

Windmills and Weathervanes

The Los Altos History Museum recently installed a windmill next to the restored Spagnoli Tank House, which you can read about in Kevin Moore's article on page 3. That got me thinking about the history of wind-based technology more generally. Although we today view wind as a nuisance that litters our yards with leaves, or more critically, as a force of nature that feeds fires, wind has historically been important for fueling human imagination. Nowhere is that truer than in the whimsical weathervane.

I first became enamored by weathervanes when I was working at the Smithsonian Institution on an exhibition about the Vikings. Although I knew their voyages were dependent on harnessing the power of the wind to propel ships across the water, holding a 1000-year-old copper wind vane decorated with dragons and beasts helped me sense the power and magic the Vikings beheld in the wind. I recall discussing this with the international group of curators I was working with; some dismissed it as just a practical sailing instrument.

Of course, weathervanes do serve a practical purpose by indicating the direction of the prevailing wind, and a knowledgeable local can use that information to reckon what sort of weather is coming. But the history of weathervanes reveals that they have often had an aspirational, divine quality about them, and have long been decorated with spiritual or symbolic motifs.

The earliest documented weathervane was built atop the Tower of the Winds in first century Athens, Greece, possibly by the astronomer Andronicus. This weathervane bore the body of a man and the tail of a fish in honor of Triton, Greek god of the sea. In medieval Europe, most towns had a weathervane atop the tallest building, and by Papal decree in the 9th century, were normally in the shape of a rooster. This was to remind all subjects to be faithful, rather than deny Jesus as had the apostle Peter.

Early weathervanes in American culture carried on the tradition of strong symbolism. After the Revolutionary War, George Washington commissioned a beautiful "dove of peace" weathervane, crafted from copper and gilded with gold leaf, to adorn the cupola of Mount Vernon. Eventually weathervanes became more of folk tradition; historian Gwen Bruno believes this is because American farmsteads are so far apart from one another, and each one needed its own weathervane to help the farmer determine what the next day would bring. As it became a folk tradition, the designs and symbolism of the weathervane became much more down-to-earth. Horses and cattle became the most common motifs, and were sold by catalogue to farmers.



Viking Age wind vane in the collection of Statens Historiska Museum, Sweden. Photo from Vikings: The North Atlantic Saga, courtesy Smithsonian Institution Press.

But what all weathervanes have in common is something that also links the weathervane to our newly installed windmill. The weathervane turns freely on a fixed vertical rod, and is designed to point into the wind. In order to catch the wind, the weathervane ornament must have equal mass on each side of the axis, but unequal area. This allows the point of least resistance (the flattest part of the decoration) to always face into the wind. This same principal is used on the "tail" behind the spinning blades of the windmill; it pivots on a horizontal axis to ensure the vertical spin-plane of blades always faces the direction of the wind.



Dove of Peace weathervane overlooking the Potomac, courtesy the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association.

President's Pen



Some good news—we're open! Of course, it didn't last, but it was a start. Good news is scarce these days. The year 2020 has been historic, and awful. A global pandemic, the killing of George Floyd, contentious political drama, record heat, so many wildfires and so much smoke. The Museum is here to collect stories about all of this and tell the stories. That's

what we do. Our current exhibition *Rise Up! The Fight for Women's Suffrage* is about a long, contentious period in our nation's history that continues to this day. I was struck by a comment made by our very first visitor when we finally opened *Rise Up!* inside the Museum. She had recently arrived from Russia and said, "I had no idea getting the vote was such a struggle." The rest of the world simply assumes America has always had democracy. We know better. It was a fight and the fight continues.

The next exhibition, *Beauty and the Beast*, tells us about climate change and makes the connection to all the wildfires and smoke. Understanding and managing climate change is at the core of my interests. I recently attended a conference on *Green Museums*. I learned that 300 museums have joined together to share best practices as we strive to conserve our resources and minimize our impact on the environment. The County of Santa Clara has a program to audit the use of energy and water, the materials we purchase and the waste we create. I signed us up. I am sure we can learn something useful.

