

From Earthquakes to Epidemics

In 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic swept the globe, altering life as we knew it. Four years later we can pause and reflect on how such profound disruptions shape our society. These events, and the ways they disproportionately affect certain communities, are the topic of the Los Altos History Museum's newest changing exhibit - *From Earthquakes to Epidemics: How Disasters Transform California's People and Places*.

While the COVID-19 pandemic is still fresh in our minds and hearts, it is certainly not the only disease that has left its mark on California. When the Spanish colonists established the mission system in the eighteenth century, they brought new and unfamiliar diseases to the Indigenous people who had lived here for thousands of years. While the Spanish used El Camino Real to transport goods, it also transported these pathogens between tribal groups. Outbreaks of smallpox, measles, and other European-introduced diseases absolutely ravaged the native Californians, who did not have the immune systems to stand up to these unknown pathogens. Entire communities were wiped out, and descendants of these peoples still feel the biological and psychological effects of these losses.

Few things strike fear in the hearts of Californians like the looming danger of Earthquakes. These inescapable disasters can strike without warning, leading to untold chaos and destruction. The 1906 earthquake, at 7.9 on the Richter Scale, leveled entire communities in San Francisco and the surrounding areas. The quake and the resulting fires left 225,500 people homeless. While the whole city suffered, the residents of San Francisco's Chinatown felt the



A 1906 Earthquake Chinese Camp. Courtesy Exhibit Envoy.

earthquake's impact more acutely. After being relegated to a camp in the Presidio, the 183 Chinese residents faced the long process of fighting to rebuild their community while prejudiced officials used the disaster as a way to prevent them from ever redeveloping Chinatown. Luckily the Chinese community mobilized, writing newspaper articles to promote their cause and designing the new Chinatown as an attraction to draw in travelers. Chinatown was rebuilt, a monument to the Chinese community's resilience.

When the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s began, it hit the LGBTQ+ community especially hard. Over 90 percent of people diagnosed with the new illness died within one year. This high death rate caused widespread panic, and out of that panic came a campaign from religious and political groups to demonize the queer community. While AIDS could infect anyone regardless of gender or sexuality, many claimed the virus was a "punishment God has given homosexuals" and used the outbreak as a way to push homophobic rhetoric. The 1986 ballot introduced Proposition 64, which would have made HIV testing mandatory and required the public disclosure of anyone who tested positive. It also would have banned anyone with AIDS from attending or teaching school. To combat these ideas, LGBTQ+ groups launched plans to educate the public about the disease and support the diagnosed. They gave talks to nurses, distributed condoms, raised funds, and shared preventative measures. These efforts paid off: Prop 64 was defeated.

The past decade has brought the most destructive wildfires and severe droughts California has ever seen. Extreme heat creates dangerous environments for farmworkers, who



A COVID-19 banner at 1st & Main, Los Altos. Courtesy Lara D. Nevin.

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are a fundamental part of the state's society and economy. Higher temperatures also increase the rate of pesticide evaporation, releasing toxins into an atmosphere that already struggles with low air quality. The 2018 Camp Fire that caused the deaths of 86 people and incinerated the town of Paradise proved it doesn't matter how prepared a community might be, there is little that can be done when these wildfires spark in extremely dry areas and are perpetuated by swift winds. All of these put extreme strain on California's people and infrastructure.

California is a resilient state; it has to be, given the disasters it faces each year. Both natural and manmade, these events can lead to massive loss of life and the breakdown of local infrastructures. They underscore the urgent need for comprehensive mitigation strategies and effective emergency response systems. These disasters also highlight the need to take care of our planet - climate change is very real and threatens every aspect of our lives. If we do not redefine our relationship with nature, we doom our home and our communities to destruction.

From Earthquakes to Epidemics is a traveling exhibition from Exhibit Envoy. It has been made possible by the National Endowment for the Humanities: Democracy demands wisdom, and by the Rotary Club of Los Altos.

~ Jordan Grealish



Fighting the Rim Fire. Courtesy Exhibit Envoy.

