los altos history museum

UNDER THE OAKS

Published by the Association of the Los Altos Historical Museum, founded 1978 Fall/Winter 2026

The Road I Call Home

Photographer Randy Bacon, based out of Springfield, Missouri, has always been "intrigued by the fact that each and every person is a one-of-a-kind, never-before-created miracle." It is this idea that has inspired him to photograph thousands of individuals throughout the United States and the world, "propelled by [an] infinite fascination and commitment as a portrait artist to capture the miracle of each person." Everyone has a story and everyone's story matters.

In *The Road I Call Home*, a traveling exhibition from Exhibit Envoy, Bacon documents the stories of unhoused individuals through portraits and narratives told in the participants' own words. The stories have relatable beginnings, painting a picture of how easily and suddenly one can find themselves without a place to sleep. While some stories have tragic endings, most are hopeful, inspiring, and encourage the viewer to approach the issue of homelessness with compassion and humanity. The goal of this project is to bring awareness to our unhoused community and, as Bacon states, to remind visitors that "we're all people and every single one of us matters."

CoCo. Photograph by Randy Bacon.

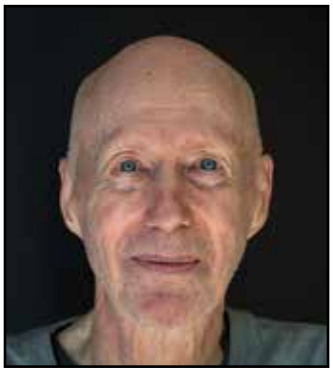
The Road I Call Home will be on display at the Museum from November 19, 2026 through January 24, 2027. The Museum will supplement this traveling exhibition with help from our partner, The United Effort Organization (UEO), a nonprofit based in Mountain View that helps people who are experiencing or are at risk of homelessness, move towards self-sufficiency and find a safe home in our community. The exhibition will include local stories from individuals working to get back on their feet with support from UEO. One of these local stories is featured here.

~ Courtesy of Exhibit Envoy and Amy Ellison, Curator and Director of Exhibitions

Jon's Story: They Didn't Take No for an Answer

Jon served proudly in the U.S. Air Force for two years during the Vietnam War. After his service, he spent 20 years doing work he loved as a bicycle mechanic, earning a reputation for his skills across several companies.

Then, more than 10 years ago, Jon became critically ill. During a lengthy surgery, his brain was deprived of oxygen, causing permanent brain damage. He survived—but could no longer work.



Jon. Photograph by S. M. Lieu.

Without enough income to afford housing, Jon spent the next decade living in his car, couch-surfing with friends and former coworkers, and moving between Washington State and Santa Clara County, including Los Altos, where he worked as a bicycle mechanic at The Bicycle Outfitter. He was grateful for the people who helped him, but he disliked depending on others and increasingly preferred the independence of living in his car.

Jon had previously been told that his two years of military service did not qualify him for assistance from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). So when asked if he was a veteran, he stopped saying "yes" and often simply said "no."

Then Jon met The United Effort Organization (UEO). "They were different!"

Wei, a UEO volunteer, listened to Jon and didn't accept the answers he'd been given years earlier. She researched the VA's policies and discovered they had changed. Jon was eligible for assistance after all.

Wei helped him re-apply and, with support from the VA, Jon now has an apartment of his own. Once housed, his

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Jon's Story: They Didn't Take No for an Answer

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health began to improve so that today, at almost 80 years of age, he volunteers regularly to fix bicycles at Hope's Corner in Mountain View!

"If it weren't for The United Effort Organization, I would still be living in my car or on the streets," Jon says. "They actually listened to me and worked on my behalf. They didn't take no for an answer."

Jon hopes people will understand that homelessness isn't always the result of bad decisions or personal failure. Often, he says, people have worked hard, but health or other factors intervene, on top of a "cost of living that's just incredibly out of reach."

His story is a powerful reminder of what can happen when someone takes the time to listen, keeps looking for solutions, and refuses to give up.

To read more stories like Jon's, visit *www.theunitedeffort.org/about/stories/*.

~ Shari Kipp, Volunteer Director, Marketing and Communications, UEO

The Road I Call Home is a project by Randy Bacon, the founder and creative behind the nonprofit 7 Billion Ones. This exhibition is toured by Exhibit Envoy.

