

UNDER THE OAKS



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Summer 2014

The J. Gilbert Smith House in the Modern World

With so much of Santa Clara Valley history vanishing beneath redevelopment, Los Altos is a rare city to have a historic home at the very center of its civic life. The J. Gilbert Smith House is tucked behind the library, across the orchard from city hall, and enveloped by the gardens of Los Altos History Museum.

Gilbert Smith, born in 1876, built the two-story house himself. He had already spent several years cycling back and forth to Stanford University, where he worked as a carpenter on the school's early dormitories. His work made it possible for his brother Harlon and his sister Elinor to get Stanford degrees. When he was twenty-five and his turn came, he told his family he had decided on a different course.

In 1901, he bought the parcel of land where the Los Altos Civic Center now stands. "The following year," he told an interviewer in 1957, "I had planted five acres in apricots and had started construction on my home." The house was completed in 1905.

He sided it with redwood shingles and built a porch that wrapped around three sides. He added a water tower at the back and a windmill; and though the windmill was knocked down in the 1906 earthquake he was proud his



Smith House, 2006.



Gilbert and Margaret Smith, ca. 1960.

house didn't lose a shingle in the historic quake.

He built a masonry fireplace for cool winter evenings and used local redwood for the home's interior details. He designed the kitchen so boxes used for collecting fruit in the orchard would fit into the kitchen cabinets for storage. The porch was versatile: part of it served as an outdoor pantry—a practical option in dry, mild California—and another part served as an outdoor summer

office—a way to keep muddy boots outside. "Every farmer who had seasonal workers ... had an outside office like that," recalled Daphne Smith, his great-niece. The house was also large enough to provide a home for the grower's mother and sister.

Smith's mother died in 1931, and at the age of fifty-five, J. Gilbert Smith married his childhood friend Margaret Hill. The couple was still working the land when Los Altos incorporated in 1952. As city founders considered sites for a civic center, they learned that architect Frank Lloyd Wright was in California and asked for his help. "We were fortunate

continued on page 2

President's Pen

Dear Friends,

As June ends and a new Museum fiscal year begins, I remind you that the Los Altos History Museum is devoted to celebrating our diverse populations and the multitude of issues that are unique to this area of Los Altos and Los Altos Hills.

Recently as a Board, we asked ourselves "Who are we?" Although the answers varied, in general the Board feels that we are a community-centered cultural resource devoted to the preservation of local history; we are guardians of stories and memories; we are storytellers of current social issues; and we are a venue for artists.

The Museum provides a secure repository for collecting and preserving pieces of history from past to present in a Civic Center location that visitors can easily find. It's a place to learn about, as well as view objects that are not often available, like the Penny Farthing bicycle now on display, or enjoy watching the model trains in our permanent exhibit, with a background depicting what First and Main Streets looked like in 1932.

Adding the permanent Museum next to the already-established Smith House 14 years ago has given our community a fine cultural facility, a place that is an important component in making the Los Altos area a desirable place to live. It is fitting that this year the Smith House, lovingly preserved since 1905, has been honored as one of the first buildings to receive a plaque from the City of Los Altos Historical Commission during National Historical Preservation Month.

The Los Altos History Museum wants and needs your membership support and additional donations to continue our level of excellence. Individual contributions like these comprise 12% of the annual financial support we need to fulfill our mission of enriching our community to shape a more informed future.

As members you may want to suggest to friends that joining the Museum strengthens the community that they love.

As I leave office, I would urge us all to continue to be a part of this growing and active organization that is here in our community, because



Los Altos and Los Altos Hills residents demand and deserve the best possible educational and cultural opportunities for all of our citizens.

Finally, it's been a pleasure and an honor to serve you as your Museum Board President, and I thank you all for your continuing support.

~ JANE REED, Board President

The J. Gilbert Smith House in the Modern World

continued from page 1

enough to have [Wright] tour the sites under consideration and give his thoughts," said former mayor George Estill. After Wright joined city officials walking lots on Fremont and El Monte, the architect found himself charmed by the Smith acreage. "He decided the Smith place was the best for several reasons," said Estill. "The trees, the heritage of Smith's [orchard] and the fact that it was one of the earliest houses ... It was apparent this was the spot."

