

The Echo

Volume 99

Number 2

Where the Past is Present

Winter 2025

Altadena Historical Society Now an Octogenarian Celebrated 80th Birthday on Jan. 14

Former AHS board member Rob Hallwachs wrote this history of AHS for our 80th anniversary. Originally published in 2015, we're reprinting it in 2025 to mark our 90th anniversary.

Altadena Historical Society began as a splinter group--a breakaway offshoot from The Better Housing Program of Altadena.

Minutes of the first meeting on Jan. 14, 1935, say originally it was to have been the Women's

Division of the Altadena's Better Housing Program but the organizers decided to branch off and organize on their own.

Turn-of-the-century Altadena had a plethora of clubs, organizations and associations, but the founding women took community improvement and history as their mission, calling themselves the Altadena Historical and Beautification Society.



Josephine Marsh

The organizer and driving force for the early years was Josephine Marsh, who with her husband Frederick was active in community affairs. (Frederick was the architect of several local projects, including the classical Altadena library on Lake Avenue built in 1937. He also designed some

Update

Since this article was written AHS has continued to grow. We've added significant collections and interesting memorabilia to our archives, expanded our collection to represent all the people and neighborhoods of Altadena, increased our digital footprint with Facebook and Instagram, upgraded our digitization efforts, created gallery exhibits in the archive, and partnered with many community organizations. We look forward to collecting, preserving and sharing Altadena's history in the years to come.

community Rose Parade floats.)

Hats, Furs and a Fountain

The founding members pictured here (19 women, 16 of them wearing hats, a few sporting furs, and all with ankle-length hems) quickly tackled both interests. They commissioned charter member, author and illustrator Sarah Noble Ives to write the history of the community, and they made successful efforts to organize the hodgepodge of Altadena street names and house-numbers.

By July of 1935 they had raised funds and gotten the necessary permissions to install a public drinking



Members of the Altadena Historical and Beautification Society – 1935

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President's Message *by Veronica Jones*



Dear Altadena Historical Members,

As the year comes to an end, we are excited to share our latest updates on what's happening within our organization and our plans for the upcoming holiday season.

First and foremost, we are making significant progress on our Oral History project, which aims to preserve the stories of those affected by

the Eaton Fire. We have conducted 15 interviews so far and are one-third of the way through this two-year effort. Your support has been essential to the project's success, and we thank you for helping us keep the voices of Altadena heard. This important project seeks to capture the lived experiences of those impacted by the Eaton Fire on January 7, 2025. Through these interviews, we are collecting heartfelt stories about what brought individuals to Altadena, their lives in our vibrant community, the challenges they faced during the fire, and their visions for the future of Altadena and their roles within this community.

The messages from these interviews resonate with themes of hope and resilience. It is truly inspiring to witness the strength of our community as we come together to honor these stories.

We will be partnering with other organizations on this project in the coming year.

The excitement grows as we re-release the book "Altadena Between Wilderness and City" by Michele Zack, expected to

be available by mid-December. This book was published over 20 years ago, and many have lost their copies in the fire. You can pre-order it on our website.

We are excited to announce the upcoming 90th Anniversary Holiday Celebration on **December 14th at the Carriage House** on Santa Rosa Ave. In partnership with Altadena Heritage, this event will feature the launch of "Altadena Between Wilderness and City." You will have the opportunity to order the highly anticipated book. Admission is free for current AHS members who RSVP online. Don't miss this great opportunity to celebrate the season and our community's rich history!

After much anticipation, AHS is pleased to announce that we are once again open to the public. Our new hours are from **10 a.m. to 12 p.m. on the first Sunday of each month**, and we are

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**ALTADENA:
PAST, PRESENT & FUTURE
MULTI-MEDIA HISTORY CONTEST**

SPONSORED BY ALTADENA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

8th Grade History Project

- For more information: altadenahistoricalsociety.org
- Cash prizes and award ceremony
- Due February 28, 2026

626-757-8016 Altadena Community Center

We are pleased to announce A Research-Based Multimedia Art Contest for Altadena eighth graders.

