los altos history museum

UNDER THE OAKS

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Sneak Peek: Our New Permanent Exhibition

Enter the Museum's upper gallery where the photomurals make you feel part of the valley's landscape. Then listen to stories about the people who shaped the area. Explore decades of history through an interactive experience. And get to know our towns — Los Altos and Los Altos Hills — on a personal level. This is what awaits you when the Museum's new technology-driven Permanent Exhibition opens in early 2023.

The exhibition, *Making Connections: Stories from the Land*, has been three years in the works at a cost of more than $3 million. It replaces the inaugural exhibit — noteworthy for its "family tree" — that was installed when the Museum opened in spring 2001. "It was meant to last 10 years," said Nan Geschke, the project's co-manager with Julie Rose. "It has been updated over time with the intention of completely redoing it. But because of the cost, it kept being delayed."

In May 2019, Geschke and her late husband, Chuck, spearheaded an effort to replace the exhibit with a lead gift by first asking Pamela and Ed Taft to match their gift. The Tafts generously obliged and the Museum board formed a committee to raise the estimated balance for the project. It was no easy task because suddenly COVID-19 changed everything, and the cost of the exhibition tripled from the original estimate. "The new exhibition was made possible by the extraordinary generosity of Los Altos and Los Altos Hills residents," Geschke said. "It has been heartwarming to see the response to the appeal. We have been fortunate to work with dedicated vendor partners, staff, and volunteers who produced what you soon will be able to see."

Progress meeting with the design team, March, 2022.

According to Museum Executive Director Dr. Elisabeth Ward, *Making Connections* accomplishes several important goals, including generating the same kind of excitement and buzz that accompanied the Museum's opening. "It will allow us to reintroduce the Museum to a whole new generation … and to practice place-based storytelling, which is among the most effective ways to pass on information from one generation to the next." At the exhibition's entry will be a quote from Wallace Stegner: "No place is a place until things that have happened in it are remembered in history …" Through photographs, videos, recorded voices, touch-activated screens, and augmented reality, the Permanent Exhibition will tell the history of "this place," stretching back to the Indigenous peoples.

Divided into place-based exhibition areas — Creeks, Valley, and Hills — the gallery will feature three huge video photomurals that form a panoramic tryptic. The introductory illustrations on each will be of the first people on the land that would become Los Altos and Los Altos Hills — the Costanoan Ohlone triblet called the Puichon. Each area will have a large portrait-oriented touchscreen to allow you to scroll through time. Nearby, a small touchscreen with audio handset will feature people's stories along with short videos. In the middle of the gallery will be a three-

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Sneak Peek: Our New Exhibition

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dimensional topographic map to create a tactile connection between today and yesterday. In an adjacent smaller gallery, the popular train diorama will still chug along, but it will be updated and will include an augmented reality experience central to the exhibition's Town section — where you can explore neighborhoods on an interactive map and watch videos chronicling Los Altos as the town begins, debates, and celebrates. In addition, there will be a Community Corner dedicated to changing displays, the first one featuring the Sister Cities program plus dolls from around the world collected by Barbara Lindsay Hall. Adjacent to the Community Corner, visitors are invited to linger and listen to voices of the past while seated in a surround-sound chair. Floating above the Museum lobby and in view of the exhibition will be an LED ring, an interactive experience whereby you can add your feedback about Los Altos and the surrounding regions. It will be a colorful visual with words and icons.

Content for the exhibition was provided by staff and volunteers who worked closely with a diversity advisory group composed of local historians headed by Dr. Perlita Dicochea. "We have worked hard to ensure that the new exhibit reflects the full range of diverse voices that have always inhabited our area," Dr. Ward said. Leading the content teams were Hills: Elisabeth Ward; Creeks: Diane Holcomb, with Larry Lang and Gary Hedden; Valley: Dr. Amy Ellison; and Town: Jane Reed and Margie Alving.

On board from the start were Donald Sibbett and Brianna Cutts, principals of The Sibbett Group, an exhibit design firm that specializes in crafting sensory-rich interpretive experiences. In fact, they designed the original two-decade-old exhibit that is being replaced. Subsequently joining the team of vendors was Syfn Labs founder Justin Gelinas, who is passionate about designing digital interactive experiences. "By using leading edge technology to tell the Los Altos story, the Museum will be able to communicate 10 times more information. It is an exhibition we hope will get many repeat visits and will become a destination for in-town and out-of-town visitors," Geschke said.

"The new exhibition will connect our visitors to the very special place that is Los Altos and the surrounding area," Julie Rose said. "Through compelling stories shared in unique ways, the exhibition experience will create — for young and old alike — a sense of belonging in our community."

