los altos history museum

UNDER THE OAKS

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Connecting People to History in a High-Tech World

In the fast-paced world of Silicon Valley, Los Altos History Museum is a reminder of the importance of blending the old with the new. While we embrace technology to enrich visitor engagement and preserve local history, our philosophy is guided by purpose over novelty. As technology rapidly evolves, so does our approach, adapting and refining how we use digital tools to deepen connections to the past.

Technology as a Gateway to Local Histories

Our Permanent Exhibition in the Museum's Geschke Gallery, *Making Connections: Stories from the Land*, is a prime example of how we balance technology with storytelling. Divided into three sections—Creeks, Valleys, and Hills—the exhibit explores the natural and human history of Los Altos via engaging digital experiences. Each section features interactive touch screens where visitors can browse timelines, listen to oral histories, and learn about local historical figures. Our oral history globe chair invites visitors to immerse themselves in local voices from the past via the Museum's Oral History Project, while an interactive map allows them to delve into the evolving landscape of the region.

Thanks to a modular design, Museum staff can update content directly and keep the exhibit fresh without constant developer assistance. Although this exhibit is a permanent fixture, in the museum world, "permanent" is often a flexible term. A decade of longevity would be a success.

Not all visitor experiences must rely on cutting-edge tech. In our 1932 model train exhibit, a simple red button sends a model train on its track, proving that sometimes simplicity is the most delightful. For those who want to take a deeper look, an iPad augmented reality (AR) app overlays historic images on the diorama, including a dirigible floating above the town.

The oral history globe chair in the Geschke Gallery.

Expanding Access with the Smith House Virtual Tour

The doll house view of the Smith House virtual tour.

While many local third- and fourth-grade students tour the Smith House each year as part of their California history curriculum, distance and accessibility constraints prevent many others from visiting in person. We developed an online tour as an alternative. In a Google Maps Street View-like experience, users "walk" through the house, exploring interpretive stops and text markers that provide insight into the 1930s setting of the home. This virtual tour also provides an experience for those who cannot physically access the house, fulfilling our commitment to making history as inclusive as possible.

Preservation in a Digital Age

As part of our mission to preserve local history, we digitize valuable materials such as oral histories and historic photos to protect fragile originals while creating backup copies. Digitization allows us to safeguard voices, stories, and images for future generations, even if physical recordings or photographs degrade.

Digitization also brings challenges. Maintaining vast archives has environmental costs, as cloud storage requires energy to sustain it. We must be selective about what we digitize, weighing each decision carefully to balance

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research access, staff resources, and preservation needs. By making thoughtful choices, we ensure that digitization serves the dual purpose of preserving and sharing our collection responsibly.

A Thoughtful Approach to Technology in Interpretation
At the Museum, we employ technology for its educational purpose rather than for its own sake. Our goal is to choose the most appropriate medium to communicate history to our audience. For instance, our AR app in the train exhibit expands the historical diorama to contexts beyond a moment in time in 1932. Audio, also an integral part of our interpretive strategy, provides an immersive way to experience history through reenactments of historical figures or curator-led tours. We make sure to include accessible options, such as large-print scripts, so that every visitor can experience every offering.

In some cases, simplicity reigns. Our current temporary exhibit, *Rooted in Time: Journey through Hidden Villa*, invites visitors to stamp farm animal cards and display them in the gallery. Interactive features like Post-It walls, where visitors can respond to questions and share their thoughts, encourage discussion and engagement without the need for screens or devices. Choosing the right tools for each experience lets us create meaningful, memorable interactions that connect visitors with our stories.

The Future: VR, AI, and What Lies Ahead
As technology continues to evolve, we are keeping an eye on the future. Virtual reality (VR), for instance, could allow visitors to "walk" through a historical scene on the exact spot where it occurred. And, of course, there is artificial intelligence (AI), especially relevant in the heart of Silicon Valley. AI might allow visitors to "converse" with historical figures or "speak" directly with the Museum's Oral History Project interviewees. Responsible, thoughtful applications could add a new dimension to interactivity.

At Los Altos History Museum, technology is a tool to enhance our storytelling, preserve our history, and make our exhibits more accessible to all. I am excited to see where this journey takes us, always with the knowledge that technology's value lies not in novelty, but in its ability to bring us closer to our shared past.

