



The Tall Tree Newsletter

of the PALO ALTO
HISTORICAL
ASSOCIATION

Since 1913

May 2026 Volume 49, No 5

Palo Alto Stanford Heritage & Palo Alto Historical Association presents

The 30th Centennial Plaque & Historic Preservation Awards



248 Homer Street



219 Seale Avenue



1130 University Avenue



1173 Harker Avenue



1212 Middlefield Road



1106 Hamilton Avenue

Sunday, May 3, 2026 2:00 – 4:00 pm

Palo Alto Art Center ~ 1313 Newell Road, Palo Alto

Palo Alto Stanford Heritage (PAST) & Palo Alto Historical Association (PAHA) will host the 30th presentation of centennial plaques to owners of circa 1925 buildings in Palo Alto on May 3.

Join us as we celebrate Palo Alto's rich heritage, with presentations, book sales and refreshments. Program highlights include awards to Lucie Stern Community Center and Stanford's Lasuen House for recent historic renovations, and presentation of the Bo Crane Award to Douglas Graham, for his significant contributions researching and documenting the history of Barron Park.



Simon Pennington

The program will also include a talk on "The Power of Place" by PAST Vice President Simon Pennington and a visual presentation of Palo Alto homes built in the mid-1920s.

PAST's mission remains dedicated to promoting the preservation of historic architecture, neighborhoods, and the unique identity of greater Palo Alto and Stanford areas. The annual recognition event is held in May to align with the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Preservation Month.

Free and Open to the Public ~ Refreshments Served



**2026 PALO ALTO
HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION
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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.

PAHA Board meetings are conducted using Zoom at 5 pm the first Wednesday of each month (except August).

Public programs are held at 2 pm on the first Sunday of October, December, February, March, and May at the Palo Alto Art Center, 1313 Newell Road. 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.

Bergmann's Department Store

By Jon Kinyon, PAHA Board Member



Bergmann's storefront, circa 1985

Bergmann's opened in Palo Alto's midtown neighborhood in 1956, relocating from its original location in Hayward, which opened in 1951. It was a true department store featuring staples such as men's, women's, and children's clothing, shoes, and housewares. But it also maintained other departments long since abandoned by other such stores: a small "Coffee Lane" restaurant, a cozy beauty salon, a toy and candy department, a Boy Scout and Girl Scout uniform department, a large yardage and greeting card section, vinyl records, and free gift wrapping year-round.

Bergmann's carried inexpensive brands such as Pendleton, Van Heusen, OshKosh, Levi's, Hanes, and Koret. It was not a store for the more affluent families in town. Back then, Emporium or Macy's, and later Nordstrom, were more to their liking.

Selling inexpensive toys didn't help Leo Bergmann pay the bills, but he understood his customers. He understood how much kids enjoyed his toy department, and he kept it fully stocked. Annual visits from Santa began the year the store opened.



Leo Bergmann, circa 1975

The store was remodeled once, in 1966, and it used only fans to keep air circulating in the summer. Shoppers might recall that

some of the aisles in the store were so tight that two people couldn't pass each other.

Most of the clerks had worked there for more than 20 years, attracted to Leo's dry sense of humor and folksy management style, which often included employee trips to Reno or excursions on his yacht. Clerks often greeted customers by name. It was very down-home.

There were occasional appearances by famous people and celebrities, such as Sammy Davis Jr., who was known to stop by and shop while visiting his daughter nearby. Many of us remember Kris Kristofferson's daughter working there.

Starting in the mid-1970s, similar department stores shuttered for good: Harryman's, Hart's, Kirkish, Loewe and Zwierlein, and Levi Brothers. By the late 1980s, Bergmann's was struggling, facing stiff competition from a growing number of shopping centers and their big retailers, which attracted the young, fashion-conscious shoppers who spent the most.



Bergmann's employees, 1990

- Pictured—Front Row 1: Margaret Bellis, Eva Brand
- Row 2: Verna Siordia, Leo Bergmann, Ethel Atkinson
- Row 3: Joan Howard, Jim Gibson, Flora Johnson

The store was only breaking even, mostly because its direct competitors were going out of business and holding frequent liquidation sales. Bergmann's was able to hang on for a while because Leo owned the building and the land it sat on.

Bergmann's finally closed in 1994.

Leo's brother Conrad Bergmann built the Willow Glen Bergmann's in 1946. It closed in 1990.

Happy 70th Anniversary to Stanford Shopping Center

By Georgie Gleim, PAHA President



Early tenants of Stanford Shopping Center, 1956

What do The Emporium, Woolworth's, See's Candy, Gleim the Jeweler, Roos Brothers, and Slenderella Reducing Salon all have in common? They were all among the original tenants of the Stanford Shopping Center when it first opened in 1956 on what had been a hayfield and a vineyard.

Back in the early 1950s, the university, facing rising costs with declining investment income, was discussing ways to boost its income. The concept of a "shopping center" was gaining popularity around the country at the time and seemed to be a worthy project to try on a vacant field along El Camino, with the idea of tapping into the \$200 million then being spent on retail in San Francisco. Alf Brandin, Stanford's Business Manager and Executive Officer for Business Development at the time, spearheaded the project, giving many presentations to local and regional groups to gain support for the project. (One colleague described it as the "chicken and mashed potato circuit.") Discussions were held, architectural design firms were engaged, local and regional retailers were brought on board, and site leveling began in October of 1954. The estimated total cost of the center's development was \$15 million, a lot of money back then.



