los altos history museum

UNDER THE OAKS

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Isabel Merriman

A dedicated animal protection worker or an attention-grabbing do-gooder? A child welfare advocate or an interfering busybody? Isabel (often spelled Isabelle) Pardee Merriman was all of the above—a mix of compassion and bravado. Born in 1843, she was the lesser-known sister of Sarah Pardee Winchester, whose mysterious house is now a popular attraction in San Jose.

A rare photo of Isabel Merriman appeared in Eugene Sawyer's History of Santa Clara County (1922). LAHM Collections

The sisters and their siblings grew up in New Haven, Connecticut, a prosperous manufacturing center at that time and home to Yale University. Their father, Leonard Pardee, was a successful businessman. He and his wife, Sarah, often entertained progressive religious and political thinkers.

One such guest was Henry Bergh, who founded the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) in 1866 and the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children in 1874. Bergh was famous for creating a spectacle to draw attention to animal abuse. He threw himself in front of trolleys and wagons pulling sick animals, and even intervened to break up dog fights. Merriman and many others were inspired by these tactics.

In 1887, Merriman and her husband moved to California with their two children, following her sister Sarah, who had relocated in 1885 after a series of personal tragedies. Sarah's wealth, as the widow of William Winchester of the Winchester Repeating Arms Company, allowed her to purchase a home for herself in San Jose as well as another for the Merriman family in what would later become Los Altos. The Merrimans lived there until 1908, when Winchester was forced to sell the property to the railroad.

The Merrimans relocated to Palo Alto, where Isabel became active in the Palo Alto Humane Society and was even elected a state humane officer. Inspired by Henry Bergh, Merriman frequently used her officer's badge to rescue injured horses

The Merriman House still exists today and is the oldest occupied house in Los Altos. LAHM Collections

and starving cows. In September 1910 alone, she intervened in at least nine separate incidents, and even had the constable of Mayfield (now Palo Alto) arrested for allegedly choking a horse to death. In another incident, Merriman had a Mountain View organ grinder arrested for compelling his monkey to work long hours in the hot sun. The organ grinder was found guilty and fined $10 "for not having unionized the monkey's hours of labor."

Merriman also pursued causes related to child welfare and safety. Even though the tough lives of poor children were well known in large cities as well as small communities, in most states there were no specific courts and processes to deal with these cases. The first juvenile court legislation in California was enacted in 1903. Further legislation was enacted to allow for additional courts and detention homes.

With her usual fervor, Merriman found ways to protect children. While living in Los Altos, she offered her own home as a haven for children and babies in need of care. In 1910, she investigated the Palo Alto and Mayfield public schools. She also placed three babies in care homes, followed three cases in juvenile court, found homes for four children, and raised money for the care of two sick children.

In 1911, Merriman appeared before the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors to suggest that husbands and fathers who were not properly supporting their families be put to work for the county for two years, which was allowed by recently passed legislation. She suggested that the men work

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Isabel Merriman

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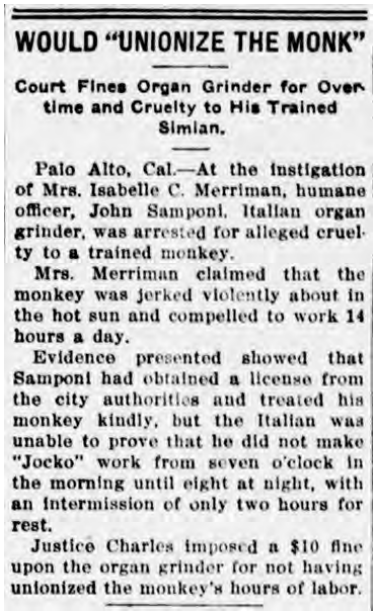
at a county woodpile and have their wages ($1.50 per day) turned over to their families. According to newspaper accounts, "her suggestions were warmly received." It is not known if any such programs were established.

