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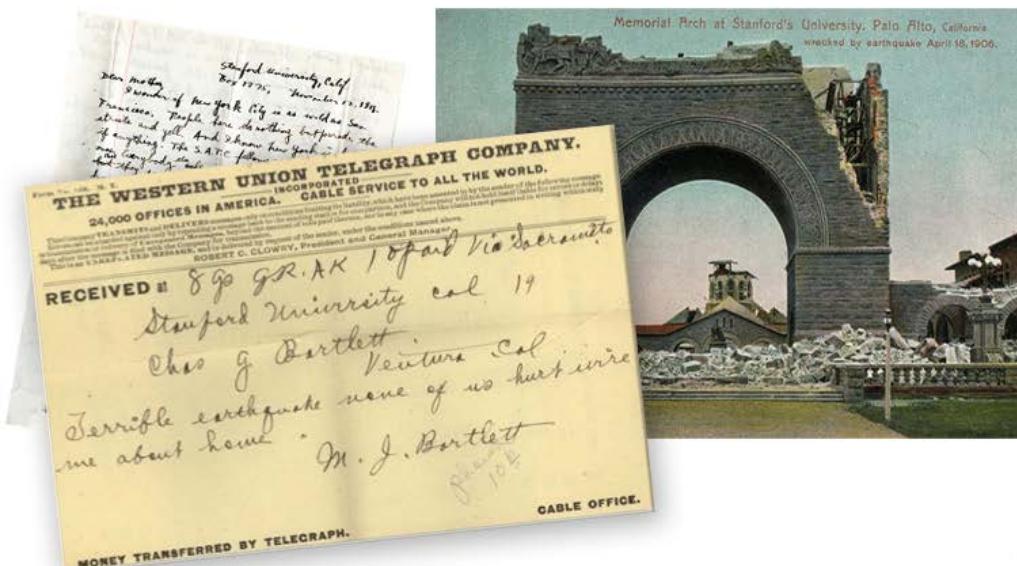
The Tall Tree

Newsletter
of the PALO ALTO
HISTORICAL
ASSOCIATION

February 2026 Volume 49, No 3

Palo Alto Historical Association presents

— LETTERS HOME FROM STANFORD — THE HISTORY STUDENTS WROTE HOME



A 1906 postcard, telegram, handwritten letter, and modern-day text illustrate student correspondence over the years

Sunday, February 1, 2026 2:00 – 4:00 pm

Palo Alto Art Center ~ 1313 Newell Road, Palo Alto

Join local author and editor Alison Carpenter Davis for an engaging presentation drawn from her book *Letters Home from Stanford*, a timeless collection of students' letters, emails, and text messages spanning 125 years.

In this engaging, fun, and sometimes poignant presentation, Davis will highlight what Stanford students wrote about the first Big Game (where's the ball?); infrequent snowfalls and first emails; the Big One and Loma Prieta; celebrating the end of World War I; a student named Herbert meeting Lou Henry; the assassination of a young president; and shipping off to Vietnam. Davis also will discuss the changes in women's roles, language, and types of correspondence that emerge from the collection.

Throughout the presentation, Davis will provide rich historical context using footnotes, letter writers' biographies, and photographs from the book. She collaborated with the Stanford University Archives on

this project, which was released in paperback in 2024. Books will be available for purchase and signing.



Alison Carpenter Davis

Alison Carpenter Davis is a writer, editor, and disability advocate with a passion for uncovering hidden stories and the power of words to connect people. Formerly a managing editor at *Outside* magazine and an adjunct professor at Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism, her work has appeared in publications including the *Chicago Tribune* and *Stanford Magazine*. *Letters Home from Stanford* illuminates the heritage, history, and shared experiences of college students everywhere through more than a century of correspondence.

Free and Open to the Public ~ Refreshments Served

2026 PALO ALTO HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION
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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.

John Steinbeck's Struggle at Stanford

By Jon Kinyon, PAHA Board Member

In the fall of 1919, seventeen-year-old John Steinbeck arrived at Stanford University from Salinas, CA. He followed an intermittent academic path over six years without earning a degree. Drawn to creative writing, he showed little interest in a traditional curriculum. He audited courses in English, journalism, and literature, often interrupting his studies to take odd jobs for money.



