Robin Chapman will lead us to orchards that once bloomed in the Santa Clara Valley. A Los Altos native, Robin had a long career in television news, including KRON-TV in San Francisco, and was a national correspondent in Washington D.C. before returning to Los Altos in 2009. She now writes a history column for the Los Altos Town Crier. She has authored four books, including *California Apricots: The Lost Orchards of Silicon Valley*. Robin is currently completing her latest book, scheduled to be published by the History Press in the fall of 2018 and tentatively titled *The Spirit of California: Tales of Exceptional People In the Land That Became Silicon Valley.*

**Sunday, January 28, 2018, 2:00–4:00 pm**

Lucie Stern Community Center ~ 1305 Middlefield Road, Palo Alto
The Valley of Heart’s Delight: A Double Feature (at least)

Before there was a Silicon Valley, the Santa Clara Valley was known as “The Valley of Heart’s Delight.” This nickname reflected the Valley’s rich agricultural heritage – from fields of wheat to orchards of apricots, cherries, plums and other fruit trees.

By the early 20th century, the Valley was a tourist destination. Thousands of visitors would travel throughout the Valley each spring by the new interurban trolleys to view the acres of orchards covered in blossoms. Community leaders saw the promotional opportunities in this agricultural paradise, and began to promote the Valley and its beauty. Thus was born “The Valley of Heart’s Delight.”

In 1922, the San Jose Chamber of Commerce produced a 25-minute black and white silent film, “Valley of Heart’s Delight,” to promote San Jose and the rest of the Valley. A version of the film with a soundtrack (added by KPIX in 1962) can be viewed on Youtube.

Growing Up with the Local Orchards

Santa Clara Valley has one of the world’s best climates for orchard crops – apricots, plums, cherries, and apples. Its rich soil also supports row crops such as strawberries and vegetables. The pre-WWII population density was low, and land was available for industry as well as agriculture. The area was known as “The Valley of Heart’s Delight” for its beauty, mild climate, and concentration of orchards, flowering trees, and plants. Canneries such as Del Monte and Schuckel thrived in Sunnyvale, and Sutter Packing in Palo Alto. The Joshua Hendy Iron Works in Sunnyvale (now Westinghouse Marine Division) turned out Liberty Ship engines during the war. Farmers on the southern edge of Palo Alto specialized in raising chickens, as can be seen in streets still named Leghorn, Plymouth, and Rock. Japanese-American farmers grew fruits, vegetables, and lovely chrysanthemums on modest plots of land, until relocated to camps during the war.

The orchards bloomed from late February until April. The thousands of acres of beautiful and fragrant blossoms made for a pleasant weekend drive through “The Valley of Heart’s Delight.” My family occasionally packed a picnic and stopped by the side of the road to enjoy the view and the pleasant spring weather.

As fruit matured in the summer, cannery workers hired workers. A common summer occupation for local boys and girls was to work cutting and preparing fruit. It was a simpler time. A family with one wage earner working at a modest job could afford a modest but comfortable home in Palo Alto. There was less pressure. While many of Palo Alto’s children went to college, those who didn’t could expect to find a decent job that would support a comfortable living.

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 Cubberley Community Center, K-7, Phone (650) 329-2353.

Board meetings are held the first Wednesday of each month (except August) at the Lucie Stern Community Center at 4 pm. General meetings are held the first Sunday of each month (October–December, February–May) at the Lucie Stern Community Center at 2 pm. 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.

An apricot orchard in early spring bloom, 1940s.
Chrysanthemums: When Flower Nurseries Bloomed

As this month’s PAHA program attests, agriculture played an important role on the Peninsula for many decades. November’s PAHA program on Redwood City highlighted the lesser-known history of our area’s local chrysanthemum industry, once vital to the region’s economy, influential on the world stage, and in which Palo Alto played a central part.

The advent of Peninsula floriculture dates to shortly after 1900 in Montara, where horticultural professor I. Takahashi from the University of Tokyo successfully cultivated strawflowers and demonstrated their ability to generate more cash than food crops. Nearby produce growers took notice and soon flower nurseries appeared in the flatlands of San Carlos, Belmont, and Redwood City, where favorable lease terms, rich soils, and abundant sunlight supported the growth of flowers of all kinds, including higher value chrysanthemums desired by Japanese and Chinese immigrants.

In 1904, Redwood City gardener Henry Goertzhain developed the idea of a cheesecloth house to filter sunlight and allow greater control over moisture, wind, insects, and temperature. The innovation revolutionized the mums industry by allowing for larger, single bloom plants with flowers as large as ten inches in diameter and plants that reached over seven feet in height! The market responded enthusiastically to these larger blooms, with Japanese growers in particular quick to adopt the new growing method.

Between 1910 and 1930 the industry expanded and mums became the Peninsula’s most valuable export, bringing in some $7 million in revenue annually. Blooms retailing for $1.50 per stem (equivalent to 18 dollars today) could be shipped via refrigerated rail transport to midwestern, Atlantic and southern markets, where each autumn 30 rail cars were sent to New Orleans for All Saints Day celebrations, while nationwide different colored mums were delivered as high school and college football homecoming corsages.

With the addition of exports to Asia and Europe, by 1929 Redwood City claimed to be the “Chrysanthemum Capital of the World”, helping San Francisco emerge as one of the world’s three great flower markets – after London and Chicago, and before Amsterdam. In 1931, the local Japanese-American community held the nation’s first Kiku Matsuri, or Japanese Chrysanthemum Festival, showcasing cultural traditions with a parade, concerts, tea ceremonies, dance, and martial arts programs. The flower is esteemed in both Chinese and Japanese cultures as a traditional symbol of long life and rebirth. In Japan, the flower’s beautiful alignment of petals, which unfold in a precise manner, represent perfection and nobility and became part of many family seals, including Japan’s royal family.

