



# The Tall Tree Newsletter

of the PALO ALTO  
HISTORICAL  
ASSOCIATION

Since 1913

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The Palo Alto Historical Association presents via Zoom Webinar



Image courtesy of Jon Kinyon

## Celebrating Gryphon Stringed Instruments' 50th Anniversary

**Sunday December 6, 2020 2:00 to 3:00 pm**

**Webinar link: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/82374510029>**



Richard and Frank, about 1975

On Sunday, December 6th at 2:00 pm, PAHA invites you to join us for a virtual program to honor Gryphon Stringed Instruments and their owners for being a musical oasis for stringed instruments in the Palo Alto area for over 50 years.

Frank Ford and Richard Johnston met as college students in the 1960s and immediately bonded with their common interest in music and stringed instruments. They formed a partnership and started out, in typical Palo Alto fashion, in Frank's garage.

In 1973, they rented a small storefront on El Camino Way, and then moved to the present location on the corner of Park Blvd and Lambert Avenue in Palo Alto, where they were able to expand their inventory and services as well as have rooms for teaching.

Please join us for interviews with owners Frank Ford and Richard Johnston and a tour of Gryphon Stringed Instruments. We think you might be pleasantly surprised by what you see behind those concrete walls of the building! When you step through the front door you feel the pride and warmth exuded by the two owners living their passion.



Gryphon Stringed Instruments founders in their shop

A brief annual PAHA membership meeting and election of directors will also be included in the evening's program.

For more information about our programs, and for Zoom instructions, visit our website at [www.pahistory.org](http://www.pahistory.org).

**2020 PALO ALTO  
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# *Ye Olde Shoppe: Spotlight on longtime family businesses in Palo Alto*

## **Peninsula Creamery**

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



John Santana Jr.

The Peninsula Creamery has been owned and operated by the Santana family since 1936 when John Santana and James B. Howell (1952 Atherton Mayor) purchased the business from Howard Cobb and Axel Raven, who had started the company in 1923. John brought his experience in the dairy business from his days at the American Creamery (which merged with the Carnation Milk Company) in Oakland where his father, J.M. Santana, was Vice President and half owner. The Creamery originally consisted of a milk bottling plant at 167 Hamilton Avenue and the adjacent diner (now the Palo Alto Creamery) that they referred to as the “Fountain.”

John grew the company to 60 delivery trucks serving over 12,000 customers from San Jose to Burlingame in its heyday, and was the sole dairy supplier for Stanford University. He turned the Peninsula Creamery Fountain into a local institution known for its thick milk shakes. He also leased the land known as the Troutmere Ranch (now the site of the Stanford Shopping Center) from Stanford University for his 700 or so Guernsey cows to graze. To keep up with demand, in 1954 the milk plant and headquarters moved to a larger building at the corner of Channing Avenue and Alma Street, where Hassett Ace Hardware is today, and the original bottling plant on Hamilton Avenue became the ice cream plant.

John Santana Junior eventually took over the business. After graduating from Stanford in 1948 with a degree in Economics, he worked in the family business until his passing in 2018. In an interview with Sunset magazine in 2017, John Junior explained how the demand for delivered milk started to decline in the 1950s, stating “Back in the ‘30s, to sell milk in a county, you had to process it there.” Then the big grocery store chains managed to overturn that law around 1950. “That was

the beginning of the end of the creamery companies.” It was hard to compete with the price of milk at the grocery store.

To lower costs, the Creamery converted their delivery employees into independent contractors and sold them their trucks. This worked for a time but by the 1960s most people were picking up their dairy products at the grocery store. In addition, Stanford University decided to build the Stanford Shopping Center where the dairy ranch was and the Peninsula Creamery had to move their herd to the south bay. The milk plant operated at the Alma Street location until its closure in 1985.



The Ice Cream Plant and adjacent “Fountain” on Hamilton Avenue c 1950

While milk sales waned in the 1960s, ice cream sales grew. The plant turned out as much as 3 million gallons of ice cream a year and more than 200 flavors from 1957 to 1994. They used only the best ingredients including Gimbels’ peppermints from San Francisco and Marshall strawberries from Washington State, and were always coming up with new flavors such as “patriotic peach” for the centennial in 1976. The well-known label could also be found in local Bay Area supermarkets.



Milk Bottling Plant corner of Alma and Channing Streets c.1950s

The Ice Cream plant eventually moved to 800 High Street and in 1983, the original Hamilton Avenue plant site was sold and torn down to construct a (Continued on page 3)

*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.*



# Gryphon Getting to 51

By Bo Crane



Photo courtesy of Bo Crane

As 1969 came into focus, Franklin Ford and his wife were living on Margarita Avenue in Palo Alto. He had just been laid off from Menlo Bike and Key. A recent UCSB graduate, Frank was connected through a mutual friend to a Cal literature student, Richard Johnston, who strummed his guitar around Berkeley. Frank's interest was in taking guitars apart to learn how they worked and the two hit it off. Together they began Gryphon Guitars out of Frank's garage, intending to specialize in building custom guitars. With that market too limited, they also branched into restoration, service and repairs.

Why the name "Gryphon"? Some might think it was because of the two-winged lion statues, known as griffins that were once in front of the Stanford's Encina Gym. "Griffins" came close to being Stanford's replacement mascot, now unofficially the Tree. But those griffins, then in storage, were unknown to Ford and Johnston, who actually found the mythological creature (alternately spelled gryphon) in Lewis Carroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, and thought it was cool. The beast Carroll created actually has the body of a lion but the head of an eagle. The shop today is peppered with Gryphon images.

