



Since 1913

# The Tall Tree Newsletter

of the PALO ALTO HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

February 2025 Volume 48, No 3

In cooperation with



CITY OF  
PALO  
ALTO

The Palo Alto Historical Association presents

## PETER COUTTS HIS FARM IN MAYFIELD AND HIS LEGACY



Unknown man at Coutts' Tower, early 1900s

**Sunday, February 2, 2025 2:00 – 4:00 pm**

**Palo Alto Art Center ~ 1313 Newell Road, Palo Alto**

A Frenchman who called himself Peter Coutts arrived in Mayfield almost exactly 150 years ago and departed six years later. Ever since then he has been talked about and called “mysterious” and “eccentric.” What did he do here, and why did he inspire so much colorful folklore? Who later lived and worked in the buildings he left behind, and what impact did their presence have?

The tale shared by our guest speakers will include long-horned Scottish cattle, two towers, a quaint Swiss Cottage and many rare 16th-century books. You will discover where remnants of the Coutts farm can be found today on the Stanford campus. Was there a cave full of stolen treasure and an illicit love affair? Join us and find out!

### Our Speakers:

#### Sunny Scott

Since 1989, Sunny has resided on campus in a 1936 house designed by William W. Wurster, surrounded by a Tommy Church garden. Before her campus life, Sunny was an interior decorator, historic preservationist, fine artist, and graphic artist. Her

contributions to Stanford include work on the Stanford Historic Houses book series (2008-2016), serving on the Stanford Historical Society Board and Publications Committee, and capturing history as the photographer for SHS, aiding various publications and programs.

#### Mary Montella

A former musician and lawyer, Mary's interest in local history was sparked by moving into an 1886 house in San Francisco. Her fascination with architecture soon extended to the captivating stories of the residents. Her involvement with the Stanford Historical Society's Historic Houses Committee began in 2009. Mary has contributed chapters to two books in the SHS Historic Houses series.

Sunny and Mary have been delving into the life and legacy of Peter Coutts and his buildings for longer than they might confess. They aim to publish a book on this subject in the near future. Together, they were honored with the 2018 Karen Bartholomew award for their exceptional service to the Stanford Historical Society.

**Free and Open to the Public ~ Refreshments Served**

**2025 PALO ALTO  
HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION  
BOARD OF DIRECTORS**

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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.*

*PAHA Board meetings are conducted using Zoom at 5 pm the first Wednesday of each month (except August).*

*Public programs are held at 2 pm on the first Sunday of October, December, February, March, and May at the Palo Alto Art Center, 1313 Newell Road. 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.*

# Marshall Black

By Bo Crane (1950-2024), PAHA Board Member



1913 San Quentin photo of Mr. Black

Palo Alto's oldest existing house at 1456 Edgewood Drive was originally built and owned by Dr. William A. Newell, namesake of Newell Road. The current owner is Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook/Meta. In between the first and current owner was Marshall Black, once one of Palo Alto's leading citizens.

An Ohio Wesleyan college graduate, Black enrolled in the Stanford economics department in 1894, and the next year at age 25 became the campus reporter for Stanford. After completing classes in 1896, he became the Palo Alto Times business manager and associate editor. He left that position to become secretary for the Palo Alto Mutual Building and Loan Association, a position he would hold for the next 14 years. At the time he was noted by the Palo Alto Times as "our popular townsman." In 1904, Black, now married, incorporated the Marshall Black Investment Company. He soon began various real estate purchases and dealings, plus making loans. He served in

the state assembly from 1903 to 1905, and in 1906, he was elected to the state senate.

In 1909, Black bought the Newell House, originally built in 1866, still just outside the Palo Alto city limits. Marshall remodeled it and enlarged it and moved in with his wife and four children in November of that year.

On September 25, 1912, the bombshell hit that Black admitted misappropriating tens of thousands of dollars from the Palo Alto Building and Loan Association. The case was sensationalized in the Palo Alto and San Francisco newspapers with big headlines and large photos of Black. Confessing responsibility, he assigned to the Association all his holdings, including his Newell house that once had an \$8,500 mortgage with the Association.

On January 30, 1913, he changed his plea to guilty and was sentenced to ten years in San Quentin. Eventually, he served three years and four months.

