



# The Tall Tree Newsletter

of the PALO ALTO  
HISTORICAL  
ASSOCIATION

Since 1913

October 2025 Volume 49, No 1

In cooperation with



Palo Alto Historical Association presents



San Mateo County Historical Association

## Lost Gas Stations of San Mateo County

Sunday, October 12, 2025 2:00 – 4:00 pm

Palo Alto Art Center ~ 1313 Newell Road, Palo Alto

Join us for a lively and nostalgic presentation with former Police Chief Bruce C. Cumming and local historian and author Nicholas A. Veronico as they take us on a journey through the fascinating history of gas stations in San Mateo County.

From the 1920s through the 1990s, gas stations were more than just places to fuel up—they were neighborhood landmarks, teen hangouts, and centers of community life. Attendants in crisp uniforms rushed to greet drivers, filling tanks, checking oil and tire pressure, and polishing windshields with a smile. At its peak, the small city of San Carlos boasted 23 stations. Today, only five remain.

Whether you remember the golden era of full-service stations or grew up in the age of self-serve pumps and mini-marts, you'll enjoy this richly illustrated look

back at a vanished way of life. Rare, never-before-seen photographs from local archives and private collections will bring the Peninsula's car culture to life.

### About the Speakers

Bruce C. Cumming enjoyed a 42-year career in California law enforcement, serving as Police Chief of Menlo Park and Morgan Hill. A lifelong car enthusiast, he owns several vintage automobiles and collects petroleum memorabilia.

Nicholas A. Veronico is the author or coauthor of more than 45 books on art, aviation, military, and transportation history.

◆ Free refreshments will be provided.

We look forward to seeing you there!

### PAHA's Fall Membership Drive Is Chugging Right Along!



Please take the time to renew your PAHA membership now at [pahistory.org/membership.html](http://pahistory.org/membership.html) or by mail to Palo Alto Historical Association, P.O. Box 193, Palo Alto, CA 94302.

We appreciate your loyalty and support!

**2025 PALO ALTO  
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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).*

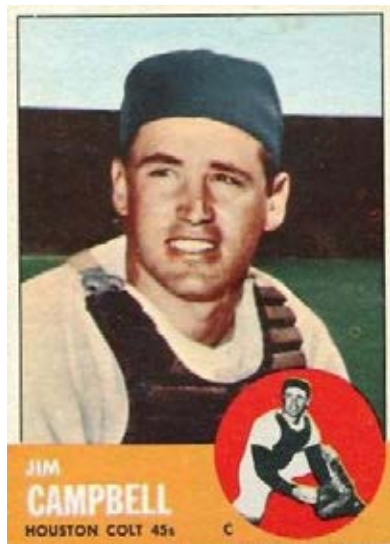
*Public programs are held at 2 pm on the first Sunday of October, December, February, March, and May at the Palo Alto Art Center, 1313 Newell Road. Programs include speakers. The final program of the year is held in June and includes a dinner and a program. The public is welcome at all programs.*

# Jim Campbell, Class of 1955

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

The first Palo Alto high schooler to play Major League Baseball was Jim Campbell, Palo Alto High School, class of 1955. Even more noteworthy than his career is his Palo Alto lineage.

James Robert "Jim" Campbell was born in 1937 in what is now the Hoover Pavilion—then the Palo Alto Hospital, which had opened in 1931. His grandmother, "Tillie," was the daughter of Guadalupe Robles Espinosa, who was the daughter of Secundino and Maria Antonia Robles, Jim's great-great-grandparents. Along with his brother, Secundino was once co-owner of the Rancho Rincón de San Francisco.



1963 Topps card #373, Jim Campbell RC Houston Colt .45s

By all estimates Guadalupe had 19 children, 13 whom survived her death in 1922. Her mother, Secundino's wife, had 29 children, again not all surviving. Gradually, the Robles rancho was reduced from its original 8,418 acres to a 3½-acre remnant inherited by Guadalupe, called the Espinosa Ranch. It stretched from El Camino along Dinah's Court and next to Adobe Creek. The family used the creek for water, swimming, and even bathing. On the other side of their roadway stood Dinah's Shack, founded in 1926 and now Alexander's Steakhouse, The Sea. Just under a mile away lies the 4.7-acre Secundino Robles Park, a fraction of his former holdings.

Jim recalled how his grandfather would annually allow a gypsy caravan traveling north on El Camino to camp on the property. His grandmother would take

Jim and his younger brother by the hand to watch the night's festivities. Meanwhile, he and his brother became pals with the Dinah's crew. The Espinosa Ranch was sold in 1948 to satisfy Guadalupe's six remaining children among 35 heirs.

