

MILL VALLEY HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER FALL 2007

30th Annual Meeting and Potluck Supper

Thursday, November 1

Mill Valley Community Center at 180 Camino Alto

Social Time 6:30

Potluck Supper 7:00

WHAT TO BRING: either an appetizer, a salad, a casserole or a dessert, an appropriate bowl or platter and a serving utensil - we will provide plastic eating utensils, dinner plates, napkins and cups.

R.S.V.P. Peggy Chenoweth at 381-7908 or peggycheno@aol.com. Please give her your name, phone number and type of food you plan to bring. A short business meeting will follow the potluck supper.

SLIDE SHOW

SUKI HILL, longtime Mill Valley resident and unofficial town photographer, will present a slide show of her photographs of Mill Valley and its residents, transients, and tourists. These black and white photographs taken between 1964 and the present attempt to provide insight into the evolution of our town.

The presentation will focus on people – how life styles, clothing styles, attitude styles and business styles have changed in Mill Valley in the past four decades. Suki Hill is a 2007 Honoree of The Milley Awards for Creative Achievement.

.Low Turnout for Walk Into History

“Downtown Then and Now” was the theme of the Thirtieth Annual Walk Into History on the Sunday of Memorial Day weekend--also the 70th anniversary of the opening of the Golden Gate bridge. Tour guides highlighted significant changes in downtown businesses. Technology made sales of coal, hay and kerosene obsolete. Economic forces sent pharmacies, hardware stores, gasoline stations, and car dealerships elsewhere. Cultural changes caused the demise of pool halls, cigar stores and bars.

Sunday was a relatively cold day and there were fewer people in evidence downtown than on Saturday and Monday. Our publicity effort was not up to par. As a result there were only 176 customers, about 100 fewer than normal.

HOMESTEAD HILL



LION HILL



The photo on the left was taken in 1973 at Miller and Evergreen. In the background on the south ridge of Homestead Valley is an 858 ft. hill on the Dias Ranch, now part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. Matthew Davis named it “Homestead Hill” in his May 1984 article in the Homestead Headlines. His 1988 book, “On Foot in Homestead” is a compilation of 38 such articles. He mentions “Homestead Hill” in 11 of the articles. The photo on the right is a painting by Thaddeus Welch entitled, “Springtime, Lion Hill, Millwood.” He painted it in 1903 at a spot near Miller and Evergreen. Matthew Davis saw this painting at the Bolinas Museum in June, 2007 and recognized “Lion Hill” as “Homestead Hill.”

Thaddeus Welch and his wife Ludmilla were famous landscape artists. In 1896, they built a snug cottage on Webb Creek near the bottom of Steep Ravine. Their paintings include scenes of Mount Tamalpais, the spit at Stinson Beach, Bolinas Bay, Steep Ravine and other nearby landscapes. In 1902 they moved to a less isolated cottage in San Geronimo Valley for its better climate and proximity to the railroad. It was easy for them to get to Millwood, the railroad station on Miller near Homestead Valley. In 1902 they painted three paintings of Lion Hill as seen from what is now the corner of Montford and Molino. One of them by Ludmilla is displayed in the History Room.

History Room Update

By David Grossman

Interns

Some new faces have adorned the History Room. Three graduate students from the San Jose State University School of Library Science have joined the History Room staff as interns through the fall semester. Bonnie Groshong, Jessica Ryan, and Peder Hash will spend six to eight hours per week in the History Room extending our open hours and assisting in all aspects of library work. The interns have been busy digitizing and cataloging the library’s historic photograph collection which will soon be accessible on the library’s web site. Please stop by the History Room and meet Bonnie, Jessica, and Peder.

History Buffs View Our Photographs

In the past month, approximately 800 people viewed our historic photographs of Mill Valley on the Online Archive of California (OAC) web site. Each visitor viewed an average of 2.13 photographs and 194 of our 200 photographs on the OAC web site were viewed at least once. The most popular photos were views of the Mountain Railroad, the West Point Inn, the Tourist Club, and Ocean View Trail to Muir Woods from the Panoramic Highway. Although most users hail from Mill Valley and the Bay area, we have had visitors from all over the U.S. and more than 30 countries across five continents from Chile to China and Austria to Australia. .

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

By John Leonard, Board president

Our most recent Walk into History featured downtown Mill Valley. Perhaps we should have called it "A Snapshot In Time" or billed it as a farewell tour. Starting before the walk, but continuing and growing in intensity, there has been a process of commercial turnover that marks this as one of the most dramatic eras of change in the downtown that we have experienced in our 100 plus year history. We have lost Capricorn and the Greenwood Store. Jenny Low's, Village Music and Sweetwater are gone. Banana Republic (to old timers, who remember the original hole-in-the-wall on East Blithedale, Banana Republic Two) is leaving. When this much loss in the retail fabric of a small downtown occurs so quickly there is cause for concern. Unfortunately, these losses and pending losses have no single cause and no single villain. And there is little the City can do to prevent change unless a proposed change in use would be more intense in projected traffic and parking impacts than the previous use.

Although the above list of going and gone businesses includes a restaurant and a clothing store, the mix of businesses in the downtown trends toward eating and coffee establishments, clothing stores, banks, and real estate offices, with a few odds and ends thrown in. Is this a reflection of what the rents will bear, of what Mill Valley has become, or a combination of the two? In any case, as we stroll the downtown and notice the empty storefronts, the "For Lease" signs, and the "Change of Ownership" applications we can reflect on the truism of Joni Mitchell's line that "you don't know what you've got 'til it's gone." Or, in the words of a more recent song, "Closing time, every new beginning is some other beginning's end."

ORAL HISTORY

By Joan Murray

I recently recorded the oral history of Jim McGowan, Jr., son of Mill Valley's chief of police from 1937 to 1961. Jim attended Mill Valley schools, College of Marin and San Francisco State. Both he and his wife Eileen (nee Sloan) were raised in Mill Valley. They now live in Larkspur. Jim recently retired after being a long-time coach at College of Marin.

Police Chief McGowan knew everyone, and since everyone knew him, Jim, Jr. was expected to behave himself. Two characters in the following tale are Roy Bernard who became Mill Valley Fire Department Battalion Chief and Lee Clark who became a UC-Berkeley math professor.

"We used to find things to do in the summer and sometimes those things weren't too good. I once borrowed one of my mother's purses that was in this stack and I thought wouldn't be missed. So I borrowed her purse and three of us went about half way up Corte Madera Grade where there was a big culvert—it's still there. We hid in the culvert, tied a string onto the purse and threw it out into the middle of the road. In those days there wasn't much traffic, but a car would come along and stop to grab the purse. We would pull in the string and take off running while they were swearing at us. We might have pulled this trick four or five times. One of us watched for cars from up on the hill while the other two were in the ditch. Our last try didn't turn out to be a great success. Roy Bernard and Lee Clark were in the ditch and I was the watch guy. I said, 'Here comes a car' and when I saw a police car following it, I said, 'Hurry up, get out of here, here comes a police car.' To this day, both Roy and Lee claim they were never warned. At any rate, they took off, but they left the purse in the road. The police picked up the purse and looked up the hill for kids, but they couldn't see us. We were well hidden. When they investigated, they discovered that my mother's name was in it. Two or three days later, my father said, 'Look, don't take your mother's purse anymore, okay?'"

It is this type of tale that makes oral histories interesting and so much fun.



Jim and Eileen McGowan

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