



Sierra Madre Historical Preservation Society

November 2016 Newsletter

The Nathaniel Carter Barn

Story and photos by Joe Catalano

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At the top of Baldwin Avenue, there are three buildings of historic significance within the empty development there beyond the stone gates. One of them, the 1939 Willis House, is now in the hands of a caring owner, and the other two have a very uncertain future.

The land stretching beyond those gates had been Nathaniel Carter's estate, known as *Carterhia*, which was acquired by Cornelius Willis in the late 1930s. He built the 1939 house, replacing Carter's original Victorian, and the property remained in the Willis Family until just a few years ago. The property, which has also been known as One Carter, comprised 64 acres that is contiguous with land held by the Sierra Madre Mountains Conservancy and the Angeles National Forest. Then, in the early 2000s, the upper portion of the estate was given to the mountains conservancy, and the lower portion sold for development.

On this lower portion, the 1939 Willis House, a rambling yet modest structure, is remarkable for its large sliding glass walls which open much of the ground floor directly to the outdoors. It appeared in national publications shortly after it was built. The Willis House contributed to the California cachet of indoor-outdoor living, and is now a Sierra Madre designated Local Landmark.

The other two buildings, slightly farther up the hill and right adjacent to the roadway, go back much further in time. The George Macomber Cabin, built in 1864, is reputedly the first

settlement cabin in this part of the foothills. And, after Carter acquired the property in 1881, he built a barn and the two-story Victorian house with sweeping views over what is now Sierra Madre. He also dug wells and built a lake and fountains, and cultivated citrus and exotic gardens. All that is left now is his barn and a few remnants of his citrus orchard.

The barn and the Macomber Cabin now sit on one of the parcels in the nascent development on Carter's former property, boarded up and falling into disrepair. Both are important historic resources to us, figuring prominently in our early regional development. Much is yet to be researched about George Macomber as a pioneer in the area; however the cabin remains as a physical record. As is pretty obvious when viewing the cabin, it was added on to over time. While it is all very small by today's standards, the earliest parts are remarkably tiny, and tell a story of the need to build shelter from the elements in an expedient way.

This in itself can tell a story about the challenges of being one of the earliest settlers in a new land. A part of that story may be that Macomber did in fact build the cabin at a natural water source. There had been a riparian habitat coming down the canyon with a natural water flow, evidenced by a long stand of Sycamore trees, which ended right above the cabin. The riparian habitat and the Sycamores were lost when the debris basin was built in 1950, which diverted the natural water flow.

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President's Message

Do you look inside your garage and despair at the sight of all those storage boxes? Just think what a Historical Society accumulates that needs to be stored!

At our recent board meetings, storage has been one of our major topics of discussion. What all do we have in storage? Of course we have photos and documents and other ephemera which are safely at the archives in the library. But beyond that, we have seasonal decorations for the museums, all the necessary items to put on our events, all the equipment for the booth that we have at community festivals, garden and workman tools, and items for rotating exhibits such as Red Car and pottery exhibits, etc. It's just amazing what all we have – a spinning wheel, thermoses, three dress forms, ice chests, a wheel barrow, tables, our small books and pamphlets, wash tubs, two grinding wheels – and lots, lots more!

So where do we store all this stuff? We have the old tack shed behind the museums, part of which is taken up with a viewable display of barn equipment from the early days of Sierra Madre. We just open the wide doors on one side to allow the display to be enjoyed. Behind a partition are some of our storables.

And we also have a Tuff Shed behind the museums where more items are stored. Then in east Pasadena we have an old

storage unit where we store decorations that we use just once a year. This storage is rented to us for \$1 a month.

You'd think that would be enough storage space, but it's not, as all these storage spaces are not large. And none are climate controlled! We do have a dry climate, but storage can get very hot. For that reason, more sensitive items have been stored in various members' homes. One thing that takes up an enormous amount of space is three pallets' worth of copies of our big history book. Those are now in two members' homes where they are protected from the heat. Also we have a few paintings and some older paper items which are now also in homes.

