los altos history museum

UNDER THE OAKS

Published by the Association of the Los Altos Historical Museum, founded 1978 Spring 2023

The Grand Opening

Audrey Tsai, a Los Altos High School student, visited our new exhibition, loved it and wrote about it for the school paper, The Talon. *Here is her story.*

There's only one place in Los Altos where visitors can find a moving train diorama, augmented reality and the recorded stories of over a dozen historical figures: the new exhibit of the Los Altos History Museum.

After over two years of planning and construction, the museum's new permanent exhibition, *Making Connections: Stories From the Land*, opened to the public Saturday, February 11. This exhibition uses modern technology to convey Los Altos' history, combining small-town charm with the larger, tech-focused Bay Area.

Unlike the museum's previous exhibition, *Crown of the Peninsula*, which told the history of Los Altos chronologically, this exhibition groups stories by which part of the land they come from — the hills, creeks, valley and town. Each section has multiple screens, ranging from tablets to massive video walls, allowing visitors to scroll through expansive timelines of the stories of those who shaped the Los Altos community and beyond.

"Our intention in organizing the exhibition geographically is to underscore that we all share the same place, and it's our collective responsibility to make it a community," the museum's Executive Director Dr. Elisabeth Ward said. "Our environment is a primary concern of younger generations, and we expect this exhibition to resonate with youth as well as adults."

The beautiful new exhibition opened February 11. Photo by Mal Taam.

Gloria Arellano-Gomez, Muwekma Tribal Council, her daughter Isabelle and Dr. Perlita Dicochea, Chair of the Diversity Advisory Group.

The hills section focuses on the thought leaders of Los Altos, as well as Los Altos Hills. The creeks pay tribute to the Ohlone people and honor the natural resources of the land. The valley shows the evolution of Silicon Valley and the growth of businesses in Los Altos. The town embraces how Los Altos grew from railroads and orchards into the town it is today.

But even among the flashy new technology and mesmerizing design, the museum has remained focused on its purpose: to tell the story of Los Altos and the people who built it.

"These were real people," Public Relations & Marketing Chair Kristen Fuller said. "They were filled with innovative, creative ideas. The world was a different place then, but it's like we've gotten to know them through uncovering and delving into this information and talking to people."

The exhibition aims to emphasize the untold stories of Los Altos, using a grant from Santa Clara County to assemble a Diversity Advisory Group of local leaders. The committee

continued on page 2

The Grand Opening

continued from page 1

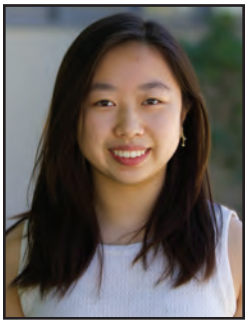
focused on recruiting representatives from communities such as the Ohlone, Latino and Asian-American communities to ensure that the exhibition would amplify their voices.

"The new exhibition is an excellent example of how community involvement in content and design can bring underrepresented histories out of the shadows," Chair of the Diversity Advisory Group Dr. Perlita Dicochea said. "It's a really groundbreaking approach and courageous to open up input to community members beyond Los Altos because it really helped highlight that Los Altos did not emerge in isolation."

Curators explored extensive historical archives to piece together the photos, videos and artifacts in the exhibition. The transition to screens also gives docents the option to update the exhibition as they uncover more history. They hope that the wealth of information will compel people to return. "With this particular exhibition, it's the immersiveness to me," Kristen Fuller said. "You become part of it, not just a person looking at it."

Connecting the community is a significant goal for the new exhibition. The Museum's leaders wanted to create a space that would allow for conversation and be engaging for all ages. They hope that the focus on the environment and inclusion would resonate with younger students who may not be able to see their place in history.

"The title of the exhibition is 'Making Connections,' and so, like any good museum, it's helping people find their connection to history," exhibition designer Brianna Cutts of the Sibbett Group said. "The idea is that there's a way to enter into the conversation."



Visit the Museum, see for yourself and join the conversation.

