

## Eugene de Sabla--and family

*by Marilou West Ficklin*

Eugene De Sabla, Jr. was called "Father of PG&E," "leader of the hydroelectric industry," "chief among leading capitalists of San Francisco"--and an "incorrigible promoter."<sup>1</sup>

His career in Nevada County has been addressed in earlier issues of the Bulletin and in the work of Dale Johnson.<sup>2</sup> This article concerns his family and personal life.

A biographer states: "Nothing in the early career of Eugene de Sabla predestined him for the field that became his life work"<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps. But his family history pointed the way. It is true De Sabla got off to a rough start--right here in Nevada County. As early as 1889 he and Alfonso Tregidgo started an ill-fated enterprise named the "Nevada County Development and Improvement Company." Its stated purpose was to "develop mines" and to "light towns and cities with electric lights."<sup>4</sup> It offered \$1,000,000 in shares of stock; Eugene bought one share at \$10. The company was not a success. Three years later they incorporated under a different name, "The Nevada County Electric Power Company" and made history.<sup>5</sup>



De Sabla traveled all over the county struggling to sell company bonds to local mining interests. Then he went to San Francisco looking for investors. In his own words: "I rang every doorbell in San Francisco's financial district." He then personally canvassed the territory for potential customers.

Success was hard-earned. It required vision, energy and determination in the face of obstacles like flooding on the Yuba and the depression of 1893.

### Family History

Eugene's story, however, is not a tale of rags to riches. The de Sablas were both privileged and accomplished--for the most part. Yet Eugene was a man driven by an internal work ethic.

On learning he would not inherit from a distant relative, he wrote:

"...as for myself I might have had an attack of heart failure to have gotten something without working for it."

He showed disdain for money spent but not earned:

"I am glad Jack got something--by Jove--how he will enjoy himself while it lasts."

De Sabla's great grandparents blessed with wealth and perhaps nobility, lost all in the French Revolution. His grandfather left of legacy in public works and engineering. His ancestors surely contributed some very strong genes. He was six-foot tall, muscular, handsome and had a winning sense of humor--or so it is said.

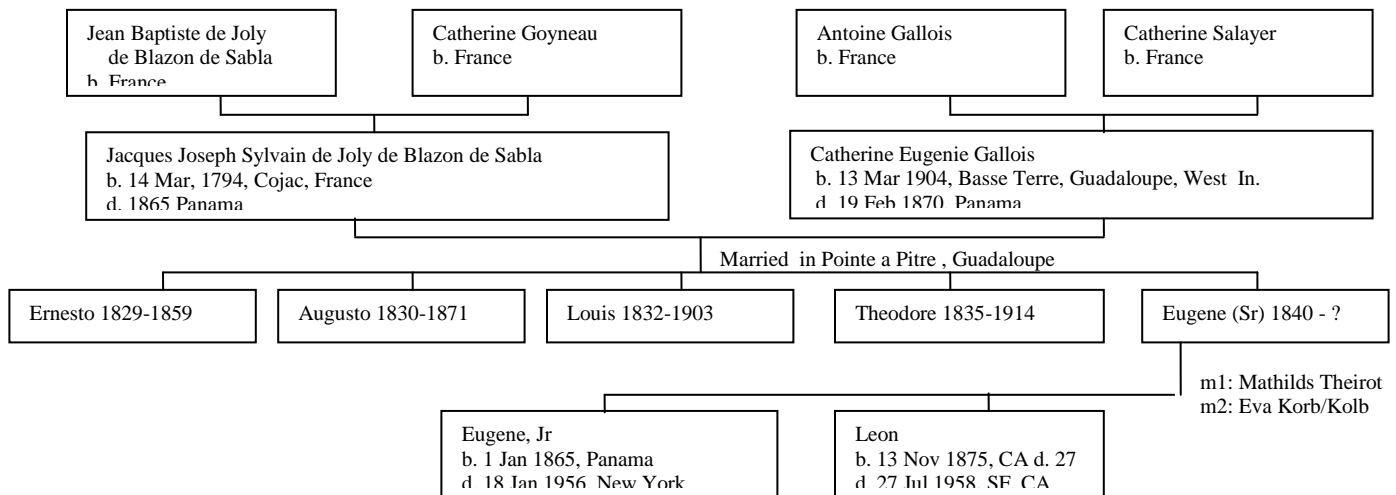
Published articles perpetuate many legends without much proof. Family records are archived at the Library of Congress. Eugene's line from his great grandparents is shown on the next page.<sup>6</sup>

