

Volume 36, Issue 4 *Fellow Citizens, we cannot escape history.* Abraham Lincoln Autumn, 2011

Our Great, Good Fortune: When a House is More than an Old Home

The scaffolding is up around the McKinney House, the work underway. Craftsmen are carefully restoring window frames and aligning crown molding. Nestled into a new coat of exterior paint, the House will soon present a fresh, welcoming face to the neighborhood.

The Society is fortunate indeed to be the steward of a robust, universally-recognized institution – the house museum.

The historic house museum is perhaps the paradigmatic historic site, the most common way for Americans to encounter local history.

Michelle McClellan
University of Michigan

The preservation model pioneered over 150 years ago by Mrs. Cunningham and the determined matrons of the Mount Vernon Ladies Association was given a tremendous boost by the American Bicentennial. Today the precise number of house museums in operation is unknown. The 1999 edition of the *Directory of Historic Houses* counted over 8000. In the Philadelphia area alone, there are at least 200. While the pace slackened after 1976, new sites enter the rolls every year.

Town & Country reports this month on copper heiress Huguette Clark's testamentary instruction to convert her 23-acre estate along Santa

Barbara's Gold Coast into a museum. One of architect Reginald Johnson's last private commissions, before he turned to public housing in 1934, it would be a gem. And the prospect suggests that the growth cycle is far from spent. But is the expansion sustainable?

In 2002, Richard Moe, then president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, sounded an alarm. His seminal article "Are There Too Many House Museums?" set off a decade of introspection, some agonized hand-wringing and much useful discussion.

The problems Dick Moe identified have a familiar ring today: deferred maintenance, perennial expenses, lagging board and volunteer participation, low visitation and doubts about relevance to the community. Moreover, traditional historic house interpretation faces stiff competition from educational leisure time alternatives amped with electronic media.

The Trust convened other national preservation organizations to take up Dick Moe's previously unmentionable question. Major funding sources, such as the Pew Charitable Trusts, pushed the conversation toward concrete proposals. Five years later, the Kykuit II Summit on the Sustainability of Historic Sites offered an initial set of findings and recommendations. Many are relevant to LMHS.

Among the findings: "Serving the needs of the local community (not the tourist audience) is the most valuable and sustainable goal;" "buildings, landscapes, and collections are the means, but not the ends of the work of historic sites." And among

the recommendations: "Historic sites must no longer think in terms of the 'velvet rope tour' as their basic bread and butter program and must instead generate more varied ways to utilize resources to enrich people's lives."

The deliberations at the Rockefeller family manse, Kykuit, did not bring closure. The question still perplexes professionals and volunteers alike from coast to coast. Secondary issues find attentive audiences at annual conferences and in the flagship publications of the country's leading preservationists: American Association of Museums, the AASLH, the NCPH and of course, the National Trust itself.

Sustained interest prompted the AASLH to launch a new book series in collaboration with the Altamira Press. Among the most intriguing and frequently cited titles are Jessica Foy Donnelly's anthology *Interpreting Historic House Museums* (2002) and Donna Ann Harris' *New Solutions for House Museums* (2007).

For those with a bent for digging deep into the literature, Ron Potvin (Asst. Director of the Center, ... for Public Humanities and Cultural Heritage at Brown University) compiled an invaluable bibliography: *A Selected Compilation of Historic House Museum Resources*. Available on-line at http://www.brown.edu/Research/INBC/documents/R.Potvin_Historic_House_Museums.pdf

The future of house museums remains at the center of a vigorous – and in many cases existential – conversation. The conference findings and the emerging literature are relevant to La Mesa in ways large and small. They have something to say to each of us.

Current maintenance at the McKinney House is a visual reminder of our great, good fortune. Yet Justice Holmes' words also suggest a moment's reflection, to assure that the troubles that plague so many of our impecunious peers make no appearance here, in these gentle hills.

By Walter Hall



"Historical" Thoughts

By Aaron Landau,
LMHS President

How does one come up with something of interest to write on a daily blog? I am having enough difficulty coming up with something that will not put you, dear reader, to sleep four times a year. That is unless you can't fall asleep at one am and need something to help you get there. However, that is not my intention. You are on your own.

So what can I write about to keep you alert? The Society is running on all cylinders. The McKinney House will be painted, windows repaired, and crown molding repaired or replaced by the end of September. All thanks to our anonymous donor and your matching funds donations that have been coming in.

