CONTRA COSTA TIMES

Hometown Hero: Tireless volunteer refuses to let tiny West Contra Costa community be ignored

By Tom Lochner Contra Costa Times

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Bob Van Bibber, a community activist in Montalvin Manor, a small community near the Union Pacific Railway.

Montalvin Manor is a case study of the changing face of America's suburbs, and Bob Van Bibber has been a witness to most of its six decades of history, as well as a tireless advocate for the people who call it home.

The 66-year-old retired landfill bulldozer operator was 12 when his family moved in 1958 to what was then a mostly white, working-class community, where he hunted ducks, frequented the local teen center and attended family picnics in Montalvin Park.

Today, the unincorporated West Contra Costa community of about 3,000 people is among the most diverse in the county. Most of the families from the days when Van Bibber met his future wife in sixth grade at Montalvin School are gone, many of the houses bought by investors who turned them into rental properties.

"My folks lived here, her folks lived here, and we stayed over the years," Van Bibber said. "I felt it was a part of my life."

Montalvin Manor is a stone's throw from San Pablo Bay but separated by two sets of railroad tracks. One blocks the view of the bay and separates the neighborhood from the MonTaraBay community center it shares with two other communities; and along the

shore, tracks that carry Amtrak and freight trains also attract children bored by Montalvin's lack of recreational opportunities, with sometimes deadly results.

Sandwiched between the two railroad rights of way is a sliver of industrial property with a creek, across the Richmond city line. For more than a decade, Van Bibber prodded authorities to do something about the perennial flooding during wet weather near some low-lying houses on Lettia Road.

Years of finger-pointing among the county, Richmond, Union Pacific and Burlington Northern Santa Fe railroads and the private landowner culminated in a lawsuit by some homeowners against the county and a slew of cross-complaints among the other parties. Finally, a resolution appears at hand.

In September, a judge found that the flooding was the result of sediment buildup and vegetation in the creek channel and the neglect of the landowner, and ordered Point Pinole to clear the channel.

The decision likely was influenced, at least in part, by Van Bibber's testimony.

"When I was subpoenaed, they asked me if I had ever witnessed a trench between the two sets of railroad tracks," Van Bibber said. "I told them it was a drainage ditch to the bay, a trench about 15 to 20 feet wide, and I used to stand in there and hunt ducks as a young man."

Montalvin Manor has had its share of quality-of-life issues in recent decades. Graffiti, much of it gang-related, in public areas. Drug-dealing and vandalism in the park. Truckloads of trash and debris illegally dumped at night. Meanwhile, police protection, from a resource-depleted Contra Costa Sheriff's Office, has been sparse.

"For years and years, they were putting Montalvin on the back burner," Van Bibber said. "Montalvin needed help. The people needed help."

The situation took a turn for the better in 2001 when changing population patterns triggered a redrawing of county supervisorial boundaries that placed it in District 1, represented by John Gioia, of Richmond. In 2003, the county, at Gioia's initiative, formed the Montalvin Manor Redevelopment Project, with an advisory committee that included Van Bibber and four other residents.

Gioia knew Van Bibber from the late 1980s when Gioia was a pro bono lawyer for the Pinole-Hercules Little League. Van Bibber was a league official, and his two daughters were players.

"Bob was one of the active leaders," Gioia said. "He's always been a strong community activist, not just on behalf of streets and sidewalks, but on behalf of young people.

"When my district's boundaries changed, and included Montalvin Manor, I began to hear from him about problems in the community."

During Van Bibber's years with the advisory committee, the county launched a program to bring houses up to code and removed a barricade that had impeded sheriff's deputies from driving into the park. The county redevelopment agency rebuilt Kay Road, a major feeder road into the community; subsidized sidewalk repair; built a barrier fence along San Pablo Avenue; and replaced a play structure in the park that had been torched by vandals.

"He's a good fighter for the community, always has been," a neighbor, Doug Hastings, said of Van Bibber. "He gets involved and stays involved."

Van Bibber also lost some battles. One that stung was in the aftermath of the death of 11-year-old Ruben Anthony Torres, a sixth-grader at Montalvin School who was struck by a train and killed in 2006 as he crossed the Union Pacific tracks with his bicycle. Van Bibber and fellow resident John Bieth organized the drive to put up a memorial to Ruben in the park, but when Van Bibber additionally put up signs proclaiming Ruben Anthony Torres Park, the county balked.

"I was told to take them down or I'd get in trouble," Van Bibber said. "So I took the signs down, and I gave them to Ruben's mom and dad and grandparents.

"We all know in our hearts that this is Ruben's Park."

Contact Tom Lochner at 510-262-2760. Follow him at Twitter.com/tomlochner.

BOB VAN BIBBER

AGE: 66

HOMETOWN: Montalvin Manor

CLAIM TO FAME: Longtime community volunteer and leader

QUOTE: "I live in Montalvin. If I didn't have a love for it, I wouldn't be living here." Hometown Heroes, a partnership between Bay Area News Group-East Bay and Comcast, celebrates people in the Bay Area who make a difference in their communities. Read about a new Hometown Hero every other week and watch the program on Comcast On Demand at Channel One-Get Local-Hometown Heroes. Do you know a Hometown Hero? Let us know about the work they do at HometownHeroes@bayareanewsgroup.com.