In December 1912, Merriman distributed over 200 Christmas gifts collected by the Unitarian Church in Palo Alto to local children in need. According to *The San Jose Mercury News*, she spent hours driving around on Christmas Eve to leave the packages at the doors of "the poor children Santa Claus might forget."



WOULD "UNIONIZE THE MONK"

Court Fines Organ Grinder for Overtime and Cruelty to His Trained Simian.

Palo Alto, Cal.—At the instigation of Mrs. Isabelle C. Merriman, humane officer, John Samponi, Italian organ grinder, was arrested for alleged cruelty to a trained monkey.

Mrs. Merriman claimed that the monkey was jerked violently about in the hot sun and compelled to work 14 hours a day.

Evidence presented showed that Samponi had obtained a license from the city authorities and treated his monkey kindly, but the Italian was unable to prove that he did not make "Jocko" work from seven o'clock in the morning until eight at night, with an intermission of only two hours for rest.

Justice Charles imposed a $10 fine upon the organ grinder for not having unionized the monkey's hours of labor.

Newspapers frequently covered Merriman's efforts on behalf of animal rights. Some reports were more attention-grabbing than others! Mariposa Gazette, September 4, 1915

The Museum's upcoming exhibit on Isabel Merriman will explore her family and background, Merriman's life in what would become Los Altos, and the many progressive causes that she pursued. Although her sister Sarah is better known today, Isabel Merriman was also a force to be reckoned with and left an important legacy of her own.

Building El Sueño: Isabel Merriman, Sarah Winchester, and the California Dream on display June 26 -November 30, 2025.

~ Pamela Baird, LAHM Exhibits Committee

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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

A Fond Farewell: Reflections on My Time with the Museum

As I wrap up my time as the Museum's Board President, I find myself reflecting on a journey that began 15 years ago, just before I retired from teaching. I started out volunteering in the Museum Store, not knowing how deeply I would come to love and admire this special place. The following year, I became a docent and joined the Education Committee, giving tours to curious and energetic 3rd and 4th graders—an experience that reminded me why I loved working with young people. Over time, my involvement deepened. For the past six years, I've had the privilege of serving on the Board, with the last year as Board President.

Watching the Museum grow has been one of my great joys. Together, we've transformed the space into one of the Bay Area's premier local history museums. The creation of our state-of-the-art, interactive Permanent Exhibition stands out as a highlight, bringing to life the stories of our hills, valleys, creeks, and towns. I've had the pleasure of working under three different Museum directors, each of whom brought new energy, ideas, and creativity. Volunteering during the pandemic was particularly memorable—challenging, yet inspiring. We moved the store outdoors under the arbor and launched an online version, finding new ways to stay connected with our community. Our beloved orchard received renewed attention and is now beautifully maintained, thanks to the dedication of volunteer Jane Packard. Under Elisabeth Ward's leadership, we introduced dynamic new programming like the Apricot STEM Fair, Rancho Day, and Third Thursdays, further strengthening our ties to the community and to our shared history.

Serving as Board President has been an honor. The best part has been working closely with my fellow Board members and Anna Toledano, our new director. Together, we've continued to build on a strong foundation and look ahead to a bright future filled with innovative programs, community partnerships, and meaningful storytelling. Though my time as President is coming to an end, I remain a proud volunteer and supporter of the Museum. I'm deeply grateful for our staff, volunteers, board members, and visitors—who all make this place so special. Thank you for letting me be part of this remarkable journey.

~ Vicki Holman

Our Hidden Gems

This photo and piece of linoleum flooring are from the remodel of the Winchester-Merriman House in 1989. Which room the linoleum piece came from is unknown. The photo and piece of linoleum were donated to the Museum by Steve Aced, who was a Los Altos Historical Commissioner in the late 1980s. Aced was an integral force in ensuring the Winchester-Merriman House became an official designated historic landmark on February 28, 1989.

