LOOKING FOR GHOSTS? WHO YA GONNA CALL?

Is Shadeland’s Ranch haunted? Who’s to say? While there are no known encounters with ghosts in the 1903 former home of the Hiram Penniman family, the question comes up regularly. A few months ago The NorCal Paranormal Project contacted the Walnut Creek Historical Society with the generous and unusual offer to help us find out.

On the evening of May 5, 2018 the two founders of the NorCal Paranormal Project plus 6 of their experienced members arrived at Shadelands Ranch with both the latest and time tested spirit detection equipment. Accompanying them were 2 volunteers and 1 staff member from the Walnut Creek Historical Society. Over the course of 6 hours the group checked for spirits in 11 major spaces in the house including the attic and basement.

In terms of visuals, if you are old enough to remember People’s Park, walking into the parlor that evening not knowing the circumstances, you might have believed you were experiencing a sit-in at the home of a U.C. Berkeley faculty member. Imagine 11 relatively young, diverse looking people sitting in a circle on the floor around the periphery of the room. Continuing with imagery of the period, the half-dozen or so small electronic devices distributed throughout the room had names like Vortex-Dome, Periscope and Rem-Pod. They looked like things right out of the “Bat Cave” or an episode of “Lost in Space.”

There was much to learn about spirits. First of all, they can be shy. Forever is a long time, so the saying “you never get a second chance at a first impression” is particularly poignant. Our session began in the entry hall letting the spirits know that we are friendly, thanking them for being with us and expressing interest in communicating. Next came a prayer very much like one spoken before a Thanksgiving meal. To complete our introductions a medium sized stuff dog was placed in the stairwell as it is generally believed that some spirits are comforted by animals.

With preliminaries completed the real work began. The first space investigated was the parlor. The protocol of asking a question and waiting for a response was representative of the approach in all 11 major spaces. Most of the time EVP (Electronic Voice Phenomenon) was the technique of choice. To the casual observer, the device appeared to be a round, hand held voice recorder with a short cord connected to a smaller rectangular device believed to be an AM radio scanner. In round-robin format each person was invited to ask the spirit(s) an open or close ended question. Between questions was a 5 to 8 second recorded period of silence. In playback the human voices sounded about right. But the recorded periods of silence were greatly amplified, picking up the slightest sound – usually background noise, such as traffic on Ygnacio Valley Road, a growling stomach or a turned piece of paper. This is precisely the moment art and science collide. From time to time the Paranormal people reacted almost in unison, hearing something differentiated from the background noise. Upon repeated playbacks they would suggest, discuss and conclude what they heard. Often it was thought to be a name, but never more than two to three words.

Continued on Page 2...
History Room Volunteers Spotlight

Vicki Wiese

Vickie Wiese came to Walnut Creek six months ago from Coos Bay, Oregon. It was not her first time in Walnut Creek; she has a degree in Museum Studies from JFK University, and ten years ago she worked at the Pardee Home in Oakland, where she was their collections manager. Vicki loved learning about the Pardee family history, and with her amazing organizational skills she was an asset to the Pardee staff. Now the Walnut Creek Historical Society can benefit from Vicki’s many talents.

In her spare time Vicki really likes to walk. She averages 25 miles of walking a week. She has participated in 3 triathlons. When she isn’t walking or helping with history projects at the WCHS, she crochets hats.

Sheila, Joe, Moira, Morgan, Darleen and Lee welcome Vicki to the History Room!

Darleen Hallberg

Darleen Hallberg was born in Hawaii. By the time she was a teenager she lived in Walnut Creek and attended Ygnacio Valley High School. Darleen tells us that during that time the area around Shadelands Ranch was “all orchards”.

Darleen went on to Cal State East Bay and became an operating room nurse. She recently retired and is volunteering in the history room, working with Moira preparing documents and photos and scanning them into our museum program, Past Perfect. She is doing an excellent job, and we’re finding with Darleen’s help it appears we’ll reach our goal of entering everything at the museum into Past Perfect!

Darleen’s mother lives in Walnut Creek, and her siblings live in nearby Bay Area towns.

In her spare time, Darleen enjoys hiking with her husband, 4 to 5 miles every other day.

