



Los Altos  
HISTORY MUSEUM

# UNDER THE OAKS

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Winter 2015

## Saving the Eichlers

Interested in mid-century modern architecture and historic preservation? If yes, then you'll be interested to know that there is a place in Los Altos where your passions have converged.

In south Los Altos, you might begin to notice something different about the houses just before and all along Clay Drive. This land was once owned by Alexander Clay who, along with his parents before him, was a fruit rancher. In 1968, Clay sold a portion of his land to Joseph Eichler, and here you will find the larger of two Los Altos Eichler subdivisions, Fallen Leaf Park.

Eichler was a merchant builder. In the post-war housing boom he built his first sub-division in Sunnyvale. He differentiated himself from other builders, such as Levitt &

Sons, builders of the "little boxes" on Long Island, in several significant ways, creating a legacy that is both architecturally unique and now historically significant. Influenced by Frank Lloyd Wright, Eichler decided to build stylistically modern tract houses and he hired architects to design them. He also insisted that they collaborate, giving a consistent look and feel to the tracts and making the homes instantly recognizable and known, simply, as "Eichlers." His cost-effective process also made them affordable to the emerging middle class, many of whom were returning veterans.

Over thirty years, Eichler built 11,000 houses, mostly in the Bay



Joe Eichler (right) and Claude Oakland, the architect for Fallen Leaf Park, 1964. Oakland and Imada Collection, Environmental Design Archives, UC Berkeley.

Area, and thirty-seven, built in 1968 toward the end of Eichler's career, are in Fallen Leaf Park. Most homeowners who live in Eichlers love them. *Really, fiercely* love them. Recently, there has been a resurgence

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## The Magic of Museums

In an age of instant internet gratification and endless TV channels, what is it about museums that keeps us coming back again and again?

Museums tell stories, but more than that, they are portals to other worlds. A carefully preserved artifact or a few lines of text on a label can transport us through time, across continents, or into the mind of another person. Suddenly, our perspective expands, or we find some part of ourselves reflected back, making us feel less alone.

Museum staff and volunteers do countless hours of research to build the context for this journey. They curate objects, but also ideas, creating entry points into the great cascade of human experience so we can come away inspired instead of overwhelmed.

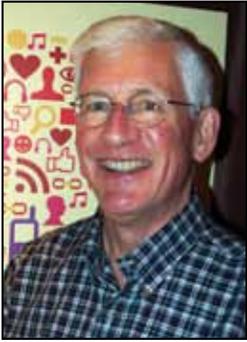
The alchemy of object, context, and viewer is the real magic of museums. When we look at the brushstrokes on a painting by a long-dead artist we admire, or

*continued on page 2*



Kate Gibson and Jessica Hough, Director of Exhibitions for the California Historical Society, at the Panel Discussion with California Artists, Sept. 24, 2015.

## President's Pen



Personal and family connections to the community are an important part of our local history. You are undoubtedly familiar with many family names—early settlers like the Taaffes, Los Altos founders such as the Shoups and modern-day Silicon Valley legends such as the Packards. Descendants of those families continue to be active in the community.

The Los Altos History Museum preserves and shares many aspects of these family histories. Our diverse collection includes an entire building—the J. Gilbert Smith farmhouse dating from 1905; thousands of documents, photographs and artifacts; and a growing collection of oral histories from long-time local residents.

The Museum's permanent exhibits include many stories of individual and family connections to our community. More stories emerge during the museum's special community events, such as lectures, workshops and tours, as well as during the educational programs that all Los Altos third and fourth graders experience at the museum.

Our current special exhibit, *Spirits Return*, connects visitors with cultural traditions throughout the world by which we honor and celebrate the memories of our ancestors.

All of the Museum's programs are the work of a small staff and a large group of volunteers. Your support makes these community benefits possible. A significant portion of museum operations are funded from annual donations by the museum's members and friends, most of whom have personal and family connections to Los Altos and Los Altos Hills. Please join them in supporting the Museum's work.

We also value gifts of time and expertise. Please consider joining our corps of volunteers to help with programs and special events. We look forward to seeing you at the Museum.