~ Audrey Tsai

Printed with permission of the author and the newspaper Editor-in-Chief, Anika Sikka.

President's Pen

The recent storms flowed in on atmospheric rivers and roused the creeks of Los Altos from their hyporheic slumbers. Transformed from dusty ditches to muddy floods, Adobe, Hale, Permanente, and Stevens Creeks surged brown and turbulent from the hills to the bay.

Winter storms and flooding have long been part of the local landscape and history. The Christmas Flood of 1955 was particularly noteworthy with record rains. Uprooted trees washed down from the hills, blocking bridges and culverts, and causing the creeks to overflow their banks. In earlier years, mostly orchards would have been soaked, causing little damage and in fact helping irrigate. But rapid post-war development meant that many acres of suburbia were inundated, with millions of dollars in damage. Residents demanded action.

The Army Corps of Engineers responded with massive flood control projects that encased local creeks in concrete from El Camino Real to the Baylands. While these channels efficiently sluiced stormwater away, they also blocked fish from traveling upstream. Soon the steelhead trout, which residents had once caught fly-fishing from backyard banks, had disappeared from the creeks.

Stories like these show how closely tied our history is to the local environment. That's why the Museum's new Permanent Exhibition guides visitors on a journey through the natural landscape and the changes that occurred over time. From the creeks where the original inhabitants lived, to the valley that produced bountiful agriculture and global technological advances; from the train that created the town, and diverse peoples who built the neighborhoods, to the rancheros who worked the hills; state-of-the-art interactive exhibits tell the fascinating stories of our local history.

We look forward to sharing our compelling new exhibition!

~ Larry Lang

Staff

Dr. Elisabeth Ward, *Executive Director*
Janna Land, *Deputy Director*
Diane Holcomb, *Director of Communications*
Sophia Abarca, *Curator of Collections*
Jordan Grealish, *Exhibits Specialist*
Farshad Fallah, *Bookkeeper and Office Administrator*
Faustino Carrillo, *Gardener*

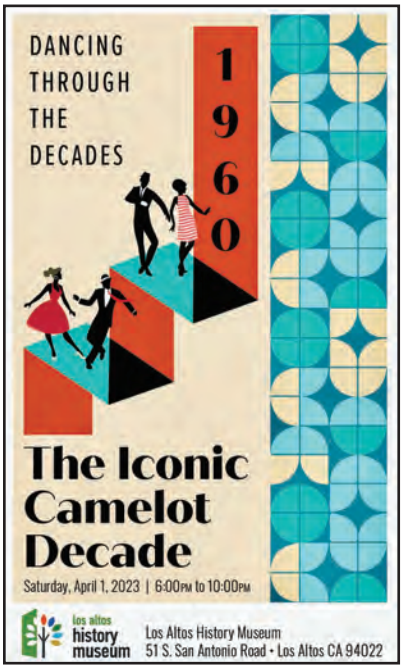
LOS ALTOS HISTORY MUSEUM
"Under the Oaks"
Gary Hedden, *Editor* Judi Eichler, *Graphic Design*
Gloria Geller, *Copy Editor*
A publication of interest to citizens of Los Altos, Los Altos Hills, and neighboring communities, produced by the Association of the Los Altos Historical Museum.
A special thanks to the newsletter mailing team!

Director's Corner

American Mosaic

The production of *Making Connections: Stories from the Land* has involved so many people and been such a labor of love for the Museum community over the last three years. It is absolutely thrilling to have arrived at the public opening of this tremendous new interactive exploration of local history. We celebrated this milestone with a series of events intended to make sure everyone who participated in this project felt thanked and included.

We started our celebration off with the lead donors, who were treated to a special evening event and given an apricot-themed thank-you bag as a small gesture of thanks for their tremendous generosity to this project. We absolutely could not have done this project without not only our two main benefactors, Nan Geschke and Ed and Pamela Taft, but also the many individuals and foundations who gave significant gifts to this project. We are so grateful to the Shoemaker, Warnock, Marcus, and Wojcicki families for donating at the sponsor level. It is a testament to what a community effort this has been to see the crowd of lead donors gathered as we unveiled the new Geschke Gallery.



