Fall Forward with Us!
Family Fun at the History Museums Continue

The museum's family fun programs continue this fall at both sites, the San Jose Historical Museum in Kelley Park and the Peralta Adobe & Fallon House Historic Site in downtown San Jose. Check out what's in store for the rest of 1999!

Splash that Blaze!
Old Time Fire Muster

Sunday, October 17, 1:00-4:00 p.m.
San Jose Historical Museum
All activities included in the price of museum admission. HMSJ Members are FREE.

Test your fire fighting skills with firefighters from the San Jose Fire Department! Experience first-hand the excitement, danger and hard work in the life of a firefighter. Children and adults alike, bring your "waterproof" clothes and compete in fire muster drills — join a bucket brigade and see how fast you can roll out the fire hoses. Kids can create and top their heads with their own paper helmet and laugh and play games with the Clown Brigade. Visit historic fire engines parked on the grounds for the day and visit the exhibition on the history of fire fighting in Santa Clara Valley, located in the replica Empire Firehouse on site.

Ohlone Traditions

Saturday, October 30, 1:00-4:00 p.m.
Peralta Adobe & Fallon House Historic Site
All activities included in the price of museum admission. HMSJ Members are FREE.

Ohlone artisans will share their traditions in this exciting, hands-on program. Play an Ohlone Indian hand game like stick dice or hoop and pole games. As you play, Linda Yamane will sing Ohlone gambling songs to bring good luck. To cool down, team members are invited to make manzanita cider from berries. Learn to make soap root brushes with Mona Garibay, and enjoy traditional stories told by Alex Ramirez.

Founding of the Pueblo
Birthday Bash!

Saturday, November 13, 12:00-4:00 p.m.
Peralta Adobe & Fallon House Historic Site
All activities included in the price of museum admission. HMSJ Members are FREE.

It's a birthday bash! Celebrate the founding of the Pueblo de San José de Guadalupe at the city of San José's 223rd birthday celebration. Help make a giant birthday card to be presented to Mayor Ron Gonzales. Enjoy a game of "pin the city on the map," and make your own adobe brick. What's a birthday party without a piñata? Take a swing or two and then treat yourself to some delicious birthday cake. Come help us celebrate!

Where Did All the History Go?
Leaving the 20th Century Melodrama

Saturday, December 4, 1:00-4:00 p.m.
San Jose Historical Museum
All activities included in the price of museum admission. HMSJ Members are FREE.

Do you have a secret desire to be on stage? Have you ever wanted to be a part of a live production? If so, this is your opportunity. Join us for an audience-participation melodrama performance. The first part of the program is a theater workshop, where you'll actually make the set and signs for the melodrama. For those wishing to take a role in the play, the opportunity awaits, or if audience participation is more your speed, that's okay too. Audience members have a part — they boo, hiss, laugh and throw popcorn as the scenes unfold.

In this suspenseful play, events from 20th century history have been stolen. Until all the events are located and returned to their rightful place in the timeline, the 21st century cannot begin. We're trapped! Please join us and help find the lost history, so we can move forward into the new millennium.

Lower left: A member of the Banana Slug String Band engages young visitors with songs on the environment at the Historical Museum. Photo upper right: A young visitor2 wheels a piñata at a summer program at the Peralta Adobe. Photo lower right: A proud visitor shows her handmade flag window from the "Rabbit In Rhymes" program at the Historical Museum. Top right photo credit: Leticia Castro, Lower right and left photos: Lisa Falk.
Upcoming Events

Cruise Over to the Air Systems Foundation Car Show and Family Fun-Fest
September 11, 1999, 3:00 p.m. – 9:00 p.m.

Kids Are The Driving Force!

Are you ready for a hot summer night? Join us for the popular 12th annual Air Systems Car Show on Saturday, September 11 at the San Jose Historical Museum.