We want to gather all those more sensitive items back, so that nothing is stored in members' homes. For that reason, we have just rented a climate-controlled storage space for them in Pasadena.

The next step is to inventory everything we have and, though it's organized, organize it even better. We'll undertake this during the cooler months. We'll be organizing some inventory fests and we hope you can come and help. Many hands make light work!

Maggie Ellis, *President*

Membership Report

A membership renewal period is always nervous-making for organizations, as it often happens that ten percent or more of their membership can decide not to renew. We were absolutely delighted that almost all of our members renewed

this year! We are extremely grateful for your continuing support.

And we are very happy to welcome new member Linda Jensen!

Maggie Ellis, *Membership Chair*



We have a NEW Facebook page!



We will be posting much more on Facebook to keep you up to date, but we found we had to close our old page due to technical difficulties. Our new page is "Sierra Madre Historical Preservation Society". You can search for it on Facebook, or you see it by going to our website smhps.org and clicking on the Facebook icon at the bottom of the home page. (Another way of getting to our website is to just google "Sierra Madre Historical Society")

You can post to our new Facebook page! And we hope you do. All you have to do is join our group. Look at the little menu on the left side of the Facebook page to find the groups category and join from there.

We welcome photos and items about Historical Society doings, our town's history, and local history. If you have any questions, please contact our new Facebook administrator Jan Wiles at jan.wiles@podley.com.



Board Report

August: Member Jeff Lapidés came to the board meeting to discuss proper storage and preservation of sensitive historical materials. He and another visiting member, Jay Whitcraft, discussed how to best preserve three old photographs found in our storage. It was decided to rent a climate-controlled storage unit. We discussed various repair issues at the museums, and the upcoming Richardson House restoration. We also discussed the Oral History project and our new Facebook account; both of these are covered in this newsletter's columns. In addition, we planned for upcoming events and prepared the budget. Rod Spears, the Library Liaison, reported on library doings.

September: We discussed storage at length, and whether to donate the three photos to the Huntington Library, that is interested in acquiring them. Board member Jan Wiles volunteered to create our entry for the scarecrow contest. There was considerable discussion about upcoming events, and about the museums (see Up at the Museums). Oral history transcriptions have been done (see the Oral History article). The budget was approved.

Oral History Update: Hearing Voices

By Louise Neiby

Our oral histories serve to piece together the past of our community. Currently, several projects are underway in our collection to access the voices from the past. Recently families have requested copies of their deceased relatives' oral histories so they could hear their voices.

During the 1990s, oral histories were captured on cassette tapes. Since the cassette tapes are in jeopardy of deteriorating, we are migrating the interviews on cassettes to archival CDs. The CD format will preserve and provide better access to the collection.

Since the early 2000s, oral histories have been recorded on CDs. We are starting to create transcriptions of selected oral histories from this CD collection. Transcription services are expensive, so we are grateful to Ann Benet, the owner of a court transcription service, for the pro bono transcription of some of our oral histories. Her trainees are happy to have oral materials to hone their skills, and we end up with free transcriptions. In the future, transcriptions will be located in the library for review by the public.

We continue our efforts to update and organize the collection.



Librarian Donna Howard (pictured here) will bring the library's October display of Old Sierra Madre postcards to our holiday party. They are images of as yet unidentified homes and scenes. Can you help identify them?

