

Published April 13th, 2022

The Town of Moraga was incorporated in 1974 and 'sealed' the deal in 1976

By Vera Kochan



Every town or city has a seal. It's basically a logo designed to include significant aspects of a municipality - symbolism relevant to its citizens. The seal is used on official stationary, business cards, websites, public buildings and more, but how many residents of any community really know what their seal visually represents, or in Moraga's case, the year-long debate that took place concerning the design and its ramifications.

In 1975, the year following the town's incorporation, the Seal Design Committee was led by Saint Mary's College librarian and Moraga historian Brother Dennis Goodman. Fellow committee members included Merle Gilliland, Barbara Gross, Geraldine Meyer, and Brother Jerome West.

What began as the search for something historically meaningful to display on the newly-incorporated town's logo, had turned into a hotly contested dispute to keep church and state separate. Standing in the middle of the brouhaha was SMC's iconic chapel building.

Many designs were in the running as evidenced by architect Gilliland's sketches. One that was quickly ruled out was that of a giant urn (such as the one in front of the Moraga Library), with "1974" in Roman numerals at the bottom. Six other "seals" of Moraga's more noteworthy symbols were also conceived by the committee: the Moraga Library; the Moraga Family Coat-of-Arms; the Hacienda de las Flores; the Moraga Adobe; Rancho Laguna de los Palos Colorados; and the SMC chapel. It was eventually pointed out that the Moraga Adobe now stands within Orinda's boundaries, and even though it is the oldest historical structure in the area bearing the name Moraga, it was not located in Moraga.

It was decided that the public should have the opportunity to vote on which choice they would approve. Rather than hold a costly special election, ballots were made available during two events. The first voting occasion came during a cocktail reception for then new Town Manager Gary Chase. The second occasion was made available at a town booth during Fiesta de Moraga.

After the voting results were compiled, SMC's chapel was the overwhelming front-runner with the Moraga Family Coat-of-Arms running a distant second. According to a newspaper article in the National Catholic Register (Aug. 17, 1975), "The first cries of dissension came only days after the official seal committee decided to recommend St. Mary's chapel to be used as the town's logo and shortly before the committee was to make their report to the council." One such objection came from a member of the design committee and was followed by other residents who felt that a religious building should not be a part of the town's logo. There were a flurry of letters to various newspapers of the day proclaiming either for or against the chapel. One letter noted that the entire state of California is dotted with cities bearing religious names: San Francisco, Santa Clara and St. Helena to name a very few. Another letter asked whether the SMC chapel could be considered as a landmark building with regards to the seal.

Not wanting to be part of any friction within the town, SMC's Director of Public Relations Michael R. Vernetti penned a letter to the editor of the local Lamorinda Sun newspaper stating, "Since Saint Mary's College has been the center of so much discussion recently concerning adoption of a Moraga Town Seal, we thought you might be interested in how we feel about the matter. We, of course, would be pleased and honored if the town council chose a design for the seal incorporating the chapel of Saint Mary's, but this is not to say the college is advocating adoption of the chapel seal." Vernetti added, "Support for this design has come entirely from people not associated with Saint Mary's. We feel that encouraging adoption of the chapel design would be improper and have not done so."

Working from the five remaining choices, the seal committee decided to take matters into their own hands. Gilliland, who was also a council member, pushed for the Rancho Laguna de los Palos Colorados (Ranch of the Lake of the Redwoods) depiction even though the lake no longer exists, but was historically located where Campolindo High School now stands. The redwoods, although non-existent with proximity to the lake, were conceptually borrowed from the Canyon area as that was part of the 1835 land grant belonging to rancher Joaquin Moraga. To add to the visual appeal of the seal, a setting sun was inserted into the background, presumably because Moraga's western mountain range was factually referred to as "poniente del sol" (west of the setting sun).

On July 21, 1976, in a 3-2 vote, Moraga Council Members William Combs, Merle Gilliland, and Barry Gross (in favor) with Michael Cory and Susan McNulty (against) passed a resolution to adopt the Rancho Laguna de los Palos Colorados as the official town seal. However, to this day there does seem to be a mysterious discrepancy regarding the actual style of the town seal.

In 1977, Goodman's notes revealed that "the style of lettering is used today to give an antique

Hispanic flavor to a publication." The town seal that citizens are accustomed to seeing on the current website, documents and buildings do not bear a Hispanic-flavored lettering. Also, earlier versions of the town seal have a decided look reminiscent of the 1970s with bright colors within an almost psychedelic-era graphic. Town documents show this seal in use at least through 1992, and Moraga Historical Society publications from the year 2002 also bear this rendition.

Lamorinda Weekly contacted several sources within the town and was met with surprise and bafflement at the thought that there was another seal design prior to the current one which showcases earth tones and a bold font of lettering. One explanation was that there needed to be a digital vector quality seal which can be scaled as large as possible without pixilating. Anyone with more information can email vera@lamorindaweekly.com.

Special thanks to Moraga Historical Society President Susan Sperry and Moraga Town Clerk Marty McInturf.



Reach the reporter at: vera@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA