



# The Echo

Volume 95

Number 1

Where the Past is Present

Spring/Summer 2022

## Exciting New Exhibit Celebrates Altadena History

**Fourteen Decades of Altadena History 1883 – 2017**

**A**tribute to the history of Altadena will greet visitors to the Altadena Community Center when they return to the building after its pandemic closure. Located on the west wall of the lobby, a professionally designed exhibit features events from each decade, tied to the rings on a slice of Christmas Tree Lane's Tree # 8, felled in 2017.

Inspired by Deodar Cedars he had seen in Italy, John Woodbury, who first envisioned a community named Altadena, ordered seeds from abroad to be planted along the long driveway to his planned estate in the tract owned by him and his brother, Fred.

John Woodbury left Altadena before he could build his estate, but the seeds were planted in 1883 by Fred Woodbury in the nursery adjacent to his own home and carefully tended by his foreman, Tom Hoag, who transplanted the seedlings to what is now Santa Rosa Avenue in 1885 with

### What's Inside

**Presidents Message**

**House Research**

**Chinese Workers in  
Altadena History**

**Eliot Jr. High/Arts  
Magnet**

the help of Chinese laborers.

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The deodars and the community grew together for more than 100 years. Now *Fourteen Decades of Altadena History*, a unique visual history of Altadena, links the two by highlighting historical events from each decade on the annular rings of a slice of a deodar tree trunk lost to drought in 2017.

Sponsored by the Altadena Community Center Advisory Board (ACCAB) and Altadena Historical Society, the project



Deodar tree #8 (also known as "Herbert") was cut down in 2017. Herbert succumbed to years of severe drought and had to be cut down for public safety. He lived through fourteen decades of Altadena History. Herbert was named by local resident Rene' Amy, who saved him from the dump.

*continued on page 3*

# President's Letter *by Jane Brackman*

**H**ello Altadena history buffs — after a four-year hiatus, I'm pleased to once again serve as AHS President as we plan for the future.

Special thanks goes to outgoing President Eric Mulfinger who made sure that AHS archives remained a vital research center, even though the county building has been closed for over two years.

And thanks to volunteers Annika Nelson, who is heading to college, and Sumayyah Jewel who has moved on to professional opportunities in the archival field.

## **Board of Directors**

*President, Jane Brackman*

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## **Volunteers**

*Ruth Dawson*

*Laurie Kinsinger*

*Mary Landau*

*Paula Wegner*

*Pam Wright*

*Dina Zanrosso*

One of the big projects coming up for us is mapping a strategic plan that will carry us through 2027, including broadening our collection, focusing on our purpose as a research center, evaluating the results of our projects, and more.

Several other projects are already in the works:

- With Altadena Heritage, we're co-sponsoring a program about the restoration of Owen Brown's gravesite, to be held at Mountain View's courtyard terrace on April 21, from 7-8:30 pm. No more reservations are available as the site has reached capacity, but the program will be shown on the AH and AHS websites and YouTube channels after the event.

- Along with the Altadena Community Center Advisory Board (ACCAB), we're sponsoring the fantastic permanent exhibit just completed in the lobby of the Community Center "Fourteen Decades of Altadena History." Plan to join us for the exhibit opening to be announced when the county re-opens the center.

- And this month, our digital newsletter, "Notes from the Archives," will begin printing monthly installments of a



fascinating letter found in the Sara Noble Ives book "Altadena"— a first-person account of what it was like to purchase West Altadena real estate during the land boom of 1888, how the bottom fell out by 1900, and what it was really like during those winter storms (we used to have) where water tore down the canyons and small tributaries, then crashed through private property.

I think you'll enjoy this newsletter. We provide accounts of what life was like for Chinese laborers, how Eliot changed from then to now, how to research your house written by house historian Tim Gregory, and an overview of the exhibit mentioned above.

I'm glad to be back, and proud to be part of this successful nonprofit organization that serves and documents the history of our small town.

With your help we're accomplishing remarkable things.



## New Exhibit *continued from page 1*

began when Tree #8 was cut down and a thin slice of the trunk preserved. Rene Amy, who preserved this tree cookie, met retired exhibit designer Baeri Penn on a trail clearing hike, and the rest, as they say, is history.

As work on the ring dating began it became clear that Herbert, as Tree #8 is known, had two sets of rings. This is because the tip of the tree's main stem was damaged, causing two branches, each with its own set of rings to grow upward.

