



# The Tall Tree Newsletter

of the PALO ALTO  
HISTORICAL  
ASSOCIATION

Since 1913

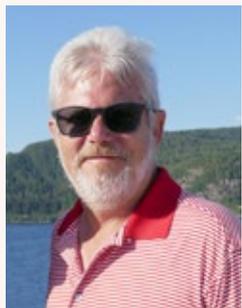
November 2020 Volume 44, No 2

The Palo Alto Historical Association presents via Zoom Webinar

## ALPINE INN: THE FASCINATING HISTORY OF A LOCAL LANDMARK



**Sunday November 1, 2020 2:00 to 4:00 pm**  
**Webinar link: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/82936876780>**



**Steve Staiger**  
**PAHA Historian**

Join us via Zoom Webinar to hear PAHA's Historian Steve Staiger recall the history of the beloved roadhouse in Portola Valley with many names! The Alpine Inn—also known as Rossotti's, Zott's, and many other names during its 168 years of providing refreshing beverages—is a local landmark.

From its beginning as a hangout for local Californios, the roadhouse has served generations of local residents, Stanford students and staff, and numerous travelers who have arrived by car, motorcycle, bicycle and horseback.

### Zoom Instructions

The webinar will be aired live via Zoom with the opportunity for audience members to participate using Q&A. You can join with any internet-connected computer, tablet, or smart phone using the Zoom app. A few minutes before the program starts, simply type the following address into your web browser (e.g. Google, Safari), click on the link and you'll be taken to the webinar.

Webinar link: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/82936876780>

If you've not used Zoom previously, you might want to log in about 10 minutes early as you will need to download the Zoom app before it will run.

If a question comes to mind during the presentation, you can send it in using the Zoom Q&A function. The Q&A button will be at the bottom of your screen. Simply type in your question and at the end of the presentation, the presenter will address the questions. Because audience microphones and cameras will be turned off during the presentation, our audience won't be able to speak to the presenter.

We will be sending an email reminder with an easy link to allow you to click directly. If you are not currently receiving the Tall Tree via email, please send us your address so that we can make sure you will be getting this and other reminders of programs and activities. Send your email to [pahatalltree@gmail.com](mailto:pahatalltree@gmail.com) and request to be added to the email distribution list.

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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. Although PAHA continues to operate during the COVID-19 pandemic, due to the current restrictions, the Archive is only open for prearranged appointments. To contact the Archive or to make an appointment to visit, email [steve.staiger@cityofpaloalto.org](mailto:steve.staiger@cityofpaloalto.org) or call (650) 329-2353.*

*Until further notice, PAHA board meetings are held via Zoom Meeting at 4pm on the first Wednesday of each month (except August). Public programs are held via Zoom Webinar at 2pm on the first Sunday of each month (October-December, February-May). Program information and webinar links are available in the Tall Tree newsletters and on our website, [www.pahistory.org](http://www.pahistory.org). The public is welcome to join all programs.*

# *Ye Olde Shoppe: Spotlight on longtime family businesses in Palo Alto*

## **Mills the Florist, “Since 1903”**

**#2 in a series by PAHA Board member, Leslie Mills**

Many merchants have come and gone in Palo Alto since its incorporation in 1894. With the changing times, we have seen several longtime merchants close shop such as Congdon & Crome (Stationers), who shut its door in 2013 after 109 years, and Palo Alto Sport Shop & Toy World, who operated for 87 years before closing in 2017, to name a few. But amazingly, there are still a few longtime Palo Alto merchants who have survived the test of time, one of those is Mills the Florist.

In 1889, at the age of 25, Frank Richard Mills and his uncle Fred moved from Mereworth, England to California. They went to Sacramento to check on jobs and were told to go to Winters, which was an agricultural hub at the time. They worked for the Moore family as gardeners but after his uncle's sudden death from disease, Frank moved to Menlo Park where he had heard there was work at the Clack nurseries on the Timothy Hopkins estate. Hopkins and Clack had built up a large wholesale flower trade selling cut flowers to the Flower Market in San Francisco.



