

## Land sale keeps history alive

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The property surrounding the East Contra Costa Historical Society Museum includes this century-old house.

Merry Nail finally said her goodbyes to the home and land she's grown to cherish all her life, as she boxed up her belongings to move in temporarily with friends nearby.

Her home is adjacent to the home of her grandfather, James Alliance Nail, who bought it from Douglas Byer in 1922. Now known as the Byer-Nail House, the building was donated in 1986 to the East Contra Costa Historical Society by James' son, Clelland, and has since served as the Society's museum for all of far East County.

Situated on the remaining seven acres of the eight-acre property, next to the museum, her family's home and acreage was in an arduous, yearlong sale due to the family's tenacity of making sure it went to the right people.

The proud new owner is the City of Brentwood, which will work with the Historical Society to create uses that will help preserve the area's agricultural history. The city paid \$1.1 million for the property, the money coming from the Brentwood Agricultural Land Trust, established four years ago to preserve agricultural lands around Brentwood.



Photos by Rick Lemyre

**The East Contra Costa Historical Society will be able to better preserve the area's agricultural history with the help of the City of Brentwood, which has purchased the land next door to the Society's Byer-Nail House Museum, seen here.**

"We think it's a fantastic project, a spectacular idea," said Kathryn Lyddan, BALT's executive director. "The only reservation that the BALT board has is that the full amount comes out of

BALT funds."

Still, Lyddan said that BALT, which is funded primarily through fees paid to Brentwood by developers, was hoping to help develop the land as an Ag park.

"We're standing by, ready to help out at any point," she said.

The Ag park idea is exactly what the Nail family had in mind.

"We are so excited that it's going the way we wanted it to go," said Nail, 56, the middle grandchild of the five remaining. "We didn't want it to go to housing or a subdivision. We wanted it to be a testimonial to our grandfather and historians, to say, 'This is the way it used to be.'"

Her grandfather James acquired the property from his father, John Byer, who died in 1921 and parceled off the land, 37 acres at the time, among his six grandchildren. The home is about 50 years old.

"I believe the Fletchers built the house. There were Bartlett pears, Tokay grapes and an almond orchard," said Nail. "But our grandfather replanted the almond orchard, because there were too many problems with the pears and grapes."

She recalls living next door to her grandparents with fond memories.

"It was fun as a kid, because we could go over and visit our grandparents. My parents had instant babysitters with them," she said. "His second wife, Effie Nail, was the only grandmother I really knew, and she would give us M&Ms for getting her the newspaper."

Pat Bello, head docent at the museum, whose mother-in-law, Cremilde Bello, was an almond huller for James Nail, said she recalls a story her mom recorded on tape about her experiences with her employer.

"She said one time he paid her too much money and told Mr. Nail, in her broken Portuguese accent, there was a problem with her pay. He thought he didn't pay her enough, and when he found out he overpaid her, he told her she was such an honest woman," said Bello, of Knightsen.

Bello was a Girl Scout on the ranch, and is excited the remaining Nail property will remain intact.

"It means a lot to me, because they were a very nice family," she said.

Plans for the newly purchased home and seven-acre package are already in talks.

"We'll be meeting with the members of the Historical Society to see what might be possible for the property, and to see what the people in the community want to do with it," said Craig Bronzan, director of parks and recreation.

He said a community garden might be one option, because it's pretty easy to do.

"Maybe have demonstrations of how to grow things, I don't know. I'm just thinking short term here," he said. "We respect all the work the Historical Society has done out there so far, and I don't want to pre-determine it for them."

Granddaughter, Lorraine Visher, 53, a teacher who lives in Davis, recalls her fondest memory at a ranch where five generations of her family lived.

"In the spring he'd (Grandpa Nail) go out to a fig tree, hang up a rope with a plank for a swing, and I'd always look forward to that moment," said Visher. "I loved the ranch as a child."

She also recalls riding in almond boats behind the tractor, where a canvas was used to catch the nuts after the trees were shaken.

"We'd get to ride on top of those stacks of almonds, from age 4 to about 10 or 12," she added.

Busy most of his life running the almond ranch to support his family, James Nail died in 1984, but not before leaving behind a legacy – his home and his history.

"My grandfather wanted to see a museum in the community, so once he decided the home wasn't suitable for living in, and it became hard for him to manage, he donated it," said Visher. "It honored all of his beliefs and it honored the community."

Memoirs written by James Nail's only son, Clelland D. Nail, can be found at the East Contra Costa Historical Society & Museum, located at 3890 Sellers Ave. Hours are 2 to 4 p.m. every Saturday and third Sunday. A docent training session will take place on March 24. Contact Pat Bello at 625-3553.