Images for the exhibit were carefully chosen to represent a cross section of Altadena events from the 1880s through the 2010s. Mount Lowe Railroad, Altadena's first school, saving the Cobb Estate, political



**Designer Baeri Penn installing exhibit**

Supervisory District 7. Special thanks go to Community Center Director II Liliana Garcia who guided us through County regulations.

Join us for a party celebrating the exhibit and the reopening of the Community Center, planned for later this spring. Art, history, and entertainment combine to make this an event to remember.

— *By Jean Phillips*



**Installer Tony Ruffalo checks his work**

events, and disasters – they all appear in their decade. And a second series of images have been prepared to allow us to document even more of Altadena's history in the future.

The exhibit is a true community effort with several people donating their time and talents to gain ACCAB sponsorship, preserve the tree cookie, research the history, locate images, and build the display (see exhibit credits below). Funds for erecting the exhibit were provided by Los Angeles County



**Dendrologist Trevis Matheus PhD. dating tree rings**



## Researching the History of Your Altadena House

Researching the history of houses in Altadena is usually not a simple, one-step process, unless a record exists of someone else's research on the same property. Buildings built before 1933 are especially difficult to trace because County building permit records before that year no longer exist, and the County didn't even start issuing permits until 1927! Still, information can be found by consulting a variety of sources. And, armed with patience and determination, the amateur "house detective" can have a lot of fun in the process!

## STEP 1: ASK AROUND

Contact prior owners and neighbors to find out what they may know about the history of your property. (Always take what you hear with a "grain of salt" unless you can find written documentation to back it up!)

## STEP 2: CONSULT THE ALTADENA HERITAGE SURVEY DATABASE

This online database contains much of the information gathered by the architectural and historical resources survey of the community conducted by Altadena Heritage



Photo: Altadena Heritage

**Documents shown in this article illustrate how the history of this house at 1405 La Solana Drive, ca. 1990, was researched**

in the early 1990s.

<http://ahad.altadenaheritagepdb.org/>

### STEP 3: CONTACT THE ALTADENA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The Altadena Historical Society, as well as having access to the Altadena Heritage database, is also a great resource for more in-depth information on your property. Volunteers can do research for you, but you are also welcome to visit and do your own research (always check first for their open hours). Some of the Society's resources include Pasadena-area directories, files on Altadena people, local newspaper archives, property records originally maintained by the William Wilson real estate company, and Altadena Heritage document files that contain historic news-clippings, photos, etc.

<https://www.altadenahistoricalociety.org/>  
730 East Altadena Drive, Altadena, CA  
91001 626-797-8016

## STEP 4: VISIT THE LOS ANGELES COUNTY ASSESSOR'S DISTRICT OFFICE

The Assessor's building records will reveal how your house originally appeared and will show any alterations that triggered a reassessment even if they were

LA SOLANO										N. E. W. of	No.	1406	
PRICE	2	Stys.	6	Rms.	M's Bd. Rms.	2	Bths.	Slp. Pchs.	1	Kr. Bd. Rm.	1	Bthr.	DATE
21,000													6/17/87
O.K.													2/17/88
\$20,000													7/18/88
16,000													1/22/90
10													1/24/92
10													10/1/93
10													2/2/95
10													7/27/96
10													10-22-97
OWNER	B. O. Kendall --- see Mr Morris or Mr Curtis												
ADDR													
PHONE	By 77205												
THE WILLIAM WILSON COMPANY													RESIDENCE

## Property record from the William Wilson file





directories housed at the Altadena Historical Society. You can look up the address in a special section of the directory and see who lived there. But be aware the names may be renters rather than owners. Also be aware that Altadena address numbers (and even street names!) changed, especially in 1928 and 1941.

The intrepid researcher can consult the Grantor/Grantee indexes housed at the County Recorder's Office. The staff there can help you get started.

Although the deed records date back to the earliest days, searching can be tedious, especially if the grantor or grantee's names are common ones. Also, if a grant deed went unrecorded or a property transaction was accomplished by means of a different kind of legal instrument, it might not show up in the index. This means you can easily lose your thread of research.

*Los Angeles County Recorder*  
12400 Imperial Highway, Norwalk, CA 90650  
800-201-8999

## STEP 7: OTHER SOURCES OF BUILDING AND PEOPLE INFORMATION

- The archives of the Pasadena Museum of History contain much information on local people and their houses. They are currently accepting visitors by reservation only.