~ Anna Toledano

President's Pen

Change is one of life's only certainties, a natural progression as intrinsic to our existence as the shifting seasons. Just as summer gives way to autumn, each stage of life carries with it the promise of growth and transformation. While the idea of change can stir up feelings of fear or uncertainty, nature's cycles reveal that change is not something to resist but a process to embrace, filled with beauty, purpose, and renewal.

The Museum now has a wonderful new executive director, Anna Toledano, and more staff changes are underway.

The glass cabinets in the Geschke Gallery will be changing to display items from 17 Los Altos community clubs and organizations, including GreenTown Los Altos, Kiwanis Club of Los Altos, The Garden Club of Los Altos, Block Action Teams, Friends of the Library, Rotary Club of Los Altos, and Justice Vanguard.

The Museum's Education Committee, which has been focused on third- and fourth-grade tours, is exploring an educational component across all the Museum's areas, including expanding or creating educational opportunities for younger visitors using our orchard, garden, Smith House, upper gallery, and changing exhibit spaces.

For our staff, we are upgrading our internet system so there is a strong connection in our basement-level offices.

In the beginning of the new year, our Third Thursdays will move to Wednesdays. And we are planning more neighborhood block parties, programs that will complement our current exhibit, *Rooted in Time: Journey through Hidden Villa* (on exhibit until March 9, 2025), and several speakers are in the works.

As always, a big thank you to the incredible volunteers who dedicate their time and energy to our Museum! Your passion and commitment bring our exhibits, programs, and events to life and create a welcoming experience for every visitor. We couldn't do it without you—thank you for all that you do!

~ Vicki Holman

Staff

Anna Toledano, PhD, *Executive Director*
Sophia Abarca, *Curator of Collections*
Diane Holcomb, *Director of Communications*
Lisa Porter, *Rental Events Marketing Manager*
Barbara Klein, *Bookkeeper*
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.

Our Hidden Gems

The first commercially successful typewriter was patented in 1868 by Americans Christopher Latham Sholes, Carlos Glidden, and Samuel W. Soule in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The patent to the typewriter was sold to E. Remington & Sons, and in 1873, the company started production on the Remington Typewriter that popularized the QWERTY keyboard we know and still use today. In the business world, the invention of the typewriter replaced pens and handwritten documents and allowed businessmen to produce documents more quickly, legibly, and neatly.

This Underwood Number 5 typewriter was used in Thomas J. Woodworth's Feed and Fuel Store office from 1922 to 1945. Woodworth's store was located on the east side of First Street in Los Altos. Woodworth's business was a staple in the community, where locals were able to buy goods such as hay, coal, grain, and feed for livestock.

In addition to his feed and fuel business, Woodworth organized and formed the first firefighting unit in Los Altos in 1922. Woodworth was the primary force in organizing the Los Altos Volunteer Fire Department, which eventually led to the establishment of the Los Altos Fire Department we have today.

Mr. Woodworth likely used his Underwood Number 5 typewriter for his business needs as well as documenting the fires that broke out in Los Altos during the early 1920s.

Sophie Abarca with the Woodworth typewriter. Photo courtesy LAHM.

As much as businesses relied on their typewriters in the early 20th century to support their business needs, companies today rely on ever-changing computer technology to run their businesses.

~ Sophia Abarca

Volunteer Highlights

One of the oldest and most endearing exhibits at Los Altos History Museum is the model train diorama. Depicting a scene from Los Altos in the summer of 1936, the model train moves through the village in a three-minute cycle as the locals go about their ordinary day. Some of the buildings depicted in the diorama still exist today. For example, the Depot Garage in the diorama is currently Reitmeir's Werkstatt on First Street.

Maintaining this historic exhibit is a labor of love for a few dedicated volunteers. What visitors see may look simple—but a complex electronics system behind the scenes requires weekly maintenance and regular adjustments.

Leading the maintenance for the past four years is volunteer Cliff Olson. A lifelong model train enthusiast, Olson's knowledge and expertise has been invaluable to the Museum. He credits the original designers of the exhibit for their long-term vision and is appreciative of the high-quality components and electronics that were used. Over the years, the exhibit's caretakers have collected hard-to-find replacement parts from companies such as Lionel, Model Rectifier Corporation, and Siemens, as well as extra diorama pieces stored behind the scenes. According to Olson, this dedication by his predecessors, particularly Armond King, makes training new volunteers easier and maintenance more efficient.

Several members of the Teen Docent Program have been regularly assisting Olson with maintenance. In particular, Julia Han is a consistent and reliable volunteer.

