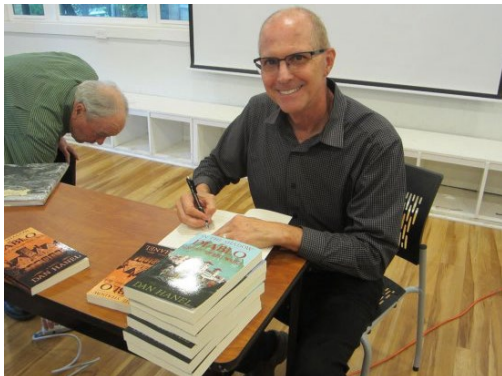


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## Author Dan Hanel discusses local history at MHS event

By Vera Kochan



Historical mystery author, Dan Hanel, signs his books Photo Vera Kochan

Award-winning mystery novel author Dan Hanel offered insight into some of the local history of Contra Costa County during his Nov. 5 presentation for the Moraga Historical Society's speaker event at the Hacienda de las Flores.

Hanel's historical mystery series, "In the Shadow of Diablo," has earned him accolades as the "2019 Next Generation Indie Book Award Winner for Best Series." The fact that his fictional main character is a science teacher comes as no surprise in that Hanel has personally received the "Eukel Teacher Trust Award for Outstanding Teachers of Contra Costa County," in addition to being named "Distinguished High School Science Teacher for the State of California."

Hanel's first novel, "Mystery of the Great Stone House," is based on Brentwood's John Marsh, who with no actual credentials, became California's first doctor and first American settler in Contra Costa County. After amassing a fortune from crops, ranching, and the fur trade, Marsh built his 7,000 square foot stone mansion. His brutal murder in 1856, prompted his long-lost son, Charles, on a quest spanning a decade to bring the killers to justice.

The Brentwood resident's four novels combine fact with fiction while bringing to life heavily researched, historical locations near Mt. Diablo and weaving a past/present

storyline. Marsh's daughter, Alice, by a second marriage, was responsible for the naming of Orinda. While married to Oakland's William Camron, their land purchase was named Orinda Park after Alice's favorite, 17th century, English poet Katherine Fowler Philips, also known as, The Matchless Orinda. Rumors of a fortune in hidden gold help to drive this novel's plotline.

Hanel's second novel, "Death at the Healing Waters," explores the west coast's most famous 1920s resort called Byron Hot Springs. Built on hot springs and salt flats, the hotel was originally constructed to provide people with the opportunity to "partake of the healing waters", which were advertised as a cure-all for a variety of medical issues. As its popularity grew, the rich and famous of the day came for a relaxing and restorative getaway. The fact that the location was so remote, prohibition never came knocking on its door. When the Great Depression took a toll on everyone's wallet, the resort eventually became the Army's Camp Tracy during WWII and was converted into a secret interrogation center for Japanese and German Naval officers. At the center of this novel's intrigue is a missing, legendary 137 carat diamond.

"Ghosts of Black Diamond," Hanel's third novel, refers to the Black Diamond Coal Mine near Antioch. Thanks to the population boom of the Bay Area in the 1800s, coal was considered a valuable commodity in its day. Founded by Noah Norton, the town of Nortonville sprouted up near the mines in order to house the workers and their families. It was populated by mostly Welsh immigrants, some of which belonged to a secret society based on ancient philosophy and mystic symbolism with ties to medieval legends such as King Arthur. These symbols can be found on many of the headstones in the adjacent Rose Hill Cemetery. Sarah Norton, Noah's wife, was the town's midwife who attended over 600 cases without losing one. She died at the age of 68 in a runaway buggy accident while en route to a birthing. Known as the White Witch, it is said that her spirit haunts Rose Hill Cemetery.

Hanel's latest novel, "Beneath the Tangled Vines," involves Contra Costa County's once burgeoning wine industry. By 1904, there were dozens of vineyards and wineries dotting the land surrounding Mt. Diablo. Martinez, Clayton, and Pleasant Hill, among so many more, added to the wine industry with their plentifully producing vineyards. San Francisco was a mecca of wine warehouses, counting at least 27 until the 1906 Earthquake destroyed all but one with fires that were fueled by the alcohol within. The California Wine Association, which held a virtual monopoly over the industry, decided to consolidate and move to Point Molate in Richmond to build Winehaven -- the largest winery in the world.

Not to be left out of the wine business, Saint Mary's College had moved from San Francisco, to Oakland, and eventually to its present location of Moraga, and under the name Christian Brothers began its altar wine production at a vineyard they named Villa de La Salle in Martinez. It was a small money-making hobby until they realized that the wine was so good they decided to move Christian Brothers to Napa in order to step up production for commercial purposes.

"Beneath the Tangled Vines" contains mysteries that revolve around Chinese immigrants and secret underground tunnels; a cryptic message in a peculiar bone box; and a fortune in missing wine.

For more information about Dan Hanel visit: [danhanel.com](http://danhanel.com).

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[back](#)

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