Frank and Richard formalized the business and Gryphon Stringed Instruments opened a small shop at 4041 El Camino Way in 1973. At that time, there were a dozen other music businesses in Palo Alto but only one other instrument repair shop (La Fosse Music) a few blocks

north on El Camino Real. Palo Alto had been all about folk music in the early 1960s, with local artists such as the Kingston Trio and Joan Baez, until the onslaught of British electric pop and rock music in the mid 60s.

In 1975, a vacancy opened at 211 Lambert Avenue due to the roof collapsing in a rainstorm forcing its tenant to vacate. After repairs were made, Gryphon moved into the front half of the building, and later acquired the back half when a furniture shop moved out. An older photo depicts a second passage door closer to the corner of Park Street. This doorway was obliterated at night by a driver who had fallen asleep at the wheel.



Photo courtesy of Nina M. Weissmuller

The 1970s bright rainbow of "Peter Max colors" that were once under the Gryphon name are gone. Today the signage is more sedate and a "50 Years" banner hangs on the outside, commemorating a golden anniversary that was celebrated on September 29, 2019.

Gryphon and its acoustic instruments has survived changes in musical trends, recessions, and the end of school music programs. Even Shirley Temple Black once bought a guitar there. Yet, they continue to sell, repair, and teach lessons for guitar, mandolin, and banjo. Frank is still hard at work fixing guitars and intends to carry on the the 51-year old business indefinitely stating, "It can't be sold," meaning Gryphon can't be recreated.



(Continued from page 2) new building which houses Mendocino Farms today. In 1994, the family made the decision to close the ice cream plant when a city directive required they switch from an ammonia coolant system to Freon (for environmental reasons). The estimated cost of \$1.5 million proved too expensive for the company.

The original Peninsula Creamery soda fountain and grill at the corner of Hamilton Avenue and Emerson Street remained a popular hangout especially for high school and Stanford students throughout the 1950s and 1960s. The family operated the Creamery until 1987 when "it just became hard to make any money after the opening of Burger King in downtown Palo Alto and the rising cost of union workers" says James Santana, John Junior's son. Rob Fischer now operates it under the name



Peninsula Creamery Dairy Store today

"Palo Alto Creamery." Purportedly, the lease requires the use to remain a 1950's style soda fountain and the tenant must mix their shakes in metal cans, the old fashioned way.

In the 1970s, the Santana family opened the Peninsula Creamery Dairy Store on the corner of High and Channing Streets (site of the former Plymouth car dealership) as an ice cream shop and soda fountain. They later added a grill, and today they serve breakfast, lunch and of course, their famous milk shakes. James Santana, who runs the business today, is the youngest of John Junior's 5 children. When asked how he was the one who took over the family business, he said jokingly, "the others were smarter." It's a lot of work. The Dairy store remains the current and only location of the once sprawling company owned by the Santana family and we hope it remains for years to come.

## Jaunting During the Pandemic

While the crisp fall weather and the pandemic persist, we recommend a jaunt to the **Emily Renzel Ponds**. Located at 2837 E. Bayshore in Palo Alto, it's a little difficult to find this Palo Alto treasure, but well worth the effort. You may see snowy egrets, mallards, ducklings, and a plethora of other waterfowl. Even though traffic on Hwy 101 barrels along within earshot, it is possible to wander through and enjoy this avian paradise at leisure. Information and a map can be found at <https://scvas.org/self-guided-birding/emily-renzel-ponds>.



Image courtesy of Palo Alto Online



Image courtesy of Pacific Art League

During the pandemic, museums and galleries have explored new ways to allow visitors to view and enjoy works of art, while abiding by the CDC guidelines. **The Pacific Art League** is no exception. While the Pacific Art League remains closed to the public, its present exhibit, "Beyond 2020", can be viewed digitally at [pacificartleague.org/exhibits-1](https://pacificartleague.org/exhibits-1), or stroll by 668 Ramona St. in Palo Alto and look in the windows to see what the jurors selected for their 99th anniversary celebration. Works on display will be changed every 2 weeks or so until the exhibit ends on Dec 31, 2020.

Continuing on the subject of **museums and galleries**, several have opened, but with limitations and requirements regarding reservations, masks, and social distancing. Check each of the websites for details on current exhibitions.

- Asian Art Museum: <https://about.asianart.org/plan-your-visit>
- Legion of Honor: <https://legionofhonor.famsf.org/visit-us>
- De Young Museum: <https://deyoung.famsf.org/exhibitions/current>
- SF MOMA: <https://www.sfmoma.org/visit/visit-toolkit>
- San Jose Museum of Art: <https://sjmusart.org>

### Welcome New PAHA Members!

Miriam Palm, Julie Gerhardt, David MacKenzie, Megan Fogarty, & Dolores McMullen

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### PAHA Upcoming Program

Sunday, January 24 from  
2:00-3:00 via Zoom Webinar  
Check our website at  
[www.pahistory.org](http://www.pahistory.org) for  
program information

### Previous PAHA Programs

If you missed the November 1 program, "Alpine Inn: The Fascinating History of a Local Landmark," you can find the video on Vimeo by using the link below. Also on this site, you can find other recent PAHA programs, including "Palo Alto: Then and Now."  
<https://vimeo.com/475740713>

### The Heritage Program

This month's heritage program features, "Alpine Inn: The Fascinating History of a Local Landmark" with PAHA's Historian Steve Staiger.

This program 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.

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