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At 175 Years Old, Moraga Adobe is Slated for Restoration

By Sora O'Doherty



The once neglected Moraga Adobe will be restored. Photo Sora O'Doherty

The Moraga Adobe is celebrating its 175th year, making it the oldest residential building in Contra Costa County and one of the oldest in Northern California.

Although it is located in Orinda, the Moraga Adobe borders Moraga, the town named for Joaquin Moraga. Both Orinda and Moraga have been interested in the fate of the building, which has regional significance.

Plans to restore the Adobe are progressing, although it is not yet possible to see that progress. Built in 1841, the Moraga Adobe was the home of Joaquin Moraga, who, together with his cousin, had received a 13,000-acre land grant from the Mexican government in 1835. The Adobe sits high on a hill above Miramonte High School and Del Rey Elementary School. The extensive views from the Adobe extend out over much of Orinda, Moraga, Rheem and farther.

The Adobe had never been open to the public and has always been in private ownership, most recently owned by the developers of J&J Ranch. In 2009, when J&J acquired the property, they opened the Adobe for a walk-through, and, inspired by the historical building, the Friends of the Moraga Adobe was formed, with Kent Long as president. In 2012 the FMA appealed the approval of J&J's development plan by the Orinda Planning Commission, under which the Adobe would have become a private clubhouse for the development. The Moraga Town Council took an interest in the building, and wrote a friend of the council letter to Orinda to try to explore options regarding access to the building for public benefit.

After years of talks, J&J and the FMA reached an agreement which has been recorded in a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). In late 2015 J&J obtained approval for 13 homes on 20 acres adjacent to the Adobe, with 2.3 acres and the Adobe building to be deeded to the Friends of the Adobe.

According to Long, the FMA needs to raise \$450,000 plus a reserve of \$50,000. J&J will pay the balance to restore the Adobe and to build a support structure with bathrooms. Thus far, the FMA has raised over \$100,000 and are hosting another fundraiser: the Fandango Fantastico on Aug. 27 to celebrate the Adobe's 175th year. (See sidebar.)

There is a three-year timeline for the Adobe restoration project, but the time has not yet begun to run. Long says, however, that in the next few months planning will begin in earnest. The Adobe originally was three rooms. Owing to the fact that the land grant included the redwood forest of Canyon, the Adobe had the unusual feature of redwood plank floors. Many parties and dances were hosted at the Adobe, and the redwood floors were very popular. Cooking was done outside the building.

The adobe walls of those original three rooms are still sound, although they are not visible, having been covered by later additions to the structure. The Adobe was expanded to include three bedrooms in 1848. Those added rooms will probably be removed, although there may be an indication of where they were. There was also a hay barn on the property, but it was removed years ago. The property had been substantially renovated in the 1960s.

The Moragas incurred substantial legal bills during the transfer of California from Mexico to the United States and during the tumultuous years of the Gold Rush. By 1886, they lost the Adobe to a

reputedly unscrupulous attorney. But the property remained in private hands and was been used as a residence until it was vacated. The building shows signs of neglect and some vandalism, but is now fenced off to prevent further harm until the work begins on restoration. The plans, which were finally approved late last year - having survived an appeal from neighbors concerned about traffic issues - call for the Adobe to be open to the public as a museum, where people, especially school children, can come to learn more about the history of the building and the surrounding area. Public access will be limited to 30 days per year and additional days for maintenance of the building.

Fandango Fantastico!

The Friends of Joaquin Moraga Adobe are hosting their third annual Fandango to raise money for the restoration of the Moraga Adobe.

Fandango party celebrations were the core of the social calendar for early Mexican settlers, and the Moraga family was well known for those held at the Adobe in the 1840s. This year's Fandango will be held on Saturday, Aug. 27. The MC for the evening will be radio personality John Hamilton, host of On the Go with KGO. Entertainment will feature traditional music from Los Arribenos de San Francisco, a band that includes a direct descendant of the Moraga family.

Tickets are \$100 per person. Visit www.MoragaAdobe.org for more information or to buy tickets online. Tickets may also be purchased by sending a check payable to "FJMA" to "Fandango Tickets" at PO Box 872 Orinda, CA 94563.

Old Adobe Inspires Young Entrepreneur

By Sora O'Doherty

Isabela Chow's light brown eyes light up when she speaks about the Moraga Adobe. She was in the third grade at Del Rey Elementary School when she learned from her teacher about the historic building. On a field trip, Isabela's class hiked to the Adobe, which sits on the hill overlooking the school, and Isabela was enthralled by the history of the people who had built the Adobe.

So inspired was Isabela that she raised money and donated \$360 to the Friends of the Moraga Adobe last year at their fundraising Fandango Fantastico. This year, Isabela, who is now going into the fifth grade, will be donating again at the Fandango on Aug. 27.

Isabela has found a number of ways to raise money for the Adobe: she sells eggs from her four chickens on Nextdoor.com. Buyers pay what they choose, which is usually around \$5 per dozen. She makes jewelry too, and sells it with her friends, sometimes at the Farmers Market. She makes beaded earrings, keychains and friendship bracelets. She looks after Kit Kit, a neighbor's cat, and adds her pay to her contribution.

Isabela also contributes from her allowance. Her mother, Ana, matches Isabela's contributions dollar for dollar. Her mother will accompany Isabela to the Fandango, and she hopes that some friends will join her as well. Last year Isabela loved the Spanish dancers with their beautiful costumes.



Isabela Chow Photo S. O'Doherty

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