Frank Richard and Alice at home, 548 Palo Alto Avenue

In 1901, Frank returned to England to marry his betrothed, Alice Bearsby, and brought her back to Palo Alto. By 1903, he had saved enough to purchase a piece of land at the corner of Palo Alto Avenue and Tasso Street where he built his home and nursery, and before long had two sons, Fred and Herbert (Bud). The 1904 phone directory lists the business as “Palo Alto Nursery, Frank Mills Proprietor, Grower of cut flowers, decorative plants and floral designs”. The

phone number was 123. Bud's son, Frank Herbert Mills, recalls his father saying that on occasion Herbert Hoover would drive up to the nursery and his wife would order flowers while he waited in the car.



Mills the Florist delivery truck, 1926

In 1908, Frank Richard Mills opened a downtown retail location at 217 University Avenue and grew flowers and plants at the nursery to sell there. He also would take the train to the Flower Market in San Francisco to purchase flowers for resale. In 1911, the florist moved to 106 “The Circle” (the junction at University Avenue and Alma Street) where his former boss, Clack, had started a retail shop in 1907. Presumably, Mills took over the business and remained there for 15 years.



175 University Avenue store, 1960s

In 1927, Mills moved to 328 University Avenue and named his store “Mills the Florist”. His business was doing well and in 1927 Mills was able to build himself a new house on Palo Alto Avenue and a home across the street for his son, Bud and his new wife, Delia Maloney. Both homes as well as two of the greenhouses remain today. Sadly, in 1930, at the peak of his success, Frank Richard Mills died from respiratory disease and son, Bud, took over the business operation. (Continued on page 3)

(Continued from page 2) In 1936, the florist moved to 203 University Avenue and stayed for 10 years. Upon inquiring about the renewal of their lease, Herbert was surprised to find the landlord had leased the property to someone else. They scrambled to find a new location and settled at 511 Emerson Street, unable to find anything on University Avenue. They remained there for approximately 5 years (presumably the term of the lease) but always hoped to get back to University Avenue.

In 1954, they bought out “The Flower Shop” at 175 University and moved in. Shortly thereafter in 1956, many of the downtown retailers were jumping ship, opting to move to the newly opened Stanford Shopping Center. Frank Herbert, said that “the downtown was like a ghost town” and he watched the space a few doors down at 235 University Avenue sit vacant for 2 years after Congdon & Crome moved to their “new”

site where Jos. A. Banks menswear store was recently located. Frank H. told his dad, Bud, “we should buy it” (235 University) since he planned to stay in the business and it made sense to put the would-be rental money towards ownership. In 1960, Herbert leased the space with an option to buy. One year later, they financed the purchase of the property.



Bud Mills working in the greenhouse on Palo Alto Avenue

Frank H. Mills took over the store in the 1960’s and today, the florist is operated by Frank H.’s daughter, Susan Diggle. Just a small portion of the retail space in front of 235 University Avenue is used for sales, and the floral arrangements are made in the basement. Most of the building is leased to others. Flower sales have changed over time with groceries stores selling them, relatives opting for donations to charities rather than sending funeral flowers, and internet companies cutting out the need for brick and mortar stores—but Mills the Florist has survived for 117 years!

## Welcome New PAHA Board Members!



### Bo Crane

Bo was born in the Hoover Pavilion and attended Palo Alto public schools—Walter Hays Elementary, Jordan Junior High, and Palo Alto High School—before graduating from Stanford with a B.A. in English. Following a career in construction project management from which he retired in 2012, Bo has been active in local historical associations including the Menlo Park Historical Association and Palo Alto Stanford Heritage (PAST). When he’s not writing or talking about history, Bo has been a long time contributor to *Cycle California!* magazine having written 40 articles on bicycling—his favorite hobby—and also wrote a fictional novel, *The Death Ride*, based on a challenging annual road bike ride conducted in the Sierra. Bo and his wife Kristen Harrison live in Palo Alto.



