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Oroville Chronology 2020

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MERCURY-REGISTER

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PHOTO BY CARIN DORGHALLI — ENTERPRISE-RECORD

Fires lead to local state of emergency

Oroville Mercury News

The local emergency allowed the city to request financial assistance from federal and state agencies, including the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the Governor's Office of Emergency Services.

CARIN DORGHALI — ENTERPRISE-RECORD

Of major concern was the ash from the North West Complex Zone fires which significantly impacted the city's drainage collection

system. The ash turned to a thick sludge that threatened to clog pipes and the potential to cause flooding when the rain returns. The

"We were already strug-

The city of Oroville, along

— *Bill LaGrone, city administrator*

The estimated cost for the necessary expansion to support new housing and those displaced by recent fires was approximately \$100 million. This expansion would have normally taken place over years and decades. However, due to the sudden increase load on the plant, it was determined the full expansion must occur within the next few years.

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CHRONOLOGY

Beautiful restoration has State Theatre shining anew

By Kyra Gottesman

OROVILLE » While the front doors of the State Theatre were shuttered for 2020 it was anything but quiet inside where major renovations proceeded unhindered by the pandemic.

During the summer Bay Area restoration artist Beate Brühl restored the original paint scheme on the ceiling as well as medallions that separate the lobby columns inside the historic theatre's lobby. The previous summer Brühl restored the 1930's-era lobby mural depicting a waterfall flowing into a pool, a lady sitting with a basket of fruit and an olive branch. In the center is another figure of a woman with her arms lifted and three doves flying above. In the bottom right hand corner is a miner panning for gold.

While ceiling restoration was in process Paul Ivazes, owner of Quality Lighting, in Grass Valley, and his son Wesley Ivazes installed replicas of the former movie palaces original 10 chandeliers and four matching wall scones.



KYRA GOTTESMAN —MERCURY-REGISTER

Paul Ivazes, owner of Quality Lighting in Grass Valley, installs one of the new chandeliers in the lobby of the State Theatre.

Earlier in the year when it became apparent that traditional graduation and awards ceremonies would have to be cancelled, the State Theatre Arts Guild decided to honor all local junior high and high school graduates, Fellows Club Top 10 scholars and members of the Las Plumas/Oroville high School Alliance Band

by putting their names in lights on the theatre's new marquee.

The names of the students scrolled on the marquee 24/7 and caught the attention of CNN. The cable news network featured the theatre with the students' names on the marquee in a special on unique ways towns across the country were celebrating graduates in the midst of COVID-19.

Dave Calendine, chairman of the American Theatre Organ Society, made a detour on west coast trip from his home in Detroit to pay a visit to the theatre where he seated himself on the bench at the Mighty Wurlitzer and played a few tunes including the Beatles' "When I'm 64."

"Oh she's a beauty, a wonderful organ and this is a great room. There's great sound in here. Theatre organs are rare. It's wonderful Oroville has this venue," said Calendine.

By the end of 2020 solar panels had been installed on the theatre's roof and the sales of the theatre by the city to STAGE was in escrow.

CHRONOLOGY

Business owners vow to stay open

By Kyra Gottesman

OROVILLE » More than 100 local business owners and community members packed into the patio at Mike's Grande Burger in mid-September to show "a united front" in protesting the state's orders prohibiting indoor operations particularly for restaurants due to COVID-19.

"The City of Oroville will not enforce the (state's) orders," said Mayor Chuck Reynolds to rousing applause by those in attendance.

In addition to the local business owners the meeting also drew state and local politicians including Dave Pittman, Oroville City Councilman; Bill Connelly, Butte County Supervisor; and Assemblyman James Gallagher, CA Third District.

Levi Fuller, son of Mike's Grande Burger owner, Mike Fuller, said he called the meeting for all business owners who were "on the same page about opening up" their businesses.

Standing in front of an unmasked crowd that

filled the restaurant's patio to overflowing, Fuller said reopening businesses including restaurants and others like salons and barbershops was not "about money. It's about freedom of choice and hard-working Americans making a living."

The over-riding theme of the meeting was a call to all business especially restaurants to reopen for indoor operations and for those businesses to "stand strong together" against "the state" and Governor Newsom.