<https://pasadenahistory.org/>  
470 West Walnut Street Pasadena, CA 91107  
626-577-1660

- The History Department of the Los Angeles Public Library (LAPL) has an online California Index which has citations to many newspaper and periodical articles. The Library also has contractors' journals on microfilm, including the *Los Angeles Builder and Contractor* (1893-1917), the *Southwest Contractor and Manufacturer* (1908-1917),

and the *Southwest Builder and Contractor* (1917-1966); online Sanborn maps where each street is shown with an outline of each building's "footprint"; and the online Los Angeles Times historic database. For access to online databases, you will need an LAPL library card, but other local libraries do offer some access.

<https://www.lapl.org/collections-resources/research-and-homework> Los Angeles Public Library 630 West 6th Street, Los Angeles, CA 90071



- The California Death Index gives death dates 1905 and later for all persons who died in California. Los Angeles County is indicated by numeric codes 19 and 70 in the listings. Remember that anyone dying outside California, even if only during a short trip out-of-state, will not be included. Once you know a death date you can research a published obituary elsewhere.

[http://www.vitalsearch-](http://www.vitalsearch-ca.com/gen/ca/_vitals/cadeathm.htm)

[ca.com/gen/ca/\\_vitals/cadeathm.htm](http://www.vitalsearch-ca.com/gen/ca/_vitals/cadeathm.htm)

- Ancestry.com is an invaluable aid in researching biographical material. Census records up to 1940 are rich with information on names, ages, birthplaces, occupations, and other data about people.

- Newspaper articles can be very informative and contain many obituaries. Unfortunately, the Pasadena Star-News is currently inaccessible due to the long-term closure of Pasadena's central library. However, the Pasadena Post which published between 1919 and 1943 is available online.

<https://www.newspapers.com/paper/the-pasadena-post/22474/>

— By Tim Gregory



# Chinese Workers in Early Altadena

## *More from the Libby Edwards Collection*

“From 1865 to 1869, as many as 20,000 Chinese laborers worked on the Central Pacific Railroad, which ran from Sacramento to Promontory Summit, Utah. The Central Pacific could not have been built without them — and without the Central Pacific, the history of the American West and California in particular might have been very different.”  
—*Michael Hiltzak, The Los Angeles Times, April 5, 2019*

Historian Michele Zack, in her in-depth historical look at our town in *Altadena Between Wilderness and City*, published by Altadena Historical Society in 2004, describes how Chinese migrants took to agricultural work after the Transcontinental Railroad was completed in 1869 and where they worked in Altadena. The Fair Oaks Ranch employed many Chinese workers on “Eaton’s Vineyard,” later owned by James Crank, who increased the number of vines to support his Sierra Madre Vintage Company. In 1883 alone, Crank spent over \$4,000 for “China men, grape pickers, \$4,171.35”.

Fred Woodbury hired ‘Chinese coolies’ to work in the garden of his Woodbury Ranch (Marengo and Lake, Altadena Drive and Woodbury Road). Brother John hired Chinese labor to build North Lake Avenue as well as



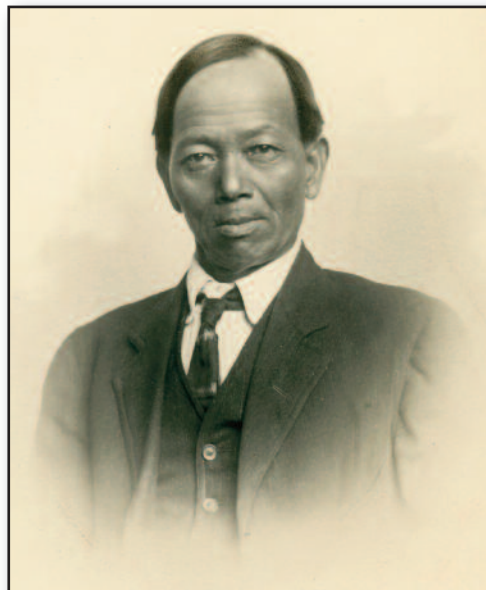
**Chinese laborers working on the Central Pacific Railroad**

Santa Rosa and Santa Anita Avenues, which feature stone rock drains on both sides of the street. They also helped plant 140 deodars along Santa Rosa Avenue which became Christmas Tree Lane.

According to Stanford historian Gordon H. Chang’s book *Ghosts of Gold Mountain*, Chinese workers in California were acknowledged as ubiquitous and indispensable, but they were accorded no voice. History has, until recently rendered them “all but invisible.... In fact, in some instances Chinese are written out of the story altogether.”