~ Carolyn Snyder

LOS ALTOS HISTORY MUSEUM
"Under the Oaks"
Gary Hedden, *Editor* Judi Eichler, *Graphic Design*
Gloria Geller, *Line Editor*
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A special thanks to the newsletter mailing team!

President's Pen

Crimson fall fireworks burst above downtown Los Altos as the Chinese pistache trees lining the streets ignite in their annual autumnal display. As we enjoy their beauty, we should also remember their origins. During the Street Tree Planting Bee in 1954, forty-eight pistache trees were donated by the Furuichi family, longtime owners of the now-closed Los Altos Nursery on Hawthorne Avenue. That gracious civic generosity is all the more remarkable in light of how their rights and dignity as Japanese-American citizens were violated by their World War II internment. Still, the family had strong ties to Los Altos, and the Museum is honored that Tyler Furuichi currently serves on our board.

The Los Altos tree-planting tradition continues with the GreenTown Los Altos 500 Trees campaign. The organization is planting more Chinese pistache trees — as well as valley oaks and fruit trees, which are all appropriate choices for the natural and agricultural history of the area. Future Los Altans will appreciate the foresight of today's volunteer foresters. Project leader Gary Hedden also serves on our Museum board.

Trees are a powerful metaphor when thinking about history. We diagram our family trees. Ancient redwood cross-sections are labeled with dates and milestones. When people's lives become entwined with a specific place over many years, we say they've put down deep roots. Not surprising then that a tree serves as the logo for the Los Altos History Museum.

Our members, volunteers, and donors are the arborists of the metaphorical tree of the Museum. Your ongoing care and support and the work of our dedicated professional staff ensure that the Museum will grow and flourish for many years to come. Thank you for joining and for sharing your time, talents, and treasure. As you'll read in this issue, good things are bursting out all over.

~ Larry Lang

Staff

Dr. Elisabeth Ward, *Executive Director*
Janna Land, *Deputy Director*
Georgianna Shea, *Museum Educator*
Diane Holcomb, *Director of Communications*
Farshad Fallah, *Bookkeeper and Office Administrator*
Faustino Carrillo, *Gardener*

Our Hidden Gems

In the Chips

In the upcoming *Making Connections* Permanent Exhibition, we tell the story of the transition from the Valley of Heart's Delight to Silicon Valley, from agriculture to silicon chips.

William Shockley is credited with making transistors out of silicon in the late 1940s. Employees of Shockley Labs went on to start companies like Fairchild and Intel, and in 1971, a journalist named Don Hoefler coined the term "Silicon Valley." By the early 1980s, this area was a technology hub for companies developing computers and software.

Alecia Thomas holding the board game In the Chips.

The energy and excitement of the period is captured in the board game *In the Chips*, now in the Museum's Collection. In 1980, Terry Bohme came up with the idea. He, his cousin Gary Suda and Bob Moog, a Stanford undergraduate, developed the game and got it produced at The Box Factory in South San Francisco. It is similar to Hasbro's classic The Game of Life — with tokens, dice, and players moving along a path. What is notable is that it references local highways, restaurants, attractions, and companies — including Hewlett Packard, Varian, National Semiconductor, and Intel. Players can buy a car at Mancini Chrysler. They can take classes at Stanford, San Jose State, or the University of Santa Clara — which determines the players' starting salaries. Players can land on spaces with advertisements by radio and TV stations that still exist. On some spaces, players have to buy a pool or expensive furniture or give a loan to a neighbor in need. Some attractions on the board are the Winchester Mystery House and Great America, where Bohme worked for two summers. The game is striking because of the low prices for things like cars and homes back then. It is also oddly striking that the "opportunity cards" invite players to invest in businesses like travel agencies and dry cleaners — not startups or apps. The game ended up selling around 30,000 copies with spin-offs detailing San Francisco, New York, and Hawaii, but *In the Chips* was the most successful.

In the Chips will be on display in *Making Connections*, coming in early 2023. Be sure to visit and take a closer look at this fascinating piece of Silicon Valley history — a hidden gem in the Museum's collection.

