



The Tall Tree Newsletter

of the PALO ALTO
HISTORICAL
ASSOCIATION

Since 1913

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Timeworn Soles of Yesteryear: Thoits Shoe Store

By PAHA Board member Colleen Thoits-Braff

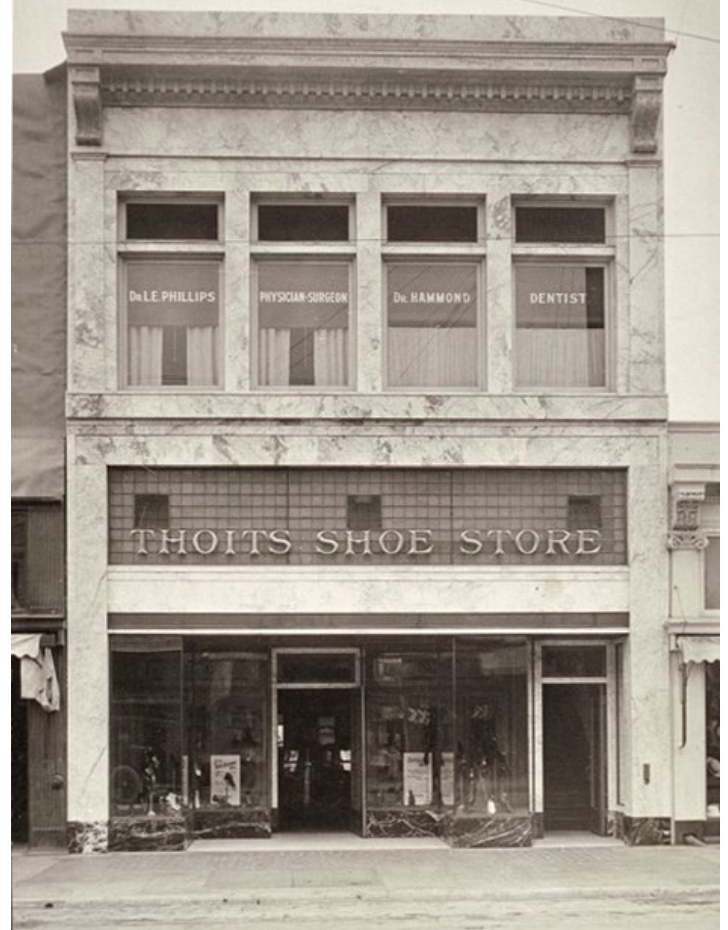
The Thoits Brothers' connection to Palo Alto goes back more than 125 years! Edward Kent Thoits (E.K.) was originally from Maine. He and his wife, Elizabeth Smith, came to California by way of Panama the year following the Civil War. In 1893, E.K. packed his family and some furniture into a horse drawn wagon and came to Palo Alto as one of the pioneer families when it was just a cluster of houses north of Mayfield. E.K. believed in the educational opportunity for his two sons at the new university Senator Leland Stanford had just built and the commercial opportunities that would develop in conjunction with the university. The eldest son, Willis, enrolled in the founding class at Stanford University which was free at the time.

E.K. opened Palo Alto Shoe Store on the first block of University Avenue believing that students would need shoes to walk the distance between the train depot and the university. Edward Claire (E.C.), the younger son, became one of the town's first commuters, taking the train to the closest high school in San Jose to finish his senior year. University Avenue was just a dirt road and the local merchants chipped in to build wooden sidewalks in order to keep women's dresses from dragging in the mud, popularly known as "hug-me-tight" sidewalks. The two boys worked in the shoe store after school and on Saturday afternoons. In those days, the job that fell to the utility boy was cleaning the mud that splashed on the shop windows by the passing surreys on rainy days.

Willis and E.C. provide many years of shoes to Palo Altans

Four years after opening the shoe store, E.K. died suddenly. An excerpt from E. K. 's obituary states, "Mr. Thoits... was a public-spirited citizen that can ill be spared. Proud of the growth of Palo Alto, he had great faith in the future of the town and took a strong personal interest in every proposed public improvement."

Willis dropped out of Stanford and left his job as head salesman at the local grocery firm, the Fair, to take charge of the shoe store. E.C. joined his brother in operating the business after he graduated from Stanford the following year.



Thoits Shoe Store on University Ave. with doctors offices on second floor, 1914

Thoits Shoe Store remained an institution in town for more than 71 years. It expanded three times and survived the earthquake in 1906, the Great Depression, and a destructive fire in November 1936. The blaze started in the basement of 174 University Avenue and was the worst fire in the city's history. Looters were thwarted while the fire still was raging. The damage was estimated at \$50,000. A new two-story office building erected to replace the old one was considered one of the finest in town. Modern with simple details and a facade of three types of marble, the ground floor was occupied by the shoe store and eight offices were leased above. The store was equipped with the latest technology including an X-ray shoe fitter machine used to assure the perfect fit.