This year’s event is guaranteed to be the best one yet — they just get better every year! There’ll be hundreds of vintage, classic, exotic and fun vehicles to ooh and aah over. But car ogling isn’t the only activity. There’ll be plenty of live entertainment from the Garcia Brothers, Nostalgia, Laura Price & Boneyard and Jake & the Rambling Grass Band, a silent auction of enticing and irresistible items, a drawing with a chance to win a brand new BMW 328i car, many fun, hands-on activities such as rock wall climbing, bumper cars, a Wanda the Whale character, San Jose Fire Department K-9 demonstrations, all the food you can eat, beverages, plus, spectacular fireworks to cap off an evening under the stars.

This successful event raises funds for non-profit organizations that provide children’s programs and services throughout Santa Clara Valley. The History Museums of San Jose has been fortunate to be a recipient of a portion of these funds since 1993.

Join us and help support the museum and other local, worthwhile organizations. Ticket prices are: adults $20, youth $10 (ages 4 – 12), and kids under 4 are free. The all-inclusive ticket includes admittance into the event, food, music and all the activities. Beer and wine will be sold separately. You can purchase tickets by calling the Car Show hotline at (408) 938-8484 or you can purchase tickets at the gate.

Mark your calendars and start your engines now!

V e e e e e e m m m m!

Living History Day on the Alameda

Sunday, October 3, 10:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.

Join the History Museums of San Jose on October 3 at Living History Day on the Alameda. HMSJ is a sponsor of this fifth annual event celebrating the history and people of The Alameda and San Jose. The celebration takes place on The Alameda between Hanchett and Hester avenues 10:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. Admission is free.

The museum will participate in several ways. The 1916 Detroit Electric car will be on display, and Portraits of the Past will entertain people with a vintage fashion show. The City Store will have a booth featuring a selection of books on local history, and assorted gift items. The museum also will share a collaborative booth with other San Jose museums to provide hands-on children’s activities.

The event also includes horse-drawn carriage rides; live music; historic displays featuring the early days of San Jose, including an exhibit on the Buffalo Soldiers; book signings by local authors; antique cars and docent-led neighborhood walks; plus much more.

The Alameda, as part of El Camino Real, was the original route traveled between the Pueblo de San José de Guadalupe and Mission Santa Clara. Over the years, mansions were built along the route. Many of these buildings are now offices, including San Jose’s only surviving Julia Morgan building.
More Upcoming Events and Programs

Portuguese Imperio Open House

Saturday, September 18
10:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m.

Don't miss the opportunity to learn more about the Portuguese community at an open house on September 18th from 10:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m. The Portuguese Imperio at the San Jose Historical Museum will be open for tours of the expansion of the lower level. Portuguese sandwiches and beverages also will be available to purchase. Representatives from the Portuguese Heritage Society will be present to share exciting plans.

The Portuguese Imperio is a replica of the first permanent imperio built in San Jose before 1915. It was located on the present site of the I.E.S. hall on East Santa Clara St. Imperios were built to honor the Holy Spirit and also served as centers for social and religious activity. In San Jose at the turn of the century, it represented the continuation of celebrated traditions, which helped make the immigrants transition from the old world to the new easier by maintaining strong bonds to their heritage.

Join us on the 18th and learn more about the Portuguese community in California and the Portuguese Heritage Society's plans for sharing these experiences. For more information call (510) 797-7585 or (650) 964-0406. Regular museum admission applies this day.

Classroom Studies Come Alive for Students and Teachers

HMSJ's 1999-2000 school programs brochure was mailed to thousands of teachers throughout Santa Clara County and the reservation process began in August. This year, teachers will use a new and improved system with several methods for booking their favorite fieldtrips — registration forms are returnable by mail, fax or e-mail. This system eliminates the possible frustration of voice mail and busy signals. The brochure and registration form is also available on HMSJ's web site. Fieldtrips begin Tuesday, September 14.