~ Alecia Thomas

Welcome to our new members:

Carol Ach and Barry Trost
Gagan Aggarwal
Michael Andrakis
Rashmi Bahulkar
Yifei Bao
Marcia Chmyz
Ann Clifton
Andrea Colaco
Len and Margie Edwards
Mary and Jacques Fossourier
Marie Gordon
Karen and Don Handal
Duanni Hurd
Shankar Iyer
Wonyoung Kim
Ashley Kim
Catherine Lacavera
Pauline and Frank Lang
Jiaqi Liu
Kim McCann
Susan Mendelsohn and Bob Flanagan
Cheryl Miller
Jory Moon
Diane Renshaw
John and Joyce Rimbach
Jana Schlansker
David Sedano
Jennifer and Greg Springer

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Spotlight on the Oral History Project

Winery Wife

As a volunteer for the Museum's Oral History Committee, I was privileged to interview Kay Gemello, a 101-year-old woman with a clear mind and sparkling eyes. Kay, born Kathryn Volarvich, married her older brother's best friend, Mario Gemello. Mario began working with his father at Gemello Winery in 1934. He took over the winery in 1944 and ran it until he retired in 1982. It included a store on El Camino Real near El Monte, behind which was the winery and a compound of four Gemello family homes.

As the Gemellos lived at the winery, family life could be disrupted by customers. On one occasion, the family was at their dinner table celebrating the baptism of one of their three children. There was a knock at the door. Kay said "No, you're not going out. This is my baby's day, and we're having dinner for the families." But Mario went out to wait on the customer because he loved to talk with customers. So, Kay opened the door and said "Mario, telephone." He returned to the house and asked, "Who's on the phone?" Kay replied, "Nobody. Go eat your dinner."

Once a customer rang their doorbell at five o'clock in the morning, and Mario went down and answered the door. The customer was going on a fishing trip and had forgotten to buy the wine. Mario took care of the customer and sold him the wine. On another occasion, Mario had bought a truckload of grapes in Gilroy and drove the truck onto the grounds of the winery. Kay looked out the kitchen window and saw her three-year-old grandson, Michael Ferguson, sitting atop the pile of grapes in the truck. He was eating them — but he did not go into the wine-making business!

Kay Gemello, April, 2022. Photo credit, Patti White.

Today, there are homes where the Gemello Winery once stood. Kay lives in Los Altos, where she and Mario moved after he retired. What a pleasure it was to meet Kay and hear her stories about living at the winery.

~ Patti White

Volunteer Highlights & Activities

If you've strolled the Stegner pathway to view our outdoor exhibit, *Wallace Stegner: A Path to Conservation*, you can thank the Museum's Facilities Committee for constructing the stands for the pathway posts and mounting the exhibit's information panels. According to Facilities Committee chair Gary Hedden, it took half a ton of rocks to anchor the posts!

Al Holstein building the Stegner kiosk.

The Facilities Committee works hard behind the scenes — fixing problems, painting walls and panel displays for exhibits, building exhibit pieces, and coordinating maintenance work with the City. They anchor storage shelves in the offices; ensure the lights work in the courtyard for rental groups; and organize the barn, shuffling things around and recently building vertical shelves to store exhibit panels.

Gary has built exhibit pieces since 2011 with the *Shaped by Water* exhibit and also curated *Pedal Power* in 2014, finding creative ways to hang bicycles from the wall. He now has a team of 16 volunteers. "Some of the crew likes design work," he said. "The design of the back gate, for instance, was done by Dave Backs and Harry Guy. For Creek Fest, some of the Shaped by Water exhibit pieces were repaired by Steve Houtchens; Fred Smith repaired the water pump — a popular activity for the kids; and Steve and Cliff Olson put together a water feature for kids to float rafts down. Al Holstein built the Stegner exhibit kiosk, and Armond King replaced the belt on the walnut huller. The team really enjoys these one-off projects." Other members include Brian Boggs, Wayne Hooper, and Lylia Needham, who have pitched in with paintbrushes and other tools, and Russ Bartlett, Larry Lang, Ian Massey, and Patti Meneely have helped with construction projects. Over the years, almost everyone has helped with event and exhibit setup and take down.

We can always use more volunteers, so if you're handy with a hammer and saw, just let us know!

~ Diane Holcomb

History in the News

Two members of the Historical Commission very familiar to us at the Museum, Nomi Trapnell and Margo Horn, are now termed out of serving on the commission after years of dedicated, thoughtful service. Taking their places are Jonathan Adams and Liza Coe. One of the last actions of Nomi and Margo was to recommend to the City Council that Mills Act protection for the Craftsman-style home at 151 Hawthorne Avenue be granted. In October, the Council agreed. The Mills Act allows a portion of local property taxes to be used for the maintenance of historic homes, an important incentive for preserving our historical heritage.

Historic downtown Los Altos is getting a fresh look. A mural called Main Street Movie Theater Remembered was recently installed on the 3rd Street side of Satura Patisserie. This mural is a window back to the 1950s and honors the time when the theater was an iconic destination on Main Street. Check out other projects by Arts Los Altos on their website, artslosaltos.org.