In Los Altos, homes that are awarded as a "designated historic landmark" must meet three criteria: Homes must be over fifty years of age, must contain a significant degree of original materials and features for the style of home, and must have historic significance. When a home becomes a historic landmark, owners receive tax savings that they can put toward maintaining and protecting the home's historic value. Homeowners must follow guidelines set by the California Office of Historic Preservation, the U.S. Secretary of the Interior, the State Historical Building Code, and the City of Los Altos.

Sophia Arbarca with the small piece of linoleum flooring that was saved.

The photo and linoleum piece are part of a collection Aced took when the Winchester-Merriman House was being remodeled. Taking before and after pictures during home remodeling or renovations is more important than many realize. These images serve as a powerful visual record, capturing the transformation and progress made throughout the project. The before photos document the original condition of a space, helping homeowners, contractors, or designers evaluate the scope of work needed. The after photos, in contrast, highlight improvements, design choices, and craftsmanship. These photos are important for historic homes as they show what a room used to look like and work that has been done to renovate the room.

If you find yourself remodeling or renovating your home, historic or otherwise, don't forget to take photos or maybe even videos along the way!

If you think your home qualifies as a historic landmark, you can find more information at *www.losaltosca.gov/historicalcommission/page/historic-inventory*.

~ Sophia Abarca

Volunteer Highlights

Teen Docent and Board Member Sophie Filer

Sophie Filer, a graduating senior from Los Altos High School, began volunteering at the Museum in July of 2022, initially joining through the Teen Docent Program. Teen docents are an extremely important part of the Museum, taking on leadership roles and interacting with visitors; leading tours; and helping to plan, coordinate, and execute important events.

In July, 2024, Sophie was promoted to be the youth representative on the Museum's Board. Sophie has been an excellent addition to the Board—participating in meetings and sharing her perspective on programs and events that would interest teens.

Sophie had this to say about her time at the Museum: "I've volunteered at the History Museum since my freshman year. Initially, I volunteered to make connections because we had just moved here from Seattle. I have loved learning about Los Altos and being a part of the community."

Sophie has helped organize Museum events such as Rancho Day, the Apricot STEM Fair, and Train Day. She currently volunteers at the front desk, welcoming visitors and giving tours.

Sophie's passion lies in Classical Archaeology, which she plans to study this fall in the United Kingdom at University College London. Volunteering at Los Altos History Museum might just be the beginning of a career in the museum world! We will miss her dedication, enthusiasm, and leadership in the Teen Docent Program, but we are thrilled to watch for Sophie's experiences in college and beyond. Thank you, Sophie, for your years of volunteering at Los Altos History Museum!

Stay tuned for the announcement of our newest Teen Docent Program volunteers. For more information about this program, please see the ***losaltoshistory.org*** website.

~ Rebecca Lowell, LAHM Board Member

Sophie Filer, teen docent and youth representative on the Museum Board.

Margaret Thompson Essay Contest

Inspired by the recent exhibition *Rooted in Time: Journey through Hidden Villa*, local students in grades 3 through 6 were invited to write about an experience in nature that made a lasting impression. The stories are judged in a contest started by Margaret Thompson in 1984 and students with winning essays are recognized at an Ice Cream Social at the Museum in May. Here are excerpts from some top essays.

Finn, a 3rd grade student at Covington School, visited Natural Bridges State Beach in Santa Cruz and wrote, "On the hiking trail I love to see monarch butterflies. They look like orange leaves with black patterns on them and have these little white dots on their body. I like to learn about the monarch butterflies by listening to the docents talk about the butterflies' migration. They talk about where the monarchs migrate, how far they travel, and dangers they could face like snow or animals."

Hazel, a 4th grade student at Covington School, went camping under the stars at Hidden Villa. She wrote, "I could hear the birds chirping. I felt my sleeping bag and the grass beneath me. As I slowly opened my eyes I saw the trees swaying above me. But something astonishing happened right then and there. I saw a deer right in front of me. With its huge brown eyes, round and curious, I felt a very special bond between us. When nobody else was awake I was there to experience something magical!"

