

# The Tall Tree

PALO ALTO HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION



## GENERAL MEETING January 29, 2:00 p.m.

### Celebrate West Bay Opera's Fiftieth Anniversary

**SPEAKER:**  
**David F. Ostwald**  
**Stage Director**  
**West Bay Opera**

The Palo Alto Historical Association enjoys celebrating important anniversaries of community organizations. This month we are proud to honor the West Bay Opera's fiftieth anniversary. West Bay Opera has been an important contributor to the musical and

cultural life of our community—offering performers and spectators alike exciting ventures into the magnificent world of opera in an intimate setting not normally available to lovers of this art form.

The City of Palo Alto issued a Proclamation honoring West Bay Opera on its 50th anniversary, noting that their first performance took place in the living room of founders Henry and Maria Holt in 1954 and that they presented a selection of opera scenes at the Woman's Club in 1955. A year later, 1956, they performed their first full length operas at the Lucie Stern Theatre.

David F. Ostwald, who has over 130 opera and theater productions both here and abroad to his credit, is WBO's current stage director. Although Mr. Ostwald resided in New York for 26 years, he is a Bay Area native and is known for his entertaining speaking style. As master of ceremonies for our January 29th program, he will give not only a history of the West Bay Opera but also introduce two performers. This promises to be a fun filled and unique experience for us all.

### General Meeting

Sunday, January 29, 2006\*  
Time: 2 p.m.

Lucie Stern Community Center  
1305 Middlefield Road, Palo Alto

\*Please note: to avoid conflict with the Superbowl, our February meeting date has been moved to the last Sunday in January.



*(Above) The cover logo from a West Bay Opera booklet.  
(Right) Henry Holt at the piano rehearses members of the company in the Holt's livingroom, 1955.*

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The Palo Alto Historical Association, a non-profit organization, was established in 1948 as successor to an earlier organization founded in 1913. Its main objectives are:

- Collect, organize, and preserve materials pertaining to the history and heritage of Palo Alto.
- Spread information about Palo Alto's history by means of programs, displays, and publications.
- Recognize and preserve historic sites and structures.

The Guy Miller Archives of the Palo Alto Historical Association are stored at the Main Library, 1213 Newell Road.

Board meetings are held the first Wednesday of each month (except for August) at the Lucie Stern Community Center at 4 p.m.

General meetings are held the first Sunday of each month (October–December, February–May) at the Lucie Stern Community Center at 2 p.m. Meetings include speakers. The final general meeting of the year is held in June and includes a dinner and a program.

The public is welcome at all meetings.

## A NOTE FROM THE PRESIDENT

**Susan  
Bright Winn**

“What interesting history has taken place in Palo Alto, anyway?” an acquaintance recently asked. For those who want to become familiar with the history of Palo Alto, there is a treasure trove of resources, not the least of which is the the collection of oral histories found at the History Desk in the Main Library. Here, the public can listen to tape recorded interviews of some of Palo Alto's noted citizens, including architect Birge Clark and his sister, Esther Clark, M.D.,

who was part of the original Palo Alto Medical Clinic.

I was particularly charmed by Barbara Marx Givens' oral history. Barbara was the daughter of Guido Marx and niece of C. D. “Daddy” Marx, two early Stanford professors. Born in Palo Alto in 1907, she was interviewed by PAHA board member Judy Leahy in 1993 in the house at 356 Lincoln built by her father in 1895 and designed by Professor A. B. Clark, father of Birge and Esther. Following is an excerpt of that interview:

The streets were very dusty. We had some tar on Bryant and on Waverley but the cross streets—oh, they were bad. Dusty in the summer and muddy in the winter. In the wintertime we wouldn't even try to walk across the street. We'd go to the corner and then go across. And these were wooden sidewalks at that time. The dust was so bad that I think it was Professor Angell who said that when it was time for the children to come home, we'd just go and collect the number that we were entitled to and take them home and bathe them and see who we'd got. Well, that came to an end in 1921 when the streets were paved and that was a great improvement. Just the other day, I came across an iron foot scraper that had been at the bottom of my front steps here. You wouldn't think of coming in the house without it.

Historian, Steve Staiger, at the History Desk of the Main Library Tuesday evenings and Thursday afternoons, has a list of all oral histories collected. And, if you are interested in learning how to conduct an oral history, call Carolyn Caddes at 327-8115.

## FROM THE DESK OF THE HISTORIAN

**Steve Staiger**

The past twelve months have brought natural disasters such as tsunami, earthquakes and hurricanes that have devastated large areas and killed thousands of people. Fortunately for us, the Bay Area has not experienced this level of disaster in recent years, although our collective memory of the 1906 and 1989 earthquakes reminds us that we are not immune to the possibility. I am also reminded that fifty years ago in

December 1955, Palo Alto and other Northern California communities, experienced a devastating flood.

We know that we should have a plan for when a major disaster strikes. Emergency supplies of food and water, and other basic needs should be put aside in an accessible location. The plan should also include thought for the preservation of family treasures—important documents, photographs and irreplaceable family artifacts. When you have only a few minutes, what do you grab? Where is the stuff you want, and have you left anything important behind? A checklist prepared beforehand is helpful in the stress of the moment.

The Association's archives are a part of the City's disaster plan for the Main Library. Because the Archives contain much that is unique and irreplaceable, the Library's plan gives special thought to its protection. Rescue personnel have instructions telling them the location of the most significant collections and how to treat the materials. Like any insurance, your home disaster plan is a good thing to have, and hopefully you will never need to implement it.



