

# Saranap Nostalgia: Many memories to be razed

By John T. Miller



Former owners Tony and Donna LaRossa are hoping they can salvage this iconic sign and transfer it to their daughter's property in Carson, Nevada.

In a few short months the wrecking crews will descend on what was once the hub of unincorporated Saranap in order for Hall Equities Group to build the new, vibrant and updated Saranap Village.

Hauled away with the rubble and debris of the antiquated buildings and vacant lots will be the memory and nostalgia of simpler times when family-run businesses carried out the day-to-day commerce of the area.

In an attempt to preserve some of this history, this two-part article looks at these former times and an appreciation for the contributions of some of these families.

One of the prominent landmarks to be removed when construction begins is the LaRossa Market building, which has stood since the mid-1950s.

After managing markets in Alameda and Berkeley beginning in the 1930s, Louie and Martha LaRossa moved to Lafayette where they opened a grocery store at the corner of Mt. Diablo Boulevard and Pleasant Hill Road.

The county wanted the property to build a freeway ramp and the LaRossas were forced to sell. Appealing to the county for more money, they were able to buy property on Boulevard Way where a chicken ranch existed.

According to "Saranap: Then and Now," written by Dorothy M. Ligda (2006), many of the neighbors — much like in recent times — objected to the large structure being built near their homes. The family persisted, though, and the market was built in 1955.

The LaRossa's son, Tony, attended Acalanes High School

where he starred in football and track. The rest of his time was spent working in the store along with his sister, Carmen. Louis passed away in 1973 and Martha became a familiar figure behind the register while Tony managed the store. His second wife Donna — who had been a loan officer before marrying Tony — helped in the store and did the books.

Donna met Tony on her frequent visits to the store and married him. "I knew when I married him that the store would become my life," said Donna. "We worked there from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. six days a week with some help in the evenings." Tony LaRossa's first wife died tragically from a fall off a horse.

The Morucci family ran the deli at the store for a time and eventually set up their own popular sandwich shop down the street. The Moruccis eventually sold their business and the family name.

Downstairs from the store, the LaRossa's rented space to many different enterprises, including Valley Glass (see accompanying story on previous page), a moving company, and a beauty salon.

According to Donna, Martha had a soft spot for other small businesses, so the rent she charged never amounted to much.

"A lot of the local workers came in for donuts and coffee in the morning," recalls Donna LaRossa, "and even though we didn't have any tables, they'd stand around and visit."

The store was sold to a Vietnamese conglomerate, and Ann and Philip Pham, who survived two years in a refugee camp after

the war and eventually escaped by boat (as told in Ligda's book), ran the market for several years.

In April of 2002, however, the Contra Costa Times reported a scandal in Lanai's Massage and Beauty Image Plus downstairs. Three women were arrested in an undercover sting and charges of prostitution were brought against a ring that had collected hundreds of thousands of dollars in illegal money.

Because the people connected with the prostitution ring were Asian, many assumed the Phams were involved. They were upset and denied any involvement, according to Ligda, and continued to run the store.

In May, 2004, Sufism Reoriented bought the property, using the gutted market for their charitable endeavors. After Hall Equities

purchased the land, Mike Murphy Baseball has temporarily equipped the site with batting cages and runs clinics there while waiting for their permanent facilities.

(Next Issue: A look at the old Holy Ghost Hall, Leo's Mobil Service Station and Danny Van Allen's bar.)

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## Food trucks staying in Orinda

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The choice of Thursday night was particularly galling to the restaurateurs, because Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday are the nights on which they earn enough to cover their bills. They asked that the project be discontinued, or moved to another night.

Respondents to a survey on the project were overwhelmingly positive, however, stunning the council with 90.5 percent of respondents wanting the project to continue, and rating it 4 out of 5 stars, although they expressed somewhat less enthusiasm for the long lines.

Javid Ebrahimi, the owner of Taste of the World, the food truck company running the pilot project, attended the council meeting with Samantha Ross, also of TOW. Ebrahimi said that the project exceeded their financial expectations, thanked the city and WUDO for their help, and stated that they wanted to continue the food truck event through the winter so people won't forget about them.

Ebrahimi discussed the possibility of a different night with the council. Apparently, no one has ever tried food truck events on Mondays. Tuesdays conflict with other events, like Concerts in the Park, and Wednesdays are an almost sacred swim event night in Orinda. The weekend would be even worse for the restaurants, so that left Thursday nights, which have proved to be very popular. However, Ebrahimi expressed his willingness to work with the restaurants to promote their businesses by advertising them on the

food truck televisions, or by having a tent for local businesses at each event.

Council Member Dean Orr said the food truck event was a wonderful opportunity with a great deal of support. He had the sense that Orindans enjoyed the opportunity to bump into other community members at the event, and, while he expressed sympathy to all small businesses, he found the food trucks to be fundamentally different and so well supported it would be hard for him to vote against continuing the event.

Council Member Darlene Gee agreed that the pilot was a great success, a 100-percent positive, fun event that added to the community's enthusiasm about downtown Orinda. The pilot appeals to a wide variety of people, she said, and added that she was amazed at the openness and willingness of TOW to partner with local businesses. That sentiment was echoed by Vice Mayor Amy Worth, who added that some customers just came to the event for a beer, then moved on to a local restaurant for dinner. Council Member Inga Miller deemed the proposal to continue the pilot a "no brainer." She commended TOW for its outreach and Planning Director Drummond Buckley for the survey.

The food trucks collect and remit sales tax. Ebrahimi said he would like to be a registered business, but as yet Orinda does not issue business licenses. He was also open to the concept of a fee, which would be incorporated into the RFP.

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