LOS ALTOS HISTORY MUSEUM "UNDER THE OAKS"

Gary Hedden, *Editor* Judi Eichler, *Graphic Design*
Gloria Geller, *Copy Editor*

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.

President's Pen

Back to normal

Four years ago, we wondered when "normal" might happen, as the pandemic flooded us with unsettling changes. Silent streets with shuttered shops. Nervous glances at other masked shoppers, hunting for elusive toilet paper supplies. Spraying deliveries with alcohol and quarantining them in the garage. Frightening reports of respirators and final farewells over Facetime.



Today, as those memories fade with a strange touch of unreality, perhaps we are back to normal. Yet some impacts are lasting. Booster vaccines join flu shots as a precaution against evolving viruses. Face masks are unremarkable. Zoom meetings and remote work have forever altered our businesses, our cities, our lives.

History really has no back to normal. Like a creek that floods and ebbs, erodes and silts, our shared story builds layer upon layer - some expected, some surprising, none quite the same. Recording those layers, remembering when and how, and sharing that understanding is the work of the Museum.

Our exhibit *From Earthquakes to Epidemics* explores the impact of disasters and pandemics in California. From fires to floods, from earthquakes to droughts, from the 1918 flu to the COVID-19 pandemic, visitors will learn about major events in our state's history, and how many disasters inspired new resilience in our communities.

Connections are part of what makes a community resilient, and the Museum is a great place to build those connections. Thank you to all the members, volunteers, donors, and staff who support our mission of reckoning how we've reached each day's new normal.

~ Larry Lang

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Dr. Elisabeth Ward, *Executive Director*
Sophia Abarca, *Curator of Collections*
Diane Holcomb, *Director of Communications*
Jordan Grealish, *Exhibits Specialist*
Lillie Moore, *Museum Educator*
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Our Hidden Gems

If you have worked in a garden or an orchard, you know that pruning shears are an important tool. Pruning trees helps with their appearance, overall health and growth. Pruning removes dead and diseased branches, allows the remaining branches to become strong and encourages fruit production.

Before Los Altos became the city that it is today, it was a small town with many orchards. The history of orchards in the area dates back to the late 1700s when fruit trees were planted at the missions. Pruning shears have always been important for the maintenance of these orchards as certainly was the case for Masami Kusumoto, whose lopping shears were donated to the Museum by his son. Lopping shears are long-handled shears used for cutting larger branches. Kusumoto was a Japanese-American who worked as a share-cropper in San Jose, sharing the crop with the landowners. He was also a farm laborer in various orchards throughout Santa Clara County, and one of the many contract workers who pruned trees for the orchards in Los Altos.



Sophia Abarca holding fruit tree lopping shears from the Museum's collection.

With the Los Altos Heritage Orchard restoration underway, pruning is part of the maintenance to get the orchard back in shape. The apricot trees are pruned to about eight feet in height, so the use of tall ladders is not required to harvest the fruit. Keep an eye on the orchard this summer as the new trees grow, and again next fall when it is time to get to work with the pruning shears!

~ Sophia Abarca

Volunteer Highlights

The Museum offers many volunteer opportunities, and last summer, Mountain View High School student Ibrahim Zanghi connected with Dr. Jane Packard, chair of the Orchard Commons Committee. She quickly got him involved in the July Apricot STEM Fair at the Green Teen booth and with the apricot harvest.



Ibrahim Zanghi and Dr. Jane Packard checking the first apricot buds in early February.

All harvest volunteers take a Commons pledge to care for the orchard in the most ethical and sustainable ways. For example, take fruit off the trees only when ripe by learning how a ripe fruit falls into your hand with an easy touch. Gather all fruit and sort into three buckets: ripe into "prime," damaged edibles into "jam," and rotten into "compost." All fruit is weighed to monitor orchard production and health.

With Dr. Packard as his advisor, Zanghi started a project to survey and monitor tree health based on their locations and water uptake. He is continuing his scientific work at the orchard as the 300 newly planted trees grow. Each tree is large enough to produce fruit this summer, although any green fruit will be picked and discarded to allow all of the new trees' energy to go into getting established.

