

Do You Remember?



By Anne Homan

Gateways to Livermore

I have always been jealous of Pleasanton's arch—it looks so neat in the downtown area and so . . . Well, historic. Once upon a time, Livermore had two arches.

John Valperga and his partners, who worked in brick and concrete, received the contract in 1916 for building city gateways on street intersections at the Lincoln Highway (now Portola Avenue), one at L Street and one at First Street. The highway made a curve along what was then the north side of Livermore. The gateways were meant to attract traffic into Livermore streets from the highway.

Valperga and his workers built a massive brick pillar on either side of First Street. Each approximately ten-foot high by five-foot pillar had fancy work done with a darker color brick—a large diamond on the flat side facing town, three smaller diamonds on the sides, and on all the corner edges a detailing that looks like dovetailing in wood work. The side of the pillar facing the highway had an indented hollow space that held a concrete column with a large lighted globe on top. Two more pillars of the same design were built at the L Street intersection. Each pillar was mounted on a concrete base and had a concrete top.

An Oakland electrician added an electric sign for each gateway. Rising in turn from the L Street pillars and the First Street pillars were tall poles which supported a wire arch spanning the streets. Suspended from the wire was the word LIVERMORE made of eighteen-inch letters of galvanized iron outlined in incandescent bulbs. The county paid for the electricity for the globes in the pillars. Livermore paid for the electricity needed for the lighted

letters and for the pillars. The *Herald* said, "It is believed that the town will receive great benefit in advertising from these electric signs and from the entire lighting system." Everything was finished and in operation by the end of August 1916, and so Livermore had two arches.

The eastern pillar at the L Street intersection was next to the property of the Highway Garage. Frank H. Duarte had built the garage in 1915. Earl Duarte, Frank's son, remembered their many customers from traffic on the Lincoln Highway, "The garage was open seven days a week. No one could come from Oakland to here without car trouble. Cars weren't dependable. In the summertime with those small tires, they would have blowouts, and they'd have to get new tires." By 1925 Bernard Mourterot had bought the property next to the eastern pillar at the First Street intersection. He ran the Trevarno Auto Court and Service Station there. The vacuum cleaner repair shop is the remnant of the service station; the old cabins from the auto court are still behind it if you look carefully. Both the Highway Garage and Trevarno's sold gas under the Flying A logo. Gas sold for about 15 to 20 cents per gallon. Self service did not exist in those days—Bernard pumped the gas for every customer, cleaned the windshield, and checked the water, oil, and tires.

In 1931 and 1932 a controversy arose over the First Street pillars. Bernard Mourterot's son, Bernard, and young Bernard's wife, Clara, were running the service station and auto court by that time. They also added a small restaurant. They believed that the pillar by their property was impeding traffic and interfering with their business. They set off arguments between the county supervisors, the city

council, the Chamber of Commerce, and the county surveyor. Maitland Henry, publisher of the *Livermore Herald*, wrote an editorial urging, "Under the circumstances the only logical thing to do is for all parties concerned to meet together, exchange ideas and thrash the thing out." Ultimately, the pillar was taken down. When this was done, the arch with the letters spelling LIVERMORE must have been removed, as there was nothing to hold it up at one end. The galvanized iron letters were put in the city corporation yard, and eventually given to the scrap metal collection for creating guns, tanks, and ships for World War II. I have no idea what happened to its companion pillar, but perhaps it was also torn down at the same time. If not, it must have been taken down when two-lane First Street was widened.

When the new Highway 50 was built in 1949 where Interstate 580 is now, one-half mile north of Livermore, the problem of attracting the attention of drivers into Livermore was more difficult. The city paid to have a large neon arrow built on a metal framework atop the western L Street pillar. As Anita Gandolfo, who lived near it at Joesville, said, "It was a very ugly sign." Anita showed me an old photograph that has the new arrow visible with the old Livermore arch spanning L Street still in place. As the city of Livermore grew, it extended its limits northward, and the ugly arrow was no longer necessary. The city had it torn down along with the arch and both L Street pillars in February 1959. Does anyone remember these gateways? I have only seen them in black and white photos. I would like to know what color the pillars were.

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