Macy's and Emporium, circa 1962

The very first tenant was Roos Brothers, which closed its downtown location to move to Stanford, opening in October of 1955. Other original majors were The Emporium, I. Magnin, Woolworth's, Livingstons, Hastings, and Lerner Shops. Many of the tenants were

locally owned retailers; those of us who grew up during that period remember Norney's, Somer & Kaufman's Shoes (which for some inexplicable reason had spider monkeys in the outdoor display windows), Sandy's Kitchen, Johnson & Co. Jewelers, Blum's (with its fabulous coffee crunch cake), the ice cream counter at Roos Brothers, and the grand curving staircase at I. Magnin. Hot dogs at Woolworth's lunch counter, the luxury of Spritzer Furs, and, of course, See's Candy were also part of the experience. And since the shopping center was closed on Sundays, many of us took our first tentative driving lessons in that vast empty parking lot. Our own store, Gleim the Jeweler, opened April 18, 1956; I have childhood memories of being taken to the store while it was under construction, little realizing what it would turn into over the ensuing seven decades.



Future site of Stanford Shopping Center, early 1950s

There was much community discussion preceding the opening. City leaders knew it would affect downtown retail business, both in income and in competition for employees, but no one knew quite what to expect. At one time, private developers even offered a plan to completely raze downtown and turn it into its own regional shopping center. There was also brief consideration of locating a White House department store on what is now El Camino Park across the street. Thankfully, those lease negotiations never seemed to get beyond the discussion point.

One of the more unusual promotional events discovered in the archives was an exhibition of Olympic athletes in May of 1958, sponsored by Sports Illustrated. Two arenas were constructed, with seating for 1,500, and an enormous prefab tank was set up for the diving exhibitions. Some of the better-known athletes involved were football star Y.A. Tittle, tennis player Don Budge, and Olympic decathlete Bob Mathias.

The Chamber of Commerce hosted a ribbon-cutting ceremony in August of 1955. It's a safe bet to say that few people had any clue just what a success this shopping center would become.

(Continued on page 4)

Stanford Shopping Center's 70th (Continued from page 3)



Times have changed: in those early days, lease agreements and renewals were reached on a handshake basis, and large national luxury chains didn't exist. One thing that has not changed is Stanford's insistence on letting the merchants have a say. The Merchants' Board was established early on, first presided over by the owner of the hardware store. And seven decades later the Merchants' Board remains, with monthly meetings providing important marketing feedback to and communication with management.

Today we like to think of the center as providing a special shopping experience, particularly with the beautiful floral designs by local treasure Jackie Gray. It's fun to take a look back at the origins, however; just imagine what some of those early planners would think of the shopping center today! It's safe to say that their creation has been a resounding success.

SHOPPING CENTER TIMELINE

1950s: Downtown dominant → Stanford Shopping Center opens 1955-56 on former farmland, draws shoppers away with free parking/convenience. Downtown declines.

1960s-70s: Shopping center expands (Macy's 1961, Saks 1963, Nordstrom 1972); 1976 major remodel to open-air garden style. Downtown struggles with vacancies.

1980s-90s: Stanford adds Neiman Marcus (1985), Bloomingdale's (1990s); shifts more upscale. Downtown remains secondary.

2000s-2010s: Simon Property Group acquires shopping center in 2003; 2012-2016 transformation adds luxury/dining, relocates Bloomingdale's.

2020s: Stanford thrives as luxury hub (Louis Vuitton, Gucci, Apple, etc.); ongoing 2025+ renovations. Downtown faces vacancies, high rents; city enacts 2025-26 ordinances to protect/preserve ground-floor retail amid conversions to offices.

(Credit given to the Guy Miller Archives for the City of Palo Alto, with the help of Darla Secor, for the historical information for this article.)



Victoria's Secret, original sign

In 1977, Victoria's Secret's first store opened at Stanford Shopping Center in Palo Alto and grossed \$500,000 its first year. Founder Roy Raymond (Stanford MBA) quickly expanded sales channels by establishing a mail-order catalog operation. By 1980, Victoria's Secret had added two stores in San Francisco. By 1982, a fourth store was added and the company was grossing over \$4 million a year. Raymond sold the fledgling business that year for \$1 million and went on to start a children's clothing line, using the same business model he had before, but that business went bankrupt in 1986. Tragically, he committed suicide by jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge in 1993. Victoria's Secret became the largest lingerie company in the world with annual sales in the 10s of billions of dollars.

Welcome Our New Members!

Theodore Foss
Paul Hsia
Jeanette Kennedy
Debbie Logue
Amado Padilla

Save the Date!

June 3, 5:00-7:00pm

Our annual party will be held at the Presbyterian Church at 1140 Cowper Street, Palo Alto. This year's theme is Back to the '50s!

SHAKE, RATTLE 'n' ROLL!

Previous PAHA Program

If you missed the March 1st program, *Heritage: A Long Strange Trip*, you can find it and other recent PAHA program videos on Vimeo by following this link: <https://vimeo.com/1174239770>

Unless otherwise noted, programs are held in person on the first Sunday of the month we present programs. Check our website at www.pahistory.org for program information.

In Memoriam:

Peter Danner

The Tall Tree is published six times a year by the PALO ALTO HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION



Jon Kinyon, *Lead Editor & Design*
Luana Staiger, Melissa Verber, *Editors*
Copy Factory, *Printing*

Photographs courtesy of PAHA Guy Miller Archives unless otherwise noted.