Bill Powell had a vision. He was one of the founders of the Los Altos Village Association (LAVA) and served on the Downtown Beautification Committee. Through his efforts with those groups we have the unique cube-shaped street lamps that can still be seen at the intersection of State and Main, and the charming lights that decorate the trees downtown, something Bill recalled from a visit to the Seattle World’s Fair in 1962.

Today’s head of LAVA, Scott Hunter, applauds such charming touches and would like to do more—colorful banners, more artwork and public gathering spaces. LAVA brings us the Farmers’ Market, the Arts and Wine Festival, the downtown flower baskets and more, all part of the small town look and feel of Los Altos.

Bill Powell had one other really big vision. He wanted something substantial and for him that meant 18 tons of granite. In 1976 he spent several hundred dollars of his own money to buy massive granite blocks from a small quarry near Yosemite. The blocks were loaded on a flatbed truck, brought to Los Altos and dropped off at the Maintenance Yard. As President of the Los Altos Rotary Club, Powell intended this to be a gift from the Rotary to the City to be installed as a fountain in Lincoln Park. The City Council was less than impressed. For one thing there was a drought in the mid 70s so it was hard to justify a fountain, but council member Ruth Koehler put it more bluntly, “We’re focused on needs that are more pressing.” She mentioned a request for help from the new senior citizens center as one example. Powell admitted that his plan was an “enthusiastic venture,” but he countered that there is a distinction between a need and a gift. A gift may not address a need, but it will be appreciated “when one can observe the simple fact that people of all ages will use it and enjoy it.”

Council member Audrey Fisher joined Powell in lobbying for the project, rain came and the drought broke and when the location was switched from Lincoln Park to the Library, support in the community picked up. With significant fund-raising help from Bill Shine, the fountain and the granite blocks were installed and quickly added to the unique charm of Los Altos.

Fast forward to 2017, and Curt Powell, Bill’s son, recognizes that village charm is still hard to define, but it is more than building heights, materials and landscaping, it is the “elegance” of the design. Among recent buildings, he likes the Packard Foundation on Second Street which opened in 2012. The tree-lined streets and set-backs from the property line contribute to a successful look.

The City has undertaken a “visioning process” and the consultant, RRM Group, is collecting input. The goal is to define a vision for downtown that will work for residents and merchants and find the balance that combines both charm and economic viability. At a recent panel discussion with residents from south Los Altos, hosted by the Los Altos Community Coalition, Therese Kristensen noted the importance of the “experience.” People often choose to visit a downtown—be it Los Altos, Mountain View, or Cupertino—because they want more than just going to a restaurant, they want something to do before or after dinner, or simply the fun of seeing other people. That becomes the experience.
Looking back at this year I am truly amazed at what we have done, what we have begun, and where we are going!

We had the popular Hau Beiren@100 exhibition with record setting attendance. His spectacular “splash” paintings were wonderful and we made so many new friends and attracted many new members. This exhibit was a real treat that happened by a chance encounter—one of our members met his daughter, they talked about his art and it led to the show!

We’ve had other successes too. The Smith House trim got painted, the old telephone got fixed, the garden sprinklers got fixed, the downstairs offices were refurbished and the overhead lights have all been replaced. These jobs take time and talent and we truly love our volunteers for all they do. One volunteer we really miss is our dear Bob Grimm. He was a pillar of the museum, impossible to replace and we are so grateful and thankful for his legacy gift.

We have a new staff member, Heather Farquhar. She will be working on our collections with a team of volunteers. After a hiatus on taking your memorabilia, we are back in business. Give Heather a call, you’ll love what she has up her sleeve.

Speaking of collections, we found articles dating back 100 years to help Boy Scout Troop 37 of Los Altos celebrate their centennial year! Visit the Smith House the last two weeks of June to see this lovely piece of our history. You can also go upstairs and pay a visit to Raggedy Ann and Andy.

Our museum store had a fantastic year with stocking stuffers at Christmas, gardening tools in Spring, books by local authors, scarves by the yard and items connected to the current exhibitions. If you would like to help out just give us a call.

You can also help as a docent. That’s where I started! You will work with a buddy—if you like people, learning new things and sharing fun stories with others, give us a call.

Elisabeth and Heather will be writing a strategic plan including a capital fundraising program for needed upgrades. The Museum is in solid financial shape, but we must always plan for the future.

As the gavel passes to the next President I am pleased to share my thoughts with you, encourage you to become a volunteer and we all look forward to building a more exciting place for you and the community.