In 1943, Thoits Shoe Store was sold to George Fletcher who owned it for 21 years before going out of business. The closure was partly due to the competition from Stanford Shopping Center.

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**FROM THE DESK OF
Steve Staiger
City Historian**

**2019 PALO ALTO
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We Lost a Photographer, but Not His Photographs

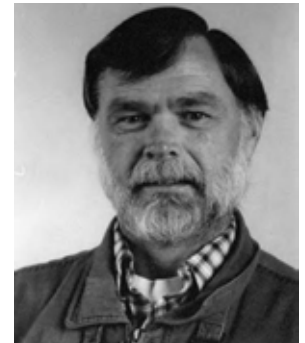
In late March, the Palo Alto Weekly published an obituary for Joe Melena, a Palo Alto resident who died at the age of 88. Joe was far more than just a long-time Palo Alto resident. Aside from being a really nice person with a ready smile, Joe was a photographer who had documented the mid-Peninsula since the 1960s.

Born and raised in the Midwest, Joe came to Menlo Park after serving in the army and attending college where he took every photography class he could find. Finding work as a photographer for the Menlo Atherton Recorder, he met his wife Lynn and they bought a house in the Barron Park neighborhood of Palo Alto.

From 1971 to 1993, Joe was a staff photographer for the Palo Alto Times, which then became the Peninsula Times Tribune.

Following the paper's demise, he went to the Palo Alto Weekly until he retired in 2000.

Joe's work as a photographer represents a significant portion of PAHA's photographic collection which can be viewed online at www.pahistory.org. We now have more than 15,000 images in our online database. Some images are more than 130 years old, and others were taken more recently. Joe is listed as the "creator" of 479 images in our collection. Only Gene Tupper, the longtime Palo Alto Times staff photographer, has more images with 546.



Joe Melena, local photographer

Photographs are one of the true treasures of any local history collection. For years, I have been asking PAHA members and others in the community to consider donating their local photographs to PAHA. Carolyn Caddes donated many of her images to us several years ago; 257 are listed in the collection. Donated images can be 5 or 100 years old—they are all appreciated. Like Joe's photographs, all images with a local subject are of interest to PAHA.



Al Cordoza skipper of the dredge at Palo Alto Yacht Harbor, 1982. Photo by Joe Melena.

The Palo Alto Historical Association, a 501(c)(3) charitable 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 at 4pm on the first Wednesday of each month (except August) at the Guy Miller Archives. Public programs are held at 2pm on the first Sunday of each month (October-December, February-May) at various locations in Palo Alto. Programs include speakers. The final program of the year is held in June and includes a dinner and a program. The public is welcome at all programs.

Do You Know Your Milkman?

By PAHA Board Member Amanda Brown



Early dairy farmer in Palo Alto, ca 1900

For younger generations, it would be odd to think they would know who delivers their milk. Most of us get our milk from the shelf at a grocery store, never meeting the farmers and distributors who handle our food. We

don't typically know the people who manage the distribution or the conditions the milk comes from.

Despite the promotion that Palo Alto was one of the healthiest cities in the early 1900s, it was also the center of a citywide epidemic. In 1903, a typhoid fever outbreak swept through Palo Alto. Jane Lathrop Stanford's campus was also under threat by the very same disease, just nineteen years after claiming her son. The early days of the city's local medical community largely consisted of three individuals—Howard Black, a local MD, W.F. Snow, and Ray Lyman Wilbur—who together were able to handle the occasional sickness. (Continued on page 4)

(Continued from page 1)

Brothers strive to serve the Palo Alto Community

Willis and E.C. remained business partners in Thoits Brothers, Inc. and began investing in Palo Alto real estate in addition to their respective careers.

E.C. was a bachelor and Palo Alto was his life-long interest. He was instrumental in the development of the town both as a businessman, a financier, and a devoted public servant. In 1895, he was a charter member of the Palo Alto Volunteer Fire Department. He was on the Board of Freeholders that drafted the city charter adopted in 1909. E.C. was a City Councilman for more than 40 years including two terms as mayor. E.C. helped create the city budget, the system of audits and accounts, and the municipal utilities. He was one of the leaders in the acquisition and development of the 1600-acre estate near the bay, including the Palo Alto Yacht Harbor. Other service included membership on the library board, vice chairman of the Red Cross, a board member of the Chamber of Commerce, and service on the hospital committees. Palo Alto grew from a handful of houses to a small city with the help of E.C.'s foresight and guidance. He also had a deep interest in local history. He was a director and life member of the Palo Alto Historical Association.