~ ED TAFT, BOARD PRESIDENT

## Staff

Laura Bajuk, *Executive Director*

Grace Perry, *Assistant to the Executive Director*

Johanna Fassbender, *Collections & Exhibitions Manager*

Stefanie Midlock, *Assistant Collections Manager*

Kristin Morris, *Collections Specialist*

Mark Perry, *Facility & Rentals Manager*

Faustino Carillo, *Gardener*

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## Saving the Eichlers cont.

of interest in Eichlers but this has not always been the case. You need go only as far as Palo Alto or Sunnyvale where many older tracts are located to see what can happen: tear downs, enormous new homes, inappropriate second-story additions, and modifications damaging the visual unity of the neighborhood.

Remarkably, after 47 years, Fallen Leaf Park remains essentially pristine, but the residents are uneasy. Two residents, Nate Johnson and Tracy Gibbons, have embarked on a project to obtain a Historic



Tracy Gibbons in front of her Eichler.

District Designation

from the City. The houses, considered architecturally "modern," will soon meet the definition of "old." The requirement for historic designation is architectural and historical significance, and be at least 50 years old. Three Eichler subdivisions have received such recognition, Greenmeadow and Green Gables in Palo Alto, and Balboa Highlands in Los Angeles.

Johnson and Gibbons have collected signatures in support of forming the Historic District from over 70% of homeowners. Next steps are assessing the homes, preparing the application by a recognized Architectural Historian, drafting guidelines for code enforcement and raising funds for the application and consultant's fees. The process is expected to run well into next year, but once the District is formed, the hope is that the neighborhood we love will remain intact, for our benefit and the entire City, a City that values its history.

~ TRACY GIBBONS

## The Magic of Museums cont.

read a handwritten letter by one of our heroes, we feel an ineffable thrill at the thought of their hands actually touching the item in front of us.

Even mundane objects have the power to move us. The sweat stains on a farmworker's tools or the meticulous embroidery on a baby's dress speak to us on a visceral level. When biography or historical context are added, our imaginations truly take flight.

By safeguarding and explaining objects, museums transform them into vehicles for discovery. In doing so, they transform us, too.

~ KATE GIBSON, CANTOR ARTS CENTER, STANFORD UNIVERSITY

# New Exhibit Opens

Our new exhibition, *Spirits Return: Cultural Traditions Keeping Memories Alive*, opened on October 29, and we celebrated with a well attended reception November 1. Delicious food and drink, and performances by the Folklorico Nacional Mexicano (Juvenil) and the Mountain View Buddhist Temple Taiko drummers and dancers delighted the audience.

We explore how people all over the world follow traditions to remember and honor ancestors and loved ones who have passed on. Our exhibit features personal altars dedicated to specific individuals, as well as general information about cultural traditions and other ways of memorializing loved ones, and how these traditions have evolved over space and time.

Visitors are encouraged to share their stories, and a community memory space invites you to sign up and create an altar or a smaller display to honor deceased loved ones.

Please join us in remembering and celebrating the lives of those who have come before us! Come see the exhibit, or attend one of the great programs we have planned for you before it closes April 17, 2016.

~ JOHANNA FASSBENDER, COLLECTIONS & EXHIBITIONS MANAGER



John and Maddy McBirney at the opening.



LOS ALTOS HISTORY MUSEUM  
"UNDER THE OAKS"  
Gary Hedden, *Editor*  
Judi Eichler, *Graphic Design*  
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## Taaffe Family Stories

One of the pleasures of the holiday season is reconnecting with family and friends, sharing stories from the past. Often these stories become part of the family folklore because of their frequent retelling, but did they actually happen?

Linda Taaffe, a former Los Altos Hills resident and part of the large local family with many branches in the greater Bay Area wanted to investigate some of these stories that were so often repeated by her parents and grandparents. To her delight and surprise, most of the stories were indeed true, bolstered by additional facts and reports in historical records. Linda and many other members of the Murphy-Taaffe family gathered to share just some of this wealth at a recent gathering sponsored by the Los Altos Hills History Committee.