The Smiths sold approximately nine acres of land outright to the city for \$115,000—quite a lot of money in those days. The city promised the apricot trees would "only be cleared as necessary," according to first city historian Joseph Salameda, and agreed the couple would have lifetime rights to the apricots. The Smiths promised, upon their deaths, to leave their home and its surrounding 1.36 acres of land to the city, to be used for historical purposes.

Following the deaths of Gilbert in 1966, and Margaret in 1973, the house and apricot orchard began to be regularly cited on city, county, and state lists of landmarks and both are still included on the California State Park's Office of Historic Preservation Points of Interest.



Early scene on Smith House porch.

In 1978, after volunteers worked to turn the Smith house into the first history museum in Los Altos, the city was awarded Santa Clara County's Historical Heritage Commission Award for Excellence for the preservation of both the home and the orchard. Since then, thousands of school children and other visitors—21,000 annually in recent years—have toured the Smith House and the adjacent Los Altos History Museum, opened in 2001.

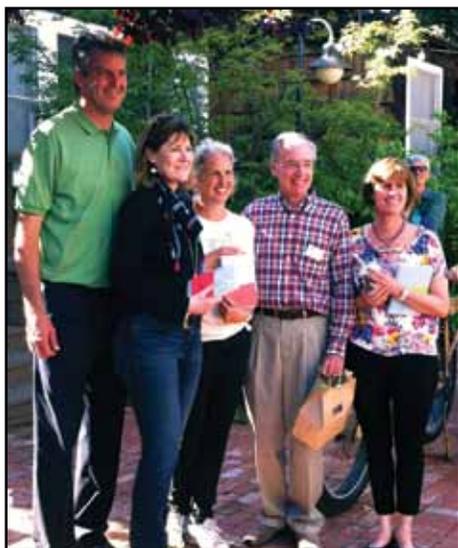
The Smith house stands as a testament to a man with very modern ideas—a man who gave up a Stanford education to take an independent path. His creativity and drive helped make both his home and his work endure—the same qualities that later brought forth a new generation of entrepreneurs in the region that surrounds Los Altos today.

~ ROBIN CHAPMAN

Pedal Power: From Wacky to Workhorse

Our new exhibition on bicycling opened April 10 for a six month run. The exhibit features unusual bikes like a lawn mower bike and a wooden bike, but it has historically significant bikes too. You will find racing legend Greg LeMond's first bike as a professional and one of the very earliest mountain bikes, Breezer #6. Just to show what rarified company we are keeping, Breezer #1 is in the Smithsonian.

The opening reception April 27 was attended by over 100 visitors who enjoyed the bikes, the good food and drink, and the chance to recognize exhibit designer Jan Davis and the team from GreenTown Los Altos that led the effort, Gary Hedden, Mike McTighe, Margie Suozzo and Maddy McBirney. It was also a chance to hear Craig Calfee talk about his latest project in the Congo.



Imagine a country twice the size of California with essentially no paved roads. That's the reality in the Congo. Calfee has designed and is building bikes there, made from locally sourced bamboo. These bikes are attractive, sturdy and very practical. Want to know more? Search "Craig Calfee" on youtube.

The Bike-to-Work Day party May 8 offered another chance to enjoy the show, this time with pizza and beer supplied by GreenTown Los Altos. Anything that promotes bicycling is important to GreenTown - "It's good for you and good for the planet."

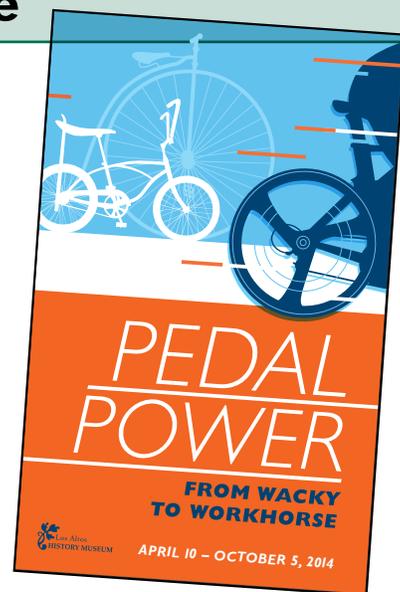
There will be many more events as part of Pedal Power:

Design-a-Bike Workshop, Sunday, June 29. Want a fun summer project? Design and build your own bike.

