Will Nethercutt - Eagle Scout Service Project- Getting To The Root Of The Problem

The Walnut Creek Historical Society had a problem. In the back of the mansion, stood a 50 foot dawn redwood tree with roots about a foot thick that were drifting away from the tree above ground and extending underneath the Walnut Creek Garden Club’s planter boxes. The planter boxes are used to teach kids in our Living History program about how the Pennimans used to grow food at the Shadelands Ranch. The roots were so large that they literally lifted the planter boxes upwards and then split the wood that held them together. Additionally, the roots stuck up out of the ground so much that they presented a tripping hazard.

Initially, the Board thought they could cut the roots so as to not appear as an ugly eyesore and to not be a hazard. However, upon a visit from a Walnut Creek city arborist, they learned that the tree was quite rare and so any interference with the tree’s root system was out of the question.

Enter our root doctor-Will Nethercutt, Eagle Scout and Northgate High School Senior, and his fellow Boy Scout troop members. For his Eagle Scout Project, Will rebuilt new planter boxes further away from the tree. They look much better than the previous boxes. He then also put dirt, tanbark, and gravel over the roots and developed a fairly smooth path so that tripping would not be such a big problem. In general the area looks vastly better than it did before.

In March, Will was honored for all his hard work on not only the Eagle Scout project but in all his achievements with the Boy Scouts of America. The historical society sent Mark Brown as our representative to attend Will’s Eagle Courts of Honor Ceremony and gave a speech thanking him for all his efforts with our garden beds.

So next time you visit the Shadelands, make sure and check out our planter box garden in the back and take a look at our beautiful Dawn Redwood. Thanks again Will and good luck next year at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo.

By Mark Brown
Judy Caponigro Joins the WCHS Board

The Walnut Creek Historical Society Board is delighted to introduce our newest member, Judy Caponigro. Judy is retired from a 20-year career in nonprofit and government advertising and marketing, leading campaigns for Special Olympics and The Department of Treasury.

Recently, she has been involved in volunteering for organizations like Good Mews Animal Foundation and Goodwill, helping with strategic and event planning, fundraising, and merchandising. As chair of the 2018 Goodwill Gala, she led a successful campaign that raised over $90,000 in revenue.

Judy’s past Board of Directors involvement included 3 years on the Good Mews Animal Foundation and 2 years on her neighborhood HOA as vice president and president. During her years as a Board member, she led neighborhood yard sales (generating over $25,000 each year) as well as instituting governance policies necessary for future growth.

Judy was born and raised in the Detroit, Michigan area and currently resides in Walnut Creek with her husband Jim and 2 four-legged children: Penny and Desmond.

Judy has done an excellent job as a house docent for the past year and a half, and she is an outstanding addition to the Garden Tea and Vintage Fashion Show committee. She is energetic, creative, and full of excellent ideas for growing the Historical Society. She will be an invaluable asset to the board. Welcome, Judy.

By: Priscilla Tudor

2019 Mary Penniman Award

Mary Penniman was a tireless worker at the 500 acre Shadelands Ranch. From the time Mary was 2 years old, she was always there to help her father out when her mother, Sarah, passed away. As soon as Mary could walk she was doing countless tasks on the ranch. In 1897 she completely took over the running of the ranch when her father Hiram Penniman was unable to do so. Throughout her remaining years, Mary continued to run the ranch until she passed away from influenza in 1909.

To honor the memory of Mary Penniman, the Walnut Creek Historical Society gives an award each year to a volunteer who has given tirelessly of themselves for many years.

This year’s recipient is well known to many of you as she has run the living history program at the museum for the last 12 years. On behalf of the board of directors, I would like announce this year’s winner is Mary Granzotto.

Since the beginning of Living History Days, hundreds of local 3rd graders like yourselves, come to the Shadelands Museum and are taught how the Pennimans lived and what life was like in Walnut Creek at the turn of the century. In 2018, Mary oversaw the 32 classrooms and 741 students who came to Shadelands Museum as well as the 736 volunteer hours it took to run the Living History Days program.

Several of the volunteers are here today along with the leader of what we think is the most successful of all the community outreach the historical society does.

Please give a round of applause to Mary for her heartfelt dedication and countless volunteer hours making this wonderful program the success it is today.

By: Teresa Wenzel
In late March we lost Bob Schroder, a friend, if there ever was one, to Walnut Creek Historical Society (WCHS). He was a Charter member of the organization in 1968, early Board member and President in the 1970s and early 1980s. Together with his loving wife Fran, Bob will always be remembered for the elaborate theater shows they organized for the benefit of WCHS. With titles like “The Sundance Kid” (1974); “Hometown – Walnut Creek” (1976); “Music America” (1977); and “Razzamatazz” (1978), these annual productions by “The Shadelands Follies” were performed over several consecutive days in June to sold out audiences in the repurposed walnut warehouse (corner of Locust Street and Civic Drive), affectionately nicknamed “The Nut House.”