Calling Nature-Loving Artists

Are you an artist? Do you love California's natural landscapes? Then you won't want to miss our next exhibition! Los Altos History Museum is seeking artists and artist teams to submit works to be included in an upcoming exhibition titled *Preserving Hope: Artful Meditations on California's Public Lands*, opening February 11, 2027. Artworks should celebrate the awe-inspiring beauty of California's national and state parks and other protected spaces. Artists are especially encouraged to consider spaces in Los Altos, Santa Clara County, or the San Francisco Peninsula. Artists are also strongly encouraged to reflect on the continued need to preserve our state's unique natural and cultural landscapes in the face of climate- and policy-related threats, and to explore community, spiritual, and cultural subjects.

Submissions are due January 3, 2027. For more details on how to submit, visit the Museum's website at *losaltoshistory.org/exhibit/preserving-hope/*.

~ Amy Ellison

President's Pen

As I begin my term as president of Los Altos History Museum's Board of Directors, I know I am following in the footsteps of many others who helped form the Museum and nurture it to where it is today—an outstanding local museum. It was established in partnership with the City of Los Altos in 1977, and centered around the historic J. Gilbert Smith House. The Museum's founding was driven by local residents committed to preserving the community's history. The Association of the Los Altos Historical Museum was formally established the following year, in 1978. In 2002, ownership of the Museum building, which was built entirely with private donations, was transferred to the City. Today, the land and building of the Museum remain assets of the City, and the City contracts with the Association to manage the Museum operations.

In its early years, the Museum was run solely by volunteers, who created and delivered its programs. Later, staff was hired to support the volunteers. Today, the Museum is managed by a staff of museum professionals. This change from a museum led by volunteers and a working board to a professionally managed museum has occurred over time. At its July 2026 board meeting, the board amended the Museum's bylaws to reflect the current structure, in which the Museum's Executive Director and staff manage the Museum's operations, while the board focuses on governance and oversight. This overdue transition is one that will take some time to be completed.

Having a professionally run museum means that volunteers can focus on the visitor experience. Whether they are guiding visitors through the Museum and Smith House, creating the beautiful gardens where people love to visit or hold events, or contributing to the many other volunteer efforts, our volunteers are an essential part of the Museum. They make the Museum the special place that it is today.

Over the next year, we all need to work together to continue to make Los Altos History Museum the premier local museum that it is. Changes are inevitable as we manage risks, budgets, changes in laws, and the changing population of Los Altos. I know that with the talent of our professional staff and the commitment of our volunteers, we will continue to be successful. I thank each and every one of you for helping us fulfill our goal of being the best that we can be.

~ Jay Thomas

LOS ALTOS HISTORY MUSEUM
"UNDER THE OAKS"

Nora Haley, *Editor* Judi Eichler, *Graphic Design* Mira Sharma, *Copy Editor*

A publication of interest to citizens of Los Altos, Los Altos Hills, and neighboring communities, produced by the Association of the Los Altos Historical Museum.

Our Hidden Gems

Spagnoli Tank House

The J. Gilbert Smith House gets a lot of love (as it should!), but what about our other historic property on site, the Spagnoli Tank House? Unlike the Smith House, built by J. Gilbert Smith, the Tank House wasn't always at this location. It was moved in 1993 by Museum supporters from its original site near Pine Lane to where it stands now. Although third-grade students learn what a tank house is on their school tours, perhaps many of our adult readers wonder what it is. Here, from the archives, is an explanation in the words of Annie Knapp Fitz, who—when she moved to Los Altos at the age of 8—lived in a tank house.

~ Anna Toledano

The Spagnoli Tank House.

What is a Tank House?

I'm Anna Knapp Fitz and have been asked that question so many times.

When our family came here in 1921 — Everyone who had a farm needed to provide their own water.

The few small towns had theirs piped in.

Our farm houses were blocks and acres away from the next house; so you can see why there was no piped in water.

The water tanks came in all sizes depending on the farmers [sic] needs. Most of them were made from Redwood Lumber.

Some were built higher for pressure; (Gravity.).

The higher tanks had to be very strong to hold 6,000 gals of water — so a two story highth [sic] was not unusual.

You didn't go to the planning commision [sic] to tell them your [sic] building on to it.

