In accordance with his wishes following his passing on January 7, 1948, the estate of Albert Johnson transferred the majority of his assets to The Gospel Foundation of California, a Christian religious organization that he founded in 1946. Included were Shadelands Ranch (about 355 acres), the Shadelands House and its contents. Notably excluded were personal items. Mr. Johnson’s instruction to Mary Liddecoat, effectively Chairperson of the Gospel Foundation Board of Directors, was to destroy all personal items. The oral history is that Mary Liddecoat dutifully carried out those instructions largely by bonfire.

Whether it was due to oversight or benign neglect is unknown, but a large quantity of handwritten, personal letters escaped the inferno. According to our Sheila Rogstad they were discovered in the barn behind the Shadelands House around 1971, shortly after The Gospel Foundation transferred it and the surrounding 1.5 acres to the City of Walnut Creek for $1. The discovery was made by one of WCHS’s first Historians, Beverly Clemson. Recognizing the significance of the letters she carefully transferred them to archival storage, taking them out of harm’s way and protecting them for future researchers.

The letters were virtually forgotten until 2002. New to the History Room, Sheila Rogstad came across the boxed letters occupying roughly 6 file cabinet drawers. Encouraged by Historian Audrey Veregge, she began reading the letters and transposing the contents into word processed files. In a short time Sheila became hooked. More than anything else the letters revealed a great deal about personalities and interrelationships. Hiram and Carrie Penniman, Mary Penniman, Albert and Bessie Johnson were no longer just biographical names depicted in black and white still photographs, but friends talking about their lives some 100+ years ago.

Sheila’s labor of love continued through 2012. Ten years for one project may seem like a long time, but the word processed letters number between 1,500 and 2,000. Included are detailed notes about each letter including description of stationary, postmarks, extraneous markings, even periodic observations about handwriting that seems out of character for that individual. The reason the exact number is not known is because the word processed letters have never been fully cataloged.

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PURPOSE AND MISSION
The mission of the Walnut Creek Historical Society is to collect, preserve, and interpret the history and heritage of the Walnut Creek area. The Walnut Creek Historical Society is a 501 (c)(3) non-profit corporation. Cash or in-kind donations are tax deductible up to the limits of the law. The Walnut Creek Historical Society welcomes new members, and those interested in the history of Walnut Creek. Board meetings are held every third Monday of the month and are open to all WCHS members and interested citizens.

Co-Presidents Lee Culver and Mark Brown
Vice President Sheila Rogstad
Treasurer Barton Tolley
Recording Secretary Karen Majors and Teresa Wenzel
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Archivist Sheila Rogstad
Investment Committee Mark Brown
Legal Advisor Anina (Ann) Dalsin

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Penniman/Johnson Letters
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The historical power of the Penniman/Johnson Letters comes through organization. Each letter is a series of spontaneous thoughts, often short, light in content, covering perhaps a dozen or more subjects. The magic happens when the letters are grouped, say between sender and recipient, and then studied in chronological sequence. The previously seemingly random snippets glue themselves together, almost like a modern e-mail chain, providing not just facts, but a storyline.

Creation of a Master Index of the Penniman/Johnson Letters is currently underway. It provides the ability to sort Sheila’s Herculean work by date, sender, recipient, and topic. The effort is most promising because with only 10% of the collection cataloged so far, there are both never before told stories and challenges to previously published history. We hope to be telling you about some of these in the near future.

Stay tuned.

J.H. LaBrie

Membership Renewal

Please check your address, if there is a star next to your name it is time to renew your membership. Please use the form on the back of the newsletter.
Shadelands Museum displays many “pieces of history” that speak eloquently of the customs, taste, and pastimes of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. One of the most admired is the crazy quilt on the music room sofa.

The crazy quilt became popular in the 1870s, inspired in large part by the asymmetrical, richly colorful Japanese ceramics and textiles that became fashionable after they were displayed at great international expositions and fairs, such as the Philadelphia Centennial of 1876.

Crazies, as they are sometimes called, are purely decorative textiles. They are very different from the practical pieced and appliqué bed coverings that had been made for a hundred years by country craftswomen who needed to keep their families warm.