Donna Niemeier, Linda Rankin, Pat Stromberg, and Penny Brawner are working diligently on our collections and archival material. They are organizing and determining what is to be done with said collections "stuff". They are also cataloging the entire archival inventory. Some objects belong in another venue if they are not related to either the McKinney House or La Mesa history. Those objects not "in our mission" or with a similar institutional home will be deaccessioned. We will have a vintage sale next June at the McKinney House to complete the disposition and further augment our coffers.

Many of your LMHS officers, board members, Society members, and volunteers are actively involved on the La Mesa Centennial Committee and on the History & Research Subcommittee. We have several projects sponsored by the Society that will take place in 2012, La Mesa's centennial year. Details will be forthcoming as each project comes into play next year.

The Membership Survey is still in progress and there's still time to get your views into the mix. The surveys will be tabulated in October and the findings reported in the January issue of *Lookout Avenue*. Please give the Society the benefit of your thoughts and ideas.

You are invited to volunteer some of your time and energy in furthering the mission and exposure of the Society in our fine city and community. Please call us at 466-0197 if you would like to play a greater role on the LMHS team.

A Special Welcome for the Society's New Members

Tommy Brown
Kathleen Crawford
Leslie Fadem & Gregory Childs
Matthew & Christina Hambrick
Robert & Crickett Kuhne
Dennis K. Robertson
Britt Palmer & Cindy Schuricht
Jonathan Tabor

On Board: Sharon Crockett

*(The first in a series of profiles of the
LMHS Board of Directors)*

With 10 years service on the Board, Sharon Crockett knows her way around the La Mesa Historical Society. She particularly enjoys the opportunity to work with a talented group dedicated to making the city a more beautiful place. And she still finds deep satisfaction in learning about the fascinating men and women who shaped La Mesa's history.

No surprise there. Sharon is a natural for the Society. Unflagging interests in architecture and construction have long influenced her professional choices and her personal life. As a

resident, Sharon always felt a special appreciation for the city's steady progress from early days as a crossroads spring, through the bustling downtown of the post-war years, to the varied and creative community it is today.

Sharon credits Karna Webster's often path-breaking public history work for igniting her early enthusiasm for historic preservation. Sharon was a land use planner at work on the Housing Element of the General Plan for the City of Santee, when she responded to a vacancy on La Mesa's Historic Preservation Commission in the late 1990s. From the Commission, it was a short step to the Society.

As a Commission member, Sharon began to attend the board meetings and events sponsored by the Society. At first her purpose was simply to learn as much as possible, as quickly as possible. But when the Board's secretary resigned, Sharon volunteered. And never looked back.

Today, after 8 months of meticulous effort, Sharon is ready to send the Society's special Centennial Calendar to press. Carefully selecting the right images, matching those visuals with the right text, illuminating each of the varied elements in the city's 100-year story, can only be a labor of love.

An accomplished artist - her illustrations enliven Paul Vanderwood's splendid new history of Agua Caliente, *Satan's Playground* - Sharon says the greatest hurdle in the calendar project was colorizing black and white photographs, with color consistency, while restoring the images and removing years of inevitable wear and tear.

The calendar will be unveiled - and available for purchase - at the Society's Oktoberfest booth. It will then be on sale at the Palermo Archives Building Saturday afternoons. Sharon is eager to bring the project, at last, into the public realm.

Despite her local government background and passion for architecture, Sharon is quick to point out that she is not an historian by training. Instead, she sees her role as all-around, whatever it takes, support to the Society's mission and activities.

Sometimes that means giving a considered opinion during board deliberations, other times it means baking the cookies in the old McKinney House stove during the Christmas Open House. For the latter, Sharon coaxed husband SDSU emeritus professor Glen Sparrow into service, to the delight of all who attended.

A life-long learner, presently pursuing coursework in graphic design, Sharon admits to being flummoxed by one of the Society's perennial challenges: getting younger folks and their families involved in local history programs and activities. Keen to respond, she believes the enduring value of a sense of place will resonate with new members.

For Sharon, just being a reliable foot soldier on a team of smart, committed men and women – all striving to share La Mesa's often surprising history with the people who live here – is the best reward.