For his senior year in 1955, Jim was moved from shortstop to center field and batted .352. After the high school season ended, he entered the minor leagues. He was hitting .350 in 1962 when he was called up mid-season by Houston's new major league team, the Colt .45s (now the Astros). His first game was on July 17, just after his 25th birthday.

Campbell played in 27 of Houston's remaining 73 games in 1962, batting .221 with three homers. He began the 1963 season as Houston's starting catcher but was soon replaced due to poor hitting. Filling in as catcher for the second game of a doubleheader at home against Cincinnati on July 4, he hit a grand slam. But later that month, after another game, Jim was released back to the minors. His career ended following the 1965 season, totaling 11 years and 857 games in the minors and 82 games in the majors over two half-seasons. Still, he had played against the most famous National Leaguers of the era, including Willie Mays, who helped the Giants in Jim's rookie 1962 season reach their first World Series in San Francisco.



Jim Campbell overlooking Adobe Creek (by Bo Crane)

Jim and his wife, Georgia, raised a family and eventually retired to Los Altos. Together, they visited the former Espinosa Ranch with Bo Crane, viewing the creek beyond the motel fencing.



# Mystery Coffins Discovered in Stanford Hills

By Jon Kinyon, PAHA Board Member



A view looking towards the town of Mayfield from Peter Coutts property

On an April day in 1908, a small group of students from Stanford University was hiking in the hills above campus when they came upon stacks of coffins that grave robbers had recently unearthed. How the thieves discovered the burial ground is unknown, as the graves were all unmarked, and no one had any clue there had been bodies buried there.

Nine of the coffins were made of wood, and inside, there was nothing more than bones, hair, and dust. A tenth coffin was made of iron with the highest quality workmanship and had a glass viewing window. Inside, a strikingly beautiful, magnificently dressed young woman was visible, and though she was long dead, she appeared to be sleeping peacefully inside her air-tight burial case. Upon further inspection of the scene, a miniature iron coffin was found, holding the body of a toddler. All around the San Francisco Bay Area, the news spread like wildfire, and speculation led immediately to theories of murder.

By all estimations, the secret graveyard had been filled with bodies during the years the property was owned by a mysterious Frenchman known as Peter Coutts. Coutts' real name was revealed years later to be Jean Baptiste Paulin Caperon, a fugitive member of the French Aristocracy. It had been close to 20 years since the "Coutts" family had suddenly vanished without a trace.

Caperon was a tall, imposing figure who never shared details of his past. He had a seemingly unlimited source of wealth, and upon arriving in the spring of 1875, he purchased 1,400 acres of prime land from William Paul, founder of the old wild west town of Mayfield (later absorbed by the city of Palo Alto).

He christened his "Ayrshire Farm" and hired more than a hundred men to build his grand estate, which included houses and chalets, a 50-foot-tall clock tower, a grand library, stables for his race horses, a race track (complete

with viewing stands), a massive wine cellar, kennels for his beagles, a dozen brick barns for his trophy-winning Ayrshire and Holstein cows, a man-made lake, waterways and a network of irrigation tunnels.

Among the estate's prominent landmarks was a 30-foot-tall brick tower designed in the style of a Norman fortress, which could be accessed only from a tunnel below it. The structure still stands, and to this day, people speculate about what Frenchman's Tower was used for. But it was likely nothing more than an elaborate pump house for the waterworks of the farm.

Monsieur "Peter Coutts," his invalid wife Elisa, son Albert, daughter Marguerite, and the children's young governess Eugénie Clogenson lived quite lavishly. The family mingled with high society, hosting elaborate parties attended by other rich residents of the area, even as French authorities at the consulate in San Francisco hired spies among the Coutts estate staff. The authorities were convinced "Coutts" was a fugitive from France who had absconded with 5 million francs from the French army. Adding to their suspicion was the fact that the deed for Ayrshire Farm was made out in the name of their governess, Eugénie Clogenson.

Eugénie was suspected of being Caperon's lover. *The San Francisco Call* newspaper speculated that with her fine manners and elegant bearing, she might be Eugénie de Montijo, a deposed empress of France. Though that was later proven wrong, it was well-known that the wife of the Frenchman hated her. *The Call* proclaimed the discovery of the coffins could perhaps "reveal the secret of the mysterious disappearance years ago of the dashing, talented woman."

