



# The Tall Tree Newsletter

of the PALO ALTO  
HISTORICAL  
ASSOCIATION

Since 1913

May 2020 Volume 43, No 7

## 1918 INFLUENZA: FROM EUROPE TO THE BAY AREA

By PAHA Historian Steve Staiger and PAHA Board member Leslie Mills



Mrs. Armour and her students at Castilleja School celebrate the end of the war while wearing flu masks, 1918

It is likely that more Americans have heard of the 1918 influenza pandemic in the last three months than in the previous 100 years. The story of the 1918 influenza pandemic is one of the most interesting events in our national history, yet it has remained hidden for generations.

It is believed the virus began with a cross-species transmission between livestock (possibly cattle or swine) and humans on the plains of Kansas. Several young Kansas farmers arrived at a U.S. army training camp at Fort Riley with the germs, and it spread across the nation as soldiers moved from camp to camp in preparation of being loaded on troopships and sailing off to the European battle grounds of World War I.

The influenza quickly spread across Europe, infecting thousands of soldiers on both sides of the war. Eventually, more American soldiers died from the virus than from casualties on the battlefield. The virus became known as the “Spanish Flu” because as it spread across Europe, the Spanish press reported its devastating effect on the Spanish population. The influenza spread equally throughout Britain, France, and Germany with equal devastation, but wartime censorship limited press coverage in those countries at war. Spain was neutral in World War I, thus getting the blame, and the name.

In the United States, the influenza eventually spread from coast to coast. Its spread was much slower than the current coronavirus, and the west coast did not feel the effect for several months. Except for a limited number of business and pleasure travelers, most Americans in 1918 did not normally travel more than 100 miles from their home. The new exception was soldiers, and they generally traveled to the east coast on their way to the war front in Europe.

The first case of the virus in San Francisco was report on Sept 4, 1918, and within three weeks the entire Bay Area was in the midst of an epidemic. Patients began to fill the infirmary at Camp Fremont (the army’s training camp in Menlo Park), then Palo Alto’s Peninsula Hospital, and Stanford campus Isolation Hospital. At Stanford campus, those affected were said to be promptly isolated and hospitalized and had lower percent mortality than elsewhere.

Between 1918 and 1919, the last year of World War I, the Spanish Flu killed an estimated 50 million people, or 3 to 5% of the world’s population. The war killed around 16 million. That year, the flu took the lives of 131 San Mateo County residents, accounting for one out of every six deaths in the county. However, this did not account for Camp Fremont where the Journal of American Medical Assoc. reported a “conservative estimate” of 147 deaths out of 3,000 cases. The influenza killed at least 13,340 people that year in California. The Bay Area counties saw deaths of 6,000 people by Jan. 1919.



Camp Fremont soldiers wearing flu masks as they march past Wideman’s clothing store on University Ave. celebrating the end of WW1 in 1918

When the epidemic reach Palo Alto in the fall of 1918, attempts to control the spread of the virus included wearing of masks as well as closures of public schools. The construction of the new Paly high school had been completed, but because of the closures, students were still at home. When the epidemic subsided, the community celebrated the opening of the new high school. On Christmas Eve 1918, they marched from the old high school on Channing Avenue to the new location on El Camino Road and Embarcadero Road. In 2018, we celebrated the centennial of that event with a repeat of the march.

As with all local history organizations, the archives will continue to document the current coronavirus pandemic and its effect on Palo Altans.



**Darla Secor**  
**PAHA Historian**

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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.*

*Board meetings are held at 4pm on the first Wednesday of each month (except August) at the Guy Miller Archives. Public programs are held at 2pm on the first Sunday of each month (October-December, February-May) at various locations in Palo Alto. 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.*

# Letter from the Archives

I had a conversation with fellow historian Steve Staiger a couple of weeks ago comparing the events that each of our generations hold as strong communal collective memories. For him, it was the Kennedy assassination; for me, it was the Challenger disaster and the attempted assassination of President Reagan. And of course, 9/11. For my kids, the COVID-19 crisis will be the first of these types of memories. It is a strange unprecedented time for them, and for all of us, as we navigate school and business closings, and shelter-in-place orders.