Mrs. Agnes Crank’s (Fair Oaks Ranch) essay “Ranch Life 50 Years Ago”, a copy of which is included in the Libby Edwards collection, offers a personal look at relations between employers and Chinese laborers who worked as house servants in homes or ranches. Her account helps us fill in some of the story as it occurred in Altadena.

Agnes Crank employed a “first rate Chinese servant named Joe, who, with the help of a house boy, did all the

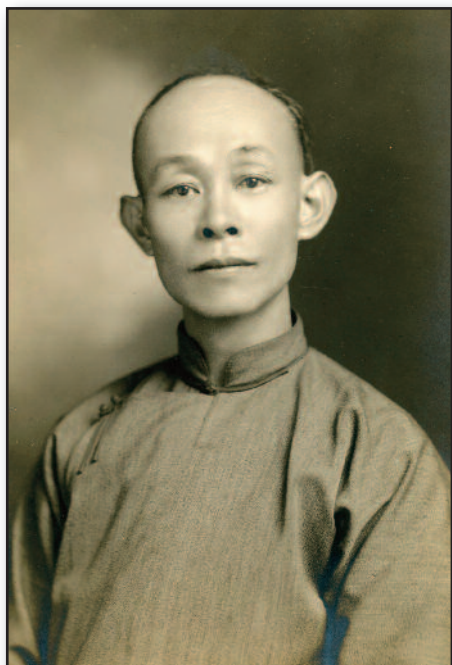


**Probably Ah Tong, Brigden house employee**

cooking, laundry work and housework, and had an eye to the garden besides."

After his domestic duties were complete, Joe would put on his best clothes to oversee the 'ranch coolies' in the fields. Mrs. Crank recalled Joe telling her "Plenty China boys, but no one like me." Mrs. Crank agreed with Joe on that point as he looked after her family very well.

Joe helped find a house boy, newly arrived from China, aged twelve, named On – the same age as Mrs. Crank's own son at that time. On had a frightful



**On – Houseboy to Mrs. Agnes Crank at The Fair Oaks Ranch and later cook to Mrs. H.L. Brigden at Brigden Ranch**

first ride out to Fair Oaks Ranch and Mr. Crank had to chase On when he jumped out of the wagon in fear. Eventually On settled in, learned English,



**Letters from Ah Tong and On to Mrs. Brigden**

accepted Christianity, and became an important member of the household. On became Mrs. Brigden's cook after the Fair Oaks Ranch was subdivided and eventually a restaurant cook in Pasadena. As Mrs. Crank tells it, On went back to China when his nails grew very long.

She tells of Capt. Hutchinson's Chinese manservant who, when told of his employer's engagement, stated he would not be directed by a woman. It was either the future Mrs. Hutchinson or him. The Captain released the man from service, whereupon he changed his mind. "If she no scare you, maybe she no scare me – I think I'll stay!".

Mrs. Crank's friends, the Vails of Chester Place (Doheny House) in Los Angeles, kept an English-style home and expected

their Chinese manservant to uphold decorum as an English butler. He grew into the role and soon took to judging guests based on the number and quality of their shoes. When the Vails' financial status spiraled, the Chinese English butler was let go as they could no longer afford to pay him. His response was "What for I go? You like me. I like you. I stay here." Then he offered his life savings to Mr. Vail.

The collection also includes letters between Brigden Ranch employers and their servants, and photos of Chinese workers who lived and worked in our foothills, that show warm relationships between Chinese workers and their Altadena employers.

**1896:** Brigden Ranch house servant, Ah Tong, visited Mr M.T. Whitaker, brother of Helen Whitaker



Brigden. Tong feared his right to remain, work in Altadena was in jeopardy as alleged by Mr. Parks, Brigden Ranch overseer. Mr. Whitaker counseled his sister to speak with Tong and make sure Parks knows he may not interfere with men in her employ.

**1903:** Ah Tong writes Mrs. Brigden “arrived safely and saw many old friends (in San Francisco).



**Chinese family: possibly family of Ah Tong or On**

Sailed for China – it will take a month to get there. Will write again when I get to Hong Kong, Your obedient servant.” Ah Tong wrote again from San Ning China, “Arrived safely after a 31-day

voyage”. He writes of his pending marriage and how he also misses her and all “friends who treat him kindly in the U.S.