2016-2017 Board of Directors

Officers:

President	Maggie Ellis
Vice President	Amy Putnam
Secretary	Pat Karamitros
Treasurer	Richard Mays

Committee Chairs:

Education	Leslie Ziff
Facebook	Jan Wiles
Membership	Maggie Ellis
Museums Curators	Norma Bachwansky
	Mike Manning
Newsletter	Diane Sands
Oral History	Louise Neiby
Ways & Means	Christel Chang
Website	Maggie Ellis

Directors at Large:

Joe Catalano
Teresa Chaure
Matt Malley
Joan Spears

Non-Board Members:

Library Board of Trustees Liaison	Rod Spears
Board Development Chair	Judy Webb-Martin

www.smhps.org

SMHPS@outlook.com



Sierra Madre Historical Preservation Society



Members' Holiday Party



Old Sierra Madre Postcard Slide Show & Cookie Feast



Thursday, December 15
7:00 p.m.



Hart Park House in Memorial Park

Members & Guests only
(non-members can join at the door)

Come feast on holiday cookies and enjoy a slideshow of the Donnelly Sierra Madre postcard collection, with images of our town dating as far back as 1908. Our library's archivist, Michelle An, will give a little talk about how postcards give historians a unique view of past times.

If you were a Sierra Madre promoter back then, what images would you want to send out? Orange groves or fine homes?

If you were a resident, what images would you want to send to your family and friends? Maybe you'd choose a card showing the little downtown you went to every day. And if you were a visitor to town, what picture would you want to send to the folks back home?

There are some homes and other scenes that we cannot identify. Maybe you can help!



West Central Avenue (Sierra Madre Boulevard), circa 1920



Up at the Museums

By Norma Bachwansky

Our thanks to Jan Wiles and her crew for our amusing scarecrows this year! Stop by the museum and see a wonderful "Lizzie" handing out treats to three adorable little goblins. Make sure to check out Lizzie's hair – a very clever use of materials!

Have you seen the new signs inside Lizzie's? Our co-curator, Mike Manning, has been busy cleaning and arranging our exhibits and has added bright, professional signs. It's a welcome upgrade and makes our exhibits easy to identify and to learn about.

The weather is finally cooling and our two storage buildings are in urgent need of re-organizing. Shelving needs to be moved to make better use of the space, and cabinet drawers re-worked to make them open better, and then a place found for everything, organized and labeled, to make it easier to find and replace supplies.

Our major project for next spring will be painting Lizzie's. We are

looking for an organization or volunteer to help with that. Paint and supplies can be furnished.

The Sierra Madre Garden Club will begin meeting at Lizzie's once a month to do light maintenance on the garden. Our garden problems continue, with animals and termite work creating further issues. The deer (we suspect) are enjoying dinner on the large agaves recently planted by Louise Neiby and her gardener. The succulents, lavender, and rosemary seem to do well, so that may be the direction we are heading with future planting. We will keep you updated.

Check your last newsletter for volunteer opportunities of all kinds. There are many ways to be an active part of the museums and of the Historical Society. If you have an interest in participating in some way, email Norma at nmbach@live.com. Enjoy the holidays and get involved!



 **JUST IN!** Winner of Best Representation of Sierra Madre! 

Here's our own Lizzie handing out goodies to three trick or treaters in front of Lizzie's Trail Inn.

This wonderful scarecrow group is the creation of Jan Wiles.

Photo by Michael Ellis

Calendar of Upcoming Events

2016

- October 29** Cemetery event
November 17 Board Meeting at Hart Park House, 7:00 pm
November 26 Winterfest booth
December 15 Holiday Party & old Sierra Madre postcards slide show

2017

- January 18** TB and its history in Sierra Madre – talk by Michele Zack
February 16 Board Meeting at Hart Park House, 7:00 pm
March 16 Board Meeting at Hart Park House, 7:00 pm
March TBD Wistaria Festival booth
April 20 Board Meeting at Hart Park House, 7:00 pm
May 6-7 Art Fair booth
May 18 Board Meeting at Hart Park House, 7:00 pm
May 27 Mt. Wilson Trail Race booth
June 15 Board Meeting at Hart Park House, 7:00 pm
June 17 Lizzie's Chicken & Ravioli Dinner and Annual Meeting
June 30 End of SMHPS year



They say Old Lizzie's dead and gone,
 But on Halloween Eve her spirit lives on.
 No one ever had a friend as dear, nor as jovial as she.
 She made her home among the foothills here,
 Keeping house and keeping secrets,
 At her Inn upon the Trail.
 She served up moonshine next to supper,
 With mirth and laughter on the side.
 Herself an immigrant, a pioneer,
 She welcomed all with open arms.
 "Congenial" they say, "with a twinkle in her eye."
 None in this village
 Could ever resist her charms.
 And now when Harvest comes around,
 And thousands come to see,
 She smiles with pride at her little town,
 Which is so much her legacy.