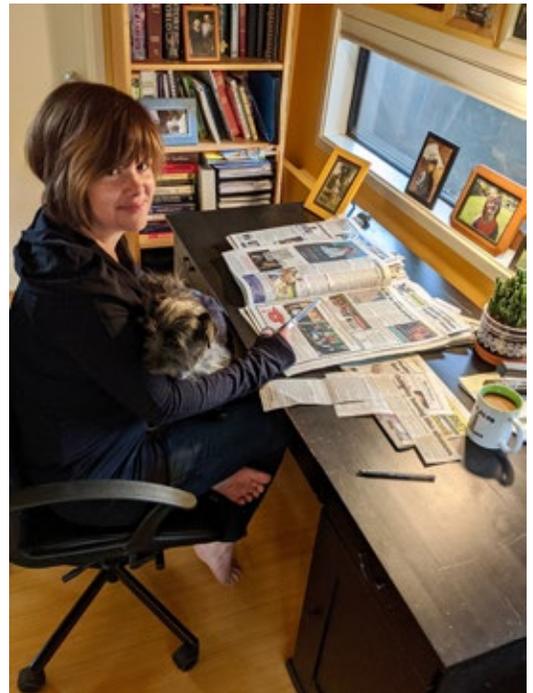
How has this affected us at the PAHA Archives? We decided to shut down the Archives during the week of March 15 with the plan that Steve and I would continue to work our hours at the Archives in person to answer email and phone requests. After the shelter-in-place order was given, we had to change that plan and the way we access the Archives.

Steve is able to retrieve our email and phone messages from home, so he is continuing to field any questions or requests that come through that way. In addition, he worked on the article about the 1918 influenza pandemic for this Tall Tree and continues to work on writing articles about our most recent Creators of the Legacy. The Creators of Legacy project began in 1994 as part of our City's Centennial celebration and recognized 55 Palo Altans who made significant contributions to our City. We added 12 new names last year as part of Palo Alto's 125th Anniversary.

Since I am a 5-minute walk from Cubberley, I am continuing to walk to the Archives twice a week to make sure all is well with our materials and equipment. I am able to bring work home such as newspapers to clip for our files, boxes of donations to process, as well as to get photos organized

and ready for cataloging when we open again. It is a full house with my husband working from home, my college student home doing classes online for spring quarter, and my two other sons home from school until at least May 1st! We are all fighting for desk space and have come up with a good time-share agreement: kids have priority during the day, I get the evening.

You can help the Archives out during this time by collecting any artifacts from this interesting moment in history! Any memorabilia about Palo Alto and COVID-19 would be welcome: posters, mailings, and especially photos of our town during this time. Feel free to contact us by email at [steve.staiger@cityofpaloalto.org](mailto:steve.staiger@cityofpaloalto.org) if you have any questions, or drop off your items when we re-open at Cubberley Community Center, Room K-7 during our regular hours.



Darla and Pepper keeping busy with Archive work



El Palo Alto, courtesy of Jon Kinyon

## TELL US A STORY!

We are always interested in your stories and recollections of Palo Alto and the surrounding communities. Please consider writing your story down and submitting it for possible publication in a future Tall Tree newsletter! It is PAHA's mission to collect, preserve, and present Palo Alto's history, and we'd love to hear from you! Submit your article and/or story to [pahatalltree@gmail.com](mailto:pahatalltree@gmail.com).

# Where is Palo Alto's History? Everywhere!

#1 in a series of articles sharing the many ways to discover local history

By PAHA Board member, Brian George



Holding area for the Archive collection in the Rinconada Library basement

The City of Palo Alto archives are a collection of documents, photos, film, video, books, artifacts, and other items that reflect over 125 years of Palo Alto's existence. We are fortunate that preserving the earliest material related to Mayfield and Palo Alto started in the early 1900s. The founding of Palo Alto in 1894 was still fresh in citizens' minds as they saved

memorabilia important to documenting life in those years. Newspapers, photos, government records, and artifacts were among the items preserved. Over time, various individuals and organizations continued to save various items until the collection expanded into what is, today, an extensive physical archive located at the Cubberley Community Center, Room K 7, and in the basement of the Rinconada Library.

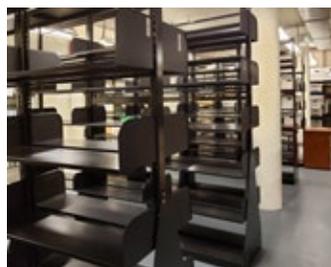
PAHA manages this archive as part of our mission to collect and preserve diverse material important to ensuring that future generations will have access to Palo Alto's history.

An invaluable part of the archive is the media collection, including still and moving images that are so important to a visual understanding of life in Palo Alto. We are fortunate that glass slides and negatives, black and white and color film and slides, motion picture film (16, 8 and 8 mm), videotapes, and photos were preserved. Major portions of the movies are related to the Children's Theatre. The archive also maintains an audio tape/CD oral history collection.

But preservation is more than just storing the media in boxes, cans and albums—it has to address the eventual deterioration of the media due to age and environmental issues. Recently, with support from Palo Alto Library personnel, The Children's Theatre, The Friends of the Children's Theatre, and PAHA, we have started a project that addresses the goal of preventing further deterioration of film and videotape.

The project's mission is to create digital copies of all of the media as a backup to the original material. Digital copies serve multiple purposes. They allow sharing of

the images with the public while protecting the originals from damage that can occur through handling. The digital files also provide a way of reproducing the material without exposing the originals to further damage. Another feature is the ability to create a visual inventory of all the media accessible to the public. PAHA has already digitized over 13,000 photos and shares them on our website ([pahistory.org](http://pahistory.org)). It is important



Library shelving for material in the Rinconada Library basement

to emphasize that the archive always keeps the original media since these originals are usually irreplaceable.