Aria, a 5th grade student at Gardner Bullis School, visited Filoli. "I thought of how much we take nature for granted, and realized that Filoli isn't just a garden, it's a reminder of what we'd lose if we don't protect these treasures. If we don't protect nature, we won't have these natural wonders to see in the future. Leaving Filoli, I felt a sense of responsibility. The beauty I saw there was not just a gift, it was a reminder of what's at stake. Nature, in all its beauty, needs our protection."

Leah, a 6th grade student at Pinewood School, visited Manuel Antonio National Park in Costa Rica with her family and wrote, "The swaying leaves gave way to a crystal ocean that sparkled with a thousand shades of blue. The waves crashed loudly against the soft, fine sand. Hundreds of hermit crabs dotted the shore, so much so that I had to maneuver around them to avoid crushing their colorful shells."

Great stories. All of the top stories are on the Museum website.

Hello Christina

Christina Zhao is our new Education and Volunteer Coordinator supporting the Museum's education programs and its dedicated volunteer community. She earned degrees from universities in Asia, the UK, and the US, and has been living in the Bay Area for more than a decade. Before joining the staff, Christina was a passionate volunteer at the Museum, where she could often be found at the docent desk, in the collections office, or assisting with special events. Beyond the Museum, she enjoys leading farm tours at Hidden Villa as a volunteer education guide and bringing the joy of art to local classrooms as a *Let's Look at Art* volunteer docent with the San Jose Museum of Art. In her leisure, Christina enjoys traveling—with cherished memories from China, India, Egypt, and Easter Island of Chile—as well as practicing calligraphy and spending time with her two beloved cats.

History in the News

Walter Chapman

We have some truly historic homes in Los Altos, and each one is a treasure. We rely on the homeowner to fall in love with their home—and want to maintain it and often restore it. This is a benefit to the entire community.

A significant restoration takes a determined homeowner. It is expensive and time consuming. And understanding the process and rules can be intimidating. An experienced, creative architect or designer can make a difference.

Walter Chapman at the Winchester-Merriman house in April.

Walter Chapman is one such designer. He is currently working on the most historically significant house in Los Altos—the Winchester-Merriman house on Edgewood Lane. The owners, Jung Yoon and Warren Yang, credit Chapman for getting them through the approval process. But more importantly, he provided a creative layout that converted a large interior room and a small one into two equally sized rooms—perfect for their twins. He managed this by adding a second dormer that closely, but not perfectly, matched an existing dormer. Chapman continues to pay visits to check on the progress of the restoration work.

Chapman is also working on the Morris house, a historic home on Eleanor Avenue. The owners, Jennifer Jacobsen and Todd Parmacek, also credit Chapman for getting them through the approval process and for his designs that preserved as much of the original house as possible. Chapman was able to save most of the leaded-glass windows and recognized and removed a balcony that had been added to the original house, helping to restore the original architectural style. A detached garage was added, in keeping with the early 1900's practice of having horse carriages, not cars.

The role of an architect/designer is not generally recognized, but in April, the Los Altos Historical Commission honored Walter Chapman with the prestigious Historic Preservation Award for 2025.

~ Gary Hedden

Director's Corner

Show Up for Museums

Reading recent headlines — on March 31, "Entire staff at Institute of Museum and Library Services put on administrative leave;" on April 2, "DOGE terminates funding to the National Endowment for the Humanities"— has been sobering for museum professionals across the country, including me. Closing these critical federal agencies deeply affects museums, from national institutions to local ones like ours. While LAHM currently holds no federal grants, future competition for funding has already intensified. California Humanities, our state affiliate, relies on the NEH for 90% of its budget. Our one pending federal grant application — IMLS-administered — was canceled for 2025.