Remembering La Mesa's Hollywood, Before Hollywood

It was one of the first brick and mortar movie studios in California. The American Film Manufacturing Company set up shop on Lookout Avenue in La Mesa a hundred years ago on August 12, 1911. They only stayed here for a year before moving to Santa Barbara, where the company affectionately known as "The Flying A" made its final home. Actors and directors got a lot done in that year, though, cranking out two films a week. Of the 100 titles made in La Mesa, only about a dozen are thought to survive.

About fifty people came to the historic location, the Wolf Building, at 8360 La Mesa Blvd. (the former Lookout Ave.) to mark the studio's local centennial and observe the installation of a commemorative plaque sponsored by generous citizens and members of The La Mesa Historical Society.

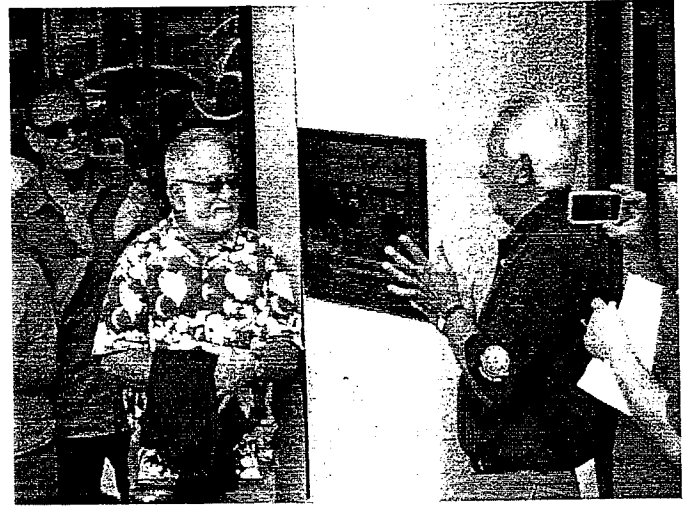


Photo Courtesy of Robert Sanchez

Past-president Donna Niemeier and several other LMHS board members were on hand to witness the event. Along with other members of the media, La Mesa's Ken Kramer, host of the *About San Diego* series, documented the proceedings and interviewed those who led the effort to commemorate the Flying A's work in our city.

La Mesa Mayor Art Madrid helped Flying A Committee Chairman Wade Douglas with the official unveiling and an aide to California State Senator Joel Anderson presented a congratulatory proclamation. After-ceremony refreshments were graciously provided by the current occupant of the Flying A suite, "Mostly Mission" owner Virginia McKenzie. It was truly a "once in a century" event!

Upcoming LMHS Events

Note New Hours: The McKinney House Museum on University Avenue will be open for tours on the 2nd and 4th Saturday of each month, from 1-4 PM.

Sept 30 - Oct 2.....**Oktoberfest**
Centennial Calendar On Sale

Nov 5 (Sat).....**LMHS Home Tour**

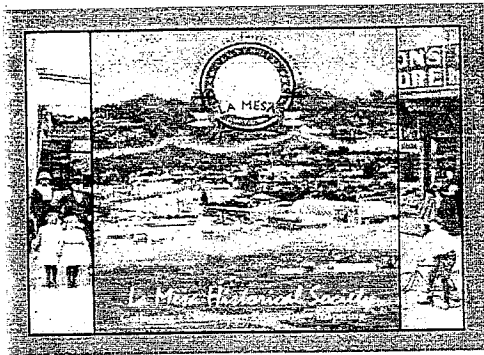
Dec 11 (Sun).....**Christmas Open House**

NOTE: LMHS closed on December 24th and 31st.

LMHS Holiday Gifts & more at Oktoberfest 2011

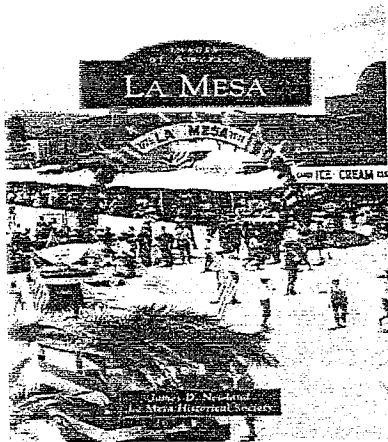
The Society's booth will be centrally located on La Mesa Boulevard in front of the historic La Mesa Depot, throughout the festival (Sept. 30-Oct. 2). The booth will feature exhibits and information on upcoming Society and Centennial events.

The Society's 2012 Centennial Calendars will be available for sale as well as books (see below), home tour tickets and other items.