Gallagher said rules governing the people are supposed to be made by the peoples' representative and "not by executive edict by one man." And when the government "ceases" to represent the people the people "have the right to withdraw their consent."

"No more, man. Go ahead and open up. Nobody needs permission. It's your right and liberty bestowed by God. Open up in doors it's the right thing to do," Gallagher said, receiving a standing ovation.

Jill LaMalfa, represent-

ing her husband Congressman Doug LaMalfa, told the crowd she and her husband were "proud" of them and hoped Chico businesses would follow suit because Oroville was a "hell of an example."

While Connelly said he couldn't give permission for businesses to defy state COVID-19 protection mandates he told the crowd that "we are sliding down the slope to socialism" and that he "had their back."

Dave Pittman, Oroville City councilman, invited any business owners who had to meet with any state officials regarding reopening to just call him and he would make a meeting room at City Hall available to them.

"I don't want to see (the state) terrorizing your business," he said.

Reynolds told the crowd to "expect the governor to be vindictive" toward them.

"You're heading into an area where you'll be doing gangster stuff. Don't be weak. It's heartwarming to see the community stand together like this," said the mayor.

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CHRONOLOGY

Seniors make the most of graduation

By Kyra Gottesman

OROVILLE » The excitement was palpable among Oroville High and Las Plumas High schools' 398 seniors in the spring despite the unusual configuration of the 2020 graduation ceremonies.

With the only way to keep students, family and faculty safe and follow COVID-19 guidelines and restrictions both schools opted to host drive through ceremonies.

From the Municipal Auditorium to Centennial Park, Rhine Memorial Drive was lined with vehicles decked out in congratulatory banners, signs, streamers and balloons as graduates sat inside with their families waiting their turn to receive their diplomas at the respective ceremonies.

"We're just really excited to honor and celebrate these seniors. We want this to be a positive experience for them despite the circumstances. We just want to really recognize them and let them know how proud we are of them for all the work they've done over the last 13 years to get here today," said Cristi Tellechea, Oroville High

"We just want to really recognize them and let them know how proud we are of them for all the work they've done ... to get here today."

— Cristi Tellechea

principal.

A video of the Oroville High ceremony along with the prerecorded speeches of 2020 valedictorians Belle Custodio and Forrest Wong was compiled and available for download from the school's website following the graduation.

There were six valedictorians among Las Plumas' 198 graduating seniors including Anneke Harrison, Halle Hemmery, Taylor Richter, Tucker Friberg, Madison McCallough and Kylee Potes. The 2020 class also had four salutatorians including Arthur Jackson, Lucas Musler, Michael Chue and Ariel Xiong.

After the graduates accepted diplomas, they proceeded to a stage decorated with flowers and flags that was specifically set up in front of the park's large arbor for the occasion. There they could stand to have their photos taken by family mem-

bers sitting in their vehicles.

From the stage the individual graduates proceeded to an area where they had their photos taken by a professional photographer.

All the speeches that would normally take place at a Las Plumas' graduation were pre-recorded and compiled into a video for graduates and their families.

"We thought it would be a nice thing to do for the seniors and so we talked to Dean (Gurr, owner of Creative Imaging) about it and he's going to put the whole thing together," said Dan Ramos, Las Plumas principal. "We will notify parents when it's ready and there will be a link to the video on our website. The graduates and their families can download and they don't need to pay anything. We'll leave up for five years."



Sitting with her family in the bed of their truck, graduate Leslie Eleazer waits in line for her diploma at Oroville High School's drive-through graduation Friday.

KYRA GOTTESMAN
— MERCURY-REGISTER

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CHRONOLOGY

DOJ finds inequity in local school district

By Kyra Gottesman

SACRAMENTO » In late August the office of California Attorney General Xavier Becerra issued a press release announcing an investigation by the Department of Justice had determined the Oroville City Elementary School District and the Oroville Union High School District had discriminated against Black, Native American and disabled students.

The release also announced the Department of Justice and both districts had reached a settlement to take “significant corrective action” which included incorporating a five-year plan with the help of state monitors and proper training to school staff members to guarantee equal treatment of students in a safe learning environment.