Zanghi commented, "What particularly interested me is Dr. Packard's goal of spreading knowledge of orchard care to youth so the orchard can live on for many generations to come." Currently, he is coauthoring a report with Dr. Packard on finding the best ways to identify apricot tree health. This will create an inventory system to be repeated year after year. Zanghi appreciated the chance to write a scientific report, something not available to most high school students.

Contact the Museum if you would like to help!

~ Alice Mansell, Orchard Commons volunteer

Spotlight on the Oral History Project

Ralph Appio's childhood is representative of many who grew up in the small agricultural community that was Los Altos in the 1930s and '40s. Born in Palo Alto in 1932 to Italian immigrant Joseph Appio and his German wife, Lena, Ralph's family moved to Los Altos in 1935 with the purchase of a 10-acre ranch on Portola Avenue, where they harvested apricots and prunes. Ralph and his wife, Shirley, shared stories that paint a portrait of an adolescence spent in the midst of the Great Depression and World War II.



Ralph Appio driving a 1920 Fordson tractor, pictured with his brother Peter and dog Bambi. LAHM Collection.

Ralph describes his childhood as being one of unpaved dirt roads lined with orchards. He recalls walking down and across the Bayshore Highway with his brother on the mornings they missed the school bus - now a near impossibility on today's busy roads. For many of the kids living in early Los Altos, a day's work did not end when their classes were dismissed; Ralph remembers coming home from Los Altos Grammar School and working around their orchard, doing anything from spraying, pulling weeds, or burning brush. His family also used to pick and dry prunes, dipping prunes into boiling water and lye before setting them out to be dried and sold. Adobe Creek and spring rains at one time reliably provided ample irrigation for the trees on his family's property; however, Ralph states this has changed with the development of a drier climate. He continued working the local orchards into adulthood, doing commercial tractor work and spraying while also harvesting and drying apricots with his mother and Shirley.

Long hours of work in the orchard, self-sufficiency necessitated by the Great Depression, and nightly blackouts post-Pearl Harbor may seem to characterize early Los Altos, but Ralph's stories of childhood mischief prove that not everything was bleak and dreary. He fondly remembers oiling railroad tracks without the train conductor catching him, miraculously hanging an outhouse on a telephone pole, and sneaking into the Alta Mesa Cemetery on Halloween with his friends. Ralph's extensive agricultural knowledge paired with lighthearted stories of his youth provide a glimpse into the hardworking, close-knit farm community that built early Los Altos.

~ Brenna Sitta, Oral History Intern from San Jose State

History in the News

For this quarter, the Museum's biggest historic news is the restoration of the Heritage Orchard. We are very proud to be leading the effort and it is featured in this issue.

J. Gilbert Smith sold the orchard to the City in 1954 with the intention that it be preserved in perpetuity. It was managed over the years, most recently by Phil Doetsch and before that by Don Speciale. They cared for the trees and sold the harvest locally to help cover their costs. Battered by disease, drought and pests, the orchard fell upon hard times and the Museum, under the leadership of Dr. Jane Packard, formed the Orchard Commons Committee in 2019 to provide assistance. With the untimely passing of Phil Doetsch in 2022 due to COVID, the City turned to the Museum for help. According to Packard, "Our goal is to restore the orchard to a source of pride for the community." She wants this to happen by the City's 75th anniversary in 2027. This year, we have planted many new trees and installed water-saving drip irrigation. Other measures are underway and we are hopeful and confident that we will meet that ambitious goal.

In other news, the January Third Thursday featured a panel discussion of the African-American experience in Silicon Valley. Author Jan Batiste Adkins started the evening by noting the "mulatto" families at the founding of Pueblo de San José de Guadalupe in 1777, and the founding of California in 1850 as a "free state" that nevertheless tolerated slavery. Kathy Cotton showed us clips of her interesting 2019 documentary film called *A Place at the Table*, about the African-American pioneers in the early days of space and computer technology. Kenan Moos told us about the impact of redlining and gentrification. Moos is director of Justice Vanguard, a non-profit organization that promotes social justice.