Now for the legends:

According to family tradition the head of the family was a Marquis exiled from France during the French Revolution. Forced into exile, they lost their fortune and the lands they had been granted as reward for valor.

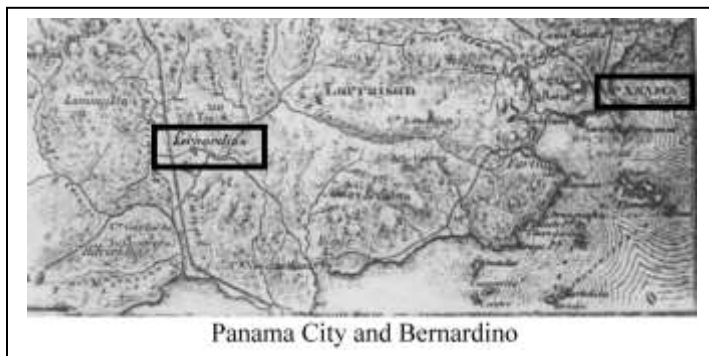
Jean Baptist had been in charge of the Tuileries when the Bastille was stormed in 1789. He fled with his Family to Martinique in the West Indies. Records show that his son Jacques Joseph Sylvan (called Sylvan by family) settled in Guadeloupe. He was a soldier in the 100 days' service under Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte.<sup>7</sup> The maternal grandfather, Antoine Gallois, was Captain

## Ancestors of Eugene de Sabla, Jr.



of Grenadiers 66th "demi brigade de lejne," Army de Guadeloupe. The grandparents married at Pointe a Pitre, Guadeloupe where four of their five sons were born. In the 1840s the emigrated to Panama where Eugene's father was born.<sup>8</sup>

By 1843 they acquired over a thousand acres at Bernardino 25 miles from Panama City. Sylvan operated a bakery. He made an unsuccessful attempt to organize a French company to build a canal and railroad across Panama.<sup>9</sup>



### Theodore de Sabla

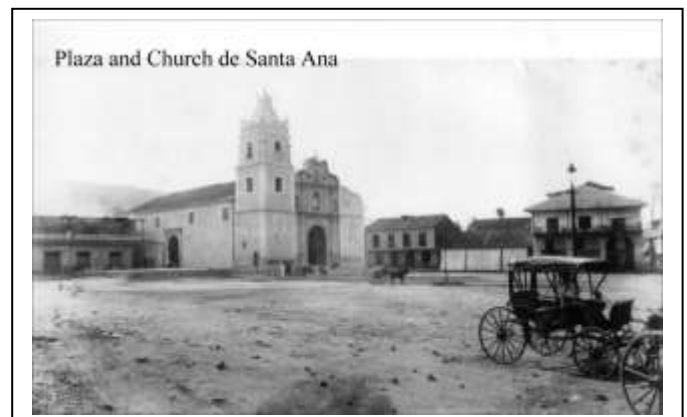
Panama was part of New Granada whose capital was in Bogota, Colombia. The gold rush of '49 made a railroad across Panama essential. In the end it was U.S. capital The events of April 15, 1856 thrust Sylvan's son, Theodore, into the midst of a disaster. He was serving as aide to the U.S. Consul when a drunken, pistol-packing Yankee rail passenger stole fruit from a vendor. What started as a dispute between a knife-wielding onlooker and the Yankee quickly became a riot.