To say that Bob was civic minded would be like describing the Pope as Catholic. His community service was boundless. He started as a volunteer firefighter for the Central Fire District in Walnut Creek before it became part of the Contra Costa Consolidated Fire District. He served on the Walnut Creek Parks and Recreation Commission, then the Planning Commission. Beginning in 1960 Bob was elected to the Walnut Creek City Council serving four terms until 1976. He was Mayor three times.

Thereafter, Bob’s sphere of influence broadened. In 1976 he was elected to the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors representing District III, serving four terms until his retirement in 1992. He helped establish the Central Contra Costa Transit Authority (County Connection) being its founding chair of the Board of Directors. He served on the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC). Today, the pedestrian bridge suspended over Treat Boulevard near the Pleasant Hill Transit Village (BART) is dedicated to Bob Schroder, also known as “Mr. Transportation.”

Despite failing health over the past few months, Bob continued to make time for WCHS. We were honored by his presence at our Membership Appreciation Day in September, 2018 and at our Annual Member Dinner in January, 2019. From the lyrics of the 1938 American classic “September Song”

Oh, the days dwindle down to a precious few  
September, November  
And these few precious days I’ll spend with you  
These precious days I’ll spend with you.

Bob, you were one of a kind. It was by chance and our good fortune that we came into your orbit. Thank you for your leadership and forever being our friend.

Until we meet again.

By: J. H. LaBrie
When friends visit Walnut Creek and need a hotel they have many to choose from—The Marriott, Holiday Inn Express, and Hilton’s Embassy Suites just to name a few. But there was a time in Walnut Creek’s history when the hotel industry was just getting started.

The first hotel in Walnut Creek—then called The Corners—was also the first business. Walnut Creek House was established by Milo Hough in 1855 near Main Street and Civic Drive. Hough was an experienced entrepreneur who had been operating a hotel in Lafayette; his Walnut Creek House, a stage stop along the 6 hour ride between Oakland and Martinez, boasted a retail store, a saloon, and a nearby blacksmith shop.

For a dozen years Hough’s business was a landmark. Then the 24 by 40 foot wooden building and its iconic flagpole were destroyed by fire. Insurance on the structure had expired just a couple of months before the blaze. It’s unclear whether Hough rebuilt anyway or a competitor did, but the result was The Walnut Creek and Mt. Diablo Central Hotel, ready in time for a 4th of July ball.

The Walnut Creek and Mt. Diablo was run by John and Hannah Noone during the 1870’s. It was located where Macy’s stands today. They also operated The Danville Hotel, which took a great deal of their time. In 1882 they decided to sell the Walnut Creek establishment, which had fallen into disrepair. Antonio Botelho purchased the building plus land around it and refurbished the hotel, converting it to a home for his large family.

Meanwhile, William Rogers, who had hotel experience but had also been a farmer and a policeman, decided to build a new hotel in Walnut Creek. The 2-story Rogers Hotel was constructed on Main and Duncan Streets and opened in 1879. Two big windows let light in from the street, and upstairs guests could stay in private sleeping rooms with glass bowl lamps. On the main floor, a dining room, bar, and parlor served as public areas. Coal oil lamps hung from the ceilings, and cuspidors were in every corner. There was a windmill with a 25 foot high water tank outside the hotel and fenced corrals with stalls for boarding horses. A wooden water trough was built in front of the hotel. Horses pulling the stage coach stopped there for a drink.

The hotel immediately became a draw for other businesses and popular with both local residents and visitors. Rogers was arrested at one point for keeping his saloon open on Sunday, but jurors failed to convict him, 10 of them voting for acquittal.

Ten years later the hotel was staying so busy with traveling salesmen and prospective land buyers that Rogers decided to remodel and double its size. He added a canopied porch and an inner courtyard, plus windows and glass doors that gave guests a view of the garden.

Around this time Roger’s son Walter took over the business, bought a gas generator, and installed gas lamps throughout the building. He added a stove to each room and offered “shuttle service”, a bus ride to the train station once the Southern Pacific Railroad began carrying passengers. By 1946 rooms were renting for as much as $9 a month!

The hotel continued until 1954 when it was torn down. Along the way it changed ownership and was renamed a few times—Las Palmas Hotel, Ala Costa Hotel, The Colonial Inn. But it’s likely to always be remembered as The Rogers Hotel.

However, The Rogers wasn’t for everybody. Construction crews from the telephone company and PG&E came to Walnut Creek around 1910 to install utilities. They needed a place to stay and thought The Rogers Hotel cost too much. Instead of The Rogers, the construction crews ate and slept at Mrs. Pine’s Boarding House on North Main Street. At Mrs. Pine’s they were offered 3 meals a day, including a packed lunch they could take to work. Mrs. Pine eventually sold the building. It changed hands several times, and along the way was renamed The Walnut Creek Hotel, which remained in business until the last owner found too many rooms were empty. By then the Caldecott Tunnel enabled drivers from Oakland and Berkeley to return home the same day instead of finding accommodations for the night.