Maybe just one room below for storag [sic] or in our case, (we bought from Robert Roy) 2 bedrooms above — a kitchen and living room below, a screened in porch full length in front.

It was built that way when we moved in the tank house.

(I lived in our tank house 17 years.)

We had the smallest farm 8½ acres.

Volunteer Spotlight: Mary Powell

Mary Powell, after 35 years of volunteering, knew how much she enjoyed working with children. When she retired from her volunteer role at Gamble Gardens, she began looking for a new way to stay involved. That's when Carol Flores recruited her to volunteer at Los Altos History Museum.

The timing was perfect. Anne Roberts was stepping down after an incredible 18 years with the Education Committee, and Mary was ready to take on this new volunteer adventure.

Today, Mary is part of a remarkable team of approximately 30 education docents who bring local history to life for more than 1,000 students each year. This includes all third and fourth graders in the Los Altos School District, as well as students from several private schools.

The Education Docent Program has six teaching units, with docents typically cross-training in several of them. Volunteers receive training in the fall and spend the spring leading field trips, usually volunteering at least one day a week during the 10-week field-trip season. One of the newer units, Water in the West, explores the essential role played by water in the development of our community. Students learn how farmers depended on water, with experiences featuring the Museum's water tank, windmill, and pump.

Behind every successful field trip is an incredible group of Education Committee volunteers. Interested in becoming part of this team? As a docent, you'll lead interactive field trips that teach local history, geography, civics, and community. You will use the Museum's exceptional galleries, historic house, and heritage orchard as your classroom. There's no better way to learn than by doing, and our small-group format means every student gets a real, memorable experience guided by you.

The Museum is currently recruiting education docents to begin training soon for next spring's tours. If you're over 18 and available on weekdays during the school year, we'd love to hear from you. Please complete our short application on the website at losaltoshistory.org/education/student-tours and we will be in touch soon.

~ Rebecca Lowell, Board Member

Save the Date!

The Museum's 50th anniversary fundraiser:

Lights, Camera, Legends!

May 15, 2027

Cultivating the Future of the Heritage Orchard

When Gachina Landscape Management partnered with Los Altos History Museum and the City of Los Altos to help care for the Heritage Orchard, we knew we were signing up for a long-term commitment. It's a process that takes patience, consistency, and years of stewardship. We're about eight months into a three-to-five-year plan and very excited about the progress we've seen so far.

One of this year's highlights was a strong apricot harvest, achieved without the use of pesticides. Instead, we focused on supporting beneficial insects to do the hard work for us. Ladybugs, lacewings, and minute pirate bugs help keep garden pests such as aphids, thrips, scale insects, and mealybugs in check naturally. When it came time to harvest, our crews spent several days gathering fruit that eventually made its way to the community through Los Altos's DeMartini Orchard produce stand.

Enrique Perez and orchardist Cristina Prevarin, Gachina Landscape Management.

Healthy soil has been another priority. After soil testing, we developed a nutrition plan centered on compost and organic fertilizers such as blood meal, feather meal, and bone meal rather than synthetic products. Our team also completed the annual pruning of every apricot tree in the orchard and took a thoughtful approach to weed management, balancing orchard maintenance with the needs of pollinators and other beneficial insects.

During fall, we continued to focus on improving soil health and increasing biodiversity throughout the orchard. Native clover was seeded to help naturally add nitrogen back into the soil, while California poppies and lupine will provide additional habitat and food sources for pollinators. New apricot trees have been planted to help ensure the orchard remains productive and healthy for future generations.

It's rewarding to see the orchard already responding to the care it is receiving. We are proud of the progress made during this first year and grateful to be part of a community that values protecting special places like the Heritage Orchard.

~ Chelsea Aiello, Gachina Landscape Management

Positively Glowing at 50

Los Altos Festival of Lights Parade Reaches Half-Century Mark

Toy soldiers, Festival of Lights Parade.

If you are in Los Altos in late November, you'll likely find yourself downtown at 6pm on the Sunday after Thanksgiving, ushering in the holiday season with the Festival of Lights Parade. This year, the beloved community tradition celebrates its 50th parade on Sunday, November 29. The event draws more than 15,000 people to watch the one-hour procession of approximately 60 entries of lighted floats, bands, and costumed characters. But the tradition began in 1977 on much humbler terms.