See you at the Museum!
~ Marilyn Henderson

Another point of view is offered by Bob Simmons, a long time resident of Los Altos and a self described “traditionalist.” He voices the genuine concerns of a number in the community who see development adding to the traffic and parking woes, bringing more people downtown and in the process destroying our unique village charm. This, of course, is not a pleasant experience.

Is there a happy spot in the middle? Los Altos Community Investments (LACI) has proposed a community plaza called First Street Green that combines open space with underground parking. Joanne Price with LACI notes that “a plaza is a good way to bring people together,” but goes on to say “it’s not the plaza, not the buildings, it’s the people who make the community.” A plaza is one way to bring people downtown, one way to create a good experience.

We are shaping the future of Los Altos and it is challenging, exciting and difficult. Stay positive and enjoy the experience.

~ Gary Hedden

Heather Farquhar joined the Museum May 31 as Deputy Director and Head of Collections. She comes to us from the Hayward Area Historical Society where she served as the Collections and Historic Properties Manager.

Staff
Elisabeth Ida Ward, Executive Director
Heather Farquhar, Deputy Director and Head of Collections
Gena Hunter, Bookkeeper/Accountant
Mark Perry, Facility & Rentals Manager
Faustino Carrillo, Gardener
History House, in the Beginning

Forty years ago, the Smith House became the History House. How fortunate for Los Altos, but how did it happen and how did it all work out so well?

The J. Gilbert Smith house was built in 1905 and sold to the City in 1954 by Mr. Smith with two important conditions:

- He and his wife Margaret could stay in it as long as they lived.
- It would thereafter be for “public use only.”

Margaret, who outlived J. Gilbert, passed away in 1973 at the age of 94. The City now owned a very old house. What to do with it?

A commission was assembled and according to Geraldine Kavenaugh in episode #1 of the Los Altos History Show, there was so much citizen interest that it was quickly expanded from five to seven commissioners. One of the original applicants was Pinky Whelan. She ran an antique shop in town, The Yankee Peddler, and was certainly qualified to be a commissioner, but she admits, “I was nervous during the interview with the city council.” That evening she heard a knock on the door and there was Mayor Art Carmichael and Councilman Roy Lave, with their wives Jean and Penny, and a bottle of champagne. Welcome to the commission!

The commission with the enthusiastic support of the next mayor, Audrey Fisher, and an active and engaged group of community members, called the Auxiliary, came up with a plan to lead tours, collect memorabilia, plan events and raise funds. There were at least 50 people in the Auxiliary, many from local church groups according to Tamme Tossy. On December 1, 1977 the History House opened its doors for the first public tour, exactly 25 years to the day from the incorporation of the City of Los Altos.

For many years the Auxiliary used the History House to display rotating exhibits, but in 1989 the interior was refurbished to depict a typical 1930s Los Altos farmhouse. In 1991, Marie Backs, association co-president with Pinky Whelan, noted, “The living room and dining rooms will remind you of going to your grandmother’s house.”

The Auxiliary was strong and membership was up because of an interested and very engaged group of volunteers who stay connected and enjoy what they are doing. And that’s the answer, the History House and the Museum did well, and continue to do well, because of our many good volunteers.

~ Gary Hedden

New Members

Welcome to our new members:

Ken and Vicki Haukom
Grace Perry
Cliff Olson
Jan and Jill Prahm
Edith Jobe
Terry and W. Hewins
Melanie Schnoll Begun
Aiko Hill
Anthony Lima

Wanda Ching
Bob Simon
Jan Thomas
Dennis Duffy
Shahla Sheikholeslam
Karen Robbins
Grandimathi
Vaithilingam

And thank you to all 820 active members!

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!

Pinky Whelan received a well deserved proclamation from Mayor Mary Prochnow at the May 9 City Council meeting. The proclamation was read to a packed chamber and recognized Pinky as one of the City’s first seven Historical Commissioners, in 1977, for her considerable efforts “instrumental in the preservation of the J. Gilbert Smith History House,” and for her many activities with the History Museum, including, of course, starting “the Annual Crab Feed more than 30 years ago.”
Our Historic Apricot Orchard

The Civic Center Apricot Orchard is a community treasure and an important source of the charm of Los Altos. It is our last active orchard, and it takes us back to the early 20th century—when the Santa Clara valley was filled with orchards. The Civic Center Apricot Orchard is a local Historical Landmark, protected by a series of City ordinances and resolutions, and in 1987 it was designated a Historical Point of Interest by the California State Parks Office of Historical Preservation. The Historical Commission is excited to encourage the beautification and increase community awareness of the Apricot Orchard. To that end, the Commission looks forward to installing historic plaques and a set of attractive interpretative signs about the orchard. These signs will tell the story of the history of apricots, other historic fruit orchards in the valley, and how our orchard changes through the four seasons of the year.