Family Cycle Carnival, Sunday, June 29. Watch a bike rodeo and daredevil stunts performed by San Francisco's Cyclecide. Enjoy contests. Lots of bikes and plenty of food and drink.

Electric Bike Festival, Sunday, July 27. See and ride electric bikes. It's the latest thing. Bikes from PiCycle, Faraday, Calfee, Vintage Bikes, and more.

Pedal Power Team - Mike McTighe, Jan Davis, Margie Suozzo, Gary Hedden, Maddy McBirney.



Historic Bike. Historic House.



Visitors checking out the bikes.



Joel Bartlett's photo of three happy cyclists on a bamboo bike.

Photography Exhibit Opens and Historic Plaques Awarded

A new photography exhibition showing photographs by Marj and Tom Green opened on Mother's Day, May 11. Their work features black and white shots of the Smith House that are strikingly beautiful while still capturing the mood of the simple 1930s depression era furnishings. "We were blown away by the results - it looks so different, and yet so familiar," says Pinky Whelan, who has been in charge of the house museum almost since it opened in 1977. "J. Gilbert Smith was a gifted amateur photographer," says museum president Jane Reed, and it is fitting that his former darkroom now holds the collection that will be on display until the holiday season. Don't miss it.

Later, a ceremony marked the debut of the City of Los Altos Historical Landmark Plaque program. Historical Commission Chair Janis Ahmadjian-Baer explains, "We celebrate our shared past as we recognize the first recipients of these historical plaques." Many of the property owners were in attendance, allowing her to "Thank you all for helping to preserve these community treasures."

Historical Landmark Plaque Recipients

Winchester-Merriman House, 1840s/1888
Cyrus P. Berry House, 1895
Farnsworth-Myers House, ca. 1895
Dutch Colonial Revival Farmhouse, ca. 1898
Civic Center Apricot Orchard, planted 1902
J. Gilbert Smith House, 1905
Adams House, 1906
San Antonio Club, 1908
Shoup Building, 1908
Altos Land Company Building, ca. 1909
Paul & Rose Shoup House, 1910
Copeland Building, 1911
S.P. Railroad Passenger Depot, 1913
Guy & Adelle Shoup House, 1915
Panama Pacific International Exposition Structure, 1916
Halsey House & Redwood Grove, ca. 1923
Marini House, 1926
Erwin Reichel Designed Home, 1927
Eschenbruecher House, 1931

LOS ALTOS HISTORY MUSEUM "UNDER THE OAKS"

A publication of interest to citizens of Los Altos and neighboring communities, produced by the Association of the Los Altos Historical Museum. A special thanks to the newsletter mailing team!



Pinky Whelan and Janis Ahmadjian-Baer making opening remarks at the debut of the historic plaque program.



Three current and one past Historical Commissioners at the Plaque Ceremony.



Plaque at the Smith House.

Spotlight on the Oral History Project

The Museum has an extensive collection of oral histories recorded since 1976, including interviews recalling the very early days of our town's development as well as more recent memories such as Steve Simons' connection to the bicycle exhibition.

Simons, a Los Altos resident born in Colorado and raised in Palo Alto, has turned his lifelong passion for biking into a very successful career bringing innovative changes to the biking world. His dad, an electrical engineer, encouraged his early fascination with taking things apart and 'fixing them.' Combining this with his early experience as a motocross racer, while still a student at Foothill College, he designed and build shock coolers for motorcycles. He then went on to design and patent a revolutionary front fork that became an industry standard for motorcycles. Throughout his career, working with and founding four separate companies (including RockShox), his focus has been on 'how to do it better.' This translated into improved shock absorbers and parts for motorcycles and bicycles, and eventually to tools which aide in the manufacture of precision parts.

Pedal Power: From Wacky to Workhorse has Simons' shock absorbers and a winning bike that used them on exhibit. In 1992, Greg LeMond, three time winner of the Tour de France, learned about the innovative shocks and wanted his team to try them on cycling's toughest road race, Paris-Roubaix. This 150 mile race from Paris to the small village of Roubaix features narrow, cobblestone streets and is rightfully called 'The Hell of the North.' Two days before the race the shocks were bolted to a bike ridden by Gilbert Duclos-Lassalle and he won by a hefty margin. He won again the next year using the very bike on display at the museum.