The DOJ’s investigation which began in May 2019 found both school districts “failed to adequately respond to complaints of discrimination and harassment, including the use of racial slurs against students of color.”

Within OCESD, the DOJ found between 2016-2019 Black students were suspended at a rate 18 times the statewide average. Middle school students with disabilities were punished twice as many days as non-disabled students.

According to court documents the investigation found that within Oroville elementary schools, Black students were punished 27.3 percent more than white students. Within middle schools, Black students reported for “threatening or causing injury” would be punished 49.6 percent more rate of days than white students for a similar issue.

The investigation revealed staff members at one of the district’s middle schools would target Black students for harsher discipline than white students. Racial slurs and derogatory terms were also identified as problems.

Suspensions were also higher within the district. In California, about 12 days of school are lost to suspension per 100 students on average. In OCESD, the average student in elementary

“The Oroville Union High School District strives to provide an excellent education to all students. We are committed to working with the state’s Monitor to improve our practices, increase staff training, and modify our student discipline practices, and assure every student will know we take seriously our equity and achievement.”

— OUHSD Superintendent Corey Willenberg

school was suspended “two to three times that rate ... nearly 10 times that rate in middle school, and nearly 15 times that rate for African-American middle school students,” according to the release.

“Oroville City Elementary School District is dedicated to providing support and training to all of its students, staff, and community members,” said OCESD Superintendent Spencer Holtom during a press conference. “Our mission here in Oroville is moving forward together — impacting the future, one student at a time. In Oroville, we focus on the whole child and are doing all we can to help them be lifelong learners. We strive to pre-

pare our students to be not only academically successful, but successful socially, emotionally, and culturally whether we are teaching in person or from afar.”

OUHSD Black students were 56 percent more likely to be suspended than white students for similar behavior. Students with disabilities lost twice as many days of school from suspension compared to students without disabilities.

Black students, as well as Native American/Alaskan students, were subject to discrimination; and Black students at Las Plumas High may have been “subjected to a hostile environment on the basis of race,” court documents revealed.

The settlement docu-

ments stated racial slurs by white students directed toward Black students were common on campuses and there was no evidence to show the district had “investigated or adequately responded to the racial harassment to prevent, stop, or eliminate further harassment.”

The investigation also revealed the district was quick to suspend students on a first offense when a suspension was considered to be the last resort for that offense.

Settlement documents stated students were regularly suspended and placed in detention or Saturday school. Instead of providing team assessments, counseling, special educa-

tion assessments, community service or social-emotional programming, students were instead referred to law enforcement.

The DOJ also noted the district’s policy for suspension of students with disabilities violated state law. The district’s policy allowed 10 days of consecutive suspension for the first offense, but the state law maximum is five days.

Students who were suspended were “denied full and equal access to education because of their disabilities, including failure to provide procedural protections, reasonable accommodations, and modifications.”

“The Oroville Union High School District strives to provide an excellent education to all students,” said OUHSD Superintendent Corey Willenberg in the release. “We are committed to working with the state’s Monitor to improve our practices, increase staff training, and modify our student discipline practices, and assure every student will know we take seriously our equity and achievement.”

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CHRONOLOGY

Earl Johnson Jr. moves up while staying a Roadrunner

By Kyra Gottesman

OROVILLE » When Earl Johnson Jr. was 8-years-old he set a goal to play Division I college baseball.

In November, Johnson, the pitcher and shortstop for the Butte College baseball team, signed his letter of intent to play for Division I Cal State Bakersfield.

"It's a dream come true. I worked very hard for this moment," Johnson said. "It took a while to get there but I'm finally here."

Johnson secured a full-ride scholarship to play for Cal State Bakersfield, the program which bears the same mascot, the Roadrunners, in the Big West Conference. Though it was a shortened season, Johnson shined both on the mound and hitting in the heart of the lineup at Butte.

"It's been awesome to see him develop not only as a player but as a person as well," said Butte baseball coach Anthony Ferro. "That's the most gratifying thing for me. He's come such a long way."

Johnson had drawn interest from MLB teams like

"My family has pushed me. I'm doing it for them."

