



Los Altos  
HISTORY MUSEUM

# UNDER THE OAKS

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## Many Communities, Many Voices: Personal Narratives from the Oral History Collection

Our communities hold so many stories that illuminate the past, far beyond what a written history or a photograph can express. We have only to ask our friends and neighbors to share their stories; when we listen carefully, we can learn how history happens, day to day, year to year.

History is much more than the sum of names, dates and events. It is really about both the individual and collective experience. We can't understand our past without hearing firsthand the stories of how it was lived.

Our next changing exhibition will shine a bright light on the past, **exploring the idea of community through the words of our oral history narrators.** In preparation for the exhibit, the Oral History Committee has sought out new communities and asked new questions to help us better understand the role of community in our past. We have also "mined" our existing oral history collection of hundreds of stories to discover more about the creation and development of communities.

Through these personal narratives, we learn how different communities exist alongside one another, how people choose the communities with which they identify, and how communities support us in all phases of life. And we see how individuals, working

within their communities, have changed the course of history and made lasting contributions to the greater good.

Following are just a few of these history-makers and their communities featured in the exhibit:



**Helen Foerster**, on founding the Los Altos Chapter of the Federated Women's Club, and building the Los Altos Youth Center: "There were 12 of us in the beginning... we decided that we ought to have a Women's Club in Los Altos since there was nothing, really, for the women here in town... They really were interested in the youth of the area, because there was nothing here at the time except a Quonset hut for the children.... So, we decided that it was time to get a youth center going."

**Dwight Matthews**, on starting his insurance business in Los Altos: "I didn't know [how] great it was,



but I knew Los Altos was a real, real upscale community. So, it was a good opportunity... Most of the people here in Los Altos were very, very nice, extremely nice... I always believed in one thing even though it was a predominately white community, that that was not an issue for me."

**Dr. Frank Berry**, on the Medical Advisory Committee that led the effort to build El Camino Hospital: "I was privileged to be the chairman of this group. It was a privilege because there were an awful lot of talented young guys around... It was all overwhelming and it came as no surprise that the election to form a hospital district passed with a 76 percent majority!"

**Usha Welaratna**, on the support provided by her new Los Altos neighbors: "We had shipped our

*continued on page 2*

## President's Pen



An important part of a museum's mission is to connect with the community that it serves. Over the past several years, the Los Altos History Museum has undertaken a number of initiatives and programs to fulfill this mission.

One of our ongoing programs is the Oral History project, which records, preserves, and makes

accessible the personal narratives of many members of our community. Some highlights from our oral history collection will serve as the foundation of our next changing exhibition, which will be on display this summer. In particular, we are most fortunate to have obtained an oral history from Bob Grimm, long-time benefactor of the Museum and the community, before he passed away last year.

Another important connection to the community is the Museum's website. We will roll out a new website that will have a more modern look and feel, fresh content, and improved access to the Museum's programs and activities. We expect that the website will be a portal to many of the Museum's assets that exist in digital form and we hope that it will broaden the community that the Museum is able to serve.

Of course, it is also important to connect with community members who choose to visit the Museum. The board, staff, and volunteers are in the process of re-imagining the permanent exhibits to document history as it unfolds, rather than just capturing a static timeline of history. This will entail the addition of some modern technology, which will allow visitors to discover and interact with a wider variety of content in greater depth. If you visited last year's *Silicon Valley: the Lure & the Legends* exhibit, you got a glimpse of what the permanent exhibits eventually could become. We intend to reach out to the community to help us refine this vision and make it a reality.

We look forward to seeing you at the Museum.

~ ED TAFT, BOARD PRESIDENT

### LOS ALTOS HISTORY MUSEUM "UNDER THE OAKS"

Gary Hedden, *Editor*  
Judi Eichler, *Graphic Design*

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. A special thanks to the newsletter mailing team!