Black, his wife, and their six children relocated to Manteca, where his wife died in 1922. His mother died the following year in her home in Palo Alto on Forest Court in a house built using Black's mishandled funds. Black later moved to San Francisco with five of his children, passing away on March 26, 1934. His SF Examiner obituary simply said he was a "former State Senator from San Jose and veteran real estate and insurance broker of San Francisco"—misstating his Palo Alto history. The Times simply stated he was "a former resident of Palo Alto," overlooking his notoriety of twenty years prior.



Story Hour at the Children's Library, 1941

## TELL US A STORY!

It is PAHA's mission to collect, preserve, and present Palo Alto's history, and we'd love to hear from you!

We are always interested in hearing your stories and recollections of Palo Alto and the surrounding communities. Please consider writing your story down and submitting it for publication consideration in a future Tall Tree newsletter!

Submit your story to [pahatalltree@gmail.com](mailto:pahatalltree@gmail.com)

# James Hogue the Imposter at Paly

By Jon Kinyon, PAHA Board Member



"Paly student" James Hogue, 1985

In September 1985, James Hogue, a 25-year-old born to a working-class family in Kansas City and a high school graduate of 1977, enrolled at Paly as Jay Mitchell Huntsman, a supposed 16-year-old orphan from a Nevada commune. On October 7, 1985, Hogue entered the Stanford Invitational Cross Country Meet. He ran far ahead of the field and won the race but did not report to the officials' table, arousing suspicion. Due to his mysterious background and physical prowess, local sports reporters dubbed him the "Mystery Boy." Jason Cole, a reporter covering the event for the Peninsula Times Tribune, uncovered Hogue's identity theft. No charges were filed after he offered an apology to the principal, and Hogue left town.

With audacity that defied belief, Hogue reappeared at Princeton in 1988, this time as Alexi Indris-Santana, a self-taught orphan from Utah. His application claimed he had braved the elements in the Grand Canyon, herded sheep, and delved into the works of philosophers. For two years, he lived this lie, even becoming a track team member and gaining admission into the prestigious Ivy Club. Only when a former student from Paly, Renee Pacheco, recognized him was his true identity revealed. In 1991, he was arrested for defrauding the university of \$22,000 in financial aid, leading to a 9-month jail sentence and the obligation to repay the scholarship money.

In 1993, Hogue's audacious criminal career took him to Harvard. Under yet another false identity, he managed to secure a job as a security guard in one of the on-campus museums. His actions directly impacted the institution's reputation when it was discovered that several gemstones on exhibit had been replaced with cheap imitations. Hogue was apprehended by Somerville police and charged with grand larceny amounting to \$50,000.

Even after serving his sentence, Hogue's criminal tendencies persisted. He brazenly returned to Princeton, this time using the name Jim MacAuthor. Although he had not officially enrolled, he attended social functions

and dined in the cafeteria. His audacity was his downfall when a graduate student recognized him, leading to his arrest. Hogue was released from prison in 1997 and promptly disappeared from public view.

In 1999, Jesse Moss, a Paly grad and film director making a documentary film about Hogue, tracked him down in Aspen, Colorado, and secured his cooperation in making the film. The documentary, "Con Man," was released in 2003.

In 2005, Colorado police searched Hogue's home and found 7,000 items, worth over \$100,000, stolen from nearby homes where he had worked as a remodeler and repairman. The stolen goods packed his house and a small secret compartment he'd built.

Hogue's criminal activities continued well into the 2010s. In 2016, he was arrested again in Aspen for living in an illegally constructed shack on Aspen Mountain, while possibly building another. He provided a false name upon apprehension and was charged with criminal impersonation. Following this, he was sentenced to six years in prison in 2017. At the time of his arrest, nearly \$17,000 in cash, burglary tools, and other items were found in his vehicle, indicating his ongoing criminal endeavors. Hogue's criminal record is extensive, with multiple felony convictions across states for crimes including theft and fraud, demonstrating a consistent pattern of criminal behavior. He was paroled in 2019, but his history of crime has not ceased to make headlines, he was most recently arrested in 2021.



**Palo Alto Stanford Heritage**

Our citizens' group that supports the value of our buildings' and neighborhoods' heritage

**NEEDS VOLUNTEERS**

Do you have an interest in our local history?  
Do you have time available?  
Skills that could help us reach out and connect, educate, research, communicate?