— Earl Johnson Jr.

the Dodgers and the Royals, Ferro said, but opted to go to college and take a scholarship with the Roadrunners. He'll begin next fall in Bakersfield.

An Ipakanni Charter School graduate, Johnson played ball for Oroville High during his senior year.

"His work ethic is outstanding. He was willing to put in the extra work that isn't just done at practice. I couldn't tell you how many times driving around town or finishing up practice that you would look out there and Earl and his father would be out working on his craft — hitting, taking ground balls, or pitching," said Josh Osborn, former baseball coach at Oroville High. "You honestly don't see that happening much anymore."

Osborn, a former All-American pitcher with the 1997 College World Series champion Chico State

baseball team, was coaching a Junior American Legion baseball team when he first met Johnson. Johnson wasn't old enough to join the team, but his father, Earl Johnson Sr., brought him out to practice with the older kids.

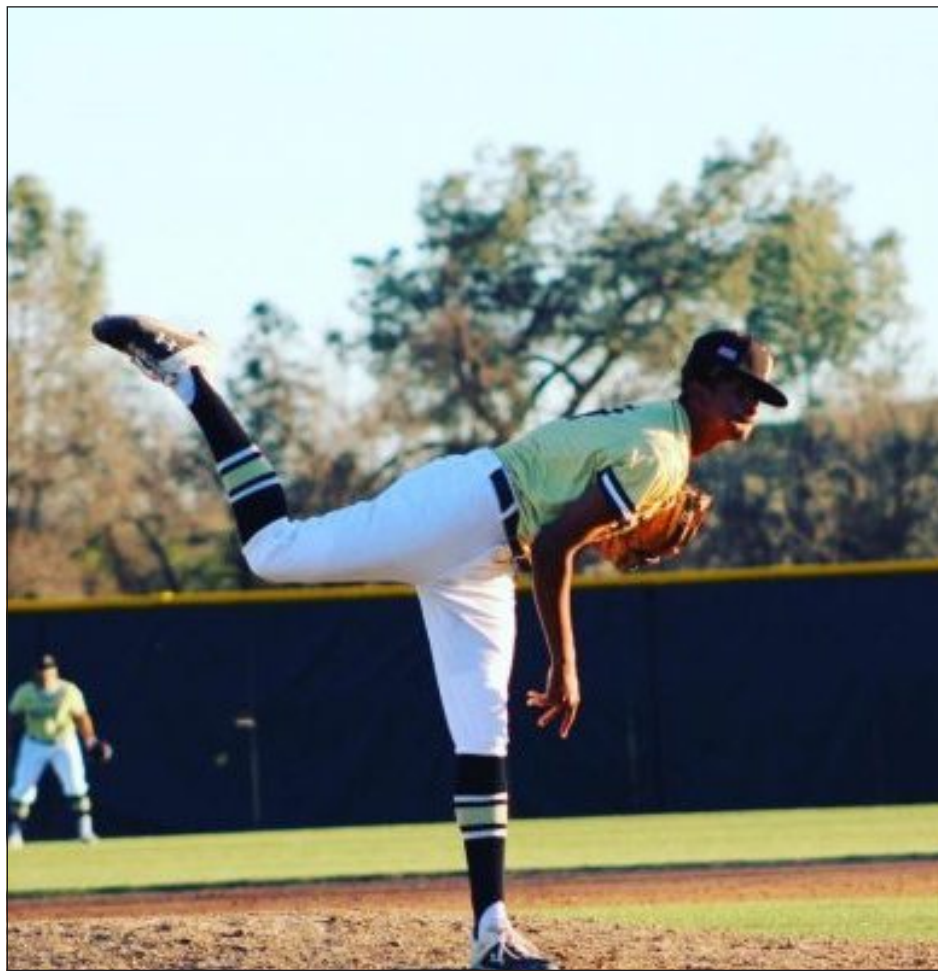
Since he didn't get any offers to play college baseball out of high school, Johnson opted to attend Butte College.

Through the 24 games of the abbreviated 2020 season at Butte, Johnson tallied a .389 batting average at the plate with three home runs and 23 RBIs. On the mound, he sported a 2.51 ERA.