Unfortunately there was a handful of armed Filibusters stranded in town on their way to join General Walker in his invasion of Costa Rica. They eagerly joined the ruckus. Soon the passengers at the depot armed themselves too.

Theodore went to fetch the Vice-Governor to re-establish order. Two angry groups faced off at the depot. Theodore dismounted and walked forward to appease the group--and pave the way for the governor. Some say he shouted in English to calm the tempers of the Yankees. Shots were fired.

Theodore was struck by three balls; one lodged in his thigh, another hit above his knee and the third went through his jacket.<sup>10</sup> The violence escalated. A larger mob gathered at the Plaza of Santa Ana and revolutionaries entered the fray.

By morning the violence was over. The U.S. State Department demanded retribution. President Pierce sent a special commissioner to investigate the cause of the riot and identify the culprits. Depositions were taken. The newspapers around the world carried the news.



Theodore testified several times--denying he shouted a warning in English--he spoke fluent French, Spanish and English. But he did not take sides--stating that he could not identify the source of the gunfire that wounded him. He did not believe he had been intentionally fired on--it was an accident. Given his status as both a resident of Panama and an employee of the Consulate, he must have felt divided loyalties.

The Commissioner reported that the black vendors were entirely to blame and the government of Panama was inadequate to control the population. He recommended the "immediate occupancy of the Isthmus from ocean to ocean by the United States...."

It was a black period in U.S.-Panama relations. The issue was brought before the U.S. Congress and a claims commission set up. Passengers and property owning Panamanians (like the de Sablas) filed claims against Columbia for losses.

Theodore became Vice-Consul in September 1856 and Consul to Ecuador in Panama in 1861. Theodore helped promote the Central and South American Cable Co. of which he was a Director. In 1878 the French once again conceived a canal across the Isthmus. Theodore became New York representative of the French Canal Company in 1882. Theodore then emigrated to New York where he married.

### **Birth of Eugene De Sabla, Jr.**

Eugene was born in Panama in 1865--the year his grandfather died.<sup>11</sup> Five years later his grandmother also died. The de Sabla boys were leaving Panama for the U.S. Eugene, Sr. emigrated to California by 1870.<sup>12</sup> Eugene's brother, Leon, was born in 1876.<sup>13</sup> By 1880 the family was boarding in a house on Hyde Street in San Francisco. Eugene Sr. was in the real estate business.<sup>14</sup>

Eugene, Jr. graduated from what is now Lowell High School in San Francisco in 1883.<sup>15</sup> He turned down a University education and opted for a practical course in assaying and surveying. He then went to Arizona to work in a copper mine in which his father had an interest. It is said Eugene worked for \$1 a day. He began to show his competitive nature: supposedly he got into a friendly wrestling match in which he and his opponent both accidentally fell down a well.<sup>16</sup>

While Eugene was in Arizona, his mother went to New York where she died 29 September 1885. She left about \$30,000 and the Hyde Street home to Eugene and Leon. She also left a small sum to her brother and sister in New York.<sup>17</sup>

The mine closed and Eugene returned to California where he joined his father's import business in 1886. In 1887 his father remarried. The woman's name: Eva Korb/Kolb and she was only four years older than

Eugene--about the same age as Eugene's wife.<sup>18</sup> It would not be a happy situation for young Eugene.

The next year, 1888, Eugene married an older woman, Mrs. Laura Russell (nee Pearkes). She already had daughter, Charlotte (born in Guatemala). In July 1889 Laura gave birth the Eugene's daughter, Vera.<sup>19</sup>

In the same year--1889--Eugene incorporated his short-lived Nevada Improvement Company in Nevada County. His father had made Eugene a partner to run his import business. The father had large holdings in Panama and Guatemala and spent much of his time away from San Francisco. When the financial panic struck in 1893, Eugene dissolved his father's business against the advice of his father's friends. Conflict between father and son may have begun at this time.