**1904:** Fair Oaks Ranch house boy and later Brigden Ranch cook On wrote to Mrs. Brigden from China – happy to see family but missing his Pasadena friends. He described high prices in China as

well as growth of Christianity, which he praised but “millions of souls yet to be saved”.

While life in Altadena appears to have been peaceful for Chinese workers, it contrasted with what was happening in more urban settings.

Archaeology Professor Stacey Lynn Camp explains in her book *The*

*Archaeology of Citizenship* that an economic downturn during the Gilded Age (1876-1900) turned American support and hunger for a Chinese labor force sour. The Immigration Act of 1875 made “contracting to supply Chinese laborers” a



**Helen Louise Whitaker Brigden (daughter-in-law to Mrs. Agnes Crank)**

felony, punishable by law. This was the first U.S. immigration policy designed to exclude individuals based on ethnic or racial basis. The 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act further restricted opportunities for Chinese migrant workers already here. There were a number of brutal and even deadly attacks on Chinese workers in Pasadena and Los Angeles, but as far as we know, none in Altadena.

Despite the larger political climate, these documents from the Edwards collection show Chinese workers in the foothills and ranches of early Altadena, were mostly welcomed, encouraged, and appreciated.

— By Deirdre Del Re

# From Jr. High to Arts Magnet: The evolution of Eliot Junior High School

**C**harles W. Eliot Junior High School has been a landmark in Altadena since it was completed in 1931. Designed by noted Pasadena architects Sylvanus Marston and Edgar Mayberry, Eliot was named for the Harvard University president who was responsible for the concept of junior or middle school. With its tower and art deco details, it was



**7th grade sewing class model dresses they made, 1939**

and eighth grades as the sixth grade has been moved from the elementary schools to middle schools in Pasadena Unified School District.



**Newly built Eliot School, early 1930s**

considered at the time to be one of the most beautiful schools in Southern California. Eliot has remained a junior high school for all of its 91 years.

When Eliot opened in 1931, it served 600 students in seventh, eighth, and ninth grades. The following year it added tenth grade. In the 1950's the tenth grade was moved to Muir High School and Pasadena High School. This may have been because of the increase in student population due to the baby boomers reaching middle and high school age.

Eliot now serves students in sixth, seventh

Over the years several things have been changed on the Eliot campus. In 1949 new shop buildings were added to the south side of the campus to house manual arts classrooms for wood working and metal arts. All boys were required to take these classes.

Female students took Homemaking where they learned sewing, cooking, baking and other household "arts". Unlike today, these classes were *very* gender specific.

A gymnasium was added in 1953 with separate facilities for each gender that included dressing rooms and showers. Students were expected to bring clean gym cloths to school each Monday (using the gym bag the girls learned to make in their Homemaking classes) and to change into their gym cloths for their gym class then shower after they were done – quite a lot to accomplish in under 50 minutes!

In 1959 an extensive seismic restoration





art studios, an art project lab, an industrial arts room, vegetable garden and an 800-seat auditorium.

Eliot honors its past by retaining the original mascot and colors: The Husky and



**Student-designed mural added to Eliot Arts Magnet**

was completed when it was discovered that the tall windows on the west wall of the auditorium were not structurally strong enough to support the tower in the event of a major earthquake. The class of 1959 had to hold its graduation ceremony in the gym.

green and white. It is looking to the future by living by its school motto:

In 2013, with the advent of the concept of magnet schools, Eliot became the first and only arts magnet school In PUSD and took the name of Eliot Arts Magnet Academy. A beautiful mural was added to the north wall of the main entrance to express its creative curriculum.

“Nurturing students' academic achievement through music, dance, theater and visual arts”.

The school serves students who live within Eliot's school district plus those who have applied for admission through the school district's open enrollment policy where they are chosen for attendance through a lottery.



**Photos from Eliot Arts Magnet website**

The school reaches out to the community by offering monthly school tours and has had Community Arts Partners with several area arts institutions such as the Huntington Library, Art Center College of Design, and the Pasadena Playhouse.

The school now has 60 classrooms, and includes a library, two computer labs, a video-recording studio, a dance studio, two

— *By Kathy Hoskins*



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VISIT OUR BLOG!

[altadenahistoricalsociety.blogspot.com](http://altadenahistoricalsociety.blogspot.com)

Altadena Historical Society (AHS), a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization was founded to gather, preserve, and make available information about the people, places and events that have shaped Altadena's past.

**Please join or renew today!**

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