LMHS Centennial Calendar

We are also working on some special interactive activities. Don't miss out – stop by to visit between the polkas, brats, and beer.



This limited edition illustrated history by LMHS Vice President and local historian Jim Newland contains over 200 vintage photos. Copies are still available for just \$20. All royalties come to the Society.

Going to miss Oktoberfest? Just stop by the McKinney House Museum any Saturday afternoon between 1-4 PM. We are located at 8369 University Avenue.

LMHS 2011 Home Tour SAVE THE DATE! Saturday November 5th

The Society will feature five wonderful, historic and stylish homes as part of its popular annual Home Tour, November 5th, from 10AM to 3PM.

We return to the Grossmont and Mt. Helix areas to showcase a mix of traditional and Mid-Century Modern style houses and landscaped grounds.

Old Town Trolley will again shuttle ticketholders to all the houses on tour day. The La Mesa Women's Club (5220 Wilson Street) will again serve as Tour Center.

A Home Tour flyer will be sent to all members soon. Check the Society's website or call 619-466-0197 for more information.

In the Spotlight: Bob Speegle *La Mesa Freemasons Lodge #407*

With the steady drumbeat for all things Centennial, La Mesans may tire of the subject even before the hoopla gets underway. That would be a shame. Public fascination with the 100th is yielding a cache of notable and worthwhile projects. Robert Speegle's new history of the Freemasons in La Mesa will finish among the best.

Bob was an unlikely candidate to chronicle the Masons first 100 years in La Mesa. His defense industry workload is unrelenting and he was a relative newcomer to Freemasonry. But Bob's inner historian recognized a good story in search of an author. So did the Lodge leadership. Soon the Brothers lined up to provide support and the project took wing.

Freemasonry in La Mesa California: One Hundred Years of Service to the Community, 1909-2009 is Bob's debut book as a local historian and it is a fine addition to La Mesa history. The work draws upon the archives of the La Mesa Historical

Society, the San Diego Historical Society, the personal papers and memorabilia held by the Lodge and the personal collections of many prominent La Mesa Freemasons.

Among many intriguing discoveries, is an original architectural sketch for the Lodge building appeared on the front page of the March 28th, 1930 edition of the *La Mesa Scout*. (An image provided by the LMHS archives)

The book succeeds on several levels. It is at once the story of one of the city's oldest service and fraternal organizations, the history of their remarkable Lodge building, a civic center landmark since 1930, and most of all an engaging account of the people who gave vitality to both the organization and the building over 100 years.

Nearly 2000 La Mesans have passed through the halls of Lodge #407, progressing through the ranks as Freemasons. Most of the founders of the city of La Mesa were members of the Lodge. The tradition of public service is undiminished – with the current roster containing many civic leaders and public servants. Tracing the passage of those family names, as they resurface over the years, is one of the books many charms.



For Bob, sleuthing out those biographies was one of the most rewarding aspects of his research, easily off-setting the painstaking tedium of getting

the reproductions done properly – an effort that consumed over 6 weeks. Discovering unexpected continuity, in people and practices, over many years of Lodge operations was another source of wonder and reflection.

By steadily recovering sources, teasing out the connections, and documenting regional nuances, local historians perform a yeoman's service to the field. Today these contributions are much better acknowledged by academic historians; SDSU's Paul Vanderwood remains exemplary. For his part, Bob credits LMHS's past presidents for their counsel during the research and writing.

Inevitably, Bob's work churned up abundant materials and with them unavoidable questions: what to preserve, what to discard? Lodge #407 now confronts issues well-known to historical societies. To wit, as technology races ahead which storage media will be most resilient?

The newly-minted historian is too modest to volunteer advice. When pressed, Bob echoes the counsel of others working against the passage of time: Do it now. Save the irreplaceable, the other questions can wait.

Sometimes we just don't see treasure hidden in plain sight. Lodge #407 is one of those; quietly presiding over the corner at Date and Orange, truly a jewel in the midst.

The Masons are pleased to open the Lodge to visitors interested in the building and the displays of historical artifacts. Friday is often a good day to visit, but others can be arranged. Direct all visit requests to the Lodge.

Bob's book, a magazine-sized hardback, with 122 pages of narrative, reproductions and illustrations, is a terrific Centennial year gift for students of La Mesa and the city's principal institutions. It is available for purchase at \$45.00.

Contact current Lodge Master Robert Ross at python_m@yahoo.com or call the Lodge at 619-464-4340. Further information can also be found on the Lodge website (www.lamesa407.com).