## Many Communities cont.

stuff from England, and there was a dock [workers'] strike, so we didn't have any furniture when we moved into the house, and people [gave] us... things like plates and spoons, and I can't remember, chairs and tables and things. So in a way it was a blessing that we didn't have any furniture. So after we got our stuff, of course, we returned everything and... by then we had become really good friends."

**Connie Young Yu**, on the unique kind of community in Los Altos Hills: "I thought, 'Well, if I'm in the Hills I get to do what I want.' I thought I could write in the Hills. It's just very conducive

because you don't have the feeling of people watching you. And also the biggest thing was I wanted to have animals... The Hills just has a good atmosphere. Right away I found people that were in the Peace Movement."

**Bob Grimm**, on building the Los Altos History Museum: "I was very concerned that this not be 'our' museum, that it be *the community's museum*, and, I think, they've done a much better job

than I could have hoped for in doing that."

Find out if Bob was right. Hear more stories, from as many corners of our community that we could identify in this new exhibition running April 28 through October 2. Join us at the opening reception on May 1.

~ KRISTIN MORRIS, COLLECTIONS SPECIALIST

## 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*

## Spirits Return - final month!

The current exhibit, *Spirits Return: Cultural Traditions Keeping Memories Alive* has been well received by our local and regional visitors. Everybody can connect to the topic of honoring our ancestors and remembering a loved one who has passed on.

The exhibit has also featured rotating installations in the Community Memory Space which provide families with an opportunity to put together an altar for a loved one or create an art piece inspired by the topic. So far we have exhibited an AIDS quilt, pieces by three local artists, and a Native American altar.

And there is more to come. If you haven't seen the exhibit yet, don't miss it before it closes on April 17. If you have already seen it, come back to see what's new in the Community Memory Space, and bring your friends and family.

~ JOHANNA FASSBENDER, COLLECTIONS & EXHIBITIONS  
MANAGER



*This altar dedicated to Jimi Simmons (1951-2011), an enrolled member of The Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde Oregon, was on display in January. Jimi and his wife Karen Rudolph raised their two sons Arthur and Jay in Los Altos.*

## Spring Garden Party

Thanks to the generosity of founding patrons Nan and Chuck Geschke, the Los Altos History Museum will be hosting a Spring Fundraising Gala at the beautifully restored Geschke estate on Saturday, May 7, 2016.

The four-level Italianate home on the corner of University Avenue and Burke was built by Frank Marini in 1926 as his summer home along with his four maiden sisters. Marini was the eldest of a large Italian family in San Francisco, with one brother and nine sisters. Marini was well known for his philanthropy; there was hardly a charity in existence that did not benefit from his giving spirit. In Los Altos his contributions helped build the Marini Hall at the Jesuit Retreat and St. Nicholas Church, named after his father.

After the last sister died in 1969, the home was a retreat house for the Sisters of the Sacred Heart for two years, at which time Tamara Ann Tossy and the late Dr. Jerome Tossy purchased it. The Geschkes purchased it in 1995, becoming only the third owners.

As guests at this Spring Garden Party, you will enjoy the wonderful history of the home and property and feel the Geschke-Marini spirit as you step into the beautiful garden setting of this grand estate. This will be one of the last opportunities to visit this home before the Geschke's



*Geschke house*

move. Included in your experience will be wine tasting, lawn games, garden tours, a unique art auction, delicious hors d'oeuvres, chamber music, laughter, and community friends. Save the date!

~ JANE REED

## Spotlight on the Oral History Project

Often when we drive or walk through our towns, especially in the springtime, we enjoy the beauty of the area but may not realize that all of this continues to exist because of the vision and dedication of many individuals.

This is especially true of Westwind Barn, an imposing structure on Altamont Road next to Byrne Preserve in Los Altos Hills. The town acquired the barn and surrounding 15 acres in 1975 from Countess Margit Besseney, who had for many years operated a riding school at the site.