Continuing this fall is the very popular Voices of Gold/Interactive school program in conjunction with the exhibit Voices of Gold: Santa Clara Valley and the Gold Rush. Fourth grade students participate in an interactive gallery game in the Voices of Gold exhibition and try their luck panning for gold. Beginning in April, Gold Rush Adventure introduces 4th graders to the stories recorded in historic documents, such as letters, diaries, legal records and photographs. Students also design their own Gold Rush adventure journals and learn to pan for gold. Experience Adobe Days, Experience Victorian Days, Explore San Jose's Past, Explore Peralta Adobe & Fallon House, Historic Transportation Experience, History Hike, Victorian School Kit, Westward Hol, School Days in the 1890s, and Women Who Made a Difference will return this school year. These popular programs served more than 33,000 students last school year.

Three special teacher programs will be offered in the fall and additional programs are planned for spring. At the School Programs Showcase on September 30, 2nd-6th grade teachers will preview many of the exhibit buildings and hands-on activities used in school programs at the San Jose Historical Museum in Kelley Park. During First a Bite, Then a Hike on Saturday, October 2, 5th and 6th grade teachers will enjoy a bagel breakfast at the Peralta Adobe & Fallon House Historic Site followed by a walking tour of downtown San Jose with docents from the History Hike school program. They will see Egyptian, Greco, Roman, and Mexican architectural elements in San Jose buildings and brainstorm ways to prepare students for a History Hike field trip. On Tuesday, November 16, teachers participating in What Do You See? What Do You Think? will learn to season their curricula with object-based classroom lessons. This interactive workshop will focus on objects, documents, and photographs from current exhibitions and exhibit buildings at the Historical Museum.

For more information about school and teacher workshops, please call (408) 918-1040, e-mail the education department at: education@sjhistory.org, or visit our web site at www.sjhistory.org.

Students demonstrate their talents at rolling hoops in the Westward Hol school program.
Photo credit: Lisa Falk
New Museum Acquisition

The World's Greatest Cyclist
Frances Dainty & Co.

by Alida J. Bray, Senior Curator

A 1926 advertisement described the Frances Dainty & Co. act as "the World's Greatest Cyclists in Extraordinary Feats of Cycle Riding and Balancing. Whirling, twirling, twisting, turning, circling, cyclists in a whirlwind of thrills, quicker than shots from a rapid fire gun." Three generations, Albert, Cyril, and Frances Geer traveled throughout the United States, Europe and Asia performing daring feats, "defying all power of gravitation," with bicycles and ladders atop a slack wire. Slack wire acts differed from tight wire acts in that the stretched wire was "slack" or tensionless.

Frances Geer was born in Hong Kong to Cyril Edison Geer and Fern Geer, while touring the act in Asia. When not on tour, the adventurous family resided in San Jose's Willow Glen neighborhood. The Geer family occupied the same residence from 1886 until 1999.

Recently the family home was put up for sale, and Frances Geer's daughter called the museum wondering if we might be interested in some items from the family slack wire act. Curious as to what a slack wire act might be, Registrar Linda Poe and I made a visit to the home. We were taken down to the basement where we discovered a red and white trunk covered in travel stickers with "Frances Dainty & Co." boldly painted across the front. Once opened, the trunk revealed a cache of aluminum bicycles, unicycles, and ladders, as well as wicker juggling clubs and hand painted banners dating to 1917. Later we discovered costumes in the attic, and boxes of promotional photographs and advertisements in the living room. But the biggest surprise was a film of Frances Geer performing his slack wire act.

Frances was also an amateur filmmaker. He had mounted a camera on the roof of the family's two-story Victorian home, and focused it on a deck beside the house where he had strung a slack wire. By now Mr. Geer was 60+ years old, but dressed in his tuxedo and top hat, he adeptly mounted the wire with ease and "defying all power of gravitation," executed his slack wire act. The beautiful Mrs. Geer, dressed in a full-length gown, assisted by handing him various ladders and clubs. The film continues, moving to the deck with Frances performing bicycle tricks that would make today's BMX extreme sports generation drop their jaws in awe.

The Geer Family Trust generously donated this remarkable collection to the museum, but the story doesn't stop there.

Several weeks later, museum volunteer Rich Markus spotted more Frances Dainty material at an antique shop in San Carlos. We visited the shop and acquired a group of objects including another trunk, more banners, hand written music to accompany the act, rolls of 15-cent admission tickets, and more promotional materials.