Steve continues the Silicon Valley tradition of exploring new ideas in a garage, and turning those innovations into products and systems that become worldwide standards.

~ GINGER SUMMIT



Steve and his wife, Lori Simons, a former national champion cycle cross racer. They can be found on weekends riding bikes with their friends and drinking coffee at one of our bicycle-friendly coffee shops.

Historical Essay Contest

The weather was hot and the ice cream was cold. The 12 winners of the Historical Essay Contest were announced at an Ice Cream Social held at the History Museum May 13. Historical Commissioner Denise Welsh presented certificates and Education Committee Chair Anne Roberts presented the Margaret Thompson trophy to Pinewood School, the school with the most wins.

The topic this year was connected to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's *Project Los Altos*. The essays were about works of art on display in Los Altos and asked, "...what would happen if your favorite work of art came alive!" Go to the Los Altos Town Crier website for a link to the fun answers.

Welcome to our Newest Members!

Linda Brinsfield	Joe Provines
Vivian Conly	Paula Salomaa
Mary Lorey	John Zotz

You are joined by 80 renewing members in this same time period, and are part of a total membership of 777 people.

Thank you all – your support is critical and very much appreciated!



Denise Welsh with the winning third grade students.

History in the News

In recent news from the Los Altos Historical Commission, Margaret Thompson was selected as the Historic Preservation Award recipient for 2014. She is the third person so honored, following Don McDonald in 2012 and Marion Grimm in 2013. Thompson is well known for the Annual Historical Essay Contest held in her name, now in its 30th year. As a Historical Commissioner in 1984, she recognized the value of engaging elementary students in our local history.



Commissioner Denise Welsh called Thompson “one of the town’s great treasures.” Thompson has been a resident of Los Altos since 1950 and was a pioneering member of the team that launched the History Museum.

In other news, the Commission approved two relatively minor modifications to historic properties. In both cases, the exterior modifications will follow current guidelines calling for a look consistent with the character of the property, but with some differentiation. A perfect match is not desirable as it hides the extent of the original construction. As Commissioner Walter Chapman explains, “It is for the benefit of those viewing the property 50 years from now. The variations can be as minor as a slightly different shingle pattern or a groove in the window trim.”

Jane Wasson, one of the owners, shared her interest and passion, “We even found matching tile from a local tile maker for our kitchen remodel a few years ago.” We all benefit from such wonderful people.

~ GARY HEDDEN

The Historical Commission opened the Museum in 1977 and continues to work closely with the Museum Association.

Antiques Show June 8

For 29 years the Antiques Show has been an important fund raiser for the History Museum. Enjoy a day of browsing, collecting and eating at Pinky’s Grill. Don’t miss the homemade strawberry shortcake. Sunday, June 8, at the Hillview Center, 10 am-4 pm.



POPs Reception

The Peninsula Outdoor Painters (aka POPs) will show off their art at the Los Altos Library July 1-31. The opening will be at the library Tuesday, July 1, at 5:30 pm with a reception at the History Museum following at 6-7:30 pm.

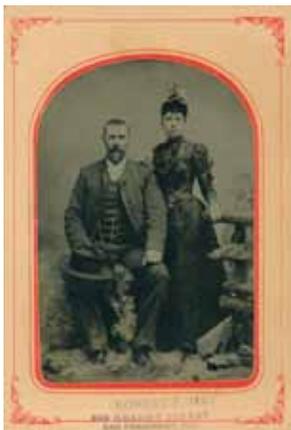


Susan Migliore, POPs artist, at her easel in the Smith House courtyard.

Director's Corner

The view from underground ... collections, archives and genealogy.

I'm delighted that another of our original exhibits will find a new museum setting; *A Place to Call Home* will be displayed in Morgan Hill. Our story connects to theirs via the Murphy clan, who came west with the very first wagon train—two years before the ill-fated Donner Party. For decades, one could travel from Sacramento to San Luis Obispo (almost 300 miles) without ever leaving Murphy land. That included today's Moffett Field, as well as Los Altos Hills, most of which was a wedding present to Elizabeth Yuba Murphy upon her marriage into the Taaffe family.