~ Gary Hedden



Kenan Moos, Kathy Cotton and Jan Batiste Adkins at the January 18 panel discussion.

Meet Audrey Hollenbeck



Hello! My name is Audrey Hollenbeck and I am the newly appointed Teen Docent member of the Los Altos History Museum Board. This new position will provide the Board with another point of view, and I am honored to have been the person selected.

I am a senior at Mountain View High School. I lived in Mountain View for 13 years and in Los Altos Hills for 5 years. I have been a

Teen Docent at the History Museum for the last three years, and was Teen Docent Manager last year, scheduling trainings and shifts for the Teen Docents. I have loved being a docent at the Museum (especially giving tours of the Smith House) and volunteering at events like Dancing through the Decades and Train Days. It is my dream to have a career at a history museum after college

Director's Corner

Our Excellent Permanent Exhibition

Inertia is a hard thing to overcome in so many natural systems and so many parts of our lives. Once a thing gets going in a certain direction, the desire to intervene and make a change wanes. So it is not surprising that museum exhibits rarely change after they open to the public even if designers and curators plan to make updates.

There are some famous examples of exhibit inertia. At the Smithsonian Institution, the process of changing an exhibit was so complex that all the curators could do was add in a small label, "This information is no longer accurate." Or at the Natural History Museum in New York, the anthropology exhibits had not changed in almost 100 years, perpetuating inaccurate information about Native American culture, until a recent government order forced them to close off whole hallways.

But Los Altos History Museum is bucking that trend with our new Permanent Exhibition, *Making Connections: Stories from the Land*. It has already received several significant changes since it opened, and more are planned.

If you haven't recently made your way upstairs at the Museum, be prepared to be delighted. We've added a wonderful topographic map, and an interactive translation phone-based app that gives an overview of each exhibition section in 23 languages. We've added new videos and new seating in the Town Section. And we aren't done yet - more videos are in the works, new audio for the immersive oral history experience is coming, and new maps.

The investment so many people made in our adaptable, beautiful Geschke Gallery will continue to provide dividends to the community for years to come. We are committed to keeping the information fresh, relevant, and engaging. So if you see anything you'd like added, or any aspect of our story that isn't included, please let us know. Our Permanent Exhibition is now a year old, and we want to keep nurturing it as it grows with us into the future.

~ Dr. Elisabeth Ward



Welcome to our new members:

Paul and Robin Bantz	Tanya Maluf
Beth and Joe Beninato	Ellen Petrill
David Carella	Richard Rairden
Madelyn Costa	Ahlahdini Rao
Aram and June Darmanian	Premika Ratnam Glass
Shriharsha Dhavale	Carol Rivers
Kathleen and Roland Dow	Maggie Rogers
Marie Evitt	Lyn Smith
Carol Fenwick	Debra Strichartz
Maureen Griffin	Jane Vaden and Norman Roth
Ronni and Jack Haderle	Deanna Wong
Owen and Kim Halliday	James Zanghi
Linda and Allan Kramer	Bo Zhao and Di Wang
Dana and Debra Kreitter	Karen and Eric Zucker
Shiaoping Lu	
Joe Maleti	

Business Members

BK Collections
DJM Inspections
Christopher Fling, Realtor
Furuichi Design
Los Altos Town Crier
The Garden Club of Los Altos

Partner Member
Kohler Legacy Law Group, PC

Corporate Member
Kiwanis Club of Los Altos

Photo Gallery



The restoration of the Heritage Orchard is underway.



Dr. Jane Packard watches the delivery of a load of freshly chipped redwood.



Our professional crew planting the bare-root apricot trees.



The new trees are nicely lined up and ready to grow.



Kristin Morris, our new head of the Oral History Committee, with her daughters Ioy and Stella, at the February Third Thursday.



Mike Mansch, owner of Alotta's Deli, shares great stories at the February Third Thursday featuring south Los Altos.