Qualifications may include other historical work, active communication or teaching experience, or just the ability to make yourself heard... Interested?

Send us an email -  
[president@pastheritage.org](mailto:president@pastheritage.org)



## Baby Buffoonery

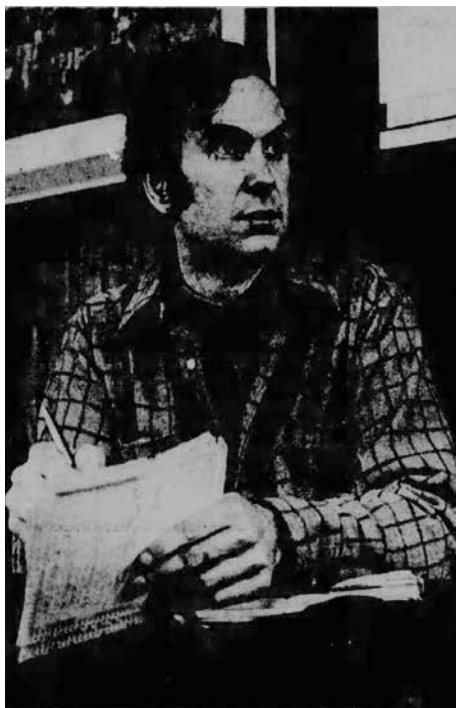
By Brian Lum and Edward Wang, Paly alumni

On April 29, 1980, 36-year-old Richard Orser was arrested in Palo Alto following the investigation of a black-market baby-selling operation. Orser, who had received a master's degree in psychology, was charged with conspiracy, operating an adoption agency without a license, and selling a human. Police Captain Frank Acosta confirmed his arrest after the police received a tip that an unborn baby was ready to be flown to Vancouver to be sold to a couple from Texas.

Soon after, Orser was released on his own recognition. However, on May 22nd, several formal charges were once again filed against Orser. Investigations showed the illegitimate adoption agency, under the name of "Familie," had been offering the same baby to over 60 people for a price of \$17,840. Investigators also discovered Orser's neighbor, Barbara Dertein, was also involved. The investigators seized from Dertein's apartment several photographs and documents of young children ranging from 2 to 4 years in age. Further investigation found that in 1973, Orser had arranged similar adoptions through a service called "Pregnancy Problem Information Center".

On July 18, 1980, arrest warrants were issued for four women: Barbara Dertein, Renee Gorin, Micki Cohen, and Carmen Kirk. Dertein held records for the Familie agency, Gorin made telephone contact with prospective clients, Kirk possessed records of a conversation about establishing surrogate mother services, and Cohen interviewed a mother planning to put her child up for adoption.

They were issued with identical charges, accusing them of helping Orser to sell a person and operating with an unlicensed adoption agency. It was believed that Familie had been operating since 1978, 5 years after Orser's first attempt at an illegitimate adoption service. However, all four women were released on their own recognition.



Richard Orser of Woodside

He is founder and director of the Problem Pregnancy Information Center in Palo Alto.

### Found in the PAHA archives

A little worse for wear, but super rare! This old Bayshore Highway sign dates from the late-1930s.



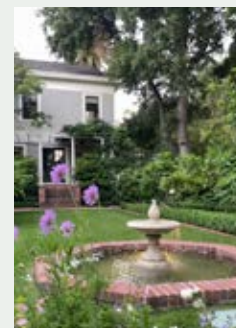
### Previous PAHA Programs

If you missed the Dec. 1st program, *A Tribute to Bo Crane*, you can find it and other recent PAHA program videos on Vimeo by following this link:  
<https://vimeo.com/1042657145>

### Upcoming Program Dates

- Feb 2 • Mar 2
- May 4 • June 4

Unless otherwise noted, programs are held in person on the first Sunday of the months we present programs. Check our website at [www.pahistory.org](http://www.pahistory.org) for program information.



Be sure to save the date for our March 2nd program celebrating

The **40<sup>th</sup>**  
**Anniversary of Gamble Garden!**

The Tall Tree is published six times a year by the PALO ALTO HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION



Jon Kinyon, Lead Editor & Design  
Luana Staiger, Melissa Verber, Editors  
Copy Factory, Printing

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