

Chance of a Lifetime

I have been a model railroad enthusiast since I was 12, and I am now 88. I have had many wonderful experiences in my hobby, but my most satisfying experience was building the train exhibit at the Los Altos History Museum. In the late 1990s the Museum approached the late Fred Vertel about building the exhibit. Fred was a collector, not a model builder, so he came to me to build the buildings and scenery, while he and his son Tom added the track and trains. I jumped at the chance to showcase my modeling.

Los Altos was once a town full of railroad commuters and had both an interurban railroad called the Peninsular Railway, and a Southern Pacific branch running parallel down what is now Foothill Expressway. From that it was logical to model Main Street with both railroads running side by side.

Next, I headed to the basement of the History House and copied all the photos of buildings and scenes in pre-1930 Los Altos. I also listened to tapes and looked at a few charming movies. What fun for an amateur historian. Armed with these photos I decided to see what was left downtown from the 1930s along First Street and Main Street.

I found that Reitmeir's Werkstatt had been there as the Depot Garage. You can just make out Depot on the rear wall today. The large buildings across from each other at First and Main are still there. The big building that now houses a restaurant was a drug store. The Post Office was at the rear and you could see the outline of a door in the Main Street side. The little store next to it was once a small movie theater. The old timers remember the artichokes printed on the wall-paper. The building across the street has a small pizza shop today that was once a political office, not sure which party.

Farther along First Street, at the corner of State Street, was an auto dealership and repair garage. Having lived in Los Altos since 1963, and in Palo Alto before that, I remember this building. Also, farther down the street was a feed and fuel store. I understand they left a pile of coal out, and you just helped yourself and left payment.

There was a Southern Pacific work camp near the tracks. I found it on a map but had to make it up since I had no photos. The interurban railroad had a substation where the new Safeway is today. I remember it and think the local theater group



The Los Altos Train Station. LAHM collection.



Bob Brown by the Train Diorama.

once used it for building props. There was also a Southern Pacific freight station where the new law building is located. The star of my scene is the passenger depot that is still there and I could measure it. I am pleased with how my depot came out. Incidentally, there was an annual rodeo held in a field where Draeger's is now located. I didn't have space for it although I did sneak in a fireworks stand.

I wanted to draw visitors into the scene and I thought having several little moving people might do it, so I added 21 animated features. I am amazed that they are still working.

I loved building the exhibit, and on opening day in 2001 watching the reaction of viewers, especially the children running along with the train. Tom Vertel maintained the exhibit until he

President's Pen



The pandemic continues to dominate our lives. As I write this, the surge has peaked, however, the risk is still present. With more vaccinations we will begin to return to life as we knew it and that will be such a relief. We have two stories in this issue that address the disruption of COVID-19. Eric Greenhut writes about collecting the stories of people who were

impacted and making sure we have them in our archives. Yuetong Zhang writes about her experience cataloging our collections, including her own story for the archives.

Collecting stories is an important part of what we do at history museums. The stories we collect today become tomorrow's history. Last year we collected posters and stories from the *Black Lives Matter* marches, and our next exhibition on climate change will give us another batch of stories. It never stops and that is one of the fascinations of being a volunteer with the Museum.

I am looking forward to the next exhibition, *Beauty and the Beast*. We all know about climate change and how the past six years have been the warmest in recorded history. This exhibition will show the beauty of wildflowers in California and how they are threatened by this change. The flowers are from all parts of California and the pictures are wonderful, but the threat to them is real. The exhibition is beautiful, and it does give us a path forward if we take the right steps.

The cover story is more light-hearted. It is a delightful look back at one of our favorite topics, trains. Bob Brown recalls his part in building the train diorama, a must stop by every family with small children. Even big kids enjoy it. We pulled some old train photos from our archives to show off the majestic beauty of these massive machines.