At the April Historical Commission meeting many community members spoke fondly of their memories of the orchard, the pleasure of the open space and the beauty of the trees, the blossoms and the taste of the fruit. One intriguing idea presented was an Annual Los Altos Apricot Harvest Festival. The Festival would celebrate the picking, eating, drying, canning and cooking of apricots. Such events are popular in nearby communities and could be welcome by both long time residents and our new arrivals to Los Altos who are eager to learn our history.

~ Margo Horn, Los Altos Historical Commissioner

Eichler Homes Exhibit

Eichler Homes: Modernism for the Masses opened in April, and was formally launched with a well attended reception on May 5th. The Eichler exhibition, which will run through October 8th, tells the story of Joe Eichler, a savvy merchant builder, who envisioned modern style homes on a large scale for a middle class eager for affordable contemporary places in which to raise their families. Through the designs of three key architectural firms, Joe was able to realize his dream, and more than 65 years later, the distinctive contemporary homes remain unique, desirable and celebrated.

The History Museum honors Eichler Homes and the Eichler dream with an exhibition curated by grandson Steven Eichler with graphic design by his wife Judi. The exhibition of photos, ’50s furniture and stories is not to be missed. A series of programs will be part of the exhibition—check the Museum website and watch for your regular email updates.

~ Jane Reed

Phil Doetsch tilled the Historic Apricot Orchard in early May and he plans to trim the trees before the harvest in July. Now that we have finally received some rain, he is looking forward to planting 100 new apricot trees next Winter. Blenheim of course, as they have the very best flavor. Phil has been in the orchard business for many years and started working on the Los Altos orchard three years ago when Don Speciale retired - at the age of 89!

Sande Stuart and Julia Lovin at the opening reception. Steven Eichler is in the background.
Relocation

Recently, the Los Altos History Museum hosted Seaweed, Salmon and Manzanita Cider, a look at the life and culture of the area’s original inhabitants. It was wonderful to be reminded of the people who were here first, but many aren’t aware that there are thousands of Native Americans still living here. Many are Ohlone people, but most of us come from other tribes. We don’t look like Hollywood Indians, so our identities are invisible to our fellow citizens.

I am an enrolled member of the Hualapai Nation. We own over 100 miles of the Grand Canyon, from the edge of the national park to Lake Mead. My Hualapai grandmother, Rowena Clark, relocated to San Francisco in the 1960’s. This wasn’t the common “relocation” in search of better jobs, better weather or new adventures, this relocation was part of a government program started in 1956: The Indian Relocation Act/Termination.

“If you can’t change them, absorb them until they simply disappear into the mainstream culture,” so observed former U.S. Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell from Colorado.

The goal was to move Native people off their reservations and turn their land and resources over to private interests. One hundred Native tribes were terminated through the 1960’s and over 750,000 Native Americans eventually relocated to urban areas. Oakland, San Francisco and San Jose were the target destinations here.

Now the third and fourth generation descendants of these travelers are living here. We have not lost our identity as Native Americans although many of us have intermarried with people of different tribes or different races. I am mixed race, Black and Native American, but Native culture and spirituality remain at the center of my life.

The exhibition by the History Museum and the opportunity to tell our story is important to us and appreciated.

~ Arthur Simmons

Director’s Corner

What an aptly named column this is, “Director’s Corner.” Indeed the Director’s office is in a corner, down on the lower level of the museum. It is a bit tucked away, which can be helpful on days when there is a buzz of activity upstairs and office work to get done. But also a big change from my last office, right on the hallway of the student union at Pacific Lutheran University. People walked by all day and all evening long, and I was asked for directions to this or that office on a fairly regular basis. I’d close my door certainly whenever I was with a student discussing an assignment or test, but otherwise, I tried to keep an “open door policy.”

Museums and cultural institutions have an obligation to be that sort of open, available, welcoming place both ethically and legally, as non-profits serving the public good. That’s why I’m proud to be working somewhere that is admission-free and located in the core of the city services for the residents of Los Altos. Though we may not get as many visitors as the library, and we aren’t thought of as critical to city operations as the police, we do serve a vital function here. Towns need to know their history, need to know the stories of their places.