History Roundtable Series: The Flying A Lecture

No one knows more about La Mesa's role in the history of the silent film era than UCSB Film Professor Dana Driskel. Dr. Driskel brought that encyclopedic knowledge to the Society's Roundtable series on August 13th marking the centennial of one of California's first film studios.

More than a hundred people crowded into the Grossmont Healthcare District Auditorium to hear Driskel explain how the American Film Manufacturing Company, known as "The Flying A" to early film-goers worldwide, came to La Mesa and the likely reasons for its departure in 1912.

Dr. Driskel, who produced an acclaimed hour-long documentary on the Flying A in 2003 (*An American Film Company*) detailed how Allan Dwan, who went on to become one of Hollywood's most respected and prolific directors, originally brought the company from Chicago to their first "brick and mortar" studio on Lookout Avenue.

Dr. Driskel screened three of the early Flying A films, holding the packed auditorium spellbound for more than two hours. Ironically, it was probably the first time any of the three had been shown publicly in La Mesa. All three films, *Three Million Dollars*, *The Poisoned Flume*, and *The Ranchman's Nerve* were actually shot in Lakeside.

The Flying A story began in Chicago in late 1910 with a raid on the staff of the Essanay Film Company. The West Coast start up was equally haphazard; the original director disappeared without word. Dwan was given the reins in a terse "You direct" telegram and went on to crank out about a hundred films in La Mesa before moving to Santa Barbara where the Flying A became a major player in the silent film industry, before shutting down in the early twenties.

Dr. Dana Driskel is writing a book on the Flying A that promises much more detail on its fascinating history, including La Mesa. More on that to come.

By Wade Douglas

Centennial Corner: Roundtable Lecture Featured

On Saturday, January 14th at 10AM there will be a lecture/presentation on the Kumeyaay nation given by Cheryl Hinton, Director and Chief Curator of the Barona Cultural Center and Museum. The lecture will take place at the Grossmont Healthcare District Auditorium at 9001 Wakarusa Street, La Mesa, next to Briercrest Park. Parking is available on site; two hour parking is available on the street. The lecture is open to members of the LMHS and to the public at large.

The lecture is part of the Society's continuing History Roundtable Series; it is also one of the centennial projects of the History & Research Subcommittee of the La Mesa Centennial Committee. The Roundtable lecture is part one. Part two will take place at the Barona Cultural Center and Museum in 2012.

Board of Directors:

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Board meetings are held the second Monday of each month at 7:00 PM.

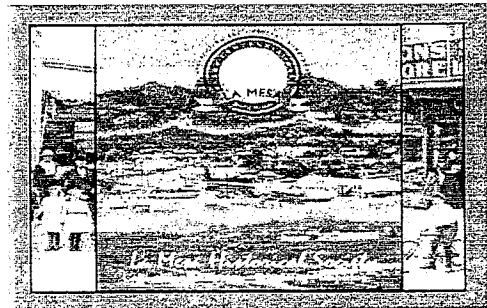
Lookout Avenue is the quarterly publication of the La Mesa Historical Society. Please share story ideas, comments and suggestions with our Newsletter Editor Anthony Mc Ivor at www.lamesahistory.com



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LMHS Centennial Calendar

Cut along line and mail the section below with your check.

**AN INVITATION TO JOIN THE LA MESA HISTORICAL SOCIETY
Membership Application**

The Society depends on membership dues, bequests and fund-raising activities to support the restoration and preservation of local history.

The La Mesa Historical Society operates the Rev. Henry A. McKinney House, a 1908 house/museum located at 8369 University Avenue (at the corner of Pine Street) in La Mesa. Open 1-4pm every first and third Saturday of the month or by appointment. Group tours are available. Call (619) 466-0197 for further information. Lookout Avenue is the official quarterly publication of the La Mesa Historical Society. Our address is:

La Mesa Historical Society
P.O. Box 882
La Mesa, CA 91941

Lookout Avenue was the original name of La Mesa Boulevard from the 1890s until the city council voted to change the name in 1940. Lookout Avenue was La Mesa's main street.

- \$250 Patron
- \$100 Sponsor/Organization
- \$50 Sustaining
- \$20 Family
- \$15 Individual
- \$5 Student

Name: _____

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I would like to be a volunteer in the following areas:

- Docent/Education
- Events
- Grounds/Building
- Archives/House