the Rev. Larry Huggett, could take a job directing education programs at Fair Oaks Presbyterian Church. Dad and my mother Dorothy bought the house owned by Glenn Wright at the

corner of California Avenue and Main Street, formerly location of L.M. Shelton's general store and post office.

Currently, the house is being lovingly restored by a family with a great sense of style and the location's contribution to Fair Oaks history. It's on a half-acre they won't subdivide.

After moving in, my parents put up a sign on the corner declaring the lot as "Fairview." Curiously, 60 years later I live just outside of Hayward in the postal zone of "Fairview," and I live on Fairview Avenue.

You can see on the Fair Oaks Historical Society 'walking tour map' the location of our home, just a block from where we're meeting tonight. The corrugated metal former four-stall village garage, where we played basketball on a dirt driveway, still stands.

Growing up in Fair Oaks Village was a bit of a culture shock for four brothers from Southern California. What looked familiar were the skies

choked with smoke from when Yolo County farmers set vast fires to burn rice stubble. And we loved moving to a community where everybody burned their garbage. It was kind of a competition to see which of us brother firebugs would get to burn ours.

Everything we needed was just a couple of blocks away. The post office, courthouse and library were all right here across the street from the Community Clubhouse. Everett Nardinelli's Oaks Hardware, Larry Smart's Western Auto and A-1 Market provided all our necessities, and Doc Applegate's office was just off Village Park.

Several large families helped fill out the classes at Fair Oaks School, Andrew Carnegie and Bella Vista. Our friends included many Nolands, Connellys, Shermans, Longs and Broadleys.

A Veteran's Haversack

My jobs as a teenager included mowing Fair Oaks Village lawns and fields, where I learned to

stay away from electrified fences after running the mower into one over on North Winding Way.

Mom became a life member of the Thursday Club, and one of her closest friends there was Lenabelle Nixon, who lived with her husband G. Patterson Nixon where Old Winding Way bends like the letter L, a couple of blocks from here.

When he passed away, I acquired the haversack he wore in France during World War I, and I am pleased to pass it along to the historical society tonight with the additional provenance of the bill of sale in his name. His first name was General, but he was never more than a corporal, unfortunately. Still, he served his country in the AEF despite the fact he was required to buy his own haversack, and in francs, at that.

Life in the Village

The Huggett family never missed a Fair Oaks Fiesta, or its parades, since festivities were literally across the street.

I was bussed to Del Campo High School from right out front of the Community Clubhouse, along with a handful of others assigned to fill out the first freshman class. While I wasn't able to transfer to Bella Vista, my parents intervened and my three brothers did. This was fortunate because that's where my brother Rand met his future wife, was president of the senior class, and was a wrestling team champion.

Our connection with Fair Oaks Village continues with the family's brick at the intersection downtown and as our parent's final resting place at Fair Oaks Cemetery.

One rite of passage for Fair Oaks Village boys that the citified Huggett brothers were ordered to avoid was jumping from the old Fair Oaks Bridge. The bridge was open to traffic in those days and is how we first arrived in town, rather than by the Sunrise Bridge.

By a show of hands, is there anyone here tonight who has actually made that leap from the Old Fair Oaks Bridge?

(At this point in the presentation, by prior arrangement, George Costenbader stood and talked about the technique used to jump from the span.)

And just to prove his authenticity, here's a photo of George and me on the Fair Oaks Blues ball team, though we are skinnier and hairier in the photo than today.

And here are some others who grew up in Fair Oaks around that time:

- He wouldn't have known me at Del Campo High School, but when I was a lowly freshman, Dusty Baker was a senior, on the way to being a four-sport letterman, a 19-year career as a baseball player and 26-year career as a manager and World Series champion.
- Living right across Main Street from our house was the home of Dr. E. M. Blunden, who

tragically died in a plane crash. His daughter, who I didn't know, was a 1967 graduate of Bella Vista and became Joan Lunden, who starred on NBC's today show for 20 years and has an autobiography coming out this year. We'll watch for how many chapters she devotes to growing up in Fair Oaks Village. An early story in the San Juan Record tells how her father fixed the broken arm of a Fair Oaks Civil War veteran, A. E. Gates of the former 116th Ohio regiment, so he could attend the 75th anniversary event for the battle of Gettysburg.

- And one of my friends, who was a singer at a Miss Fair Oaks pageant during the fiesta, Dave Thome, went from starring in Bella Vista musicals to Music Circus, and then performing in nine Broadway musicals. He had the lead role in 'A Chorus Line,' longest-running Broadway musical until 'Cats' came along. And then, perhaps more importantly, Dave became the town crier for Disney World in Orlando.

Fair Oaks' Earliest Newspapers

Going back to the earliest arrivals, the residents of Fair Oaks were fortunate that the developers created a type of newspaper, The Fair Oaks Citizen, to keep them informed.

The Citizen began in 1906, and the Fair Oaks Progress in 1918. Residents could read about the war and prospects for citrus production.

Here's a copy of one from 1911, which at that time would have been the only source of news to Fair Oaks residents other than The Sacramento Union, oldest newspaper in the west and which had made famous one of its correspondents, Mark Twain.