The parade was the brainchild of three downtown merchants: Hope Higbee, proprietor of Cranberry Scoop; Jack Huston of Russell-Huston Men's Clothiers; and Marion Jackston, owner of her namesake children's clothing store. Inspired by a trip to Disneyland, where they saw the park's spectacular nighttime holiday parade, the trio approached the Los Altos Village Association about creating a similar event in Los Altos.

The first parade was held on Thanksgiving evening to promote goodwill, holiday spirit, and increased sales for downtown merchants. It featured a few lighted costume characters and wound its way through downtown until, according to news accounts and spectators' recollections, it literally disappeared into the crowd.

Today, an all-volunteer committee of about 20 people contribute their time and talent throughout the year to produce the event, while over 150 volunteers work behind the scenes on parade day.

The city of Los Altos designated the parade a Heritage Event and provides support from the Los Altos Police and Los Altos Public Works departments each year. Funding depends on donations from residents and businesses, as well as grants from local foundations. Though the parade has grown in scope tremendously over its first 50 years, it has remained true to its theme, "A Child's Holiday Fantasy."

All community members are welcome to enjoy the parade! For those unable to attend in person, the parade will be broadcast live on Comcast KMVT 15 and streamed on YouTube.com/@KMVT15, courtesy of KMVT 15 Silicon Valley Community Media & Television.

More parade information is available at LosAltosParade.org.

~ Nora Haley, Co-President, Festival of Lights Parade Association Board of Directors

Teen Perspective

If you had asked me what fiscal policy was a couple of months ago, I probably wouldn't have had an answer for you. Now, after my first few months as the Youth Representative to the Los Altos History Museum's Board of Directors, I know that term, along with many other new words I'd only heard in TV shows before.

I would describe my time on the board with just one word: observational. I've cherished every moment on the board because it has given me a perspective on how a nonprofit the size of the Museum operates. I want to absorb how each member thinks and approaches the decisions they make.

Before joining the board, I had only experienced the Museum as a volunteer tending the front desk, never considering the discourse around the budget that keeps my favorite place running, or the new initiatives being developed to make it even greater. I've started seeing every exhibit, program, and shift through a new lens.

I'm excited to continue stepping out of my comfort zone and eventually start initiatives of my own. Thank you to the Museum and my fellow board members for guiding me through this process. Thank you to Board Member Allison Aldrich and former Youth Representative Riya Srivastava for their words of advice. I can't wait to see how the year goes!

~ Derrick Harris, Youth Representative, Board of Directors

Welcome to Our New Members

Natasha Alimchandani
Justin Amos
Mary Baumel
Kamryn Blawn
Kellie Bloom
Iliana Bray
Rachel Burstein
Scott Campbell
Jean Caswell
Audrey Cu
Michael Erdenberger
Eric and Ayako Flint
Noor Gill
Laura Grant
Abhay Gupta
Raisa Haque
Claudia Hevel
Maridee Huston-Charlton
Yewon Jang
Shelley Johnson
Robin Huston Johnston
Lata Krishnan
Kevin Li
Mark Sandoval
Rachel Marrion
Wendy Marti
Sowmya Mullapudi
Charlotte Nelson
John Noel
Shelley O'Such
Arit Paul
Jacquelyn Popkoff
Jim Reynolds
Sarah Ritter
Ryan Sanders
Akanksha Singh
Ron Smith
Kelly Tan
Steven Tindle
Nancy Traficanti
Amanda Vallans
Morgan Wertz
Bonnie Whalen
Dilafruz Williams
Joshua Yee

Business Members

Corporate
BriteCo, Inc.
Kiwanis Club of Los Altos
Recor Medical
Traveka Wealth

Partner
BK Collections
Los Altos Mountain View Community Foundation

Business
D J M Inspections
Christopher Fling, Realtor
Los Altos Town Crier
Pine Cone Lumber Co, Inc.
The Garden Club of Los Altos

Director's Corner

Full Steam Ahead into 2027

It's hard to believe I've started year three of my service to Los Altos History Museum. Time has truly flown by, yet each year has been marked by core mainstays: engaging Train Day programs, major exhibitions, and now, a third Annual Appeal.