The design of crazy quilts involved hundreds of irregularly shaped pieces of material combined with elaborate creative embroidery. The fabrics were usually rich silks, satins and velvets, often embellished with buttons, lace and spangles. The materials could not be washed, and because the finished textile had no batting or filling, crazy quilts provided no warmth.

Although they were mostly for looking at, not for use, most surviving crazy quilts are in poor condition, and nearly impossible to repair. Many of the silks that were the principal fabrics were treated with metallic salts that gave the material desirable weight and rustle. Unfortunately, these treatments have led to irreversible shredding and deterioration.

What was the purpose then of spending so much time, ingenuity and labor in creating something so apparently useless? (Our descendants may one day ask the same question about computer games.)

In the late Victorian era, many women in the growing upper middle class, especially in cities, had plenty of leisure time—but little to do with it. Crazy quilts and similar crafts were ways to pass the time that sometimes hung heavy on hands that weren’t allowed to work outside the home, or to do much meaningful work in it.

The end result of all those hours of cutting, piecing and embroidering was an eye-catching textile that could be displayed on the back of a sofa, to be admired, envied and criticized by other leisured ladies. Hard-working farm women like Mary Penniman would never have had, or made, the time to create such a display of their needlework skills. But probably they would have admired, as we do, the persistence and creativity required.

Jane Viator
Eugene de Sabia and John Martin had an idea. The year was 1899, and they imagined sending power all the way to Oakland from their new Colgate Power-house on the Yuba River. This was a distance of more than 140 miles, and would involve crossing the Carquinez Strait. It was an ambitious plan, especially without much knowledge of high-voltage transmission over long distances. They started by building 2 parallel lines of cedar poles using horses and manpower. The aerial part of crossing the Strait was the biggest challenge: the span was over 4,000 feet, 3 times as long as anything that existed at the time. But it was accomplished, with the lowest cable stretched 280 feet above the water to allow for the masts of passing ships.

In March 1901, de Sabia and Martin formed California Central Gas and Electric for the retail distribution of hydro power in California cities. They began acquiring local utilities in Bay Area towns. Meanwhile, the great-great-grandnephew of the last king of Poland, Paris born Prince Andre Poniatowski, was living life as a prince should—enjoying horse racing, yachting, and big game hunting. On a visit to San Francisco he investigated investment opportunities, which resulted in the formation the Standard Electric Company. The goal of this company was to send power to San Francisco from the Mokelumne River, 150 miles away.

Small utilities near San Francisco were purchased by the prince and operated as United Gas and Electric. Then in 1904, de Sabia and Martin bought both Standard and United. They now had a plant and a service area. The prince, with a good return on his investment, went back to France.

A year later, the company owned 10 hydro plants in 22 counties. Talks began about merging with San Francisco Gas and Electric, and the result was the creation of Pacific Gas and Electric Company, incorporated October 10, 1905. PG&E was born, and in spite of a pretty big earthquake in April 1906—would survive.

All over the country electricity was affecting how people lived. Public places—stores, theaters, hospitals—were the first to install electric lights, but before long homes had electricity as well. Shops began selling gadgets and appliances that depended on electricity. In 1890 there were only 120 electric generating plants in the United States, but by 1900 there were 1200. As electricity became more available, PG&E created a traveling exhibit in a railcar which visited rural areas to show people amazing electrical devices: an ice making machine, a motor driven sewing machine, a cream separator.
Continued from page 4.

By 1910, Walnut Creek finally had electricity. It replaced coal oil, just as it had replaced—in larger cities—the use of gas manufactured from coal. Electricity was fed to Walnut Creek businesses and homes through power lines installed by Great Western Power Company. Main Street commercial buildings, constructed by James Stow, were built with electric lights. One business, the Walnut Creek Meat Market, acquired a grinding and chopping machine powered by electricity in addition to electric lights. In Walnut Creek homes new lights were shining brightly, and outside electric trains—which operated until the 1950's—were soon transporting people and freight.

PG&E kept acquiring smaller utility companies. By 1930 there was a PG&E building in Walnut Creek on Main Street. Electricity was now part of our everyday life. PG&E was here to stay.