The earliest residents also kept up to date with life in the colony with a monthly magazine, "Oak Leaves," and copies are in the historical society collection.

The Fitzgeralds

The San Juan Record was born in 1933, the year after a record-breaking frost wiped out most of Fair Oaks' orchards. The publication was a product of John and Geraldine Fitzgerald and fought for its survival along with the ranchers. It was sold in 1935 to Leon and Lola Wheaton.

The Wheatons

Leon Wheaton wrote articles and editorials with the simple byline of "Wheat," and took on many hard issues facing the young community. In an act of self-preservation, he declared a Fair Oaks school board election invalid because a legal advertisement had not been placed in a "newspaper of general circulation," as required by the California Constitution.

This is a regulation that still exists today and keeps many a small paper in business. Interestingly, the candidate who had lost was John Holst, for who one of our schools is named today. The paper also took the lead in June of 1938 endorsing the bond

issue leading to construction of San Juan High School.

The Menefees

The Wheatons sold the publication in 1948 to Seldon and Audrey Menefee and the newspaper kept pace as the community grew due to the impact of Aerojet General Corp. and various aggregate companies south of the river. In fact, when the Huggetts first arrived it was not uncommon to hear the roar of rocket engines being tested from Aerojet, one of the region's major employers.

The Knudsens

In 1960, the publication was purchased by Reinhart and Kathlyn Knudsen of Fair Oaks. Reinhart was a former advertising executive who had big dreams for community journalism and outreach throughout Sacramento County and began expanding the concept of the Sacramento Suburban Newspapers.

Area developer George McKeon became a majority stockholder in 1964 as it continued to expand and, in 1975, the entire group of newspapers was purchased by the Panax Corp. and became part of the Sierra Publishing Company.

This map shows Reinhart Knudsen's achievement. While some of the boundaries and newspaper names shifted over time, the concept remained the same, with a handful of editors, reporters and correspondents tailoring news to most of the communities in Sacramento County, East Yolo County, and Mather and McClellan air force bases.

The 'Green Sheet'

And while not the biggest in the 153,000-circulation chain, The San Juan Record, here in Fair Oaks, remained the flagship.

The headquarters site of the San Juan Record and the chain for most of its life, was in Fair Oaks Village, here on Entrance Street where the Shangri-la

Restaurant is now located, formerly a mortuary after the San Juan Record relocated.

As a former advertising executive Reinhart realized that he needed a way to differentiate his publications from others and advertising circulars that were regularly thrown on doorsteps in those days. By printing the outside pages on green newsprint, advertisers could drive around on Wednesday mornings and see that their messages were getting delivered on front porches. Hence the name, “The Green Sheet.”

Now the economics of the whole operation depended, primarily, ... on children.

Reinhart’s concept was based on the idea that the paper was delivered for free and that the paper boy or girl would come to your home once a month and collect 50 cents for their good service, such as getting it on the porch and before you left for work. Then, they would meet with a supervisor once a month and divvy up the take.

Today's equivalent might be when you get an email that gives you the opportunity to "unsubscribe" when you never actually subscribed in the first place.

Now that might be expecting a lot from a 12-year-old.

In fact, do we have any former Green Sheet newspaper carriers here tonight?

(At this point in the presentation, former San Juan Record paperboy Rand Huggett spoke about how to properly toss a newspaper on the porch and collecting payment from people who didn't actually subscribe.)

Now that was clearly a set-up using my brother Rand. He gained notoriety as an artist, even at Bella Vista High School when he declined to sell one of his sculptures to the principal. He recently retired after 30 years teaching art at Amador High School in Sutter Creek, where his murals welcome you to that city, Jackson, and elsewhere.

He also worked for the Green Sheet preparing the various newspapers for shipping to the Folsom Telegraph for printing. His artwork included the cover of the Fair Oaks Historical Society brochure, seen here, and the only known image of the famous Ghost of Sailor Bar, located on the river at the end of Illinois Avenue.

In 1977, the San Juan Record reprinted an account of the ghost by Judge W. A. Anderson first written in 1906 and published in the Fair Oaks magazine Oak Leaves.

The judge concludes ominously, “Fair Oaks is not without its ancestral specter.”

I Googled “Ghost of Sailor Bar” and found 2.2 million results. So, he must be real, right?

I’d been sports editor of the Del Campo Mighty Roar and the American River Junior College Beaver, and that led Reinhart Knudsen’s daughter, Kris, to recommend me for the position of Green Sheet sports editor.

I covered lots of stories but, most importantly, virtually every Little League and Bobby Sox group in the county were given stacks of sheets to fill out with statistics after each game and I'd condense them into writeups for each community paper.

The fun side of the job was that I was the youngest sportswriter at the 1973 and '74 World Series in Oakland.

Knowing I was a Sacramento State journalism major, Green Sheet news editor Dick Bengston asked me to take a crack at a story about how two dozen quail had been killed at the park next to Fair Oaks' Deerfield Commons school. He liked it so much that I was promoted to be news editor of The Suburban, the Green Sheet that covered the Arden-Arcade area.