Competition from cheaper South American growers and increasing land prices in the emerging Silicon Valley put pressures on local flower nurseries, which continued to be active until the 1990s, when 95% of the nation’s cut flowers were still grown in California. However, the outbreak of white rust in Santa Clara County in that decade devastated the chrysanthemums crop, while increasing international market pressure and soaring real estate prices led flower growers to abandon California more generally. The state now produces only 2% of the cut flowers sold in the US.

At this time, the California Chrysanthemum Growers Association relocated to Palo Alto, where by 1955 five rail cars of mums would leave Palo Alto Station daily during peak season. Innovation on the growing side continued, with the use of lights to retard bud formation, extending harvests later into the year, and the introduction of polyethylene in the place of cheesecloth. Gas heaters in the winter and electric evaporative coolers in the summer further lengthened growing seasons.

Beyond a few small growers, the legacy of mums on the Midpeninsula continues to this day in the person of Paul Althouse, who purchased the original Goertzhain Redwood City Nursery in 1944. Mr. Althouse, now in his nineties, continues to raise mums and other colorful flowers in the northwest corner of Palo Alto’s Elizabeth F. Gamble Garden. Paul’s mums are cut for flower arrangements delivered weekly to various Palo Alto community locations, and they can be visited daily in season at Gamble Garden.

History Jaunts for the New Year

Be sure to visit Peers Park (and bring the children and grandchildren!) to see the ten towering trees in the Challenger Redwood Grove. These trees commemorate the 1985 space shuttle flight, on which astronaut Loren Acton carried a package of redwood seeds from Palo Alto’s El Palo Alto tree. It is now 30 years since the seeds were planted and the ten trees tower above the plaque. Peers Park is located at 1899 Park Blvd in Palo Alto.

A must-see, especially if you haven’t been there lately, is the Computer History Museum at 1401 N. Shoreline Blvd. in Mountain View. “This captivating Silicon Valley museum takes a deep dive into...the modern chip world, ancient Incan computers, Renaissance-era calculators...and other spectacular geeky glories.” Visit the website computerhistorymuseum.org or call (650) 810-1010 for details about admission, hours, docent tours, and special events.

MOAH’s exhibit, Thomas Edison and His Rivals: Bringing Electricity to America. Learn about the 20th century rivalries between Thomas Edison, George Westinghouse, and Nikola Tesla as they raced to bring life-changing inventions and electricity to the American public. The Museum of American Heritage is located at 351 Homer Ave. in Palo Alto, is free, and open Friday to Sunday, 11 am - 4 pm. The exhibit runs through February 18, 2018. For more information, call (650) 321-1004 or visit MOAH at moah.org.

To burn off those extra holiday calories, visit San Mateo County’s recently opened, 6,142-acre, La Honda Creek Open Space Preserve, and hike its miles of trails that stretch from Skyline Boulevard to La Honda. The preserve is free, open to the public daily from sunrise to sunset. For directions, and trail maps, visit https://www.trails.com/topomap.aspx?trailid=HGS013-024.

2018 PAHA Calendars still available for pickup and purchase!

2018 PAHA Calendars are still available for pick up and purchase at the January 28th PAHA meeting at Lucie Stern Community Center. Calendars are free to all members who are current with their dues. They can also be picked up at PAHA Archives, Tuesday 4-8 pm or Thursdays 1-5 pm, or received by mail by sending a check for $5.00 for shipping/handling to P.O. Box 193, Palo Alto, CA 94302.

Additional calendars are available for purchase at Bell’s Books, Books Inc., and the Palo Alto Art Center, from $15 each.

Palo Alto History Museum UPDATE – The Palo Alto City Council unanimously upped its support for a Museum on December 11 by extending the museum’s lease option for the Roth building, adding a matching grant, and agreeing to appoint three Council members to help the board raise funds for this important project. Bottom line: if the museum raises $1.75 million by November 30, 2018, the City will add $665,000 in historic preservation dollars and open the conversation to free up more funding. PAHA is where the Museum was born; thank you for the many gifts you have made. Please talk this up and help get the Museum built. Donate at PaloAltoHistoryMuseum.org. — Laura Bajuk, Interim Director

We’re almost 125 years old! Interested in helping Palo Alto celebrate its quasquicentennial in 2019? Contact Brian George on briang8897@aol.com to join up.

Welcome New Members!

Lifetime
Virginia DiMarchi
Annual
Jennifer Anderson
Janifer Burns
Rebecca Carter
Joy Chase
Trudy & Klaus Eichstädt
Kirsten Essenmacher
Ellen Fox
Mary Herndon
Judy Hulse
Linda Illig
Scott Kilner
Nadia Naik
Seelam Reddy
Eve Rice
Dale Sainsbury
Rita Vrhl
Anna Wachtel
James Wu

The Heritage Program for January 2018 will feature
“Palo Alto as Early Influence on Lives of Public Service”
Wed. 8 pm, Thurs. 8 pm & Sats. 1 pm
Channel 30.

DVDs of previous programs may be borrowed from PAHA’s Guy Miller Archives at Cubberley, Room K-7.
Hours: Tues. 4-8 pm, Thurs. 1-5 pm

In Memoriam
Eleanor Doty
Jean Lane

The Tall Tree is published eight times a year by the Palo Alto Historical Association

Follow PAHA on

Luana Staiger, Peggy McKee, Jon Gifford, Melissa Verber, Editorial
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