Martin Murphy Sr. and his wife Mary were part of the first wagon train that left Missouri in 1843 and explored the route to cross the Sierras near Lake Tahoe, and from there descending into the fertile lands of California. This was the same route that was followed two years later by the legendary Tahoe Donner Party. Their daughter Elizabeth was born en route (the first child of pioneers to be born in California territory), and actually was accidentally dropped in the Yuba River during a challenging crossing, thus christened Elizabeth Yuba Murphy. Once they reached the lush California valleys, Martin



*Martin and Rose at the ranch, late 1880s.*

quickly became an established landowner, purchasing vast tracts of land extending from the Bay Area to Southern California. When Elizabeth married William Taaffe, a successful merchant from San Francisco, her father gave them the deed for 2800 acres which included most of La Purissima Conception (where Los Altos Hills is currently located). The land currently occupied by Foothill College was the site of their home (later renamed the Griffin House).

Marian Steineke Taaffe and her sister Maxine were born and raised in homes along Purissima Road (part of the original Taaffe lands). They and

all their cousins and friends rode their horses up the dirt lane that was Purissima to the one-room schoolhouse that is now Chapel of the Hills on Duval Way off Robleda in Los Altos Hills. When they were six and seven years old, their father Max Steineke was invited by the King Saud of Saudia Arabia to come to his country to explore for oil. The family joined their father for two years, living in the desert and experiencing a desert kingdom that exists now only in fiction and imagination. Their adventure is documented in Wallace Stegner's book, *Discovery*, which was commissioned by the Standard Oil Company to record this remarkable story.

These stories represent just a fraction of the material that Linda and her family have been able to record and document about their diverse and bold extended family. With their support, the Los Altos History Museum is looking forward to drawing together many of these legends in an exhibit next year.

This example of the Murphy-Taaffe family legacy serves as a reminder to each of us to take advantage of the approaching holiday season to ask questions and explore all the tales waiting to be shared. Each family has a collection of adventures that reflect customs of other lands, histories of daily life in earlier times, and remarkable coincidences that eventually bring us each to this special place. The challenge for us now is—ask the right questions, and then listen!

~ GINGER SUMMIT



*Martin J. Taaffe, 1888.*



*Rose Hoffman Taaffe, 1888.*

## Director's Corner

*"Thank you for making us better people."*  
—from a Keys School student (Palo Alto)

When I read this, my heart skipped a beat. *"This is what we do,"* I thought. *"This is what our mission means. We are inspiring imagination, stimulating thought and transforming society!"* Big wonderful ideas, I know... but what does it really mean, day to day? Now it was right in front of me, in the delightful scrawl of a 2nd-grader, with its illustration of a bright red train at the bottom.

As we installed the new exhibit, *Spirits Return*, I was moved by our amazing team of volunteers and staff. Jorge, a Foothill college student, honored an uncle who died too young. Saroj and her daughter-in-law Theresa (remember "the horse wedding?") deepened their relationship working on the exhibit, learning things about each other they never would have otherwise. A new book has been published by the researcher from Kentucky whose ancestor settled here, started a new family, and inspired the fictional Zorro. Our archive held answers she needed.

Moments like this tell me we're on the right track.

The Museum is a cultural resource, and a catalyst. We have a regional draw, affecting people outside our community as well as in. We change lives through educating and it never ceases to amaze me.

~ LAURA BAJUK, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



*Dress from 38 Countries, voted blue ribbon winner at Reflect + Create.*

## Photo Gallery



*Daniel Malinali at his talk on Aztec Cultural Traditions.*



*Fourth Annual Bike Tour of Historic Los Altos starts at the Museum.*



*Marianne Lettieri at her lecture on Found Art, as part of Reflect + Create.*

## History in the News

The renovation and adaptive reuse of the historic Halsey House in Redwood Grove took a big step forward in October. The options recommended in a report by M. Sandoval Architects, Inc. were reviewed by the Los Altos Historical Commission and the Commission unanimously recommended immediate implementation of measures to protect the Halsey House from further deterioration and to ultimately renovate the House for City Recreation programs and community use. If approved, the project would entail the repair, renovation and reconstruction of the Halsey House, including widening the existing roadway, construction of a new detached storage building, and other site improvements at an estimated cost of \$3.5 million.