"Our program is not just about building baseball players but it's about building young men," Ferro said. "I think he's flourished and it's gratifying."

Johnson credits his family for always supporting him in his athletics while growing up. His father and his uncle both attended every game.

"My family has pushed me. I'm doing it for them," Johnson said. "They sacrificed a lot for me. I'm just trying to do the best I can to provide for them."



CONTRIBUTED

Earl Johnson Jr. delivers a pitch for the Butte College Roadrunners. He'll be moving on to Division I ball with the Cal State Bakersfield Roadrunners.

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CHRONOLOGY

City council races come down to the wire

By Kyra Gottesman

OROVILLE » As of 8:30 p.m. on November 3, 2020 the race for Oroville City Council was close, with just 27 votes separating the third and fourth place candidates.

A total of seven candidates were vying for three open council positions. Two — Janet Goodson and Scott Thomson, the vice

mayor — were incumbents. The other four candidates included Lisa Torres, Krysi Riggs, Bobby O'Reiley, Jack Berry and Bryan Flicker.

Those in the lead on election night were Thomson, Riggs and Flicker. Thomson had 18.61% of the votes with 2,490; Riggs had 16.90% (2,260); and Flicker had 16.60% (2,221).

Not far behind was incumbent Goodson with 16.40% (2,194 votes), trail-

ing Flicker by just 27 votes. With 13.58% (1,817), 9.26% (1,242) and 8.6% (1,155) respectively, Torres, Berry and O'Reiley were out of contention.

When the final tally was released Thompson received 2,882 votes. Incumbent Goodson pulled ahead of Flicker securing her reelection with 2,549 votes, 55 more votes than Flicker who came in a close fourth with 2,494 votes

"I'm really excited and honored that so many people have chosen to believe in me," Riggs said. "For me, it's all about relationships. My next step is to continue developing healthy and trusting relationships with the current council members."

Riggs, executive director of Axiom, a youth center for junior high and high school students, is also the treasurer of the

Downtown Oroville Business Association and on the Oroville Park Commission. She said she hoped to bring a fair and balanced perspective to the council. Her two primary areas of interest are quality of life for residents and supporting small businesses.

Thomson, pastor of River of Life Church, said he was honored, taken aback and blessed. Before moving to Oroville, he owned a high-

end custom cabinet business. His campaign was prompted by his young sons and feedback he'd heard from business owners. He believes every City Council decision should have the younger generation in mind.

"Oroville's moving in a great direction," he said. "We have a great team, great staff, so now, it's time to build on that momentum."

CHRONOLOGY

Demonstrators show support for Southside Community Center

By Kyra Gottesman

OROVILLE » Despite the rain, a crowd of nearly 50 gathered outside of Oroville City Hall on November 17 to protest the city's potential move to take over the Oroville Southside Community Center.

Lead by Kevin Thompson, pastor of No. 1 Church of God in Christ and director of the Oroville Southside

Community Improvement Association, the nonprofit that has operated the center since 2016, those gathered believed there was cause for concern.

Thompson said the nonprofit obtained public records showing the city had been discussing the building since April without center representatives. He believed his team should have been approached by the city several months ago to partic-

ipate in the discussions.

The U.S. Economic Development Administration gave a \$1.5 million grant for the construction of the center 20 years ago. The initial grant expires in May 2021. Butte County and Oroville were partners in the center during its inception. With the expiration date nearing, the county asked the city if it might have any interest in acquiring the building. The city began exploring its op-

tions in closed sessions.

On December 1 the demonstrators returned to City Hall. Councilors were surprised the first time demonstrators showed up to a city council meeting.

Community members toted signs reading, "A people united will never be divided," "Don't take from our community" and "Save our center." Speakers included Bill Bynum, a community activist and Lisa Torres, a for-

mer council candidate.

However, this time the council was prepared for the demonstrators. Mayor Chuck Reynolds, Vice Mayor Scott Thomson and Eric Smith showed up early to give coffee to the 50 demonstrators. Thompson was grateful and agreed to have a meeting with them to discuss the matter in private at a later date.