Finally, despite the risks, our many volunteers and docents continue to help us put on our exhibitions. A small but dedicated group of volunteers, wearing masks and keeping as much distance as possible, installed *Rise Up!* and docents, including our new teen docents, and store volunteers, help us keep the doors open. These good people and our loyal donors make it possible for the Museum to survive and thrive.

Thanks to all, and stay well,

~ Gary Hedden

Staff

Dr. Elisabeth Ward, *Executive Director*
Dr. Amy Noel Ellison, *Exhibition Curator*
Diane Holcomb, *Outreach Coordinator*
Dianne Shen, *Collections Strategist*
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LOS ALTOS HISTORY MUSEUM "UNDER THE OAKS"

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

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A special thanks to the newsletter mailing team!

Windmills and Weathervanes

continued from page 1

Weathervanes have become major collector's items, with unusual antique designs fetching hundreds of thousands of dollars. The Los Altos History Museum is blessed with two original weathervanes, commissioned by Bob Grimm from West Coast Weathervanes in Santa Cruz, CA. One was installed in 2001 on the top of the main museum building, and features a family of quail, California's state bird. The other one was created in 2015 to grace the top of our storage barn, and shows the silhouette of a man riding a tractor. It was based on a photo of J. Gilbert Smith out in his orchard. Both pieces are beautiful reminders of a time period when we had to rely on our own knowledge of weather patterns, and the direction of the wind, to guess what tomorrow's weather would bring.

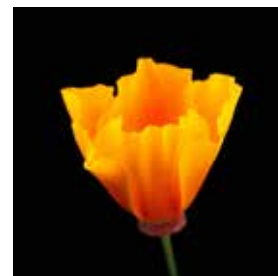
~ Dr. Elisabeth Ward

In 2018, the Museum inaugurated *The Weathervane Society* in memory of Bob and Marion Grimm. This donor group follows the example of the Grimms, who made generous annual contributions to the Museum and who also kindly remembered the Museum in their estate.

Coming Soon

Breathtaking photographs address climate change and its effect on a universal symbol of beauty: the wildflower, in *Beauty and the Beast: California Wildflowers and Climate Change*, a new traveling exhibition appearing at the Los Altos History Museum in March 2021. For over 20 years, international award-winning photographers Rob Badger and Nita Winter have worked to capture California's vanishing wildflowers, bringing awareness to the beauty of the Golden State as well as to the dangers facing our natural habitats from climate change. All geographic regions of California are highlighted in this stunning show, from the high alpine "rock gardens" above 11,000 feet in the Sierra Nevada Mountains to Death Valley National Park's below-sea-level environment.

Beauty and the Beast: California Wildflowers and Climate Change is an exhibition by Rob Badger and Nita Winter. The exhibition originated at the San Francisco Public Library, and is traveled by Exhibit Envoy.



California Poppy
(*Eschscholzia californica*).
Photograph by Rob Badger
and Nita Winter

The Iconic Windmill

It has been said that the six shooter, barbed wire and the water pumping windmill were the three leading inventions that helped settle the West. While historians may add other mechanical inventions to that list, most people would agree that there is nothing more iconic of the American West than the windmill. The ability to draw fresh, clean water from underground sources and store that water in an elevated tank using wind power, was essential to both the survival and expansion of the agricultural community as they moved westward. Often the first large investment a farmer would make would be a water pumping windmill. The newly installed water pumping windmill at the museum will help visitors understand the importance of having stored water. The elevated tank allowed for water to be available upon demand for domestic and agricultural use. More importantly, the ever-worrisome threat of fire to farmers was lessened by having a tank full of water ready to suppress a fire. This was a vast improvement to the bucket brigade fire suppression methods used without the benefit of water pressure from an elevated tank.