Stay healthy and happy,

~ Gary Hedden

Staff

Dr. Elisabeth Ward, *Executive Director*
Dr. Amy Noel Ellison, *Exhibition Curator*
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LOS ALTOS HISTORY MUSEUM "UNDER THE OAKS"

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

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Chance of a Lifetime

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moved to Oregon. I then did the maintenance, but as it got harder to climb around the layout, I told the then Executive Director, Laura Bajuk, that it was time to turn the maintenance over to others. I understand that she called on Armond King and he has been the "train guy" ever since.



Armond King with a certificate for community service from Anna Eshoo. We all know - it's because he's the "train guy."

Over the years, many Museum volunteers have been involved and lovingly maintained and repaired the trains. Bob Grimm was there at the very start and helped for many years. Mike Kotowski painted the scenic backdrop of hills and blue sky. Jason Reinier set up the audio that captured Bob Grimm's voice. I don't know about you, but I still get a thrill every time I go upstairs and hear him yell out, "All aboard."



A steam freight train switching in downtown Los Altos in 1954. LAHM collection.

I have been told that there are big changes coming to the Upstairs Gallery, but not to the Train Diorama. The Sibbett Group is leading the design of the gallery renovation and I had the opportunity to work with them recently on the design of the *Magic of Scale Model Railroads*. Now installed at the *California State Railroad Museum*, this is a wonderful exhibition and once it opens again, you really should plan a visit to Sacramento.

~ Bob Brown

Our Hidden Gems

Picture this: A pair of glasses blurring with mist perched over a mask on someone in deep concentration mulling over files in the vault. The first half of that image is standard for the vision-impaired during the pandemic, and the latter half is my introduction to the adventures of a collections media intern.

I had imagined ancient, dusty manuscripts on the brink of disintegration. Instead, I found an immense amount of life. Over time, the records and people immortalized in history became people which, to a humanities and English student, is a wondrous realization. They were more than just letters on a page but “living” characters with personalities, families, legacies and Los Altos threads.

Over the past four months, I underwent a metamorphosis from a passerby of local history to one who recognized and celebrated names and events and their importance in our community. It has transformed the way I’ll engage with museums. I learned about the immense amount of work that goes on at the museums I once casually browsed, and I value the role I played in documenting our unique slice of history.

The COVID-19 pandemic crafted a truly unique experience. When restrictions eased, I went into an eerily empty museum once a week. My awe and excitement bloomed in the vault, and sometimes, I wanted to Sharpie a smile on my mask even if the only people to see were those from the past. My latest project is cataloguing the collection “Documenting COVID-19 in Santa Clara County.” I met Eric Greenhut and contributed to the collection with my story, an international student experiencing 2020 in America. I detailed my homesickness and worry over politics and health. Being so far from family in this intensely lonely time led to my own growth and maturity. I also celebrated the opportunities that have emerged, the



Yuetong Zhang, a “selfie” by the Smith House mailbox.

projects I could work on and all the new people I connected with because I chose to remain here. I feel comforted that my time during the pandemic has been recorded.

You may have equally compelling stories to tell, pictures to share, and words of COVID wisdom to impart. Please add your experience with the COVID-19 pandemic to our collection. A future intern will thank you.

~ Yuetong Zhang

Yuetong Zhang is a 3rd year Humanities Mellon Scholar at De Anza, pursuing her A.A. in Liberal Arts and English. She is an international student from Gaborone, Botswana. She serves as the chair of environmental sustainability for De Anza’s Associated Student Body and is currently our collections media intern.

Membership

Welcome to our new members:

Gina Atkinson	Don Hanson
Mary Kay Bigelow	Gloria Hom
Alyce Boster	Margo Horn
Agnes Caulfield	Jan Kallshian
Kenna and Jim Fenton	Norman and Kathy Kitching
Suzan Lindsay Foreman	Bill Ziegenhorn

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Museum Without Walls Update

Last year, donors contributed to a special fund to help modernize our Collections Department, allowing us to purchase much-needed new equipment:

- **Epson Expressions XL 12000XL-GA Flatbed Scanner** for high-resolution scanning and digitization efforts.
- **iPad Pro 11-inch 256 GB** to take photos and videos of objects/artifacts. The iPad also allows volunteers and interns to download apps for scanning, basic photoshop, re-colorization/re-touch and photo augmentation.
- **Intel NUC and BenQ 27inch Graphic Arts Monitor** to replace an old computer and monitor for art/design work.