### Lisa Krieger

Lisa discovered the Palo Alto Historical Association while researching the story of her 1923 Crescent Park bungalow – the former home of a telephone lineman, osteopath, station attendant, bookkeeper, insurance agent, and a physician with the VA hospital. It revealed how much Palo Alto has changed over the decades, and how critical our collective memory is to its future. Lisa studied biology at Duke University and is now a journalist at The San Jose Mercury News, covering science, medicine and the environment. She swims at Rinconada Pool, attends St. Mark’s Episcopal Church, and hikes in Foothills Park at every opportunity. Her daughter is a graduate of Palo Alto High School, and Lisa is indebted to the city for so many foundational experiences.



### Catherine Hamrick-Down

Catherine is a fourth generation Californian, and a third generation Palo Alto native. Her mother’s family moved to the newly incorporated town of Palo Alto in 1899 from Livermore, CA. Her great-grandfather, Christian Christensen, owned Christensen Heating, Plumbing, and Tinning, as well as Christensen’s Hardware Store on Hamilton Avenue. He was also the mayor of Palo Alto from 1930 through 1932. Growing up in Palo Alto, Catherine attended El Carmelo Elementary School, Wilbur Junior High School (now Jane L Stanford Middle School), and Cubberley High School. She currently works part-time as the Executive Director of a small international trade law firm in Washington, DC. Catherine and her husband live on the peninsula with their two 20-pound Maine Coon cats, and enjoy traveling and visiting their adult daughters whenever their schedules allow.

# Jaunting During the Pandemic

It is important to get out and about safely during the pandemic—suitably masked and practicing social distancing—with a few of your family and friends! Virtual museum outings, virtual trips to exotic places, and Zoom get-togethers have begun to pale, but here are some other ideas on how to spend your free time.

## Self-guided Palo Alto tours

Following up on the October Tall Tree’s recommendations to visit Palo Alto’s own Tall Tree, Greg Brown Murals, Sarah Wallis Park, and the Squire House, below are a few other links to interesting self-guided local destinations. These great suggestions are provided by the Woman’s Club of Palo Alto and include printable maps with accompanying images, and fascinating historical narratives of three self-guided walking tours.

- Embarcadero Self-Guided Tour
- The 500 Block of Ramona Street Self-Guided Tour
- Homer Avenue Historical Corridor Self-Guided Tour

Visit the Woman’s Club of Palo Alto’s website to print out these great self-guided walking tours.

<https://www.womansclubofpaloalto.org/self-guided-tours>



The Gilbert house at 433 Melville Avenue as seen on the Embarcadero Self-Guided Tour



Pedro De Lemos designed building at 520 Ramona Street as seen on the Ramona Street Self-Guided Tour



Site of the original AME Zion church on the peninsula, 819 Ramona Street is part of the Homer Avenue Corridor Self-Guided Tour

(Photos provided by the Woman’s Club of Palo Alto)



## Drive-In movies

During the scorching heat waves of August and September, I remembered in the past going to an air-conditioned movie theater to escape the sweltering temperatures. What fun to discover the revival of the “drive-in” as an unintended consequence of the pandemic. The website, [AAA.com/drive-in](http://AAA.com/drive-in), led me to an intriguing and informative article about West Wind All Digital Drive-in Theaters in San Jose (as well as Concord, Sacramento). Go to <https://www.westwinddi.com/> for what’s coming and the plethora of movies, activities and special events the whole family can enjoy!

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## PAHA Upcoming Programs

Sunday, December 6 from 2:00-4:00 via Zoom Webinar  
**Celebrating Gryphon Stringed Instruments’ 50th anniversary!**

The Zoom link will be featured in the December issue of the Tall Tree.

For the duration of the current COVID-19 restrictions, PAHA plans to continue with Zoom webinar presentations each month. Stay tuned for notices about future programs.

## The Heritage Program

This month’s heritage program will feature, “Palo Alto: Then and Now” with PAHA’s Historians Steve Staiger and Darla Secor.

Airs on Channel 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.

## Welcome New PAHA Members!

- Colleen Braff, *lifetime member*  
Sandra Florstedt  
Cynthia Hansen  
Lisa Krieger  
Joe Sinnott, *lifetime member*

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



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