Continued on Page 5
The building was torn down and rebuilt with stores on the ground floor and ten bedrooms above. Rooms were rented by the month. The building remains today with offices upstairs and retail below.

In the 1920’s a new trend in hotels became popular when the automobile enabled travelers to drive to vacation destinations. As an alternative to high priced lodging—hotels were charging $3 to $5 dollars a night—drivers stopped at auto courts, one room uncarpeted cabins that cost $1. These cabins were very basic; guests brought their own bedding and towels. There were two auto courts in Walnut Creek, one called White Spot on Mt. Diablo Boulevard—the ancestor of today’s motel.

There have been a lot of changes in hotel accommodations over the years. Today there are hotels in Walnut Creek for every taste and every budget.

By: Lee Culver

Same Train, New Track

The Historic Walnut Creek Station House is reimagining itself once again. The historic building that was first constructed in 1891 as the Southern Pacific Station House has served the Walnut Creek community for over one hundred years. The Southern Pacific Station House was opened in Walnut Creek on June 7, 1891. The railroad was important to connect this town with San Francisco. For Walnut Creek passengers it turned a four hour trip by horse and buggy into a “leisurely” two hour trip by train. It also opened commerce up for local merchants and ushered in the beginning of Walnut Creek as a shopping district. The Southern Pacific Station House closed its doors in the 1960’s and was bought by John S. Herrington in 1971. Mr. Herrington moved the building to its new location. He opened Vic Stewart’s steakhouse at the building and ran the railroad themed restaurant for 44 years. Now, the Station is going to house a combination of retail office space and service businesses such as title companies and spas. It is understood that the old buildings in a community will need to change function as the years go by. Often new technology will be incorporated into these structures to allow increased function in the modern age. Repurposing historic buildings is valuable for communities not only in terms of retaining the authentic nature of the community, but also has environmental advantages over new construction. It eliminates the waste of demolition and provides energy savings by utilizing the existing buildings materials. The adaptive reuse allows the building to preserve the memories of the past while meeting the modern needs of the community. The Station House holds a special place in Walnut Creek History, it was the Walnut Creek building at the epicenter of the transformation from a sleepy farming community to the modern and sophisticated Bay Area city that Walnut Creek is today.

By: Rachel Harry, Northgate High School, Class of 2019

Spotlight on Walnut Creek 1969

50 Years ago in 1969 Walnut Creek was developing the North Broadway area on Burnard Croakerts property. There is still a plaque near the Main Post Office. The photo is of a water color of the new building that opened in 1969.

Also in 1969 the city opened Boundary Oaks Golf Course up on Valley Vista Rd.

Heather Farm was under construction and opened a year later.
DOWN TOWN HISTORY TOURS

Join us on a Downtown History Tour and you will visit historic sites that are part of our heritage in Walnut Creek.

The next tours are May 11th, June 8th & July 12th

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.org

Save the Date

Member Appreciation Event

Sunday, October 6, 2019

4 PM—6 PM
Shadelands’ Bathroom - Original or an Addition

There has long been a debate about whether the upstairs bathroom is original to the house. Recently a document, “The Shadelands Farm and the Hiram Penman Family 1896 to 1909” by Sherwood Burgess, WCHS Historian in the late 1980’s and 90’s, was found in the files. Burgess states that, “This report was compiled mainly from two boxes of letters in the Shadelands Archives: Mary Penman to Bessie Penman 1896 to 1908, and Carrie Penniman to Bessie, 1896 to 1909.”

Burgess quotes a letter from Mary to Bessie in which she extolls the virtues of the bedrooms and comments that the bedroom which is to be Bessie’s has a “real nice dressing room and closet, considering it slants off in order to put the door into the bathroom.” This would seem to be proof that the bathroom was part of the house from its inception. Burgess refers to another letter from Mary in which she comments on how nice it was to take a bath in a bathtub and to have a furnace. In the report Burgess talks about the monumental amount of work that fell on Mary’s shoulders. He comments that she was not only running the ranch but overseeing the building and the furnishing of the house and the moving of their possessions. He cites a letter in which Mary laments that Charlie, her right hand man “was busy making the septic tank” and so not available to perform his ranch tasks. If there had not been a toilet, there would have been no need for a septic tank. We know that high tank oak toilets were in use in the Victorian era and the early 1900s. These toilets were sold in the 1902 Sears and Roebuck catalogue. In that same catalogue there is linoleum for sale very similar in pattern to the linoleum in the bathroom and downstairs hall. we were told a number of years ago that Shadelands’ linoleum was from the 1920’s, but I wonder. Linoleum aside, based on this evidence we can say with relative certainty that the bathroom is original to the house.

By: Priscilla Tudor

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Contact WCHS office for more information on joining the board.
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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PLEASE CIRCLE ONE:
Individual $25      Family $45      Student $15      Lifetime (over 55) $300

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