We are now upgrading the collections section of our website. Stay tuned and Thank You!

Spotlight on the Oral History Project

As history is unfolding in front of us, I decided to record how the lives of people in Santa Clara County are being affected by COVID-19. Two factors influenced my decision. One is that as a volunteer with the Oral History Committee at the Museum I have experienced interviewing many local individuals. Secondly, both of my Father's parents died during the 1918/1919 Spanish Flu Epidemic, so I wanted to find out more about what my grandparents possibly experienced.

There are many stories to be told and I felt the COVID-19 interviews could be done safely by using Zoom. It is being used for people to stay in touch with each other and it has proven to be a perfect platform to record interviews and store them in the Museum's archives.



Eric Greenhut interviewing Dr. Jane Lombard. Photo credit Paula Tuerk.

I set out to interview a cross section of the population from various age groups, families, singles, and students, including business and retired people, children, and young adults. To date, I have recorded 16 interviews and I am now focusing on health care professionals. I interviewed Dr. Jane Lombard, a cardiologist who is starting up a new department at El Camino Hospital that will specialize in the diagnosis and treatment of female heart disease. She is one of only five female cardiologists in the Bay Area. COVID-19 has made it difficult for her to meet with her patients in person, which she feels is necessary for an accurate diagnosis. She does use Zoom for patient interviews, and she and many of her fellow workers experience "Zoom Fatigue" from working online with patients.

One memorable event, very early in my work on this project, came when my nextdoor neighbor was honored by a drive-by of El Camino Hospital workers. My neighbor is a nurse there, caring for patients with COVID-19. I captured on video the many cars driving by with horns honking, people cheering and the cars plastered with signs thanking Nurse Kim for her courageous service. That video is now in the archives at the History Museum.

~ Eric Greenhut

Volunteer Highlights

Welcome aboard the J. Gilbert Smith Virtual Eyes Media (VEM) express. We will travel from 1906 to the 1930's through the eyes of Margaret and J. Gilbert Smith. The History Museum is working with VEM to create a virtual platform to showcase the history of this incredible husband and wife and follow their journey living in Los Altos once upon a time.



Cassie Lowry taking 3D pictures in the Smith House.

Cassie and Troy Lowry, founders of VEM, approached Dr. Elisabeth Ward with their updated technology hoping to bring the Smith House to life. Cassie, granddaughter of the owners of Los Altos Nursery, and her husband, Troy, offer a new and creative way to showcase unique spaces such as the Smith House. Cassie donated her time to photograph the Smith House, both inside and out, with the results appearing in 3D format. The technology was created by a local inventor, Matt Bell, who grew up in Los Altos and Palo Alto, and founded the company Matterport in 2011, along with co-founder Dave Gausebeck. Cassie used a special camera with a 360 lens, and the Matterport technology stitches the scans together to reconstruct a virtual tour that is so realistic it makes you think you are in the room. The technology is used to give real estate tours, for insurance claims and even to document crime scenes. It is also used by museums around the world to "let the museum visit you."

The Smith House Committee and the Education Committee are joining forces to create two versions of a "bird's eye view" unfolding specific artifacts of the history of J. Gilbert Smith. The first version depicts a more general, overall synopsis of the house with several detailed scenarios of icons such as the G.E. Monitor Refrigerator located in the sunny, bright kitchen as well as the Steinway Square piano originating from the 18th century housed in the parlor where Margaret Smith entertained her guests. The second version, planned for the school tours, will be more specific with breakout explanations of items such as games, Raggedy Ann and Andy dolls, and furniture found in the 1930's. As our visitors virtually travel through the house, they will have the opportunity to pull up explanations of items that interest them by clicking a specific icon.