Added to my workload was regular attendance at the Sacramento County Board of Supervisors and the San Juan Unified School District.

One story I wrote that went relatively unnoticed at the time was when the school board decided the land in its district across the river, between the American River, Folsom Boulevard, Hazel and Sunrise avenues was nothing but dredger tailings and a wrecked car lot and decided to trade it to the Folsom-Cordova district for some property they had in Orangevale.

Think of how much that tax revenue would mean to the San Juan district today.

San Juan Record, the 'Flagship'

As the flagship of Sacramento Suburban Newspapers, Fair Oaks' San Juan Record was the ideal of what a hometown newspaper should be. It had high school students report on their schools, and news of special events, sports, clubs, churches, entertainment and business. All in Fair Oaks.

And remember when the classifieds were where you'd go to sell stuff from your garage, or even find a job? \$2 for 2 lines sounds like a pretty good deal

today. Now we go to Craigslist, Facebook Marketplace or ebay.

Then, in 1980, Reinhart Knudsen retired, but I don't think even he anticipated the upheaval about to hit the world's ability to communicate. Still, I took over as managing editor of the Green Sheets, then at 176,000 circulation. Our home base had moved to Rancho Cordova, near Sunrise Boulevard, to house all the operations, including the presses.

So, what happened?

First, Sunrise Mall developers bulldozed the massive fields of golden poppies north of Madison Avenue, with similar occurrences in South Sacramento with the Florin Mall. Malls considered themselves regional, so they didn't advertise locally in papers like The Green Sheet.

As businesses such as supermarkets surrounded these customer magnets, mom-and-pop stores like A-1 market and H&H market in Fair Oaks couldn't compete and went out of business.

The rivalry between the Sacramento Bee and Union, intensified, creating more competitive pressure with our weekly paper. And, finally, when the same company that owned the Union bought the Green Sheet, employees voted to join the Northern California Newspaper Guild bargaining unit. With ownership unable, or unwilling, to pay those wages, the Green Sheets shut down two weeks later.

Without much fanfare, earlier that year I had written a small article, practically buried in the church news section, with the headline: “Supervisors will discuss cable TV.” Who correctly predicted how this would change our world?

After The Green Sheet

The Sacramento Union asked me to join in somewhat replicating the Green Sheet approach with a section tailored to different communities called “Thursday’s Extra.” It had some, but not all the community news of the Green Sheets, including a feature story section entitled “Neighbors.”

Shortly afterward, the Sacramento Bee copied the concept down to the very title, “Neighbors,” and leased a building in Fair Oaks at the intersection of Sunrise and Sunset. They refused to pay union wages to employees, backed up by a strange court ruling that said Neighbors employees weren’t actually Sacramento Bee employees.

At the Union, I later became a crime and investigative reporter and, as they say in the business, ‘if it bleeds, it leads.’ So, I became the expert reporter on axe murders and other sensational crimes.

After two people died from an explosion in the Arden area, I became the first reporter to learn about the Unabomber. I also wrote a series of articles leading to the first lawsuit against Philippines dictator Ferdinand Marcos’ family holdings in the US, including at Rancho Murietta.

But again, technology was creeping up on the world’s newspapers.

I moved to the East Bay where, in a succession of jobs, I worked as the public relations voice of Chabot College and California State University, East Bay. I later became president and CEO of the Hayward Chamber of Commerce before I retired.

Hayward, like Fair Oaks, is another stop along the Lincoln Highway.

Meanwhile, America's major newspapers were dying, including The Sacramento Union, which once boasted a circulation of more than 100,000. Today, the printed version of The Sacramento Bee is reportedly 25,000. The properties both businesses sat on have been bulldozed flat. However, you still can find Mark Twain's former Sacramento Union headquarters in Old Sacramento.

And you can still find copies of the San Juan Record at the Sacramento Main Library, 3rd floor. I could only find about 32 years of them, however, so the search goes on for the newer microfilms originally donated to the Fair Oaks Library.

Today's Journalism

However, the fate of real journalism is still undetermined. When I left Cal State East Bay, only two of the 23 California State University campuses offered a bachelor's degree in journalism. Today, I'm guessing most in this audience are more circumspect of your news sources than we used to be.

Walter Cronkite would be aghast to learn that media monitors such as this one that uses 2,400 data points, conclude that the traditional TV networks are today considered "left leaning."

And we also know which are right leaning.

Most online headlines and articles are no longer written with the journalistic principals of the who, what, when, where, why and how of a story at the top, the so-called inverted pyramid.

The rule now is 'click bait' teasers that get you to click on a link and, for that, an advertiser gets the eyeballs he wants and pays for that look.

My son's major in communications prepared him for his career as a manager at Nintendo, where he works across North America with social media mavens we know as "influencers" people trust.

So, we search for accuracy today. And without the San Juan Record to guide us, at least those of us in Fair Oaks can go to the source of all truth at

... the Fair Oaks Historical Society. Open every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday.

Thank you for the opportunity to come back to such a happy reunion here in my hometown, Fair Oaks.