Welcome Darleen. Everyone in the history room thanks you for being a part of our team.

By: Lee Culver

LOOKING FOR GHOSTS? WHO YA GONNA CALL?
Continued from Page 1...

What we learned is that many spirits, but no ghosts, inhabit all the major spaces of Shadelands Ranch. Ghosts are people who have passed-on but have not yet reconciled that they are dead. While the identities and numbers of spirits are not yet known, it is almost certain that all are friendly. Now that we are acquainted, perhaps they will tell us more later this year.

We closed the evening by singing happy birthday to the spirits in the attic with the lights off - a new experience to be sure. The name of the birthday spirit was left blank, hoping for self identification in EVP playback. No such luck. Finally, we thanked the spirits, asked them not to follow us home and bid them “adieu,” - until we meet again.

Everyone arrived home safe.

By Judy Caponigro and J.H. LaBrie
Walnut Creek Historical Society Scholarship Awards

Two exceptional young women made history by becoming the second recipients of the Walnut Creek Historical Society Scholarship Award. Sarah Son, a senior at Northgate High School and Madison Cortessis, a senior at Los Lomas High School each received $2,000 to the school of their acceptance. Both of these young women were required to be exceptional students, active within their community, submit 3 essays, two references (one from their history teacher) and a resume.

Madison Cortessis

Madison received her scholarship on May 29th at Las Lomas’ Senior Awards Night from board member Teresa Wenzel. Madison played volleyball for Las Lomas for 4 years. She also played club volleyball for NorCal and Xceleration. Madison was President of her National Charities League Chapter and a volunteer at Camp Wonder a summer camp for children with skin diseases and ARF. In addition, she held a job at the San Francisco Creamery and as a volleyball coach. Madison has been described as “someone who truly loves history” and as “an amazing, diligent, and persistent young woman who possesses the potential necessary to succeed. The Walnut Creek Historical Society wishes Madison much success in her endeavors at UC Santa Cruz as well as her future goals of majoring in political science or history and going to law school.

Sarah Son

Sarah received her scholarship on May 29th at Northgate’s Senior Honors Circle from our Co-President Mark Brown. Sarah was Editor in Chief of the yearbook, a volunteer as a summer camp counselor and tutor for the Monument Crisis Center and volunteered as Philanthropic Programs Chairman of Assisteens which entailed organizing crafts with seniors at the local senior center planning holiday themed parties for children at Meadow Homes Elementary School. She has been described as “sophisticated beyond her years” and “a true superstar”. The Walnut Creek Historical Society wishes Sarah much success in her endeavors at UCLA as well as her future goals of majoring in Economics and then onto law school.

History Room Presents

BRIDAL GOWNS THROUGH THE AGES
Come check out our summer museum exhibit.
June 17th—August 26th
At the Shadelands Ranch Museum
Wednesdays and Sundays 1 PM—4 PM
Please note we will be closed the following Sundays due to private events: August 12th & 19th
3rd Grade Downtown History Tour Update

Did you know that there is a secret trap door in Walnut Creek? Did you know that there was once an island in Walnut Creek? Or, that there was once a place called the “Nuthouse” located downtown? These and many more are pieces of hidden history we might pass by and never notice in our beautiful city.

The Walnut Creek Historical Society offers Walnut Creek Downtown History Tours to local third grade classes. Students have been enjoying these tours for the last twenty years. These free 90 minute “hands and feet on” tours are given to Walnut Creek third graders, their teacher and accompanying parents every spring and fall. Teachers, students and parents have greatly enjoyed the tours and have found it to be both educational and entertaining. We believe this is truly a magical and memorable experience for both students and adults, revealing many new, interesting and sometimes hidden historical facts about Walnut Creek. In addition, the tour is specifically designed to support the state standards for History and Social Science for third graders.

The 3rd Grade Downtown History Tour Docents have been very busy during the school year. For the 2017-2018 school year we hosted tours for 435 students and 140 parent chaperones. We have hosted Buena Vista Elementary, Murwood Elementary, Parkmead Elementary, PALs Elementary, St. Mary’s School, Palmer School and Seven Hills School, Indian Valley and Walnut Heights. These tours are so popular that we even had a tour crasher at one of our stops!