When the town assumed ownership, there was the immediate challenge of how it was to be managed and operated. One stipulation the council made at the outset was that the facility was not to be exclusively for Los Altos Hills residents. “We want to do something for the broader community. Los Altos Hills cannot be an island in the community—we get benefits from our neighbors, so the barn is the opportunity to share with others.”

A group of residents, including Nancy and Jitze Couperus, formed the Friends of Westwind, and created a model of how the barn and surrounding facilities could function, with classes as well as boarding facilities for horse lovers in the area. Nancy was one of the original visionaries who started the therapeutic riding program for physically handicapped children—the Westwind 4-H Riding Program, which continues to operate today, with the active involvement of high school students and adults from the surrounding area.

Recently the town took over the operation of the barn, completing a substantial retrofit of the structure and upgrade of riding rings and paddocks for horses. With a new concessionaire, the barn continues to be a focal point of activities for horse riders from throughout the bay area, who love the facility and surrounding trails. The barn is also the site for many popular family activities throughout the year which are open to everyone.

All of this has been made possible through the vision and dedication of Nancy and Jitze Couperus, and countless volunteers over the years. Their story will be one of those featured in the exhibition coming to the Museum which will highlight the stories of individuals who have contributed so much to making our community a beautiful place to live.

~ GINGER SUMMITT



*Jitze and Nancy Couperus with Reno*



*Westwind Barn, circa 1980. Museum Collection*

### New Members

Welcome to 21 new members, and thank you to 166 renewing members. Our total membership at this moment is 794.

Stacy Baier	Mark Leadenham
Stephanie Belier	Dwight Matthews
Dennis Bennett	Maddy McBirney
Kathy Boggs	Darren McClung
Virginia Brown	Teri Medcalf
Diana Chan	Donald Neff
Jill Curcio	Cindy Olander
Michael Ellerin	Kathy Orciuoli
Carol Garsten	Pete Peterson
Ted Hoff	Michele Raffin
Cathy Howland Rongey	

## Director's Corner

It is a year full of historical anniversaries and more coming!

The heritage orchard planted by J. Gilbert Smith turns 115 next year. While new trees have replaced the old over the years, there remain a few trees at least 90 years old and still producing delicious Blenheim apricots. The community declared it a historical landmark 35 years ago.

The Museum will turn 40 next year, and the City of Los Altos 65. Our city was the first to incorporate after the end of WWII, and included an over-the-speed-limit round trip run to Sacramento to get the paperwork officially recorded.

25 years ago, the Smith House was revamped, changing from a few small rooms used as galleries into a Depression-era orchardist's farmhouse. We soon outgrew it as a museum, so 20 years ago we started a capital campaign to build the new Museum. It turns 15 years old this March and with the Smith House continues to serve its community well. The exhibits are well-loved, and we work to keep it looking fresh.

But we can do better than that. There is a phenomenon in our industry called "Museum 2.0"—the idea that like Web 2.0, the viewer or visitor is involved in the material... not just a reader or observer. Your staff is well-versed in this trend and we're working with the board on the ideas it generates... how it would change and improve what we present in the Museum, Smith House and even our agricultural exhibits and grounds.

We think both Gilbert and Margaret, who would turn 140 this fall, would approve. Stay tuned as we develop these exciting ideas!

~ LAURA BAJUK, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

## Photo Gallery—Crab Feed



*Julia Lovin, Jeanne and Duncan MacVicar*



*Honored guests Clay Schluchter, Council Member Megan Satterlee, and Mayor Jeannie Bruins*



*Mike and Nancy Schneider, Kathy and Lee Lera*



*Auctioning the Stephen Curry autographed basketball*

## History in the News

Good news from the Los Altos City Council—the application fee waiver for overlay zoning for a Historic District for Fallen Leaf Park was granted in January. The fee represented a significant hurdle for the Eichler homeowners, who can now begin fundraising to hire an Architectural Historian and prepare the application. Nathan Johnson and Tracy Gibbons are leading the effort to create the City’s first Historic District and hope to file the application this year.