We invite our community to stay tuned as the J. Gilbert Smith 3D Express rolls out and join us as we watch imagination and creativity unfold..

~ Sharon Barkoff

History in the News

The Halsey House at Redwood Grove Nature Preserve is back in the news. In January, the city council considered hiring a consultant, Architectural Research Group, to evaluate options for moving forward, including price estimates. First though, the council asked that three city commissions, Historical, Parks & Recreation and Finance, review the proposal and in March provide recommendations. Independently, the Friends of Historic Redwood Grove continue to follow the progress, as they have for many years. At the council meeting, a Friends committee member, Marie Backs, made the point that of course the Halsey House has historical significance, "It is the reason we have the Nature Preserve." In an independent development, architect Jeff LaBoskey with Aidlin Darling Design is conducting a survey of interested stakeholders. Jeff grew up in Los Altos and is looking forward to bringing us some fresh ideas. Does that mean we will finally see some closure on this long running saga?



Robert Hindman with Los Altos Community Investments offering Elisabeth Ward a tour of the ongoing building renovation.

On State Street, a fascinating project in downtown Los Altos is also seeing some closure. The adaptive reuse of the 65-year-old two-story structure at the corner of 3rd and State Street is well underway. The Spanish Colonial Revival elements have been greatly enhanced with new tiles, white-stuccoed exteriors, ornamental wrought iron handrails and gates, and a brick paved *paseo*. Progress has been challenging as the COVID-19 health restrictions slowed construction, suppliers were late with deliveries and one even suspended operations. The building, once a grocery store, *Purity Stores*, was designed by Wendell Roscoe in the 1950s. His design offered a dramatic arched ceiling that has now been freshly revealed. Wendell visited the project at the age of 99 and was able to see the work in progress. He passed away soon after, but he would have been pleased with the look. The redesigned balconies and wide walkways are delightful. We look forward to this addition to our charming downtown.

~ Gary Hedden

Director's Corner

Permanent Exhibit Makeover

Once in a generation—that is, every 20 years—we have a chance to update our understanding of the past. What was new, important, relevant, and understood as historic 20 years ago naturally becomes common-place knowledge that loses some of its edge over time. And of course, in our area, a lot has changed in the last 20 years. At the History Museum, we have a responsibility to be leading the conversation about our area's history, and constantly seeking new revelations about the past. That is why we collect artifacts, oral histories, and archival material, so we can research, interview, and investigate the resources we have and come to a better understanding.



I am excited to announce that the Los Altos History Museum is well underway with a project to redo the upstairs permanent exhibition, originally opened in 2001. As a testament to how well it was done 20 years ago, we are retaining the ever-popular 1932 Train Diorama and we are also working with the same design firm, the Sibbett Group, for the renovation. But the overall organization will be completely different, with an emphasis on the recognizable local places that help us all feel connected to the past. And the design will be much more tech-savvy, with large video displays and interactive monitors.

During 2021, we will be keeping our members informed about the progress of this major project. This issue's cover-story touches on the changes that will be taking place, and is the first in a series showcasing the changes. Though the wonderful work of Bob Brown and others won't be going away, we will be adding digital interactives that will allow for more information to be shared with visitors so they stay fascinated and engaged.

Thanks to inspirational and transformational gifts from Nan and Chuck Geschke and Pamela and Ed Taft, a group of lead donors have stepped up during 2020 with commitments to make this project a reality. We are so grateful that during this incredibly challenging time we have been able to concentrate on a project that motivates the entire staff, our volunteers and our community to think big. The new permanent exhibit is on course to open Spring of 2022. Stay tuned for updates!

~ Dr. Elisabeth Ward

Photo Gallery



David Mariani signing his book "Poverty of Affluence, The Story of the Mariani Family in California."