Participants will have individualized access to the collection of maps, vintage photos, interviews, and stories at the Altadena Historical Society to research their project and create a visual or multimedia representation that teaches others about what they have learned.

Using their creativity to design a visual or multimedia representation of their investigations, such as a short film, a podcast, or an interactive display, students will gain experience using important 21st century skills while developing critical analytical skills using primary resources; all while learning about a topic that is deeply meaningful to them and their community. Cash prizes are awarded to contest winners. For more information, please go to Altadenahistoricalsociety@yahoo.org.

also available by appointment. We hope to broaden our hours soon.

To preserve Altadena’s history after January’s tragic fire, AHS collaborated with designer Baeri Penn to update the “17 Decades of Altadena History” exhibit in the Community Center lobby. Be sure to see the new historical images when you visit the AHS Archives. The exhibit is open Monday through Friday from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

On January 15, 2026, Paul Ayres will return with another of his popular talks titled “Altadena After the Fire: What is Lost and What Remains.” Please check our website for more details.

As we approach the holiday season, it's clear that our organization has had a busy year, and we couldn't have achieved this without your unwavering

support. From the impactful Juneteenth celebration, which honored the historical significance of this important day and awarded scholarships to local students, to the launch of our oral history project, and the recent re-release of the "Altadena between Wilderness and City" book, our dedication to preserving and promoting Altadena’s rich history continues to grow. It is because of you that we exist.

Thank you for your continued support. We encourage you to stay engaged as we move into the new year, and I look forward to sharing more updates soon. Wishing you all a happy and peaceful holiday season!

*Warm regards,
Veronica Jones
President
Altadena Historical Society*

PRE-SALE

ALTADENA

BETWEEN WILDERNESS AND CITY

90th Anniversary
SPECIAL COMMEMORATIVE EDITION

The Altadena Historical Society commissioned noted journalist, historian, and Altadena resident Michele Zack to write the history of Altadena over 20 years ago.



This edition features historical photographs and illustrations, many of which were reproduced for the first time in the original printing. The Altadena Historical Society is reissuing the book in celebration of its 90th anniversary, with a hardcover that includes enhanced photographs and a mention of the Eaton Fire.

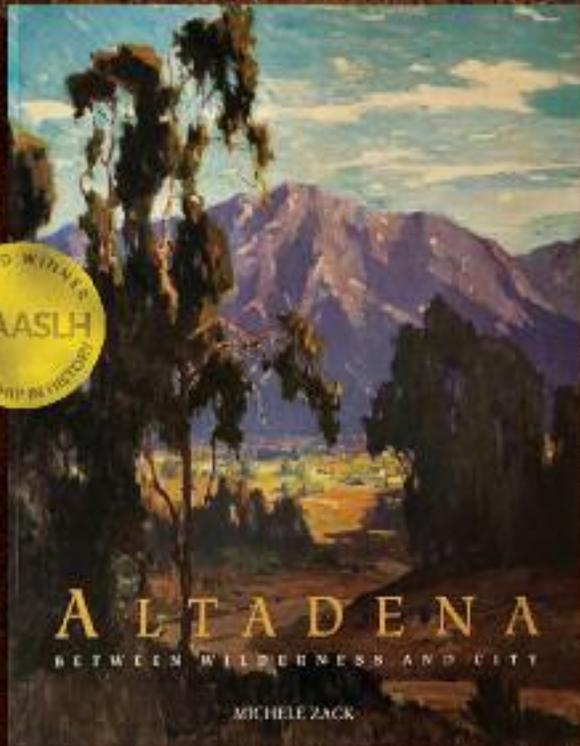
The book received an Award of Excellence from the American Association for State and Local History in 2010. It earned high praise from scholars.

Hardcover, \$100
+ \$10.50 tax, if shipped +\$6

May be picked up at the
Altadena Historical Society's office
after December 15th.