Thoits' Palo Alto Shoe Store, 1895

E.C. shared in the city's prosperity but lived simply in the family home located at 285 Hamilton Avenue. In 1933, it was moved to make room for downtown development. As noted in the local paper on April 6, 1933, "A man went to bed one night recently in his home at the corner of Hamilton and Bryant Street and woke up the next morning in the same bed, the same room and the same house but in a location many blocks away, without having been disturbed." E.C. had slept in the house the night it was moved to 119 Bryant where it still stands today!

Willis Thoits was one of the founders and later president of Palo Alto Mutual Building and Loan, helping new residents build homes. During the Great Depression, Willis was known for his extraordinary efforts to keep people in their homes by extending credit and payment



Advertisement, ca. 1937

deadlines. He was active in public affairs and was a progressive member of the Palo Alto Chamber of Commerce and chairman of the Library Board for 15 years. At age 38, he married Hazel Lamson and they had five children. The Craftsman home they built for their family in 1915 still stands at 939 Forest Avenue and four generations have resided there.

Willis passed away in 1935. His widow, Hazel continued in partnership with E.C. growing the family's real estate holdings. When E.C. died in 1951, his property interests were distributed to Willis and Hazel's five children. Warren Thoits, the youngest son, together with his siblings, continued the family's interest and investment in local commercial real estate.

The next generation continues family legacy

Warren graduated from Stanford and was a partner of the Thoits, Love, Hershberger and McClean law firm. He was determined to

carry on the family tradition established by his grandfather, father and uncle of giving back with selfless commitment to Palo Alto. In addition to contributing financially to Palo Alto organizations, Warren also contributed his time, serving on community boards. As a landlord, he provided several nonprofit organizations with free or reduced rent office space in their formative years and was accommodating with small retail tenants going through financial hardship. In 2000, Warren Thoits was honored by the Chamber of Commerce with a Tall Tree Award for Outstanding Professional.

When Warren died in 2009, he left a legacy of generosity to the community.

Today, Thoits Bros., Inc. is managed by CEO, John Shenk and governed by a mostly family board. The Thoits family is proud of its legacy and seeks to continually enhance Palo Alto through the manner in which the company conducts its business and supports the community and its merchants.



University Avenue, ca. 1940s

Annual Dinner Postponed

Due to community concerns about the COVID-19 and timing for when we will be able to gather again, PAHA's annual June dinner program is being postponed, hopefully to the fall. Stay tuned later this summer for updated information.

We look forward to seeing you all again at the start of our program year in October! This is the last issue of the Tall Tree until September. The editors appreciate all of the contributions we've received and welcome your continued support. Feel free to contact us at pahatalltree@gmail.com with any ideas or articles that you would like to see in upcoming issues. Have a great summer!

(Continued from page 2) A full-fledged epidemic was an event that the city was not prepared for.

The first victims were local high school students. It then appeared on Stanford University campus, and shortly thereafter in various parts of the city itself, primarily downtown. The Board of Health in Palo Alto supplied doctors with different questionnaires that allowed them to check where the infection could have originated. After combing through information from those who contracted typhoid, it became clearer who was at fault for spreading the disease. Questions included: "What is the plumbing situation within the household? Do you know where your milk originated from? Do you know the full name of the man who delivered your milk?" Beginning in February when the original two cases were reported until April, at the height of cases reported infections, totaled 91 confirmed cases in Palo Alto.

Ultimately, it was a perfect storm that led to the typhoid fever outbreak. In late 1902, a family outside of Palo Alto contracted typhoid fever from a visiting cousin. Their



First hospital in Palo Alto, ca. 1900

waste was being leached into the nearby stream. This led to the water in the stream becoming infected. A local milkman used the water from this stream to rinse out his cans, and his delivery route lead him through Palo Alto and Stanford University. Despite the subsequent and immediate shut down of the dairies, it was too late, and residents were already sick.

By the end of the epidemic, 120 students contracted the illness. Out of the 120 confirmed, nine had died. Though the disease finally ran its course in May of 1903. There were no new cases reported by June of that year and the last patient that was diagnosed with typhoid was officially cleared as healthy by medical staff.

In Memoriam

Robert Jack, Former PAHA Board Member
Millie Mario, Life member

PAHA Upcoming Programs

As the COVID-19 situation evolves, PAHA will schedule future programs in accordance with health authorities' rules and guidelines. Messages will be sent out as we have more information about future programs.

The Heritage Program

PAHA's January program, "How Palo Alto Impacted My Life: The Game Would Not End" with Dave Newhouse continues to air on Channels 28 or 30 on various days and times. Be sure to check in during the summer to see rebroadcast of some of PAHA's special programs. Programs are simultaneously streamed on the Media Center website www.midpenmedia.org.

Check website for schedule

PAHA Archives

Due to the shelter-in-place mandate, the PAHA Archives at Cubberley Community Center, Room K-7 is closed until further notice.

To contact the Archive, email steve.staiger@cityofpaloalto.org or call 650-329-2353.

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