When I think about what tugs most at my heartstrings day-to-day at the Museum, a recurring scene comes to mind. Our beloved model train breaks down more regularly than I'd like to admit, and when it does, I am often called up to fix it. More than once, I've arrived in the Upper Gallery to a group of kids, their faces urgently pressed against the glass of the diorama, eager to see the train and trolley car emerge. When I manage to get the train running again, the room erupts in pure excitement. But when my skills fail, the disappointment is immediate—until I can call in engineering reinforcements—and it serves as a gentle reminder that keeping our history vibrant and operational takes a village of ongoing care and community support.

Beyond daily maintenance, we're also dreaming big. Looking ahead to the Museum's 50th anniversary in 2027, I've already begun preliminary research on reinterpreting the J. Gilbert Smith House, exploring how we can make our tours, signage, and overall visitor experience historically richer and more robust.

Your gift to this year's Annual Appeal will help create these moments of joy, learning, and connection across generations. Contributions support the essential general funds that not only make the big things possible, but also the small—including keeping the trains running on time!

Thank you for keeping our history moving and for helping us build an exciting future together.

Donate now at *losaltoshistory.org/donate*.

~ Anna Toledano

Staff

Anna Toledano, PhD, *Executive Director*
Amy Ellison, PhD, *Curator and Director of Exhibitions*
Diane Holcomb, *Director of Communications*
Sophia Lujan, *Curator of Collections*
Lisa Porter, *Director of Operations and Facilities*
Barbara Klein, *Bookkeeper*

Photo Gallery

Madihah Akhter and Anna Toledano prepare to share insights in "A Conversation between Historians on Partition and Memory." Photo by S. M. Lieu.

Volunteers come together for a group photo at the Volunteer Appreciation event. Photo by Malcolm Taam.

Proud winners of the Margaret Thompson Essay Contest display their winning certificates.

Liz Nyberg and Russell Satake flank Tanya Momi at the program "Interpreting the Partition through Poetry and Art." Photo by Malcolm Taam.

Former Los Altos mayor Penny Lave (1992–93) poses next to her photo at the preview of The Spirit of '76: Reflecting on America's 250th. *Photo by Malcolm Taam.*

Anna Toledano gives the State of the Museum talk at the Annual Meeting of Members.

Photo Gallery

A young visitor creates a Cubelets robot at the Apricot STEM Fair. Photo by S. M. Lieu.

Mary Powell, chair of the Education Committee, trains teen docents on the Permanent Exhibition.

Connie Young Yu, author of Patchwork History: The People's Bicentennial Quilt, *points out the square she created. Photo by S. M. Lieu.*

Jerry and Diane Balin strike a pose in luau-inspired costume pieces at the Members' Summer Social photo booth. Photo by S. M. Lieu.

Larry Lang, Vice Mayor of Los Altos and former Museum Board President, marvels at a model train at Train Day. Photo by S. M. Lieu.

Visitors create pinwheels at the Mid-Autumn Festival. Photo by S. M. Lieu.

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www.losaltoshistory.org

Museum and Store Hours
Thursday to Sunday, Noon-4pm
We are closed New Year's Day, Easter, Juneteenth, Fourth of July, Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Eve, and Christmas Day.

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Event Rentals
(650) 948-9427 x12
weddings@losaltoshistory.org

Mission Statement *Los Altos History Museum gathers and presents compelling stories and artifacts that bridge the past and the present by fostering the creative energy of staff and volunteers to challenge established narratives and produce engaging educational programs and exhibits for the community.*

On the Calendar

The Road I Call Home, on display in the Main Gallery Nov 19, 2026–Jan 24, 2027.

Preserving Hope: Artful Meditations on California's Public Lands, on display in the Main Gallery Feb 11–April 18, 2027.

Community Corner exhibit opens in the Geschke Gallery March 4, 2027.

Los Altos 75th Anniversary on display in the Main Gallery May 6–Oct 18, 2027.

Margaret Thompson Essay Contest ice cream social Tues, May 11, 2027, 5:45–6:45pm.

Lights, Camera, Legends! annual fundraiser in the Museum Courtyard Sat, May 15, 2027.

Apricot STEM Fair in the Museum Courtyard Sun, June 13, 2027, 11am–3pm.

The winner of the Apricot STEM Fair basket happily displays his goodies.

Board Meetings Fourth Tuesday of each month, 4pm, in person and online.