Order Direct



fountain in front of the Security First National Bank on Lake Avenue at the northeast corner with Mariposa. (Unfortunately, it fell victim to a run-in with a car a few decades later.)

Thoughtfully, the fountain had a lower bowl for pets, and water was provided free of charge by Rubio Canyon Land and Water Association.



County Supervisor Roger Jessup at the Dedication of the Fountain on N. Lake Ave. —September 1935

Trees, Poppies and Bird Calls

Prudent use of water, one of the society's interests, was part of their beautification campaign, leading to many landscaping projects. They planted palm trees along Fair Oaks Avenue, sowed California poppy seeds on barren hillsides following the 1935 La Vina fire and went after property owners with weedy vacant lots and shack-like garages and sheds. They also sent letters to merchants "urging them not to put store sweepings in the gutters." (Their efforts were reportedly successful).

In the early years, the monthly meetings in members' homes had the flavor of a women's club or literary society of that era. The group's business discussions were usually followed by vocal and piano presentations, book reviews, poetry readings and personal recollections –followed, of course, by refreshments.

A newspaper article about the monthly meeting dated May 25, 1936, says "Ralph J. Wyatt will give a talk and present beautifully colored stereopticon views made by himself of beauty spots in Altadena Park. Bird calls will be made by Mrs. Naomi Sweeny Brown, 'the California Mockingbird,' as Mr. Wyatt throws on the screen photographs of birds that frequent the park."

No Wars or Quarrels

Meanwhile, Ms. Ives doggedly pursued the community's history. Resident Clara Johnson wrote in her journal, "In the late 1930s a very lovely little

old lady trudged up and down the streets of Altadena ringing doorbells..."

"Her house-to-house canvassing was not to sell" cosmetics, encyclopedias or vacuum cleaners, but to gather information for the history book.

Funded by the society and advance sales, Ives' history book was published in 1938 after three years of work. Ives said her biggest concern was for the book's "authenticity," as she had to rely so much on people's memories.

Ms. Ives didn't think that "A history without a war... serious quarrel or catastrophe to give it zest" was deserving of the word "history" in its title, so the 350-page book was titled simply "Altadena."

Five hundred copies were printed and bound by the Pasadena Star-News commercial division. They sold for \$2; this was still the Great Depression. The book, no longer in print, is now a collector's item.

Change and Growth

From welcoming male members to dropping "community beautification" from its name and mission to focus solely on the community's history, the Historical Society has changed over the years. Founding members would be surprised – and, we hope, pleased – at the fruit of their efforts.

When longtime Supervisor Michael Antonovich lobbied the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors to build a community center in the heart of town, the Historical Society found its first permanent home and occupied an 800-square-foot space when the complex opened in 2003.

Today, the headquarters that society members call "Archives" overflows with a treasure trove of letters, journals, newspapers, photographs, books, maps and artifacts, and 80 years of society meeting minutes that tell much of the community's story.

The AHS Board still meets monthly, while the musical and literary presentations have been replaced by quarterly meetings, open to the public, featuring academic and amateur experts on aspects of Altadena history.

Fire Stories and Altadena's Future

by Cynthia Pearson and Veronica Jones

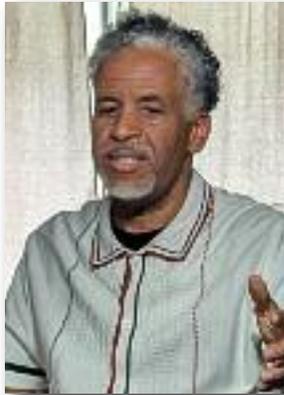
In June 2025, Altadena Historical Society launched the Altadena Oral History Project, debuting the Project at its Juneteenth celebration with a video that celebrates the stories of Altadena residents who survived the Eaton Fire. During the coming year The Oral History Project will continue to preserve the histories of Altadenans in recorded interviews that make clear why Altadena and its residents are so special.