When asked what she's learned volunteering with the train diorama, Han said, "It's extremely important to understand how everything works together, on both the micro and macro scale. I used this knowledge a couple of weeks ago when we worked to fix some of the animations that depended on understanding how they all worked together in order to fix them. I've also used this a lot with projects at school and for Science Olympiad. I do an event where I build, test, and fly a plane." Han stated that she was introduced to miniatures and models by her grandfather, who collects and builds model planes.

The always popular train diorama, February 2023.

Olson is currently seeking additional help with train exhibit maintenance. Experience is not needed, but an appreciation for model trains and attention to detail are essential. If you would like to volunteer to learn how to maintain the model train exhibit at the History Museum, please contact us at info@losaltoshistory.org.

~ Rebecca Lowell

Spotlight on the Oral History Project

Longtime Los Altos resident and Hewlett Packard engineer Clyde F. Coombs was at the forefront of developing technology. After serving three years in the Navy, Coombs accepted a job at HP in 1959, and he and his family moved to Los Altos in 1965. He began as a process engineer. His challenge was figuring out how to get circuitry on both sides of the printed circuit board. Coombs helped develop the plated-through process, which allowed the engineer to plate a hole in the circuit board and connect the circuitry on both sides. He used gold as a protective cover for the copper and had to sell other engineers and Dave Packard on the concept. He was a little concerned when he showed Packard the gold-plated printed circuit board, but he recalled that Packard said, "This looks quality. When people buy Hewlett Packard products … it should look quality." HP acquired a reputation for gold-plating their printed circuit boards.

There was no manual available at that time to explain how to build printed circuits, so Coombs contacted experts in various processes and asked them to contribute to a book. He edited the *Printed Circuits Handbook*, which became a best seller and has gone through seven editions. He called it a cookbook. Coombs served as editor or coeditor for several more technical books, all published by McGraw Hill.

In 1967, Coombs transitioned from printed circuit boards to core memory. He developed a process for HP to make their own core memory, but the process was labor-intensive. An HP task force decided that Singapore was the best place to build a fabrication facility to make core memory. Coombs went there in February 1969 to start the Singapore operation and stayed until June 1972. Under his leadership, HP Singapore went from zero to about 850 employees. The University of Singapore was just getting started, and their electrical engineering department invited Coombs to teach there. Along with managing HP Singapore, he taught a class for a year.

Clyde Coombs, June 2019. Photo courtesy Clyde Coombs.

After returning from Singapore, Coombs continued to edit engineering texts and served on the Grace Commission, which studied how the Department of Defense did research.

Coombs and his late wife, Ann, were active in Los Altos. When Bob Grimm ran for City Council during a divisive time, Clyde served as his campaign manager. Ann served on the County Planning Commission and wrote *Trees of Los Altos*, spending two years photographing trees for the book.

Interviewing Clyde Coombs and taking his oral history was a delightful experience.

~ Patti White

History in the News

Our inventory of historic homes in Los Altos and Los Altos Hills is limited, and it appears that we will soon lose one more. The Francis Avidano home on Atherton Court in Los Altos Hills was approved by the Town Planning Commission for demolition and site development.

The house, built in the 1910s and known for its unique architectural style, was originally a farmhouse with an apricot orchard. The area around it was developed in the 1970s, and, as reported in the Los Altos Town Crier by staff writer Curtis Driscoll, nearby residents are "disappointed to lose a neighborhood landmark that has been an important part of the history of Los Altos Hills over the decades."

Lisa Schmidt, on the Town Council, offered some additional perspective. The house was not identified as a historic house on the deed, so the new owner did not have that information when he made the purchase. The house is structurally unsound and would have required extensive work to come up to modern codes. Plus, the house had been altered over the years and did not represent a specific time period. For those reasons, the council voted to allow the demolition and new construction.

Restoring a historic home is costly, but building any home these days is costly. There are many examples of homes that have been restored on the outside and renovated to modern standards on the inside, a process known as "adaptive restoration." These are expensive projects but satisfying to the homeowner and a delight to those who appreciate the visual connection to the past.

As reported by Driscoll, Michelle Babayan, who grew up on Atherton Court and remembers the house as part of her childhood, said about the demolition, "I guess there's nothing anyone can do but cry."

~ Gary Hedden

House on Atherton Court, October 2024.