Recently we received thank you notes from one of our schools. Here’s what the students had to say:
“I learned there is a time capsule in city hall. I can not wait to see it open on October 2044 (2049)”. Garrett
“I learned that Walnut Creek used to be called “The corners””. Jolie
“My favorite part of the tour was learning were the different buildings were”. Sophia
“I learned that the first person to have telephone was Tim Stow (James Stow)”. Calei
“I liked that how the docent made us use our imagination”. Warren
“I can’t wait to go down town and tell my parents history of Walnut Creek”. Natalie
“Thank you for being our brilliant tour guides. I loved every second of the trip”. Bertie
“This was one of my favorite field trips that I have gone on”. Ivan

By: Teresa Wenzel
Remembering Early Shadelands

When the Penniman house was sold to the City of Walnut Creek for $1.00, in 1968, it was stipulated that everything in the house belonged to the Historical Society. Well, there wasn't anything in the house as it had been used by the Cerebral Palsy Society for a school.

A 1989 Interview with Jeanne Wheeler of the Walnut Knoles area gave us early information. Knowing several of the “Shady Ladies”, she joined in 1968 as “Walnut Creek was a little town and we all knew each other.”

The “Shady Ladies” were a group of volunteers who cleaned the mess from in the house and unpacked the items from the barn and basement. The husbands helped a lot. Jeanne began volunteering, four years before the house opened to the public. “It was a mess, in terrible shape and dilapidated. The plaster was coming off in chunks. The paint was peeling and there was gray dust over all.”

Jeanne doesn’t remember all the furniture, but knows there was the front door curtain and the Stella music box. Trunks and crates were brought in from the barn—clothing, china, a toaster, and linens from the 6 box car loads of crates. The blue and white dishes came from Scotty’s Castle in Death Valley.

Not much was done to the house until Elizabeth Isles talked with the City attorney in 1988 and was able to have the inside remolded and the roof redone in 1991. Some Civic Pride grants were used, but most of the funds were available from the sale of the Frank. L. Wright drawings and books sold at Sotheby’s auction in N.Y. Early on, only the lower floor of the house was open to the public.

Mary Liddecoat, Director of the Gospel Foundation, that handled the Shadelands Ranch was “no spring chicken, but a delightful lady. She worked hard to save the house.” said Jeanne. “But still we had bonfires to burn personal items, thankfully not the letters.” The Gospel Foundation inherited all the Johnson assets.

There were caretakers, Mrs. And Mrs. Cass, before and after we took ownership. On May 14, 2018, Mike and Thomas Birdsall told us, in a different interview, how they worked with the Cass’ and played chess with them. The boys laid the “summer house” brick patio from the pile of bricks in the basement and re-pointed the house foundation.

In the next newsletter we will have an article on a new surprise we found in the upstairs closet. New discoveries are what keep us having fun at Shadelands!

By: Sheila Rogstad
From the History Room::
The Port Chicago Explosion

Seventy-four years ago, at 10:20 pm the night of July 17, 1944, two enormous explosions rocked the Port Chicago Naval Munitions base on Suisun Bay, seven miles east of Martinez. The SS E.A. Bryan, loaded with over four thousand tons of ammunition, bombs, and depth charges, broke into pieces. The SS Quinault Victory, waiting to receive cargo from 16 railroad cars filled with four-hundred tons of munitions, was left with her stern upside down and five hundred feet away. The pier at Port Chicago was completely gone. Smoke and fire shot two miles into the air, and all over the East Bay windows were blown out.

In downtown Walnut Creek, a quarter of the plate glass windows were smashed by the explosion. Among the businesses that suffered broken windows were The El Rey Confectionery, the Courier-Journal, Bradley Brothers Soda Shop, Safeway, and The Walnut Kernel. More seriously damaged were Lester Lawrence Garage, Hagstrom’s Market, and Walnut Creek Pharmacy. At the El Rey Theater, patrons jumped from their seats in the middle of watching Jane Eyre. As they ran for the door, an army officer in the audience ordered them back to their seats. Most people complied. In Walnut Creek homes, those who left windows open found them broken, and at Shadelands Ranch, four large windows on the upstairs landing shattered. The blast was felt as far away as Las Vegas.