Man has harnessed the wind for thousands of years but had always been challenged by the inability to overcome violent changes in wind direction or critically high wind speeds. The invention of a windmill that required no human oversight to control the wind wheel, and could be left unattended to pump water as long as the wind blew, was a life changing invention for the country. Windmills became a very competitive industry and windmill manufacturers quickly grew all across the U.S. Marketing and advertising became an important part of the windmill industry. Catchy names such as the "Cyclone Windmill"



Kevin Moore with our windmill. Kevin is a water-pumping windmill enthusiast, and the owner of Rock Ridge Windmills located in Cloverdale, CA. He has worked with windmills for about twenty-five years and is known around the world as the "Windmill Guy."

made in Santa Clara, CA and the "Hercules Windmill" made in Stockton, CA competed for a market share. At the same time fierce competition came from Midwestern windmill manufacturers who sold the "Star Zephyr" and "GEM" windmills at discount prices. The marketing ploy of adding the farmer's name or cattle brand to the windmill tail became a salesman's tool to help "close the deal."

The windmill installed at the museum is a clone of the model from one of the most prominent windmill companies, the Aermotor Windmill Co. from Chicago. This windmill used a simple design to lift water from the well into an elevated tank and would automatically turn the wind wheel out of the wind to prevent damage from high winds. Early windmills required a weekly trip up the windmill tower to lubricate the moving parts. A frightful and dangerous climb on a windy day led to replacing most windmills around 1915 with "oil bath" windmills that only required a yearly oil

change. This new design soon became the standard.

While the windmill was a business investment to a farmer, today the peaceful movement of the windmill wheel can almost be hypnotic to museum visitors. It is not unusual to find visitors watching the windmill as the wheel spins and the tail vane gently moves the windmill to catch the wind.

"There is just something about a windmill that makes me want to stop and watch the wind at work," is something I have heard many times. I encourage you to visit your new windmill and take a moment to enjoy the windmill as she catches Mother Nature's wind.

~ Kevin Moore

Fifty Years of Art

For fifty years the Los Altos Art Docents have taken pride in teaching art to the children of the Los Altos School District. Frustrated by budget cuts for art instruction, Nancy Marston and Marlene Grove founded the program in 1970 with lessons in watercolor painting, clay tiles, clay animals, cut paper animals and flowers, and wire sculpture.

The program continues to thrive with 95 docents, two district-paid employees, and many art shows. To celebrate the golden anniversary, the Art Docents sponsored a student logo design contest. The winning design is featured on the cover of the anniversary sketchbook, *50 Things to Sketch*. All submissions are showcased in the History Museum's virtual *Young at Art* exhibition. www.losaltoshistory.org/exhibit/young-at-art/

~ Kimberly Dickerson



Naiel, holding the sketchbook. Photo courtesy of the Los Altos Art Docents.

Spotlight on the Oral History Project

Jane and John Reed moved to Southern California after living in Los Altos for 52 years. Jane's many contributions to our community are preserved in her oral history taken shortly before their move.

The first organization to benefit from Jane's leadership was the American Association of University Women. In 1968 it was one of the few groups where college educated women could find meaningful outlets for educational and service activities. Through AAUW Jane made many lifetime friends. After becoming AAUW President, she joined the Los Altos Parks and Recreation Commission in 1974. This launched an interest in city government; friends encouraged her to run for City Council in 1980. She hoped to replace Audrey Fisher who had been on the council for 16 years. Elected by about 75 votes, Jane soon helped achieve one of her campaign goals ... having council members agree to serve just two 4-year terms, a norm that has been followed ever since. We also have Jane to thank for curbside recycling in Los Altos and bikes being permitted on Foothill Expressway.



Jane Reed relaxing in front of her new home in Southern California. Photo credit John Reed.

Jane has had a lifelong interest in art. It was her major at UC Berkeley where she met John Reed. She loves connecting people, comes naturally to being an event planner and expanded the Arts and Wine Festival as the Director of the Los Altos Village Association. In 1997 Nan Geschke asked Jane to help develop the Museum's new Permanent Exhibit. After it opened in 2001, Marie Backs asked Jane to Chair the Changing Exhibits Committee which she did for 15 years! Jane also served as a Board member and President, and said, "Working with the museum has been a joy."