Lynn Stegner and Georgianna Shea

In other news, the Stegner exhibit brought in a program with Lynn Stegner, daughter-in-law to Wallace Stegner and a noted author herself. She offered insights about Wally in a conversation with Georgiana Shea at the Museum in October. To the question "Did you feel any pressure having that name?" Lynn responded, "No, I felt lucky. I just enjoyed it." To "What explains his environmental passion?" Lynn said, "It was his home turf. He grew up in a landscape defined by aridity. Growing wheat in Saskatchewan, he knew what it meant when you don't have enough water to irrigate." And finally, to "What is your favorite Wally book?" Lynn replied, "*Wolf Willow*. It is a great choice for the younger generation." Watch the recording of their conversation on the Museum's *YouTube Learning Channel*. And when you next visit the Museum, don't miss walking the Stegner pathway to read the text panels and to aim your smartphone at the QR codes to hear and see Wally himself. You will discover a fascinating collection of historical clips.

~ Gary Hedden

Director's Corner

The J. Gilbert Smith House

The centerpiece historic Museum building — the reason the Museum exists at all — has been getting some extra love and attention this last year. It feels a bit like we'd stepped into a "way back" machine that took us to the summer of 1978 when the Museum first opened to the public at the J. Gilbert Smith House. Back then, all the docents, exhibits, and events were hosted there, then commonly known as the "History House." Museum visitors would come up the wooden steps to that wonderful wraparound porch and then into the welcoming, amazing foyer with its perfect original redwood paneling.

Since May of this year, for the first time in over 20 years, the J. Gilbert Smith House has again been serving as the location where we welcome visitors, as we closed the main building to accommodate the construction of the new Permanent Exhibition. Docents have made themselves comfortable on the porch, ready and able to answer visitor questions. And the store has created a lovely shopping experience inside the House, cozy and welcoming. I've been struck by how warmly and ably the Smith House fulfills its role as the public face of the Museum. While much has changed in the Civic Center since 1905, when Mr. Smith finished building the house, and at the Museum since 1978, when the Smith House became the Museum, the house itself stands as a testament to the fact that some things remain very much the same.

Through all the changes of the last 45 years, Pinky Whalen has continued to decorate the house for every season, helping everyone appreciate the house. Staff has also shown the Smith House special attention. Heather Farquhar ran some fascinating tours and programs about the history and architecture of the house, Amy Ellison hosted a lovely history book club, and over the last year, Sharon Barkoff and Jordan Grealish created five changing exhibits in the gallery upstairs.

In a few months, we'll be moving back into the main building for the opening of our exciting new Permanent Exhibition, and there will be new programs, staff, exhibits, and activities. But the redwood of the J. Gilbert Smith House will continue to provide us with the warm embrace of home.

~ Dr. Elisabeth Ward

Photo Gallery

Lined up to get their Train Day tickets. The day was busy from start to finish, with almost 1,000 visitors.

Train Day, back after three years, was fun for kids and their parents too!

Kevin Pyne, designer, and Georgianna Shea, curator, of Wallace Stegner: A Path to Conservation.

Elisabeth Ward thanking Georgianna Shea and Will Wyman, guest curator, for creating such a delightful Stegner Pathway exhibit.

Birgit Shay and Diane Simmons of the exhibits committee setting up the Walter Stegner desk.

Supervisor Joe Simitian and Mary Hughes studying one of the Stegner pathway panels.

Photo Gallery

Pumping water. Creek Fest brought back popular pieces from the award-winning exhibit, Shaped by Water.

Gloria Arellano-Gomez, Muwekma Tribal Council, and her daughters, Isabelle and Georgianna, with a land acknowledgement statement at the opening of Creek Fest.

Mary Kuperman, a key contributor to Creek Fest, describing a bead necklace to two young guests.

Two teen docents looking at the appalling amount of trash collected during creek clean ups.

Georgianna Shea and Gia Kalyani at the Los Altos High School's chapter of the National Art Honor Society student art exhibition and sale in November.

The last Garden Committee meeting of the year. Such a good group, thank you so much for making the Museum beautiful!

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Museum and Store Hours

Thursday to Sunday, Noon-4pm.

Smith House and Store open, Museum closed for construction.

We are closed Christmas Eve, Christmas Day and New Year's 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

Wallace Stegner: A Path to Conservation, outside and around the J. Gilbert Smith House, through March 5, 2023.

A Society to Match its Scenery: Wallace Stegner's Local Legacy, gallery, J. Gilbert Smith House, through March 5, 2023.

Green Foothills: Advocates and Activists, in person and on Zoom, Saturday, March 4, 10:30am.

Making Connections: Stories from the Land,
our new Permanent Exhibition coming soon.
Watch for a postcard in early January.

Jordan Grealish in the Smith House Gallery with the show she curated on the Walter Stegner legacy.

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