Walnut Creek officials, Fire Chief Guy Spencer, Fire Marshal J. T. Schroder, and Deputy Sheriffs Norman Wilson and Clinton Jones, immediately traveled to Port Chicago to help. Six Walnut Creek Red Cross nurses accompanied them. Joe Bell drove the Brubaker ambulance to offer its services. The Walnut Creek group found a first aid station in the basement of the Port Chicago Veterans’ Building. Lights in the town were not working, but a carnival company set up searchlights wherever needed.

Walnut Creek began clean up the next day. Insurance and glass companies, the Street Department, and the police were kept busy making repairs and patrolling to prevent looting. Only 10 women showed up at the Walnut Creek Legion Hall to make surgical dressings—and the call went out to encourage more participation. The country was at war; D-Day had taken place just 6 weeks before.

Three-hundred and ninety were injured in the explosion that July night, and three-hundred and twenty men were instantly killed, most of them African Americans.

In the 1940’s, patriotism and a desire to help the war effort encouraged black men to enlist, but at that time all branches of the armed forces were segregated. African American men were given menial jobs as drivers or cooks. At Port Chicago, black sailors worked with munitions, loading them onto ships headed for the war in the Pacific. It was a dangerous job, and they hadn’t been trained to handle explosives. Very few of the white officers directing the men were trained either.

There was an investigation following the explosion which placed no fault on anyone, but justified the lack of training for black sailors by saying they were “poor material, and required unusually close supervision”. Benefits for victims were greatly reduced when there were complaints that most of those eligible for benefits were black.
After the explosion, the black sailors were asked to resume loading bombs and ammunition. Two-hundred and fifty-eight men refused because of the unsafe conditions. When they were accused of mutiny and threatened with a death sentence, all but 50 agreed to return to work. The white officers who had been supervising the black sailors at the time of the explosion were given 30 days of leave.

The trial for those 50 black sailors accused of mutiny took place two months later. The men maintained that it was a work stoppage, not mutiny, since they didn’t try to seize control. But they were found guilty and sentenced to 8 to 15 years in prison.

During the next couple of years there were unsuccessful attempts to overturn these convictions. However, the Navy released the sailors in 1946 and sent them overseas.

In the years since the explosion The Friends of Port Chicago National Memorial, along with local politicians, have tried to exonerate the men. Freddie Meeks, the last survivor, was pardoned by President Clinton in 1999. For the others the verdict has remained the same.

Still, changes because of the Port Chicago tragedy have taken place. After the explosion the Navy brought in two divisions of trained white sailors to load munitions, and eventually bases, training facilities, and naval ships were integrated. By 1948 when President Truman desegregated the armed forces, the Navy had already done so.

The national memorial that now stands at the explosion site was dedicated in 1994 and became an official unit of the National Park System in 2009. It’s located at the Military Ocean Terminal Concord. Visitors must be cleared with the U.S. Army two weeks in advance, and reservations are necessary. Ranger led tours are held Thursday through Saturday. For more information check the Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial website, www.nps.gov/poch/planyourvisit/index.html

By: Lee Culver

Downtown History Tours

Did you know the home of Dr. Claude Leech and his wife Eva can still be seen on Main Street 145 years after it was built? Dr. Claude Leech was one of the first doctors in Walnut Creek and his wife, Eva, was the first woman to be elected to the City Council.

If you join us on a Downtown History Tour you will visit this historic site as well as many other places that are part of our heritage in Walnut Creek.

The next tours are on July 14, August 11, and September 8 at 9:30 a.m.

These easy 90 minute walking tours on city sidewalks are offered on the 2nd Saturday of each month. Check-in begins at 9:00 a.m. at the fountain at Liberty Bell Plaza on the corner of Broadway and Mt. Diablo Blvd. The tour begins at 9:30 a.m. and is 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.

For more details about the tours, call 925-935-7871 or go to our website at: wchistory.com/
Please check address, if there is a star next to your name it is time to renew your membership.

Please use Membership Renewal Form.

Check out our website at wchistory.com

WCHS Membership Renewal Form
Please return form with your renewal

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