Now we are in the process of cataloging all the materials and planning an exhibition of the collection. A number of the items are in need of conservation. If you would like to contribute to the conservation of these wonderful and historically significant artifacts, please contact the Museum at (408) 918-1052.

Photos and ephemera from HMK's permanent collection.
From the Permanent Collection

No Plain Jane: Women's Fancy Straw Hats

This fanciful exhibition of straw hats from the permanent collection of the History Museums of San Jose opens August 17 and runs through November 23, 1999 at the DeLuz House located at the San Jose Historical Museum. The exhibition features a mainstay accessory of outdoor activity — the straw hat. Every era has incorporated straw into hats because of its durability, lightness, and ability to keep the wearer cool in hot weather. The exhibit celebrates the straw hat's rural beginnings through its adoption into high city fashion with over fifty examples from the collection.
The Hotel Vendome and Lick Observatory Bring Tourism to the Valley
by Jack Douglas

The Hotel Vendome and Lick Observatory played significant roles in the promotion of tourism to the Santa Clara Valley. Two events occurred during the same time in 1888-89 that would capture the Santa Clara Valley from an agricultural backwater to a national center for tourism. The opening of the Lick Observatory and the Vendome resort hotel focused easterners' attention on our Valley and its many natural and man-made attractions. The Hotel Vendome would come to rival such similar resort establishments as the Del Monte Hotel in Monterey, the Del Coronado in San Diego and the Claremont in Oakland/Berkeley.

Our Valley, with its excellent year round climate, vast acres of flowering fruit trees and its picturesque mountain backdrop, was a sight to behold, and local developers such as T.S. Montgomery were quick to realize its potential. Montgomery convinced local investors, mostly businessmen whose property values would soar with the popularity of San Jose, to pool their resources to create a grand hotel in the manner of such eastern watering holes as Saratoga and the Hamptons.

The developers purchased the eleven acre estate of Josiah Belden, San Jose's first mayor, for the sum of $60,000. The land was already landscaped with mature trees and shrubs, and its location on North First Street was a short walk from the railroad depot. Jacob Lenzen, one of San Jose's most prominent architects, was chosen to draw up the plans. The developers thought at first that they could not afford such an ornate hotel, but the thrifty Lenzen convinced them that he could come in at $500 under the original estimate, so the project went ahead.

The rambling wooden structure was built in the then popular Queen Anne Style, with towers, dormers, verandas and balconies galore. Every room was said to have a view and access to the outside.

The Vendome exceeded its developers' dreams when it opened with a flourish on February 7, 1889. Rooms were immediately filled, and plans were in the works for additions to the building. The Hotel's ballroom became the social spot of the Valley, where parties, weddings and conventions provided a whirl of activity. The local Bohemian Orchestra, with conductor Leo Sullivan and other performers found steady work at the continuous functions. To make the Hotel even more appealing an indoor pool, a bowling alley and a nine hole putting green were added. The park-like setting was ideal for moonlight strolls.

Once settled into the luxuries of the Vendome the visitors had the choice of many optional day trips out, and these required the services of the Vendome Stables, which was run by Franklin Ross who monopolized the scenic tour business in the Valley. His Mount Hamilton Stage Company carried a steady stream of visitors to the recently constructed Lick Observatory.

Lick Observatory Trips

The Lick Astronomical Observatory, funded by the estate of the late pioneer capitalist James Lick (1796-1870), had just opened prior to the Vendome debut, and the world’s attention was drawn to what was then, the world’s largest telescope. Had the observatory been located on the Valley floor, perhaps only the more astute visitors would have come to see it, but placed on Mount Hamilton, one of our highest peaks, all manner of folks, tourist and local, charmed to take the 28 mile stage or buggy ride to the top.

Riders would leave the Vendome at 7:30 a.m. and arrive at the Observatory at 1 p.m. The ride out of town and over the first mountain range brought you to Hall's Valley at 9:35 a.m., then an hour later the stage arrived at Smith Creek Station where drivers changed horses for the last seven miles up from a 2,000 foot elevation to 4,200 at the top.