"No plans have been made from the city whatsoever. Hypotheticals have been dis-

cussed, but the council has given no direction, made no policy," said Bill LaGrone, city manager of Oroville. "There's so many things that could potentially happen. We need to have a meeting with all stakeholders and figure out how this is going to work for all of us. Let's all come together and negotiate our way through this so there's a resolution that everybody is happy with at the end of the day."



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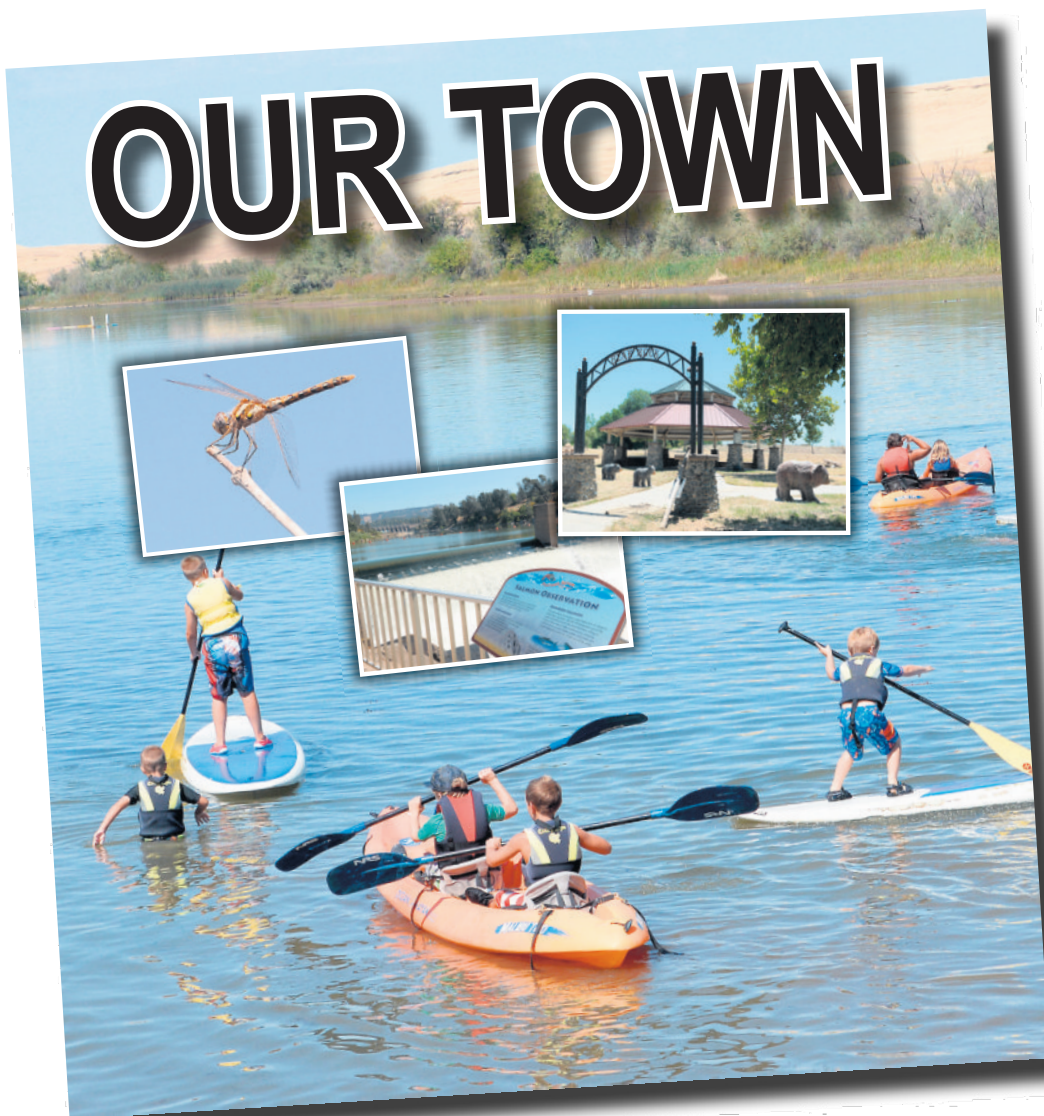
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OUR TOWN

OROVILLE MERCURY-REGISTER

2021



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Be a part of this year's
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