

A Longtime Tenant Remembers El Centro

by Maureen “Mo” McFadden

About the author: McFadden is a published author, photographer and film producer. Her work has been seen in The Hollywood Reporter, On Location, Food & Home and Casa Magazine, among others. She co-produced Casey McGarry’s documentary “Grasshopper for Grandpa” about the history of Jimmy’s Oriental Gardens in 2014. She is owner of McFadden & McFadden P.R. which continues to represent an array of non-profit and entertainment clients.

El Centro has been exactly what the name implies—the center of Santa Barbara’s business activity for more than 150 years. The spot at 21-27 East Canon Perdido Street where the El Centro Building is located—between State and Anacapa on the north side of the street—was once at the center of our Chinatown. The significance of the name El Centro took on new meaning to me when I came across this fact since I’ve had my business there for twenty-three years.

Located on the second floor, my space was once the receptionist’s office for the law firm that took up all the space on the second and third floors when the building first opened in 1929. My business and I became a tenant of the El Centro Building in 1992. By then new walls had been added to make individual offices and suites out of the original floor plan. I landed a coveted office there because I had a freelance gig as press agent for the Lobero Theatre that turned into a fab ten-year adventure. It had its

The author at El Centro, by Paul Wellman.





The Chinese Joss House, formerly on the site of El Centro. Photo courtesy of the Santa Barbara Historical Museum.

offices in the building and so when this one came up, I grabbed it. Everything I needed was within walking distance—from the Post Office to the drug store to coffee joints to a State Park—throw in multiple lunch and dinner spots, topped off with the most important place in the ‘hood, Jimmy’s Oriental Gardens, for after work chilling.

There were always lots of lawyers in El Centro because it was so close to the Courthouse; Larry LaBorde, Jeff Daugherty, Channing Bates, and Charter Hughes are still there from when I moved in. John Lippincott, the landlord, had an office for his travel films. In the second floor lobby, an old safe still exists and the law firm of LaBorde & Daugherty uses it for file storage. Across from the safe is a conference room where the Video Doctor, Fred Winter, had his business for many years. Now



El Centro. Photo by David Jones.

we have an historian, a computer tech, a landscape architect, and a psychologist on my floor; and a natural products company on the third floor. On the ground floor around the back is Dr. James Rolfe, the dentist who gained attention for his Afghanistan Dental Relief; a travel agency was once where Sansum Clinic now is; and optometrist Larry Nordgaarden remains snug in the middle on the front of the building. As I'm rattling off the names of people who had/have offices here, I realize I don't know how many actual suites there are in El Centro. Where *Casa Magazine* is now, Patco Jewelers held court, followed by brief stints with Video Dreams, Fox 11, and the Lobero Stage Company. A few more entertainment related people moved in like Ted Baer, a show biz lawyer and Boxtales Theatre Company. We would meet occasionally in the hallways and exchange tidbits or talk about projects we were working on. We all looked out for each other.

At three stories tall, El Centro has three different entrances to the second floor—one is a private staircase to an office at the back of the building. Sheila Snow, a lawyer and mediator, has been back there for a long time. The office is complemented by a nice breezeway where CPA Dennis Iden's firm is located. There are side doors and you'll find a miniature gem in the closet-sized elevator at that entrance for access to the three floors (the smell of metal on metal in the lift took me back to memories of New York and Philly). El Centro originally housed a library and a gym with showers on the third floor as well; all converted to offices now, only traces of them remain.

Financed by the Demory Brothers, El Centro was designed by architects Edwards/Plunkett/Howell, and opened just before the start of the Great Depression in 1929.¹ The arches on El Centro complement those of the Lobero. While researching this story, I noticed a possible nod to the architecture of the Chinese Joss House that once stood here. The small second floor exterior balcony on El Centro resembles the full-length outdoor porch seen on the Joss House. It made me wonder if architect Henry Howell intentionally bowed to the history of the ancestors who came before.

Speaking of ancestors—while I was working late one night, my son Eli was with me. He was about eight years old. He went out to use the men's room and came back quickly. He asked me if there were any other people in the building. I said no, probably not, it was after working hours. I asked why. He said he saw a group of people back by the elevator talking and they were dressed in old-fashioned clothes. I asked if they



View from the author's office to the second-floor hallway. Photo by Michael Imwalle.

were menacing. He said no, they didn't seem to be bothered with or by him. I stuck my head out my office door, and saw no one. He never saw anything like that again but I have had psychics and those who can channel past lives tell me there are lots of ghosts here. With all the activity that's taken place in El Centro, it's no wonder.

When I moved in, John and Muriel Lippincott were the landlords. Both have passed away but their children still own the building. Bryan Lippincott, John's son who manages the building, told me, "My dad along with his father-in-law, Leonard Aker, purchased the building in 1948. It was considered a 'white elephant' at the time, using my father's term. Maybe because it wasn't on State

Street." Bryan added, "Even though she [the building] has got some wrinkles and age spots, 'The Grand Dame' has survived the last 86 years pretty well." Hard to think of this building as a white elephant now, as the Downtown Organization has really re-invigorated the "Downtown Corridor" and El Centro is in the zone.

Digging around the Santa Barbara's Historical Museum's Gledhill Library with the help of Michael Redmon was how I found out that El Centro sits where the Joss House did—the center point of Chinatown according to the Sanborn map of the time. All this time I thought the name reflected its central location in downtown today. There's always more to the story and this one has some great sequel potential. The powerful Chee Kung Tong inhabited the Chinese Masonic Temple, or Joss House, in the middle of the block. It also included substandard housing for Chinese laboring families. El Centro was built on the site after the Joss House burned down.²

When it opened in September of 1929, the mix of businesses was varied and included offices for the Santa Barbara Polo Club, The Santa Barbara

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This ad hangs framed in a hallway of El Centro. Note Henry Howell is listed as architect of note. Photo by Michael Imwalle.

Foundation, Santa Barbarans Inc., The Martinsen Library, and stores for gifts, lingerie, a corsetiere, dressmaker, locksmith, accountant, jeweler, real estate agents, tree surgeons, and lawyers. Heaney, Price & Postel—the predecessor to Price, Postel & Parma today—were on the second and third floors. And circling back to the beginning of the story, my office was once

the reception area for that firm, the center of activity for access to all levels from junior lawyers to the name partners.

Today's El Centro continues to host an eclectic mix of tenants just as it did when it opened and probably 150 years ago when the Chinese population chose this section of town for their own. Some things never change. It's like the energy at this spot just continues to spin and welcome—it was my destiny to land here at the center of El Centro.

NOTES

1. Rebecca Conard, Christopher Nelson and Mary Louise Days, *Santa Barbara: A Guide to El Pueblo Viejo* (Santa Barbara: Capra Press, 1986): 121.
2. *Santa Barbara: A Guide to El Pueblo Viejo*, 121. Linda Bentz, "From Canton to Canon Perdido: Chinese Fishermen of Santa Barbara," *Noticias of the Santa Barbara Historical Society* Vol. XLIV, No. 3 Autumn 1998: 80. Richard Piedmonte, "The Chinese Presidio Community," in *Santa Barbara Presidio Area, 1840 to the Present*, ed. Carl V. Harris, Jarrell C. Jackman and Catherine Rudolph. (Santa Barbara: University of California, Santa Barbara Public Historical Studies and the Santa Barbara Trust for Historic Preservation, 1993). 119 - 128.