Our Museum isn’t the only good one in the area. The Computer History Museum is worth a visit, and in January, Nomi Trapnell was there to give her final presentation of the amazing Babbage Difference Engine #2. This mechanized calculating machine, designed by Charles Babbage in the 1840s, has 8000 bronze, cast iron and steel parts and weighs five tons. With the moving gears and lever arms it is a sight to behold. Babbage was a gifted, if prickly inventor and became irritated with the inevitable errors in the hand calculated mathematical tables of the time. He determined to build a machine that would eliminate such human error. It was not built in his lifetime, cost and a difficult personality undoubtedly contributing to that. Finally built in 1991, Engine #1 is on display at the Museum of Science in London. “It just sits there looking cute,” according to Nomi, whereas Engine #2 is a working model. Sadly, after seven years it is moving to Seattle, home of the former Microsoft executive who commissioned it.

~ GARY HEDDEN



*Nomi Trapnell with Babbage Difference Engine #2*

## Our Hidden Gems

Bill Hough donated a collection of items from his high school days and his mother’s teaching career. This included some science fiction literary magazines from Los Altos High School in the 1970s, photos of Bill’s high school graduation, class photos of his mother’s fourth grade classes over the years, and a booklet written by Mrs. Hough’s 1989 fourth grade class on how they experienced the Loma Prieta earthquake.

It felt like I was looking at a little slice of life for one family in Los Altos. The science fiction journals were fun to catalog, and I got to read what the students were interested in at Los Altos High School at the time, like Tolkien. The class photos were also very cool, they were from the late 1970s to the mid 1990s, almost always of a fourth grade class. It was interesting to see the slowly changing fashions for elementary school kids, and see how their personalities came through.

It’s great to have a donation come to the Museum from the recent past. We are dedicated to preserving the history of Los Altos, and that history happens every day. Collecting items from the recent past ensures that future museum staff and visitors will have the resources to learn about our life now and have material for future exhibitions. Bill’s donation was mostly from the 1980s, and that means we have time to ask questions and gather more information. It’s important and it makes collecting so much fun.

~ ANDREA DOMPE



*Andrea Dompe working on collections*

## Photo Gallery—Crab Feed



*Great kitchen help*



*Margie Alving and the new software system—no stress, it's all under control*



*Lori Tuttle, center, with National Charity League volunteers Sydney and Heidi Robinson*



*Karen Purtich with Mercury News columnist Steve Yaska, the "Seasoned Collector"*



*Dinner is served*



*Ed, Marie Backs and Jane Reed calling out the raffle winners*



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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 or  
[hello@losaltoshistory.org](mailto:hello@losaltoshistory.org)

## 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

**Ikebana Show**, Saturday, Sunday, March 19-20, at the Los Altos Library, noon-4 pm, live demo each day at 1 pm

**School Tours**, Grades 3-4, weekdays, 9-noon, April & May. Teachers & homeschoolers, contact the Museum, it may still be possible to sign up

**Family Day at the Museum**, Saturday, April 2, 10 am-noon

**Spirits Return: Cultural Traditions Keeping Memories Alive**, Final Day, Sunday, April 17, noon-4 pm

May is **Historic Preservation Month & Museum Month!**

**Many Communities, Many Voices: Personal Narratives from the Oral History Collection**, Opening Reception, Sunday, May 1, 2-4 pm

**Silicon Valley Gives!** (A day of online fundraising), Tuesday, May 3

**Spring Garden Party**, Saturday, May 7, 4:30-7:30 pm, Geschke Home

**Essay Contest Winners Ice Cream Social**, Tuesday, May 10, Museum Courtyard, 6:00 pm

**Antique Evaluation by Steve Yvaska & Lunch**, Sunday, August 21, 11 am-3 pm, at the Museum, tickets available at [hello@losaltoshistory.org](mailto:hello@losaltoshistory.org)



Wendy Reynolds sporting the latest in crab accessories

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

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