Museum docents Sharon Barkoff, Pat Hedden and Janet Klinke shortly before the shelter-at-home order shut us down in late November.



Linda Eckols and Nikki Andrews wrapping up a painting from the online art auction.



Dennis Duffy and Julie Rose wrapping up another art auction painting.



Hardworking Brian Boggs installing a sign at the "Three Bears Outhouse."



Karen Zucker, Martha Sakellariou and Maddy McBirney collaborating on an "Arts Los Altos" project to create a 30-foot mural showcasing our local events, traditions and innovations.

Photo Gallery



Dr. Amy Ellison by her favorite panel from the recently closed exhibition **Rise Up!**, showing powerful images of women marching in Oakland in 1913 and again in 2020 in support of justice and equality.



Fred Smith and Wayne Hooper painting the panels for our new exhibition, **Beauty and the Beast**.

Beauty and the Beast: California Wildflowers and Climate Change

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 travelling exhibition appearing at Los Altos History Museum from March 6 to July 11, 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 features the power of fire and renewal, a behind-the-scenes look at capturing these images, and an overview of California's geographic regions—those diverse and delicately balanced ecosystems supporting spectacular explosions of nature's color. Most importantly, these beautiful images address how climate change and other human impacts effect California's wildflowers.



Rolling hills with wildflowers, Peace Valley, California. Photo credit Badger and Winter.



Wildflower meadow, Carson Pass, Eldorado National Forest. Photo credit Badger and Winter.



UNDER THE OAKS

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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.

General Inquiries

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Collections/Research

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research@losaltoshistory.org

Event Rentals

(650) 948-9427 x12
weddings@losaltoshistory.org

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

Beauty and the Beast: California Wildflowers and Climate Change, open through July 11.

A 27-Year Wildflower Journey, Thursday, March 18, 5pm, Zoom, go behind the scenes of Beauty and the Beast with the exhibition's award-winning photographers, Rob Badger and Nita Winter.

We Love our Volunteers, Thursday, March 25, 4-5pm. All Museum volunteers are invited to a gathering on Zoom, where we will reveal the winners of the Trivia Quiz, and singer/songwriter Michael McNevin will sing original tunes.

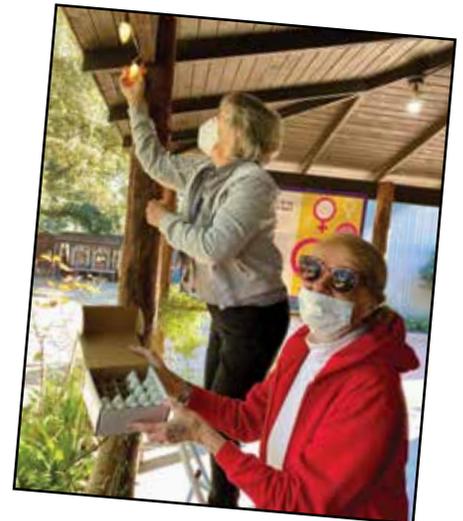
What is Citizen Science? Thursday, April 22, 5pm, Zoom, learn why we need ordinary people to save the planet in this talk by award-winning author Mary Ellen Hannibal.

Film Screening: "The Valley," Friday, May 7, 7pm, Zoom, with Director and MVHS grad Saila Kariat, in commemoration of Asian Pacific American Heritage Month.

Historic Preservation through the Mills Act: Carrots instead of Sticks, Thursday, May 13, 7pm, Zoom, presentation by local preservationist Jon Baer.

Annual Meeting of the Members, Thursday, June 10, 4-5:30 pm, Zoom, hear from our leaders, elect new directors and officers, and thank those whose terms of service are ending.

Los Altos Goes Green, Thursday, June 24, 5pm, Zoom, join this panel co-hosted with GreenTown Los Altos to learn how local environmental leaders are fighting climate change.



Caroline Landsbergen and Pinky Whelan changing to white lights on the Smith House porch. Getting ready for a fun event—one of these days!

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