As I’ve been getting familiar with the people, places, artifacts, photos, and archival material we have here, I am discovering just what a treasure trove the Los Altos History Museum is. And I hope to continue that legacy through my efforts as the Executive Director. It’s a responsibility I enjoy and take seriously, to bring the stories of this place to life for the community. As initiatives get rolling, we’ll have updates in the newsletter, on our Facebook page, and in our bi-weekly emails. If you don’t receive those emails, and haven’t connected with us on social media, please consider doing so. We want to hear from you and we want to let you know what we are up to.

This issue of the newsletter has some great stories to share about our wonderful J. Gilbert Smith House, about the orchard, and more. I am working with some folks in the city and county and hope to have some news to share soon about the signage project and other upgrades for the grounds around the museum. I know we all want to make sure visitors to our courtyard and Civic Center appreciate why this place is special not only to us at the museum, but to the whole town.

As I settle into my job here, down in the Director’s Corner, I hope you all will feel that I have an “Open Door Policy.” It’s so nice to be here and I’m looking forward to getting to know all of you.

~ Elisabeth Ida Ward, Executive Director
Photo Gallery

Pictured are all of the students who wrote the winning essays in the 33rd Margaret Thompson essay contest. The theme was based on the recently closed exhibition, “Seaweed, Salmon, and Manzanita Cider.” The school with the most prize winners this year was Pinewood School and kindly holding the trophy for Pinewood are third grade students Josephine Dunne and Avery Simonsen, who actually attend St. Simon.

Susan Moss welcomes the more than 200 members of the Garden Club of Los Altos to the History Museum, one of the stops this year on the Club’s Spring Tour in early May. The Museum has Garden Club records going back to their first year in 1929.

Ellen Gonella with her dramatic flower arrangement at the art of Ikebana event at the Museum in April. Ellen even made the ceramic vase!

Nora Lacey, founder of the Assyrian Arts Institute, with Congresswoman Anna Eshoo at the Lincoln Park dedication ceremony in April of the magnificent bronze sculpture, Shlama. Shlama is more than the word peace in the Aramaic language; it is a heartfelt greeting used in the Assyrian community every day. The Arts Institute donated the piece to the City of Los Altos to thank us for being open-minded and kind to the thousands of Assyrian-American living in the Bay Area. Anna Eshoo, who is proudly Armenian-Assyrian thanked us as well. She pointed out that the Assyrians were among the original Christians and they are under attack by ISIS. Their art is under attack and art is a marker of history, important as “generations to come will know who and what we are.”

Members of the Board meeting the new Executive Director at a reception in March.
Photo Gallery – Eichler Opening Reception

Judi and Steven Eichler, curators of the exhibition.

Roger Baldwin, owner of an Eichler in Sunnyvale, with a picture of the price paid by the original owner in 1958—$17,000.

Marie Backs serving delicious bites of ham salad sandwich.

Karen Duncan proudly points to her Eichler on Parson Way off San Antonio Road. She has lived there since the 80s.

Jim and Emy Thurber with John Reed in the middle. There’s a Joe Eichler connection—Joe was Jim’s campaign manager for his 1962 run for the House of Representatives.

Larry and Carla Bjork, long time Museum supporters, encourage you to see the new exhibition!
Museum and Store Hours
Thursday to Sunday, Noon–4 pm
We are closed New Year’s Day, Easter, Fourth of July, Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Eve, and Christmas Day.

General Inquiries
(650) 948-9427 x14 or hello@losaltoshistory.org

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

On The Calendar

Eichler Homes: Modernism For The Masses, an exhibition on the iconic homes of Joe Eichler, closes October 8.

Annual Meeting and Volunteer Recognition Party at the Museum, appetizers provided, Wednesday, June 14, 4:30-7 pm.

A La Soiree at the Museum, an evening event by the Los Altos Dept. of Recreation, Thursday, June 22. To purchase tickets call (650) 947-2797.

Scout Troop 37, a celebration of 100 years, Smith House, June 24–July 2.

After Hours Business Mixer hosted by the Los Altos Rotary Club, Kiwanis and the Museum, Wednesday, June 28, 5:30-7 pm, at the Museum.
$5 Chamber of Commerce members, $15 non-members, collected at the door.

Our Community Through the Eyes of Children, Smith House, July 7–September 8, a Los Altos School District summer program.

Blowout Sale at the Museum Store, your chance to buy unique items discounted 50%, Saturday, July 8, 10 am-4 pm.

40 Years! Celebration Dinner at the Museum with acoustic folk music by MaCajo, Sunday, July 23, 5-8 pm, $50.

Let’s Talk Antiques with Steve Yvaska, bring your items and get Steve’s expert feedback, Sunday, August 20, 11 am-3 pm, $75 donation.

Train Days! Saturday & Sunday, September 16 & 17, 10 am-4 pm.

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