The depression of 1893 had hurt Eugene's new company as well. He was actively seeking funds in those days. Had Eugene, Sr. invested in his son's company? In 1894 his Nevada County Electric Power Company filed papers to create bonded indebtedness and transfer the company place of business from Grass Valley to San Francisco. On that document E. J. de Sabla, Jr. invested in 3,405 shares while "E. J. de Sabla, Trustee," invested in 1,250 shares. Was the second person the father?

It has been suggested that Eugene and his family lived at Prospect Hill in Nevada City when electric lights were first turned on in 1896.<sup>20</sup>

A second daughter, Leontina, was born to Eugene and Laura in August 1897. The Lake Vera project completed in 1898 was named for their first daughter. By 1900 the de Sablas lived in a mansion on California Street.<sup>21</sup> In 1901 Eugene became Vice President of the newly created California Gas and Electric Company along with his partner John Martin.

Meanwhile family interests back in Panama were suffering, especially with respect to the land in Bernardino. The French canal proposal having failed, the U.S. under President Theodore Roosevelt moved ahead with its plan to build and control the canal. Unable to conclude a treaty with Colombia, Roosevelt moved warships to Panama as a show of force in support of a revolt by Panama.

It is not clear where Eugene's loyalties lay. He had not yet become a citizen of the U.S. His friend or business associate in Panama wrote Eugene a letter dated January 17, 1902.

Dear Sabla

What the devil am I to say to you in reply to your inquiry whether you should come out here now. You know, or should, perfectly well what has been going on here--also that our political unpleasantness is by no means settled, that this city is so to say on the eve of being fought for again, that anyone having a dime to lose is losing it, that smallpox has been encouraged to take up an abiding abode hereabouts and what not?...You are not likely [---] in the battle of the canals now going on in U.S. Senate and I dare say you are as

satisfied as I am that Panama will win eventually. Of course no definite decision can be arrived at. U.S. must be able to treat and close with an authorized power in Colombia--therefore peace in this Republic is an essential for an early solution of the problem that concerns us so closely.

My opinion is that, if you are able to, you should commence to be prepared to build up Santo Domingo etc etc. as canal matters take definite shape. To sell your belongings here would be to deprive yourself and family of an extraordinary permanent income. I would recommend your converting the ruins into decent second class apartments which will have great demand. I in your place would break into the yard of the Bakery and throw the whole thing into one \$12 to \$15,000 [----]. Gold invested will yield you, if I am not a cabbage head, \$18,000 per [----]. I give you the foregoing advice early. See to your arrangements early if you propose to give any heed to my views. Don't waste time forking around for a buyer of the property at such figures as you will dream of if canal question is settled.

Mrs. Brandon sends her best regards to Madam and yourself--so do I. Very happy 1902 to you all.

Yours sincerely, D.W. Brandon.

Panama revolted against Colombia in 1902. The U.S. Senate ratified Roosevelt's treaty with the new Republic of Panama and canal construction began. The de Sablas' Bernardino fell victim to the project. Theodore de Sabla was by then its sole owner. He pursued litigation against the U.S. until his death after which his widow, Marguerite, took up the cause. Years of litigation put her name in the annals of international law.<sup>22</sup>

By 1904 Eugene was famous and very rich. Pacific Gas and Electric was created in 1905. He was called "one of the heaviest capitalists in the metropolis." When his stepdaughter, Charlotte, married, the City newspapers covered the wedding in intricate detail. The press just couldn't get enough of the de Sabla lifestyle.

Then came dawn April 18, 1906--and the break on the San Andreas Fault. It ruptured the water lines and the PG&E gas infrastructure in San Francisco. Fire destroyed the already ruined downtown. Within hours Eugene and other officers walked through the wreckage.

They immediately got to work on reconstruction, but unfortunately the company did not have sufficient funds to do the work. It faced receivership. However it had a new President, Frank Drum, who refused to allow it. Instead he recommended that the directors each be assessed \$10 per share of stock to raise the necessary funds. De Sabla let his assessment become delinquent. His share was sold publicly and the funds deposited in the company treasury. He suffered great financial loss. As usual he recovered.