We then had a thank-you party for the many people who worked behind the scenes to make this exhibition happen, including the researchers, volunteers, contractors, and vendors who worked diligently on the content, design, and fabrication. We all enjoyed food donated by our preferred caterers and hospitality from our own volunteers! It was great that Jane Reed was able to be in town to thank her for all her hard work on the Town section.

Finally, it was time to let in the general public at our Grand Opening, which took place on Saturday, February 11. What an event that was! We had over 350 visitors to the Museum, streaming in to see the new Permanent Exhibition, a performance by the Muwekma Tribal youth dance group, and speeches from Supervisor Simitian, Mayor Meadows of Los Altos, Mayor Swan of Los Altos Hills, and Mayor Hicks of Mountain View.

It was especially fitting, considering the content and theme of the exhibition, that we also had multicultural programming all day long organized by an area nonprofit called Mosaic America. The Museum received a large grant from the County to produce an exhibition that would tell the untold stories of Santa Clara County, purposely designed to lift up underrepresented populations. We delivered on that grant proposal in style, with an amazing array of people profiled in the People Stories sections of the exhibition and a timeline that hits on many events that resonate across various populations.

The new Permanent Exhibition represents a true turning point for Los Altos History Museum, one that ensures the Museum will be welcoming and inclusive to everyone living in our area. I could not be more proud of this achievement.

~ Dr. Elisabeth Ward

Meet Sophia

Sophia Abarca is our new Curator of Collections overseeing the Museum's 16,000 objects, artwork and paper archives. Native to the Bay Area, she grew up in South San Francisco and is a longtime Giants, Warriors, and 49ers fan. She earned a BA in Anthropology from San José State University and an MA in Museum Studies with an emphasis in Collections/Registration from San Francisco State University. Before coming to Los Altos, she worked as the registrar for the Hayward Area Historical Society. In her free time, she enjoys reading, visiting museums and gardens, watching sports, and playing with her Labradoodle, Riley.

Spotlight on the Oral History Project

Mary Golda Ross: A Hidden Figure

Among the many oral histories that make up the Museum Collection, Mary Golda Ross's is one of the voices you'll be able to hear in the new Permanent Exhibition's globe chair experience. Ross, a mathematician and engineer, is considered a "hidden figure" during the 1960s space race. She was interviewed in 1998.

Portrait of Mary Golda Ross, by America Meredith, 2011. Courtesy of the National Museum of the American Indian.

Mary G. Ross (1908-2008) was born in Oklahoma, and was the great-great-granddaughter of the legendary Cherokee chief John Ross.

She started working at Lockheed Aircraft Company in 1942, after earning a master's degree in mathematics from Colorado State Teachers College. Ross was the first female engineer hired at Lockheed, and the first Native American engineer. For the first decade of her Lockheed career, Ross worked on airplanes, including the P-38 Lightning fighter plane, solving design issues related to high-speed flight. In 1952, she joined the then-secret Skunk Works and worked on preliminary design concepts for interplanetary space travel. She was one of the authors of the volume of the NASA Planetary Flight Handbook that dealt with travel to Mars and Venus.

Ross moved to Los Altos from southern California in 1957 when Lockheed moved its Missiles System Division from Van Nuys to Sunnyvale. At the time, the area was mostly orchard and farmland. Ross was part of Lockheed's outreach to colleges and universities in the area to help establish the math and science curricula that would need to be taught to support the transition to high tech.

When she moved to the area, Ross said she expected to live in an apartment as was the case when she lived in Hollywood; however in 1957 there were no apartments. She ended up buying a small house between Grant Road, Fremont Road, and the railroad tracks (now Foothill Expressway).

In her oral history, Ross talks about what Los Altos was like when she moved here and how much she enjoyed living in the town. She retired from Lockheed in 1973, and continued to live in Los Altos until her death in 2008.

~ Bobbie Riedel

History in the News

Heritage Trees

At the January Historical Commission meeting, Vice Chair Kirk Paige commented that we have very few heritage trees in Los Altos and he thought more deserved such recognition.