A very young John Steinbeck, circa 1918

His years in Palo Alto were marked by hardship, introspection, and the emergence of his literary voice. These appear in fragments of his early correspondence, offering glimpses of a young man facing ambition and limitation.

Steinbeck lived frugally. He started in campus dorms but soon moved to an off-campus shack to save money. His letters show moments of social life. In a 1923 note to Florence Taminelli, he wrote: "I cannot step out much, Florence, because I have lots of ambitions and very little money, so my fun from now on must be very prosaic." He described local dances to another young woman: "We have been dancing twice a week in the pavilion. There is a stern and rockbound row of old ladies who have constituted themselves chaperones." These provided brief escapes from solitude, but his focus stayed on self-improvement.

To classmate Carl Wilhelmson on April 7, 1924, he wrote: "At times I feel that I am playing around the edges of things, getting nowhere. An extreme and callow youth playing with philosophy must be a pitiable thing from your point of view."

Money was his main worry. He balanced classes with manual labor, including night shifts at the City Cafe in downtown Palo Alto, where he washed dishes and waited

tables. In a letter to Florence, he wrote: "I am poor, dreadfully poor. I have to feed someone else before I can eat myself. I must live in an atmosphere of dirty dishes and waitresses with soiled ears, if I wish to know about things like psychology and logic."

Other jobs included surveying in Big Sur, ranch work near King City, and breaking army remount horses. Years later he recalled: "When I was in college, I was a real poor kid. I got a job breaking army remounts for officers' gentle behinds. I got \$30 a remount or fifty with basic polo... But I needed the dough bad, and I figured it was better to limp and eat than to be whole and hungry."

His creative writing clashed with scholastic convention. To Wilhelmson, he described a confrontation with Professor Russell: "Mrs. Russell said they were not real, that such things could not be, and she was not going to stand me bullying her into such claptrap nonsense... And I could not stand that, Carl, so I swore at her because I had been out all night in the making of my pictures."

Despite tensions, the period was formative. It saw his first publications, including the 1924 story "Fingers of Cloud," which explored interracial themes.

A key influence was Professor Edith R. Mirrieles (1878–1962). In a letter to her, Steinbeck wrote: "Dear Edith Mirrieles: Although it must be a thousand years ago that I sat in your class in story writing at Stanford, I remember the experience very clearly. I was bright-eyed and bushy-brained and prepared to absorb from you the secret formula for writing good short stories, even great short stories. You canceled this illusion very quickly. The only way to write a good short story, you said, was to write a good short story. Only after it is written can it be taken apart to see how it is done... It has never got easier."

By June 1925, Steinbeck left Stanford for New York to pursue writing. The poverty, isolation, and ambition he faced shaped the empathetic realism of works like *The Grapes of Wrath*. His letters reveal the spirit of a young writer overcoming obstacles.

"The Hermit": Stanford's Mysterious Folk Hero

By Jon Kinyon, PAHA Board Member



One of Domenico "The Hermit" Grosso's surface pit mine, 1910

In the rugged foothills west of Stanford University, where the Jasper Ridge Biological Preserve now stands as a haven for ecological research, once lived a man whose life embodied the fading dreams of California's mining era. Domenico Grosso—often called Domingo in historical records and newspapers—was an Italian immigrant whose solitary pursuit of silver in the late 19th and early 20th centuries turned him into a local legend: a hospitable hermit whose story weaves together adventure, obsession, and quiet resilience.

Born in the 1830s near Genoa, Italy, Grosso's early life was marked by wanderlust and hardship. He served as a soldier under Giuseppe Garibaldi, the revolutionary unifier of Italy, and reportedly acted as a valet to the Duke of Genoa.

By 1869, he had immigrated to the United States, having previously worked in Panama and mined in Chile. Arriving in San Francisco, he initially labored for a banking company before becoming a ranch foreman for Nicholas Larco on lands that would later border Stanford's campus.

It was here, in 1875, while overseeing the ranch, that Grosso discovered traces of silver on property owned by Dennis Martin (one of the area's earliest settlers). Larco acquired the mineral rights, and Grosso supervised the digging of two vertical shafts: one abandoned at 75 feet without ore, and a deeper one reaching 200 feet, which yielded a few tons of low-grade material.