This news only compounds our challenging financial climate. Our sole guaranteed annual funding is our $195,000 grant from the City of Los Altos, $75,000 of which goes to maintenance of the Heritage Orchard. We raise the rest from donations, memberships, program admission, facility rentals, and grants. While fundraising for us is business as usual, doing it at this moment is extraordinary. We have to contend with not only the economic downturn, but also new threats, such as a potential loss of nonprofit tax-exempt status for 501(c)3 organizations.

How can you help? Donate to LAHM and your beloved cultural institutions, and advocate for museums. Write to Congressman Sam Liccardo urging him to protect funding for the humanities. Follow advocacy updates from national organizations like the American Alliance of Museums and the American Association for State and Local History, and state associations such as the California Association of Museums and CalNonprofits.

There is hope: At the time of writing, attorneys general from 21 states have filed lawsuits to save IMLS. With your voice and support, museums like LAHM can — and will! — continue our work to challenge established narratives and tell histories that need to be heard.

~ Anna Toledano

Welcome to our new members:

Maria Daehler
Pete Dailey
Katie Dunlap
Marie Garcia
Clayton Holstine
Nithya Kanamarlapudi
Helene and Kjell Karlsson
Joseph Klein
Kathleen McCarthy
Tom Perloff
David Shawcross
Betsey Sowder
Michelle Sturiale
Rene Welti

Business Members

Business
Christopher Fling, Realtor
DJM Inspections
Los Altos Town Crier
The Garden Club of Los Altos

Partner
BK Collections

Corporate Members
Cloudinary
Kiwanis Club of Los Altos
Los Altos Mountain View Community Foundation
Pink Ribbon Good

Photo Gallery

Jennifer Springer sharing stories about growing up on Moody Road near Hidden Villa at the Moody Road Block Party in February.

Ben King, Hidden Villa Summer Camp Director, helping at the Hidden Villa scavenger hunt in March.

A spring picnic in the Heritage Apricot Orchard with some of our many garden volunteers.

The Education Committee at its monthly meeting in April.

Anna Toledano introducing Julie Dominguez at preview night for the exhibition She Sang Me a Good Luck Song: The California Indian Photographs of Dugan Aguilar.

Charlene Nijmeh describing the Trail of Truth ride to raise awareness of the Ohlone fight for tribal recognition at the March Third Thursday talk.

Photo Gallery

Pinky Whelan celebrating her 93rd birthday in April, pictured here with her family. Pinky was the key founder of the History House in the 70s and an active Museum volunteer ever since.

S. M. Lieu leading an informative photo workshop in April.

Gerri Acers engaging with students in the Geschke Gallery during the 3rd grade tours in April.

Michael Wilcox, Stanford University, offering interesting insights about our original inhabitants at the Museum's Third Wednesday talk.

The popular Garden Club of Los Altos plant sale at the Museum in April.

Covington School students learning about our agricultural heritage during the 4th grade tours in May.

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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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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

Meet the Smiths, on display in the J. Gilbert Smith House.

Community Corner, Local Nonprofit Groups, on display in the Geschke Gallery.

Annual Meeting of Members, Tues, June 24, 4-5:30pm.

Building El Sueño: Isabel Merriman, Sarah Winchester, and the California Dream, exhibit opens Thurs, June 26, in the Main Gallery.

The Pardee Sisters: An Interview with Mary Jo Ignoffo and Robin Chapman, Wed, July 16, 5:30-7pm.

Apricot STEM Fair, Sat, July 19, 10am-4pm.

Isabel's Garden Scavenger Hunt, Sat, Aug 9, noon-4pm.

Members' Summer Picnic and Volunteer Appreciation, Sun, Sept 7, 5-8pm.

Train Day, Sun, Sept 14, 10am-4pm.

Janan Boehme Talk, Wed, Sept 17, 5:30-7pm.

Lisa Porter doing some serious spring cleaning in the courtyard!

Board Meetings, Fourth Tuesday each month. 4 pm, in person and online.