Canary Island Palms on Rinconada Court, 2023.

The Canary Island palms along Rinconada Court are in that select group of protected trees. How that happened illustrates the challenges involved. The palms, well over 100 years old, were planted by landscape designer John McLaren along the driveway of the Farnsworth family's farm in the 1880s. At that time McLaren also landscaped Stanford University and San Francisco's Golden Gate Park. Over time, the trees became part of the neighborhood's unique charm and were enjoyed by all. That suddenly changed in 2003 when new owners early one morning cut one down and were prepared to cut a second until the neighbors managed to stop it. The story is that they formed a human chain around the tree to save it. The new owners, Jeffrey and Carissa Steefel, agreed to let the Historical Commission settle the dispute. They said they feared the trees harbored rats and falling palm fronds posed a hazard. Furthermore, they would not have bought the house knowing they could not remove the trees. The Commissioners noted that a majority of the residents on the street wanted the trees saved, and with the single-story overlay zoning law that protects the look of a neighborhood in mind, they voted to declare the palms protected, heritage trees.

The commissioners did consider the tension between the rights of property owners and neighborhood expectations, but their decision saved the trees, and that is why we have eight majestic palms on Rinconada Court with a noticeable gap where the one is still missing.

~ Gary Hedden

Donor Appreciation Preview, February 2

Kristen Fuller and Bruce Barton.

Ed Taft, Dr. Elisabeth Ward, and Nan Geschke.

Paul and Antje Newhagen, and Jerre Hitz.

Donna and John Shoemaker.

Lois and Bob Adams.

Dick and Irene Sasaki.

Photo Gallery

Dr. Elisabeth Ward offering opening remarks at the Grand Opening of the new exhibition. Photo by Mal Taam.

The crowd in the courtyard for the opening ceremony. Photo by Mal Taam.

Gloria Arellano-Gomez, Muwekma Tribal Council, and her daughter Isabelle offering welcoming remarks and a land acknowledgement. Photo by Mal Taam.

County Supervisor Joe Simitian thanking everyone for the hard work and dedication that made this new exhibition possible.

The Grand Opening ribbon cutting with Joe Simitian, Nan Geschke, and Mayors Sally Meadows, Linda Swan, and Alison Hicks. Photo by Ed Taft.

Xpressions Dance school with one of the intercultural performances curated by Mosaic America.

Photo Gallery

Opening day crowd enjoying the Grand Opening.

Brianna Cutts and Donald Sibbett with the Sibbett Group, lead designers for the new exhibition.

Julie Rose explaining the use of the train diorama iPad. Photo by Mal Taam.

The always-popular train, here with 2-year-old Luca and his dad, Claudio Martonffy.

Polish folk dancing with Simorgh Dance Collective, part of the programming by Mosaic America. Photo by Elisabeth Ward.

Vicki Holman smiling after a very busy day at the store. Photo by Mal Tamm.

los altos history museum

UNDER THE OAKS

NonProfit Org.
U.S. Postage
PAID
Permit No. 12
Los Altos, CA

Assn. of the Los Altos Historical Museum, 51 So. San Antonio Road, Los Altos, CA 94022 **Address Correction Requested**

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.

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

Collections/Research
(650) 948-9427 x11
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

The Past Shapes the Future: A Retrospective, open through May 28, Museum gallery.

Memorial Celebration for Phil Doetsch, Civic Center Orchardist, Sunday, March 19, 11am-1pm.

Dancing Through the Decades: The Iconic Camelot Decade, Saturday, April 1, 6-10pm.

Teen Docent History Walk. Stroll University and Orange Avenues and learn about the history of the stately homes from our teen docents! Saturday, April 15, 11am-3pm.

Third Thursday: Conversations & Reflections, May 18, 5:30-7pm, Museum gallery.

Annual Members Meeting, online, Wednesday, June 21.

Georgianna Shea has transitioned from full-time staff to special project assignments. We wish her well and can't wait to see her again!

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