Volcanic rock halted progress on the mine, and by 1877 the commercial venture collapsed amid Larco's bankruptcy. The rights were deeded to Grosso after Larco's death in 1878. Undeterred, Grosso established a homestead near the main shaft, building a cabin (from dismantled bunkhouses), a chicken coop, stables, and terraced gardens. He diverted a spring into a trout pond and planted grapevines, olive and fig trees, oleanders, roses, and numerous vegetables.

Living reclusively, he continued prospecting, digging well over 20 surface pits. He claimed rich silver finds—

though these were never verified and widely considered exaggerated. But were they?

Paranoid about thieves, Grosso hid hefty bags under his floorboards, insisting they brimmed with premium ore matching his display jars. Annually, he'd haul them to Redwood City, ostensibly to assay or sell. Some whispered he'd amassed a fortune; others scoffed at fool's gold.

When Stanford University acquired the land in the 1880s, attempts to evict him failed; he was permitted to stay as long as he continued prospecting.

Despite his isolation, Grosso was remarkably sociable and cordial. He maintained trails through the hills, spotting visitors from afar and hoisting flags—American, Italian, French, or Chilean—to welcome them. Stanford students, locals, and even Jane Stanford frequented his estate for hikes, homemade wine (vinegary white for strangers, fine red for friends), and meals like rabbit legs or pickled miniature corn.

"Come on and eat a rabbit leg," he'd invite, deflecting any compliments by crediting "Julia"—a mysterious figure, assumed to be a lost love from Italy, whose memory often evoked melancholy when music played at his gatherings.



Domenico Grosso's estate, 1910

After Grosso's death in 1915 from a stroke, at about age 85, the enigma deepened. His house was ransacked, and the bags of ore vanished overnight—along with any potential clues to Julia's fate. Did she exist in letters hidden away? Or was she a romantic invention, a shield for a lonely soul? Stanford's archives and local records hold no clues—no birth certificates, no photographs—leaving her as a poignant footnote in Grosso's legend.

And those mysterious burlap bags? They disappeared into oblivion, their fate unknown. Did they cradle treasure, spirited away by opportunists? Or mere rocks, a hermit's delusion? Domenico "The Hermit" Grosso's legend endures: a folk hero who mined not just earth, but hearts, leaving whispers of what-ifs in the poison-oak-guarded mine shafts in the hills.

Letter from the President



**Georgie Gleim
PAHA President**

Welcome to 2026!

Last year was a momentous year for the Palo Alto Historical Association, and 2026 is shaping up to be just the same.

As you probably know, this past year marked the completion of construction of the long-awaited Palo Alto History Museum — an idea first dreamed of by Karen Holman and the PAHA board more than twenty years ago. I won't go into the many ups and downs, starts and stops, that have gone into the process, but at long last the Museum stands ready to open this spring under the talented leadership of Marguerite Gong Hancock, board chair Nelson Ng, and a dedicated and accomplished board of directors.

This letter would be remiss not to thank Rich Green, PAHA board member, former PAHA President, and former Museum President, who put in countless hours in bringing the project through its approval and construction phase, building on the dedicated work of multiple volunteers before him.

If you have been lucky enough to tour the Museum at any of the recent events and open houses, you have a taste of what a wonderful community treasure this will be, giving us the ability to learn about Palo Alto's past and imagine its future.

And once the Museum opens, you will have a chance to see the city's Archives, managed by PAHA, in our beautiful new environment on the second floor. Even now our city Historians, Steve Staiger and Darla Secor, along with multiple PAHA volunteers, are organizing the material currently in room K-7 at Cubberly Community Center to be ready for the big move. We can't wait!

In addition to these exciting plans, of course, PAHA has continued conducting regular programs, free to the public, at the Art Center and Rinconada Library. Thanks to those who have generously given their time and talent to make these presentations, as well as to those who have attended. (If you missed any, each program is recorded and available for viewing on PAHA's website.)

We are looking forward to an exciting 2026!

Welcome Our New Members!

Brad Anderson
Asset Management Company -
(Frank Johnson)
Hilde Crady
Boyd Haight
Autumn Hancock
Barbara McNeal

Upcoming Program Dates

- March 1 • May 3

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 for program information.

Previous PAHA Program

If you missed the December 14th program, *A Toast to Palo Alto - Its Complicated Alcohol Story*, you can find it and other recent PAHA program videos on Vimeo by following this link:
<https://vimeo.com/1150518806>



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