In the year after the quake Eugene seemed preoccupied with family matters. He believed his stepmother was bilking his father out of his fortune. A rift grew between father and son. It appears that as Eugene grew wealthier and more powerful, his father's wealth declined. The situation pained Eugene

considerably. He turned to his Uncle Theodore. In October 1907 he wrote:<sup>23</sup>

My dear Uncle Theodore

...In regard to my father, I don't know what to say. He is completely under the thumb of his wife, who has from the time he married her done her best to make trouble between us; I have, and so has Laura put up with all kinds of nonsense from them both, but during this last visit it got to a point that I had to tell my father that altho. He personally would be always welcome at my house I preferred to break off any acquaintance with his wife and did not care to have her come to my house or have anything to do with my family. My father had already then been here about a month and had made no effort to call at my house or see my wife and children--all this at the bidding of his wife who has him completely under control; naturally he did not like the position I took and left without seeing his grandchildren and probably never will see them as long as his wife is on top of the earth. Life is too blamed short to be quarreling so it is better to quit knowing people with whom you cannot get along--don you think so? Have you ever seen Mrs. DeS?

In regard to the financial condition of my father--I do not think it is good. I think his plantation is in his wife's name, but I don't know positively--for he is very reticent--with me about his affairs. He owes Leon a large sum but the poor devil can't get anything if it were not for me. I don't know where the boy would be; I have made some money for him and have given him a good position in my office here--so that he is now getting to know something and will be able to look out for himself all right after a while. Leon says "I start to talk to the old man about paying me something on account--if interest or principal due me and he starts talking about Eva, so that to quit hearing about Eva I stop asking for any money."

I spoke to him about your indebtedness when he was here, but got no satisfaction--he [states it was a personal affair of his etc.

The long and short of it is he hasn't any money of his own--at least I don't think he has--and whatever assets he has now belong to his wife.

I have written you, my dear Uncle, at length and rather freely expressed myself on tender subjects--so naturally would not care to have any of my surmises or remarks quoted.<sup>24</sup>

I hope you're all well; I had thought of going to New York this fall, but have too much yet to do to get away--maybe able to next year. The children are fine and well -- Laura joins me in love to Aunt Marguerite Joly and yourself.

Your affectionate nephew,

Eugene

About this time the de Sablas purchased an estate in Hillsboro named "El Cerrito." Nine servants helped them live the opulent life: Head butler, butler, governess, chambermaid, housemaid, maid, house boy, laundry boy, cook.<sup>25</sup> They constructed a Japanese Tea Garden on the grounds (now on the National Register of Historic Places). They paid \$150,000 for an additional twelve acres so as to construct a chain of decorative lakes on the property. But the man who made his money developing water resources spent \$50,000 drilling but could find no water for his lakes.

The press continued its fascination with the de Sablas. On February 22, 1912 the front page of the Examiner ran a 3-column photo of Mrs. Eugene de Sabla under the headline: De Sabla Jewels Worth \$75,000 are Stolen at

Mardi Gras. A thief stole the jewels from Mrs. De Sabla's room at the Palace Hotel while she slept and Eugene partied in the ballroom downstairs. The reporter devoted six columns to the jewelry and gowns of the de Sabla women (Laura, Vera and Charlotte) and only one to the detectives trying to solve the case.<sup>26</sup>



On another occasion the de Sablas were in a collision. The news reported that though the de Sablas were not injured, Mrs. de Sabla fainted from fright. It then mentioned that the two men in the other vehicle were thrown onto the highway and one was not expected to survive. The coachman picked the man up from the pavement and hailed a passing car to take him to the hospital--woman in that car also fainted.<sup>27</sup>

By 1913 Eugene was well into the next phase of his business life: he was now president of General Petroleum Company. California crude had been under development for some years and PG&E had begun in 1906 to use petroleum in addition to hydroelectric power to fire boilers for its steam plants. General Petroleum had named a 6,000-ton vessel for Eugene. (The de Sabla was torpedoed by a German submarine in 1915.)