With so much land to manage, they hired help. Mike and Eliza Farrell (pictured) worked for the Murphys, he as a head orchardist, and she as housekeeper and likely governess (we know she trained as a teacher). Their own home and orchard were here in Los Altos and Los Altos Hills. Leaving no heirs, their collection of photographs and ephemera were recently given to the Museum, and are being

catalogued and researched by our collections volunteers, under the leadership of volunteer Pauline Diestelhorst.

So, what else are we up to down here in the cool basement? Margie Alving is cataloging and digitizing a collection of letters between Frank and Josephine Duveneck. In lieu of a microfilmed archive, Judie Suelzle is perusing early newspapers to create a searchable Word document of headlines pertaining to the development of Los Altos. Foothill College students are looking through 1939-1945 newspapers; with the 70th anniversaries of so many WWII milestones approaching, we think local stories will be valuable to the public.

We uncover our past by understanding the items in our collection; it's often surprising how contemporary are the lessons it teaches. Sound like your thing? Volunteers are always welcome; contact Stefanie Midlock at extension 11.

~ LAURA BAJUK, E.D.

Staff

Laura Bajuk, *Executive Director*

Grace Perry, *Assistant to the Executive Director*

Stefanie Midlock, *Assistant Collections Manager*

Kristin Morris, *Collections Specialist*

Mark Perry, *Facility & Rentals Manager*

Faustino Carillo, *Gardener*

Photo Gallery



Museum members Julia Lovin, Nomi Trapnell and Gerry Blaufarb with Mary Morris and Julie Ogilvie strike a pose at Los Altos Live.



Cille Emery and LAHM Docent Chair, Marilyn Henderson, at the Bouquets to Art special exhibit.



Gary Hedden, Pedal Power exhibition coordinator, with George Mount. Mount was the King of US road racing 10 years before that other guy, Greg LeMond.

ON THE CALENDAR

California Country & More Antiques Show, Hillview Center,
Sunday, June 8, 10 am-4 pm

Annual Meeting & Volunteer Recognition Party, Tuesday,
June 24, 4-7 pm

Design a Bike Workshop, Sunday, June 29, 10 am-1 pm

Family Cycle Carnival, Hillview Center Parking Lot, Sunday,
June 29, 11 am-4 pm

POPs in the Orchard, Tuesday, July 1. Opening at the library,
5:30 pm; reception at the Museum, 6-7:30 pm

Electric Bike Festival, Sunday, July 27, 10 am-1 pm

Train Days! Saturday & Sunday, September 20-21, 10 am-4 pm

Historic Bike Tour, Sunday, September 28, 9:30 am-12:30 pm

Pedal Power, Closing Day, Sunday, October 5, 12-4 pm

Opening Reception – *Silicon Valley: The Lure & the Legends*,
Sunday, October 19, 2-4 pm

More events are in the works – watch for your monthly member email updates!

Time to Celebrate!

Annual Meeting & Volunteer Recognition

Tuesday, June 24, 4-7 pm

Join us at 4 pm for the annual meeting of the members to hear from our leaders, elect new directors, and thank those whose terms of service are closing. It's been a terrific year with many accomplishments, and we want to share highlights and thoughts for the coming year with you.

At 5 pm, we will celebrate the hundreds of volunteers who make the Museum "happen." This is a wonderful social time in our beautiful gardens for all our members to enjoy each other's company, and superior refreshments. Nominations for Outstanding Volunteer Awards are still open – contact Ellen Katz & Brigitte Ahlfeldt via Grace in the office with your nominee.

Everyone is welcome!



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51 So. San Antonio Road, Los Altos, CA 94022

www.losaltoshistory.org

Museum and Store Hours

Thursday to Sunday, Noon–4 pm

We are closed New Year's Day, Easter,
Fourth of July, Thanksgiving Day
and Christmas Day.

General Inquiries

(650) 948-9427 x14

Collections Research

(650) 948-9427 x11

Event Rentals

(650) 948-9427 x12

Mission Statement

History inspires imagination, stimulates thought and transforms society. The Los Altos History Museum preserves and shares our local history to enrich our community and to shape a more informed future.

Address Correction Requested