Welcome to our  
new members!

Bonnie Pollard &  
Stan Stratton

# 70TH ANNIVERSARY—BELL'S BOOKS

Palo Alto's oldest independent new, used and rare book store, Bell's Books, celebrated its seventieth birthday last August. The store received the 11th Senatorial District commendation as the Small Business of the Year for its exemplary contribution to the Palo Alto area. It also received a proclamation from the City of Palo Alto. Over 400 people attended the event. Speeches were made by California Senator Joe Simitian, Mayor Jim Burch, Historian Steve Staiger, Planning Commissioner Karen Holman, and Architectural Historian Dennis Backlund.

The story of Bell's began in 1935 when Herbert Bell, age 24, drove north from Los Angeles with a station wagon full of books to start a store (the College Book Company) for his employer, David Lawyer, a Los Angeles book dealer. Lawyer thought there might be a market for textbooks in Palo Alto due to its proximity to Stanford. The store's original location was 104 University Avenue, adjacent to the sporting goods shop known as Smith's on the circle. Bell's idea was to attract the students who came in for bicycle rentals.

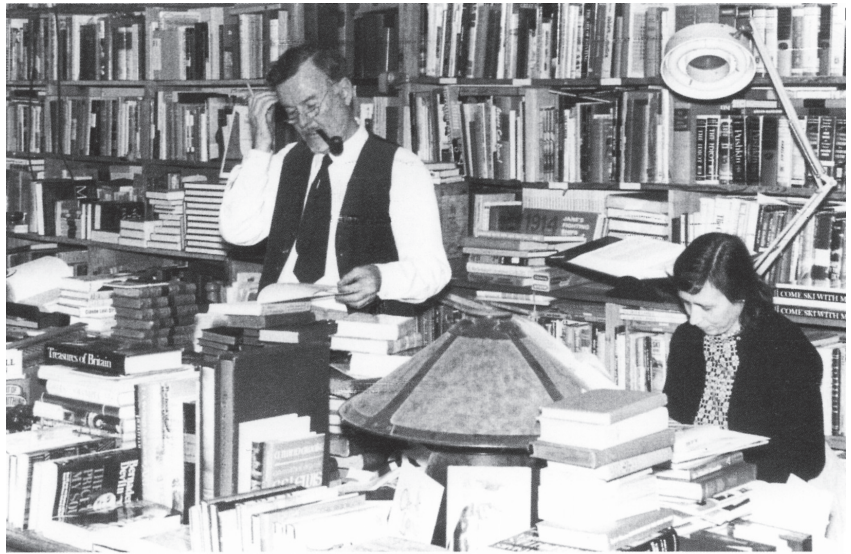
In 1936, David Lawyer determined there was no money in selling books to students, and sold out for \$2,300 to Bell who said later, "So he sold it for a song, and I bought it for a song, and I went singing my way into poverty, and lived on hamburgers for some time."

After several moves, in 1948 the store relocated to 229 Hamilton (the Cardinal Hotel) where the high ceilings allowed for Bell's signature look—soaring shelves with tall ladders. Finally, the 536 Emerson property came up for sale in 1950, and the Bells purchased it. Built in 1924, the building with its egg-and-dart molding on a dark green marble base outside, and pressed tin ceilings with a period staircase and balcony inside, was designated Category #2 on the Historic Register by the City of Palo Alto.

Three generations of Bells and their spouses have worked in the store. Today, daughter Faith Bell purchases old and new books and large collections. She is assisted by Barbara Worl, who has been with Bell's for 55 years. A noted rosarian, Barbara has an encyclopedic knowledge of books on horticulture.

Herbert Bell was passionate about music, food, and good literature. He worked to keep Latin in the public schools and performed in local theater productions. He spent every day of his life surrounded by books, and quoted readily from a vast array of sources. He died in 1992, leaving the family home filled with 30,000 neatly categorized books and the harpsichord he built.

The Bell family has been actively involved in social change for seven decades, working for education, literacy, creative writing, music, antiwar and political action, unhoused issues, historic preservation and local business development.



## BELL'S BOOKS CELEBRATES 70 YEARS

*Herbert Bell surrounded by books from which he quoted readily, and long time employee, Barbara Worl, 1950.*

## PAHA'S HERITAGE PROGRAMS ⇌ CHANNEL 30 ⇌

**JANUARY: SWAPPING STORIES IV  
Part A, "Exploring the Archives"  
Feature: Film of the 1941  
University Underpass opening**

**FEBRUARY: SWAPPING STORIES IV  
Part B, "Exploring the Archives"**

Wednesdays 8:00 p.m.  
Thursdays Noon  
Saturdays 1:00 p.m.

Videos of past PAHA meetings can be checked out from the History Desk at the Main Library during Historian's hours: Tuesday evenings & Thursday afternoons.

\*

## FROM THE ARCHIVES...



*Yesteryears Palo Alto—This photo from the Guy Miller Archives at the Main Library shows the Seale family in front of their home near California and Byron. Built before 1890, the house has since been destroyed.*

### INTERESTED IN BECOMING A PAHA MEMBER?

#### HERE'S HOW...

Pick up a brochure at any city library or at one of our monthly general meetings. Or, send your name, address, phone number and email address to

PAHA, P.O. Box 193  
Palo Alto, CA 94302

with a check for your choice of membership:

Individual:	\$25
Family:	\$40
Sustaining:	\$60
Business:	\$100
Life:	\$350

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