Catch The Spirit

Welcome to our new members:

Azita Ahi
Diego Baron
Karen Bartholomew
Julie Bly Devere
Meredith Bordoni
Courtney Chang
Rose Chen
Kristin Fedorak
Pearl Garvin
Stacey Gennoy
Mary Gospe
Wayne Grubbs
Jingjing Gu
Jen Hearty
Krysten Hommel
Robert Hsieh
Maki Imoto-Tar
Celia Jaber
Alex Jacobson
Peter Leong
Steven Lonergan
Rebecca Lowell
Stephane Moore
Kelly O'Reilly
Oscar Palma
Sandy Parkes
Uygar Pekerten
Shanelle Peterson
Valerie Rura
Pelin Sakalsiz
Ken Siegel
Alexander Smedile
Nancy and Paul Stephenson
Charo Switalski
Chingyee Tsai
Halsey Varady
Candace Wilke
Henry Wu
Jianguo Zhong

Business Members

BK Collections
DJM Inspections
Furuichi Design
Los Altos Town Crier
The Garden Club of Los Altos

Corporate Member

Los Altos Mountain View Community Foundation

Director's Corner

Holding on to History in a Fast-Moving Technological World

In my 15 years working in museums, I've witnessed firsthand how quickly technology changes—and disappears. And as a historian of science, I know that "new" doesn't always mean "better." New technologies are like hypotheses, waiting to be tested by time. Some stand the test, while others fade, leaving only faint traces behind.

My first foray into museum tech was in 2014 at the New York Botanical Garden, where I led the museum-side development of an augmented reality (AR) mobile app for our *Wild Medicine* exhibit. We designed it specifically for the iPhone 4 and used QR codes to trigger AR displays about medicinal plants—a novelty then, compared to today's universal QR code scanning. All I have left of that app is an MP4 video recording of it in action. AR has transformed in the course of a decade: Today, any smartphone can seamlessly launch AR content. This rapid evolution underscores how hard it is to keep up with tech trends—and how quickly even innovative tools become part of history.

At the Computer History Museum, I worked as an instructor for a weekend program called Design_Code_Build, where I led middle school students through the hardware and software exhibits. One of the items that we highlighted was the first iPod prototype with its groundbreaking click wheel. I remember asking my parents for one as a holiday gift; to those students, it was an artifact from another time, serving as a reminder of how quickly technology ages and how short our collective memory can be. I am certain many readers here remember even older artifacts that are now preserved in that collection.

Planned obsolescence presents a particular challenge to museums—especially history museums—which move slowly compared to tech companies. Museums can invest heavily in a tech-driven exhibit only for vendors to go out of business, warranties to expire, or replacement parts to disappear. There is no true way to future-proof, but by being selective and thoughtful, we can ensure that the Museum's technology remains a tool, not a fleeting novelty, in the way that we tell our histories.

~ Anna Toledano

Photo Gallery

Solving one of the riddles attached to the balloons at the well-attended Mid-Autumn Moon Festival in September.

Dick Blanding watching over the trains at the always popular Train Days.

Jamie Drake with her little dog Moxie performing at September's Concert in the Courtyard.

Exhibit Committee members Pat, Diane, Judy, Carrie and Jeanine setting up the exhibition Rooted in Time: Journey through Hidden Villa.

Christina Zhao and Nina Vuoso at Preview Night for the Hidden Villa exhibition.

Board members Jennifer Springer and Allison Aldrich at Preview Night with Julie Bly DeVere (middle) during her last week as interim ED.

Photo Gallery

Jacques Fossourier dancing to the delightful jazz music of Left University at October's Concert in the Courtyard.

Caroline Landsbergen enjoying her "retirement" party in October. After 23 years she is stepping down as Garden Committee chair, but she will still work in the garden!

Marci Hayden, new Garden Committee chair, sharing a shovel with Caroline as Garden Committee members proudly look on.

Third generation cattleman Christian Navarrete explaining rope handling to a very attentive audience at Rancho Day in November.

Making corn cob dolls at Rancho Day with Grace Rao and Christina Zhao.

Art instructor Rachel Palacios describes how to create unique and colorful Mexican Tin Art at Rancho Day.

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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.

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

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

Community Corner, Local Nonprofit Groups, opens Thursday, December 19. Upper Gallery.

Rooted in Time: A Journey through Hidden Villa, open through March 9, 2025. Main Gallery.

She Sang Me a Good Luck Song: The California Indian Photographs of Dugan Aguilar, opens Thursday, March 20, Main Gallery.

Save the date, June 14, Annual Museum Gala and Fundraiser, details pending.

Nice toss, cowboy! Fun at Rancho Day.

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