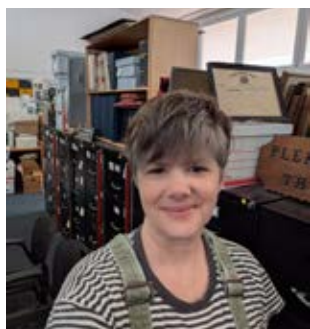
No one knows what exactly happened to Eugénie Clogenson. She disappeared years before the "Coutts" family pulled the same vanishing act. Had she mothered a child with the man of the house and then been murdered somehow, along with their love child, by an insanely jealous wife? We will never know.

When the iron coffins were discovered, it was noted that they bore the stamp of a San Francisco coffin-maker. But the maker's records had all burned in the wake of the 1906 earthquake.

Given the expensive clothing worn by the deceased and the sudden disappearance of Clogenson from historical records after the mid-1880s, it seems likely that it was her. How and when she died is forever lost to history.

The 11 coffins were reburied at Palo Alto's Alta Mesa Cemetery in unmarked graves.

## Straight From The PAHA Archives



**FROM THE DESK OF**  
**Darla Secor**  
**City Historian**

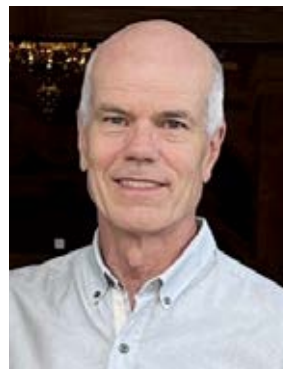
The summer months tend to be slower at the Archives in terms of visitors, but we have been keeping busy with various projects and, of course, preparing for our move to the new Palo Alto Museum. The move, which we anticipate will be in early 2026, has hastened our pace of organizing and cataloging unprocessed materials in K-7. We have been using ArchivesSpace, a content management system, to help us keep track of what we have and where it is located. As the moving date gets closer, we will also box all of the materials we have been storing in the filing cabinets. If you have visited the Archives, you know this is not a small endeavor. In our new space at 300 Homer, our materials will remain organized in boxes, and will be stored on shelves. Accessing our materials will feel a little different, but we promise you will get the same results.

Other projects keeping us busy this summer include continuing our partnership with the Palo Alto Children's Theatre by uploading their digitized photographs to our online collections. We've added over 3500 images of Children's Theatre productions and activities starting from 1939. You can check out our progress by browsing our digital collections at [pahistory.org](http://pahistory.org). We also continue with our own digitization project which involves organizing, labeling, and describing undigitized images for addition to our general online collection. We're fortunate to have volunteers this summer who have contributed to making these new images accessible online. As a part of that project, we had fun visiting the Vintage Media Lab at the Mitchell Park Library during the past couple months to digitize over 500 slides that were donated to us. We were lucky to be the recipient of images taken in the 1980s of hundreds of residences around Palo Alto. Even luckier: each slide was labeled with the address and date the image was taken. Those images will be "coming soon" to our online digital collections.



## Welcome Our New PAHA Board Member

Originally from Canada, Jeff Watt arrived in Palo Alto to pursue a Ph.D. in Electrical Engineering at Stanford University, launching a career in the region's semiconductor industry. After a few years in Sunnyvale and Mountain View, he returned to Palo Alto, where he and his wife raised their two daughters. His curiosity about local history began with a simple question: why did every lot in his neighborhood have such a large setback? That question led to many evenings spent combing through microfilm at the Guy Miller Archives, uncovering city documents from the 1950s and 1960s. He discovered that the cause was a setback map oversight following improvements to the then-private streets after the area was annexed by Palo Alto. This investigation sparked a deeper interest in the area's land history, stretching back to the Spanish colonial and Mexican eras. More recently, Jeff has been investigating the enduring mysteries of the Palo Alto redwood: is it really the same tree seen by early Spanish explorers, when did its twin fall, and when was it first called "Palo Alto"? He's excited to continue exploring local historical puzzles and to support PAHA's mission as a new member of the board.



**JEFF WATT**

### Welcome Our New Members!

Peter Rice  
Amy and Barry Asin  
Nelson Ng  
Barry Smith  
Rose Thoits  
Christopher Young  
Linda and Tom Vlasic

### Upcoming Program Dates

- Dec 7 • Feb 1
- Mar 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](http://www.pahistory.org) for program information.

### Previous PAHA Program

If you missed the June 4th event, *Heritage: Night At The Museum*, you can find it and recent PAHA program videos on Vimeo by following this link:  
<https://vimeo.com/1094609257>

### In Memoriam:

John Hanna



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