Jane's campaign motto was "Jane Loves Los Altos," and she has shown her love in so many ways. On a personal note, in 2015 Jane recruited me to join the Museum Board; it feels like a poignant "full circle" to have had the privilege of doing her oral history as we say a *fond au revoir*.

~ Marcia Adams

Volunteer Highlights

Chances are, when you arrive at the Museum the first faces you see are those of our docents. Their smiling faces may be masked but our docents are still here to welcome you.

These dedicated volunteers, led by Docent Chair Janet Klinke, work in two-hour shifts. They greet visitors, answer questions and, when the Smith House is open, lead tours through this historical treasure.



Janet Klinke, Linda Eckols and Ella Chang ready to greet our visitors.

"Our docents like history, helping the community and meeting people," said Janet, and "Being a docent means you really get to know the Museum."

Exhibition Curator Dr. Amy Ellison trains the docents on exhibit content, ideas for engaging with visitors and how to use the technology. These days, she includes COVID safety procedures.

The available docent pool has dwindled, as many are in the high-risk category and uncomfortable volunteering during a pandemic. Thankfully, our Teen Docents stepped up. Janet noted, "We would not have opened without them!"

Ella Chang, a junior at Los Altos High School, is a history buff who joined the program to find out more about the roots of our community. "Although COVID and the wildfires have posed some difficulties, I've greatly enjoyed giving tours of the open exhibits and seeing others learn about the agricultural history of the land or the local women's suffrage movement," she said. "I hope that after we get through all the craziness of this year, I can continue to give more interactive tours and help share the rich history of the town with my fellow community members, students, and history nerds."

~ Diane Holcomb

Membership

Welcome to our new members:

Marjorie Green
Ian McNish

Dennis Milligan
Steven Houtchens

Business Members

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The Garden Club of Los Altos

Our Hidden Gems

I was born in Kathmandu, Nepal, and in 2009 my parents won a lottery to hold a green card in America. Living in Mountain View, I went to Los Altos High School and Freestyle Academy. I am now a sophomore at UCLA's School of Arts and Architecture studying Design and Media Arts.

In 2018, I participated in a summer program at the History Museum. We learned about the important life of Juana Briones, a mother, healer, and pioneer. For the Juana Briones exhibition, I painted a picture depicting the connection of her legacy to the present moment. It was rewarding to learn about an underrated, historical woman of color.

The Black Lives Matter movement inspired many of us to paint protest murals. I was picked by the City of Palo Alto to paint a mural in front of City Hall. The experience was rich with the hope that systematic change would occur. In Los Altos a group of high school students, alumni and staff formed an action and education group called Justice Vanguard. We hosted a Black is Beautiful event in Lincoln Park, mixing art and education to uplift black culture and educate the community about systemic racism. We made a dozen panels of art and recently donated a few lucky pieces to the permanent collection at the Museum.



Kai and Kenan Moos with Dianne Shen, delivering art panels to the Museum.

The Black is Beautiful event was one path to recognizing Black voices within the community, supported by the Museum preserving some panels. Next is confronting racism in the community. What do you believe in? When do you lend a hand? Do you look away?

The journey of activism hasn't ended. A petition has been presented to the MVLA School District to address racist attitudes, citing examples of students of color being singled out and intimidated. Racism is nationwide, but the individual acts of racism are within each community, even in Los Altos.

~ Urna Bajracharya

Director's Corner

Organizing Online

A historic year is about to come to a close, and I think we've all learned so much. We learned a lot about viruses—definitely—and about our civil society, including the importance of voting. And we all learned just how very much of our lives can be conducted remotely, online.