The first phase of the project focused on Black History and Fire Stories and featured seven community members: Lowell Jones, Bennie Maupin, Sheldon Wright, Toni Raines, Shannon Larusel, Dori Larusel, and Cheryl Branum. The stories and memories shared by the participants highlighted aspects of Altadena that contributed to idyllic childhoods and peaceful living for decades: strong relationships among neighbors and celebratory community events set in the quiet and nature-filled enclaves of the foothills. The video concentrated on the history of Altadena's Black residents, many of whose families spanned multiple generations in the area and comprised an important and special community within Altadena. The pain of losing properties that were personal and family legacies going back decades was evident as each participant recalled the events of January 6 and 7 and the aftermath, but the aspirations and resilience of the community was apparent even within the devastation and loss. In capturing the stories of these Altadenans and their hopes for a future Altadena – specifically Black Altadena -- that retains its spirit and identity in a new, transcendent form, the Oral History Project's first phase brought together reflections on the past and the future in a precarious but potential-filled moment in Altadena's history. "Some of what I grew up in will be part of what Altadena becomes," said Sheldon Wright.

Since that first installment, the Oral History has filmed additional oral histories from

Altadena community members, focusing on the personal stories of each contributor's past, present, and future in Altadena: how each contributor came to live or work in Altadena, their observations of Altadena during the duration of their residency, their experiences during the Eaton Fire, and how the fire events have shaped their plans for the future.

With so many Altadena residents still displaced and community knowledge at risk of disappearing, the Oral History Project has documented (and continues to collect) important family histories, helping to illustrate the various waves of immigration into Altadena



Sheldon Wright

and the reasons families came to Altadena – and why they stayed. The Project has also captured vivid descriptions of Altadena over the last several decades and how the community has changed in those years. Supplementing the pre-existing (and luckily surviving) archives and objects at the Altadena Historical Society, the Oral History Project commemorates individual stories and lineages within the context of Altadena's broader and longer history.

Of course, the Project was inspired by and centers the Eaton Fire. The first-person accounts of the fire experience are filled with emotion and show how this pivotal event had massive impact on the community at large. Despite the tragic nature of the Fire, the interviews have consistently shown the deep connection and strength of the Altadena community and serve as a historical record of how Altadena is working to come back stronger than before.

Process and Production

The Oral Histories Team at Altadena History Project is composed of roughly seven volunteers who meet monthly to plan interviews and discuss the process. The core team is made up of Altadena community members, which allows for direct access to potential interviewees.

All of the interviews have been filmed by professional documentary filmmakers, resulting in a series of interviews that fully capture the interviewees' emotional and cultural experiences. In contrast to some other oral history projects that are solely captured on audio and are often segmented into individual stories, the Oral History Project serves an archival purpose as well as a narrative one; by filming the interviews, Altadena Historical Society is able to create short documentary films that are presented at public events – such as the Juneteenth event - - and then published online for future and wider viewing. These short documentaries illustrate to the Altadena community that they are not alone in their experience and foster connection, while also providing a timely view into Altadena for the rest of LA County and beyond.

Continued Work and Support

The Oral History Project's work is ongoing and, in many ways, is just getting started. With an open invitation to community members to share their stories, there is a large list of prospective interviewees eager to share their stories, each of whom will contribute to the enduring importance of this expansive project.

While leading the way, Altadena Historical Society is not alone in this effort and in fact working on developing partnerships in sharing and complementing its work. The Oral History Project has been featured on *LAist* in its extensive coverage of the Eaton Fire and its aftereffects, and community efforts to gather accounts and memories from Altadena's residents will sustain cultural information and understanding even as time passes and Altadena becomes its future version.

As the first year of the project approaches, Altadena Historical Society, with the generous support of the many donors, the Oral History Project can continue its necessary work to preserve and celebrate the history of Altadena through the stories of its people.

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Altadena Historical Society
730 E. Altadena Drive
Altadena, CA 91001-2351

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ALTADENA HISTORICAL
SOCIETY

730 E. Altadena Drive
Altadena, CA 91001

(626) 797-8016

email:

altadenahistorical.society@yahoo.com

website:

altadenahistoricalsociety.org

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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