Smith Station, the jumping off place for the top, had a hotel for visitors who stayed over before or after their experience at the Observatory. The hotel received, as the archives of the San Jose Historical Museum, lists a number of famous people who stayed overnight there. Most travelers had only an hour to see the Observatory before returning at 2:15 to San Jose. The down town ride was much faster. The visitors who wanted to view the stars through the telescope left San Jose at noon and sometimes didn't return until 4:00 the next morning.

For most visitors, getting there was the best part. Baron Gustave von Berg, a scientist visiting Stanford University, described his trip in a travel letter of 1893: Not far from Palo Alto is San Jose, a most pretty little city with 20,000 inhabitants. The friendly villas with many tall palms and all kinds of tropical plants, surrounded by most beautiful orchards, were delightful. After lunch at a splendidly situated hotel the seven of us climbed into a coach with four fine chestnut horses and rode 4,000 feet up to the Lick Observatory, at present the largest in the world. ...It is currently planned to mount a somewhat larger refractor in Chicago, but nothing can replace the pure transparent air on Mount Hamilton! The road climbs in 365 curves with moderate grades through deep ravines, but it is a long way, the elevation is significant; we needed five and one-half hours to reach the observatory so that it was already dark on our arrival. We had, however, during the whole drive such a magnificent view, such a wonderful twilight and atmosphere, such rare flora, that we could hardly get over our rapture.

...There is no hotel at the observatory, so we had to ride back to San Jose. Was that a trip! In darkness, always downhill, down abysses, without any protection, how our four chestnuts raced! We shut our eyes and thought "As God will;" so we were happy to lie safely in our beds in San Jose at 2 o'clock in the morning.

Through darkness and bad weather the Mount Hamilton Stage Line horses were sure footed, and, according to Clyde Arbuckle, there was never an accident on this curving, treacherous road to the top. The Stage Company, which operated daily until 1973, replaced the horses with motorized transport in 1911.
The trip to Mount Hamilton became a favorite trip for local groups as well. Whole classes of Normal School students made it a regular seasonal outing, and poets such as Henry Mead Bland, Carrie Stevens Walter and Edwin Markham wrote of their ramblings on the hillsides there.

Changing Times

Changes in transportation and tourist habits made the Vendome Hotel-Lick Observatory adventure less attractive. Motor stages didn’t require stops along the way up Mount Hamilton, and the Lick telescope was eclipsed by newer, more powerful instruments elsewhere.

The Vendome Hotel was seriously damaged in the 1906 earthquake when a three story addition fell like a house of cards. It was a miracle that only one man, Thomas O’Toole, was killed in the wreckage. The noted local architect William Weeks took on the job of restoration. In spite of this renovation the Hotel was becoming something of a white elephant. In the post-World War I era San Jose’s emphasis was turning from tourism to manufacturing and food processing. The rambling old hotel escaped the wrecking ball in 1919 and limped along until 1930 when a syndicate headed by J. Bradley Clayton and Frazier Reed purchased it to be razed and the grounds prepared for an exclusive housing tract.

The destruction of the Vendome signaled the end of big time tourism in San Jose. The grand old lady had served her purpose however. She had helped put the Valley on the map and in the minds of many visitors who would return to become residents. We will never again have a hotel with the grandeur and spaciousness of that wonderful old hotel.

Editor’s note: Jack Douglas’s new book: Historic San Jose: Tales of Nativel Park, published by the Campus Community Association, is now available in the museums’ City Stores.

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Over sixty stunning examples of California Indian basketry and commentary from native basketweavers, artists and scholars.

I Want it At My Fingertips!
Help! A Record Book for Household Names, Notes & Numbers
Published by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, this book provides easy access to important phone numbers and addresses. A perfect house-warming gift!

All photos: Lisa Falk

Volunteer Opportunities

HMSI's volunteers open the doors for many visitors who are interested in understanding multicultural history. Volunteer training is ongoing. If you know someone interested in joining us, call Jennifer Warner at (408) 918-1050.

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