I certainly was amazed to learn how much of our Museum activities could be done online. It wasn't on our radar to have online-only exhibitions, but we've done it twice this year: the powerful photos of David Bacon documenting the lives of migrant workers *In the Fields of the North*; and more recently, an online exhibit showcasing the creativity of our local youth who participated in a logo contest recognizing 50 years of the Art Docent program in our local schools. You can see the results in *Young at Art*, now online. Hosting online talks and events have also become the new norm, and we have not seen a drop off at all in the quality of the discussion and content (although I think we all miss the chance to socialize before and after over refreshments). I've been pleased with our ability to offer substantive programming virtually.

But what has impressed me the most has been the efficacy of online fundraising. People have given so generously, exceeding our expectations not only in May with our drive to bring our collections online and create a Museum without Walls, but most recently, with the Tribute to Jane Reed. Saying goodbye to Jane was very difficult, and I know it was hard on her to leave town too. But the outpouring of support for the changing exhibition program Jane helped propel to excellence softened the blow. It was magical to see the way the Fundraising Committee galvanized to pull that effort together with such short notice, and incredible that so many friends, members, and neighbors wanted to be part of it.

It just goes to show that as much as we think of the Museum as a wonderful building with a beautiful courtyard and a well-preserved historical house, what really makes the Los Altos History Museum is the people.

Thank you all for being a part of the miracle that the Museum is still here at the end of this unprecedented year. We hope to see you in person in 2021.

~ Dr. Elisabeth Ward

Photo Gallery



Julia Lovin, Jane Reed and Nomi Trapnell dressed up for "Women on Wheels," the City's Car Parade to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the 19th amendment.



Chef Chu was honored and thanked for supporting the Museum in the restaurant's 50th anniversary celebrations. Photo credit Dianne Shen.



Vicki Holman with Wayne and Judy Hooper, working at the successful outdoor Museum store.



Teen docent Haley with Liz Nyberg showing off the Smith House version of Rise Up!



Margie Alving and Jan Davis helping with the installation of Rise Up!



Rise Up! opened Oct. 15, ready for business. Docents Barbara Beebe and Sophie at the greeting station outside the gallery.

Photo Gallery



Fred Vertel, who died August 25, was the much-beloved force behind the Museum's popular train diorama. Fred also enjoyed music; shown here playing the calliope, Oct. 2008. Photo courtesy Patty Grimm.



Bea Teer (R), who died June 26, is pictured here with Pinky Whelan (L) with a flyer for the first California Country and Folk-Art Antiques Show. Started by them in 1985, it ran 25 years. Photo courtesy Pinky Whelan.



Margaret Brooks and Catherine Kristian greet visitors to one of three recent Friends of the Library book sales held in the Museum courtyard. The Museum was pleased to help!



Margie Alving with Patti and Bob Meneely process Sami Ibrahim's donation of agricultural tools from the 1950s.



Linda Eckols and Elisabeth Ward unveil the thank you sign recognizing everyone who made the new displays, renovated Tank House, windmill and freshly planted Apricot tree possible.



Los Altos Garden club President Nancy Shardell and Gary Hedden enjoy a moment at an event recognizing the help and contributions of the Garden Club with the Museum's outdoor exhibits.



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Museum and Store Hours

Our open hours are pending guidance from the County Department of Public Health. Check our website for updates.

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Event Rentals

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Mission Statement *The 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

Rise Up!: The Fight for Women's Suffrage. The story of local women leading the fight for equality from 1920 to today, open anytime on the Smith House porch through February 21, 2021.

Young at Art: Students Celebrate 50 years with the Los Altos Art Docents, open through December 31. Online, see student designs showcasing their creative talents to commemorate the 50-year legacy of the Art Docents.

Women in Tech: Then and Now, Thursday, January 14, 2021, 5pm, on Zoom. Learn more about the women disrupters who built Silicon Valley. Free, but please reserve your spot.

Beauty and the Beast: California Wildflowers and Climate Change, opens Thursday, March 4, 2021.

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

Board Meetings, Third Wednesday each month, 4 pm, by Zoom, everyone welcome



Store volunteer Anne Connell with a spider hat. Trying to scare up some business!