Walter Chapman, Chair of the Historical Commission commented, "The big challenge will be funding, but this building will provide needed community space, good use of park land and it will be a source of community pride."

In November, the Los Altos Parks and Recreation Commission also approved the renovation plan, although there was concern regarding on-site parking and the number of programs that could be held. The next step is a presentation to City Council.

Closer to home, the Museum's Tankhouse restoration took a step backwards with the discovery that additional structural work is required. The immediate next step is to install flashing for protection from winter rain, then longer term, get the engineering drawings and bids required to line up some financing and get the job done next year.

~ GARY HEDDEN

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

### New Members

Welcome to eleven new members, and thank you to 77 renewing members. Our total membership at this moment is 803.

Russell Brown	Lisa Stambaugh
Robin Estrada	Jennifer Trinh
Michael & Valerie Garnese	Jonathan Zalisk
Emmett & Ruth Hearn	Michael Zalisk
Barbara Phelps-Sandall	Julia Zarcone

## Our Hidden Gems

Mary Fitz, born 1914, was raised in the small mining town of Johnston City, Illinois. Mary completed the eighth grade, but as was typical for girls at the time, did not attend high school. At the age of 14, she traveled by train to Chicago to work as a servant and nanny. In her twenties she was a performer for five years with a traveling theatrical troupe that appeared at the California Pacific International Exposition in San Diego in 1935, and again in 1936. At that time, Mary came to visit her cousin Annie Knapp's family in Los Altos and Annie painted her portrait.

In 1938 Annie married Joe Fitz, also a cousin of Mary's, leading to the combined last name we know so well, Annie Knapp Fitz.

In 2007 Mary's niece Jeanne Locatelli brought her Aunt Mary, then 93, to live in Woodland, California, near Sacramento. Jeanne returned in 2008 to bring her aunt's belongings to California, and discovered the painting, rolled up and unprotected in a basement cupboard, but still in excellent condition. It is now in the possession of the History Museum, and as one of the Museum's earliest pieces, it is truly one of our Hidden Gems.

~ JOHN RALSTON



*Mary Fitz, oil portrait by Annie Knapp Fitz.*

# Photo Gallery — Kids Love Our Museum



Fall Festival



MoonFest



Train Days



MoonFest



Ohlone Days



MoonFest



# UNDER THE OAKS

Non-Profit Org.  
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Assn. of the Los Altos Historical Museum, 51 So. San Antonio Road, Los Altos, CA 94022

[www.losaltoshistory.org](http://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 x16

## 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

## ON THE CALENDAR

**Memoir Writing Workshop**, with Sylvia Halloran, Saturday, January 23

**29th Crab Feed & Auction**, Saturday, February 6, St. William Parish Hall, 6-10 pm

**Build Your Dream Layout**, workshop #1, "Scale & Gauge," no experience necessary. Adults, or children 13+ with parent or guardian. \$30 per workshop, or both for \$50. Saturday, February 20, 10-11:30 am

**Indian Cooking Class**, with Saroj Pathak, Sunday, February 21, (tbd)

**Essay Contest**, Grades 2-6. March, check the website for details.

**Family Day at the Museum**, Saturday, April 2, noon-4 pm

**Build Your Dream Layout**, workshop #2, "Build a Memory," no experience necessary. Adults, or children 13+ with parent or guardian. \$30 per workshop, or both for \$50. Saturday, April 9, 10-11:30 am

**School Tours**, Grades 3-4, weekdays, 9-noon, April & May. Teachers & Homeschoolers, contact the Museum as soon as possible to sign up.



Stefie Midlock, Johanna Fassbender and Jan Davis dancing the Coal Miner's Dance at the opening reception of Spirits Return.

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

**Board Meetings**, First Wednesday each month, 4 pm, everyone welcome  
**Smith House Tours**, Every Sunday, 2 pm