Currently Mitchell Park Library personnel Bob Skolmen and Chris Castro, PAHA Historians Steve Staiger and Darla

Secor, and myself are working on preserving the motion picture films. Bob and Chris have carefully evaluated the films to determine their condition. Some of the collection has significant deterioration which requires immediate action while others are not in imminent danger. The plan is to deliver most of the films to a local organization, the Niles Film Museum, for cleaning and digitizing. Once that is completed, we will prepare the films for storage in a freezer, purchased by PAHA, at the Rinconada Library. This will prevent further deterioration. A separate activity will be to digitize eleven of the Children's Theatre videotapes. The originals are in an obsolete format that requires special equipment to access. Bob Skolmen received a grant from the Bay Area Video Coalition (BAVC) in San Francisco to process these tapes.

Another part of the film collection has been accepted by California Revealed (CA-R), a project of the California State Library, for free digitizing based on their historical value. Under their annual grant program, CA-R selected fourteen of the Children's Theatre films that will be digitized and uploaded to their website. PAHA will receive copies of the digital files for our archive and the original film will be returned for storage in the freezer.

The costs of the project, including digitizing and properly storing all the films, are being shared by The City of Palo Alto Library, Friends of the Palo Alto Children's Theatre, and PAHA. The target for completing this film preservation project, though delayed somewhat by the Covid-19 pandemic, is early 2021.

# History Jaunts for the Spring

## Explore local exhibits virtually

- Take a virtual tour of the **Winchester Mystery House** on their website by clicking on this link: <https://winchestermysteryhouse.com/video-tour>
- Take a virtual tour of the **Palo Alto Art Center's** popular "Rooted: Trees in Contemporary Art" exhibit. Go to [www.canopy.org/rooted-exhibit-2020](http://www.canopy.org/rooted-exhibit-2020)
- Visit the websites of **local and San Francisco museums and galleries** to find out what is available online during the pandemic.

## Read a book

The Palo Alto library system offers a broad selection of digital and audio books for your reading pleasure at [www.library.cityofpaloalto.org/online-resources](http://www.library.cityofpaloalto.org/online-resources).

Here are some recommendations to **read while sheltering-in-place**:

Local authors have crafted mysteries set in Palo Alto or the broader Silicon Valley:

- Keith Raffel's *Dot Dead, Smasher, A Fine and Dangerous Season*.
- Lora Roberts series of Liz Sullivan mysteries, *Murder Crops Up, Murder in a Nice Neighborhood, and Murder Bone by Bone*.
- Dave Eggers dystopian novel of technology going haywire in a Google-ish company is a cautionary tale, *The Circle*.

Popular non-fiction works, if you haven't read them, are definitely worth a read.

- *Bad Blood*, by John Carreyrou presents the fascinating saga of Elizabeth Holmes and Theranos, Inc.
- In *Small Fry*, Lisa Jobs tells a candid story her life as Steve Jobs' eldest child.

## Getting out

Are you being careful to observe social distancing but needing to get outside to preserve sanity? Here are a few suggestions for local walks.

- **The Stanford University campus** is essentially deserted, parking is available, and it's a good hike from the Oval through the campus and around Lake Lagunita.
- **Mrs. Stanford's Arizona Garden**, adjacent to the Mausoleum and the "fallen angel" are also lovely at this time of year.

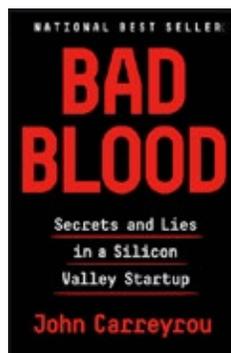


Image courtesy of Wikipedia



Image courtesy of Wikipedia

## Welcome New Members!

Annita Spencer  
Barry Smith  
Martha Wallace

## PAHA Upcoming Programs

*As the COVID-19 situation evolves, PAHA will schedule future programs in accordance with health authorities' rules and guidelines. Messages will be sent out as we have more information about future programs.*

## The Heritage Program

Airs on Channels 28 or 30 on various days and times. It is simultaneously streamed on the Media Center website [midpenmedia.org/heritage](http://midpenmedia.org/heritage). Check website for schedule

## PAHA Archives

Due to the shelter-in-place mandate, the PAHA Archives at Cubberley Community Center, Room K-7 is closed until further notice.

To contact the Archive, email [steve.staiger@cityofpaloalto.org](mailto:steve.staiger@cityofpaloalto.org) or call 650-329-2353.



**CORRECTION:** Our April issue of the Tall Tree incorrectly wrote the original address of the London House was on Bryant Street. The original address was 535 Ramona Street.

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