Herbert Hoover and a shareholder of General Petroleum named Weir registered a company called "Inter-California Ltd." in London in 1912. Their objective was to acquire and operate oil and mining properties in California. It purchased Continental Oil Company but then sold out to de Sabla's General Petroleum which had an option to buy Union Oil.

On February 1, 1913 the *San Francisco Call* reported that de Sabla denied any action on General Petroleum's option to buy Union Oil.<sup>28</sup> On October 31, 1913 de Sabla cabled stockholders that a British syndicate had organized a holding company to control General Petroleum and Union Oil.<sup>29</sup> Hoover and Weir (a shareholder in General Petroleum) took over General Petroleum and its option on Union in 1914.<sup>30</sup> (General Petroleum was eventually absorbed by Standard Oil.)

On October 21, 1914, Uncle Theodore de Sabla passed away in New York. Meanwhile Eugene's father had also passed away leaving his wife, Eugene's stepmother, Eva, a widow. Eva moved to Carmel-by-the-sea where she was elected to the city council and then served as the first female mayor. She lived out her life with her spinster sister and bachelor brother. (She died in San Juan Bautista in 1948.)<sup>31</sup>

Eugene faced bankruptcy in 1917 but ended up in U.S. District Court. Creditors of Northern Electric petitioned to have de Sabla declared bankrupt. One of the creditors was the Bank of Italy (now Bank of America). De Sabla offered a compromise but it was not accepted. Opponents accused de Sabla and Northern Electric of collusion and insisted in taking the case to U.S. District Court.<sup>32</sup>

On Halloween in 1922 the Electric Development League of San Francisco held a "Pioneer Day" at the Palace Hotel. Eugene was to be one of the honored guests. He did not attend.<sup>33</sup>

Eugene lived a very long life. Sometime between 1914 and 1920 he had become a citizen of the U.S. and registered to vote.<sup>34</sup> He remained in California until he was 88 years old then moved to New York, where he died at age 91 in 1956.

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Photo Credits:

Photo of E.J. de Sabla: *Modern San Francisco and the Men of To-day, 1905-1906* (San Francisco: Western Press Association, 1906) p. 73

Panama City Map: H. Tiedemann, Civil Engineer (New York: 1851) Copy at Bancroft Library, U.C. California, Berkeley.

Plaza and Church of Santa Ana: W.H. Fletcher Collection, ©California History Section, California State Library.

Photo of Mrs. Eugene J. de Sabla: *San Francisco Examiner*, February 22, 1912, pp. 1 and 2.

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Endnotes: (if desired--especially: 2,4,6,8,10,12,14,17,21,25,31)

<sup>1</sup> *Modern San Francisco and the Men of To-day, 1905-1906* (San Francisco: Western Press Association, 1906) p. 73; "State Electric Work Honored," *S.F. Chronicle*, Oct. 31, 1922, p. 7, col. 2.

<sup>2</sup> See Bulletins: Doris Foley, 23:5,6; Dale Johnson, 55:3 and "The Nevada 'Rome' Powerhouse and the Birth of