Photo Gallery



Collection committee members Suzanne Maguire-Negus, Sande Stuart, Paul Kuckein, Jeanine Valadez, Marty Kahn, Christina Zhao, Margie Alving, and Gill Lane meeting with Curator of Collections Sophia Abarca in February.



Store committee members Penelope Midlock, Kaye and Bert Loughmiller, Barbara Klein, and Sue Pierce meeting with Chair Vicki Holman on Valentine's Day.



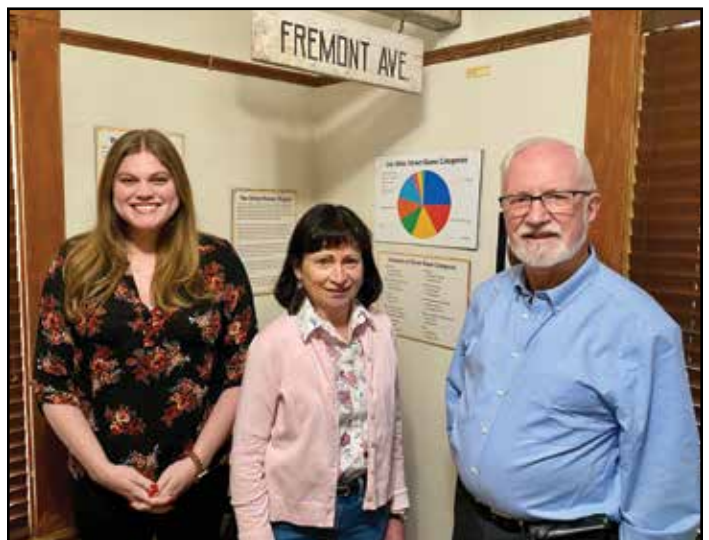
Dancing through the Decades team members Don Durr, Liz Nyberg, Cindy Bogard-O'Gorman, Dennis Milligan, Lisa Porter, Pilar Parducci at the computer, Shari Elmer, Julie Rose, Jan Thomas and Jung Yoon getting ready for the big March event.



Dr. Elisabeth Ward and Pinky Whelan celebrating Valentine's Day and reminiscing over Pinky's leadership that started the History Museum in 1975.



Audrey Fan, Hayden Tang and Aimee Ge selling youth art as a fundraiser for the Asian American Pacific Islander Silicon Valley chapter in January.



Jordan Grealish, Gina Atkinson and Paul Kuckein with their exhibition on street names at the Smith House.



UNDER THE OAKS

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www.losaltoshistory.org

Museum and Store Hours

Thursday to Sunday, Noon-4pm

We are closed New Year's Day, Easter, Fourth of July, Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Eve, and Christmas Day.

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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

What's in a Name? History of Los Altos Streets, open through April 7, Smith House gallery.

From Earthquakes to Epidemics: How Disasters Transform People and Places, open through May 12, Museum gallery.

***Understanding Silicon Valley's Workforce Issues: A Conversation with Reporter Ethan Baron**, Third Thursday, Mar. 21, 2024, 5:30-7pm, at the Museum.

Dancing Through the Decades: The Nifty '50s, Saturday, March 23, 6-10pm (Museum closed to the public for the weekend).

Rotary Club of Los Altos: 75 Years of Service Above Self, opens Thursday, April 11, Smith House gallery.

***The Los Altos Story: The Impact of the Rotary AIDS Project**, Third Thursday, April 18, 5:30-7pm, at the Museum.

***Gathering the Fruits of Orchard Rehabilitation**, Third Thursday, May 16, 5:30-7pm, at the Museum.

Expressions: Multicultural Artists Showcase, opens Thursday, May 23, Museum gallery.

Annual Meeting of Members: Tuesday, June 25, 4-6pm, at the Museum.

*Registration required.



From tiny saplings grow mighty oaks. Gary Hedden's granddaughter, Sierra Rose, was recruited to pose for the new planned giving brochure.

Board Meetings, Fourth Tuesday each month, 4 pm, in person and online
Third Thursdays. Join us for stimulating conversations, 5:30-7pm. Free for Museum members.