Poem by Christa Backstrom (The Spirit of Sierra Madre)

Photo by Jan Wiles



The Nathaniel Carter Barn (continued from front page)

Carter of course is recognized as the founder of Sierra Madre. He migrated to California for health reasons, and one of his earliest endeavors was organizing and promoting tours for Easterners and Midwesterners. His venues included what was to become Sierra Madre, a locale that he "discovered" for its particularly healthy air and climate, and by the turn of the century the locus of this activity was the Sierra Madre Canyon, with tents, cottages and a number of health sanitariums. His 1881 purchase of the Sierra Madre Tract essentially comprises present day Sierra Madre. Carter kept the upper portion for himself, which became *Carterhia*, and then proceeded with development of the remainder.

What is important about the Carter Barn from a cultural standpoint is that Carter was a true visionary about California's bounty, and was in the forefront of "healthy" California living based on it. Using what at the time was an abundance of water, he developed water infrastructure for both development and his own horticultural and agricultural purposes at *Carterhia*.

He experimented with and developed his orange groves and other exotic plantings, as a visionary about California's bounty. The Barn of course was a center for all these activities.

From an architectural standpoint, the real fascination about the Barn is to be had on the inside. The exterior is plain boards, however what this covers is structure, visible on the inside, of a beautiful latticework of light wood framing, including lofts and a gangplank up to the inside of the pigeon coop cum cupola at the roof ridge. There have been some minor alterations to the Barn over time, but the essential character as Carter built it is very clear to see.

Today, both the Cabin and the Barn are unused, boarded up, and with uncertain fates as the surrounding development languishes. The Barn especially continues to deteriorate, and neither has been nominated for historic designation yet. Technically, the parcel on which both buildings sit is available for sale; however how to re-use these building is a very interesting question.

We hope that a good solution will emerge for preserving these important parts of our history.



Macomber Cabin



Nathaniel Carter Barn

BE SURE TO VISIT OUR NEW FACEBOOK PAGE!!!



Sierra Madre Historical Preservation Society



Sierra Madre Historical Preservation Society
 P.O. Box 202, Sierra Madre, CA 91025-0202
 (626) 836-6709
 www.smhps.org

SAVE THE DATE

Thursday, December 15
 7:00 p.m.

Old Sierra Madre Postcard
 Slide Show & Cookie Feast



Hart Park House
 in Memorial Park

Members & Guests only
 (non-members can join at the door)



SIERRA MADRE HISTORICAL PRESERVATION SOCIETY
 P.O. Box 202, Sierra Madre, CA 91025-0202
 Membership / Donation Form

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Telephone _____ E-mail _____

Membership Level

- ___ \$20 Individual
- ___ \$25 Family
- ___ \$5 Student
- ___ \$30 Contributing
- ___ \$60 Patron
- ___ \$100 Supporting
- ___ \$500 Lifetime

Specific Donations

- \$ _____ Sierra Madre Historical Archives
- \$ _____ Oral History Program
- \$ _____ Museums
- \$ _____ Richardson House
- \$ _____ Lizzie's Trail Inn

Total Enclosed: \$ _____
 Please make check payable to SMHPS.

The Sierra Madre Historical Preservation Society is a 501(c)(3).
 Your contributions are deductible within the limits of the law.
 Thank You.

Yes, I would like to be a volunteer for the SMHPS. _____