Lee Culver

Morgan Perkins

Morgan Perkins is volunteering in the History Room. She is originally from Delaware, and in 1998 moved to Key West, Florida. With her history degree she got a job in public relations with the Fisher family at Salvor, Inc. Salvor has located and collected the remains of several shipwrecks in Florida waters, and was recovering treasure 22 feet deep from a Spanish galleon they discovered in 1985, Nuestra Señora de Atocha, named after a Madrid shrine for protection. The worth of the treasure on the Atocha is estimated at about 400 million dollars. Morgan’s public relations job, which lasted a year, included arranging programs for the Travel Channel and National Geographic. For the next 8 years she worked for Salvor in their conservation lab and in collections management. She liked learning the background of the artifacts from the Atocha and researching who owned or made them before entering the information in a database. When Morgan and her husband moved to California she began working on a Masters degree in Museum Studies. When completed she hopes to work in museum education and programing, with a focus on history. Meanwhile, she is helping the History Room team, sorting and categorizing photos and information from the 80 years of Walnut Festival history the WCHS now manages. Sheila, Lee, and Joe welcome her and are glad to have her skill and expertise!
Walnut Festival Queens

The Walnut Festival Association recently donated 80 years worth of historical items to the Walnut Creek Historical Society. Materials include photographs, newspaper articles, Festival programs, concessions information and more! Volunteers have donated many hours cataloging, organizing and scanning the wealth of information and now we could use your help.

Currently we are working on our photographic collection of the Walnut Festival Queens and Court. Each year local organizations such as the Lions Club sponsored a young lady for Festival Queen. Candidates are an important member of the tradition of fund raising and community service. The money raised from the Festival goes back into the Walnut Creek community to support recreational, charitable and educational programs and facilities.

While our volunteers and historians have been able to identify the majority of Queens dating back to the 1940’s we still have a few unaccounted for. Here is where you can help. Do you remember attending the coronation? Was your next door neighbor a Walnut Festival Queen? Perhaps you participated in the whisker competition. Take a look at the featured photos below and contact us with your memories. If you were a Walnut Festival Queen we would love to hear from you and include your experiences in our oral history collection!

Can you identify this happy family? We do not know the year or the name of this Queen.

Looks like a shiny new BART train! We know BART began operation in September 1972, when was this photo taken?

Our 1964 Queen, Vickie Lee DeLima. But which one is Vickie?
Join Us on a Downtown History Tour!

Our popular guided walking tours of historic sites in downtown Walnut Creek are continuing on every 2nd Saturday through October.

Upcoming Tours: April 14, May 12 and June 9.

The easy 90-minute walk on city sidewalks brings to life the early times of what has become a Bay Area destination city. It is a perfect way to spend a morning and then stay to enjoy all that downtown Walnut Creek has to offer.

We meet every 2nd Saturday, rain or shine, from March through October at Liberty Bell Plaza in front of the fountain on the corner of Broadway and Mt. Diablo Blvd. The tour begins at 9:30 AM and ends at City Hall by 11:00 AM. The tours are free. A booklet with historic photos of the sites visited may be purchased at the tour for $5.00. Registration in advance is not required.

Have you ever wondered what the oldest commercial building is on Main Street, or where our first bank might have been, or how many buildings still standing downtown are over 100 years old? On the tour, you will learn all this and much more about the past in Walnut Creek.

For more information call the Shadelands Ranch Museum at 925-935-7871.

Ann Shelton

Walnut Creek: Then and Now....

Now home to Mechanics’ Bank and their iconic head fountain out front, 1350 North Main Street was once home to the Rogers Hotel. Opened in 1879 by William Bolton Rogers, it was equipped with a dining room, bar, and several sleeping rooms upstairs. The hotel became a stage stop in 1880 for travelers on their way from Concord to Danville and Lafayette. Business was brisk with visitors from San Francisco and Oakland as well, prompting Rogers to convert his dance hall into eight more boarding rooms. Business, it seems, was almost too good. Rogers was arrested for keeping his saloon open on a Sunday in June in 1882. After a trial, 12 jurors failed to agree on a verdict, and 10 of them voted to acquit the popular hotel operator.

More interesting information on Walnut Creek can be found in Brad Rovanpera’s book, Walnut Creek: An Illustrated History, available for $25.00 at the Shadelands Ranch Museum.
Check out our website at wchistory.com

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