- PG&E," at :  
www.restorecalifornia.net/yuba\_powerhouse.html
- <sup>3</sup> Axel Gravender, "The Trail, " *The Union*, Jan. 28, 1956. citing Charles Coleman, *PGE of California* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1952 )
  - <sup>4</sup> Incorporation Papers (N55) filed in Nevada County 1889, copies archived at Searls Historical Library.
  - <sup>5</sup> Incorporation Papers (N65,66).
  - <sup>6</sup> Panama Civil Death Certificates; Civil Marriage Certificate, Pointe a Pitre, Gaudaloupe; Civil Birth Certificate for Catherine, Basse Terre, Gaudaloupe. Original documents archived at Library of Congress, Collection of the Canal Zone Library-Museum, de Sabla Family, Personal Papers 1804-1977, Box 2
  - <sup>7</sup> The location of 'Cojac' not determined. May be near Nerac, in the Province of Lot et Garonne in the south of France. Or it might have been in the French West Indies.
  - <sup>8</sup> Estate papers of Catherine Eugenie de Joly de Blazon de Sabla, Nov. 16, 1870, French Consulate, Panama..
  - <sup>9</sup> "Colorful Eugene de Sabla Builds a Utility," *PGE Progress*, April 1976, p. 8.
  - <sup>10</sup> Deposition of Theodore de Sabla, aide to Consul Ward, in "The Panama Massacre, a collection of principal evidence," pp. 34-35, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
  - <sup>11</sup> Age is given as "2 days short of 91" when he died Jan. 18, 1956.
  - <sup>12</sup> Estate of Catherine de Sabla, op. cit. states that son Eugene is married and residing in San Francisco.
  - <sup>13</sup> Leon b. 13 Nov 1875, CA, d 27 Jul 1958, San Francisco California Death Index as displayed at Ancestry.com.
  - <sup>14</sup> U.S. Census, 1880, City and County of San Francisco, 6th ward, NARA Microfilm T9-0074, p. 735A, displayed at Ancestry.com.
  - <sup>15</sup> Lowell alumni webpage  
www.lowellalumni.org/history\_19century.shtml
  - <sup>16</sup> "Colorful Eugene de Sabla Builds a Utility," *op. cit.*
  - <sup>17</sup> "Mrs. De Sabla's Last Will," *San Francisco Call*, May 24, 1888, 3:4.
  - <sup>18</sup> Marriage record of Eugene Sabla [Sr.], 3 Sept 1887, Solano, County, CA, International Genealogical Index, LDS Family History Library. Birth record from California Death Index as displayed at Ancestry.com.
  - <sup>19</sup> S.F. Directory 1889-1891.
  - <sup>20</sup> Axel Gravender, "The Trail," *The Union*, Feb. 4, 1956.
  - <sup>21</sup> 1900 U.S. Census, San Francisco County, Vol. 33, ED. 202, Sh 9, line 70, NARA Microfilm
  - <sup>22</sup> de Sabla v. U.S. De Sabla Family personal papers and letters, Collection of Canal Zone Library, op. cit.
  - <sup>23</sup> De Sabla Family personal papers and letters, Collection of Canal Zone Library, op. cit.
  - <sup>24</sup> With sincere apologies to Eugene, I print his words here because they are already public record donated by family to the Canal Museum years ago.
  - <sup>25</sup> 1910 U.S. Census, San Mateo County, CA, Township 2, Vol. 106, ED 53. p. 20b, NARA Microfilm T624.
  - <sup>26</sup> *San Francisco Examiner*, February 22, 1912, pp. 1 and 2.
  - <sup>27</sup> "De Sablas in Motor Crash, *San Francisco Examiner*, December 28, 1914, 3:3.
  - <sup>28</sup> "De Sabla Denies Trip Concerned Option on Union," *San Francisco Call*, February 1, 1913, 1:5.
  - <sup>29</sup> "New Petroleum Factor," *New York Times, Online Edition*, 31 October, 1913.
  - <sup>30</sup> Walter W. Liggett, *The Rise of Herbert Hoover* (New York: Read Books, 2007) p. 186.
  - <sup>31</sup> 1920 U.S. Federal Census, Monterey County, Vol 72, ED. 15, Sh. 2, line 23, NARA Microfilm 733, Reel 122; also obituary *Hollister Advance*; Jan. 9, 1948, p.1.
  - <sup>32</sup> "Bankruptcy of de Sabla is opposed," *San Francisco Examiner*, October 14, 1917, 6:1.
  - <sup>33</sup> "State Electric Work Honored," *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 31, 1922, 7:2.
  - <sup>34</sup> "De Sabla, Eugene Joly, Jr, Merchant, Republican," Great Register of Voters, California 1914-1920, Hillsborough, San Mateo County, California State Library Microfilm, 1986.