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## Opening Palo Alto's scrapbook



*Historical group gives old photographs new life*

by **Cross Missakian**

With a combination of cutting-edge technology and old-fashioned hard work, the Palo Alto Historical Association is opening a new portal to history -- online.

Now, anyone visiting [www.pahistory.org](http://www.pahistory.org) can take a peek at how Stanford University stadium looked like during its construction in 1921 -- back when it but a flat expanse of ground and teams of mules were used to move the earth. Or they can check out University Avenue from the turn of the last century, when wooden, peak-roofed stores populated the street rather than concrete multi-story buildings of today.

Though the first 500 photographs were made available on the Web site only about a month ago, the project has already stirred public response, according to Palo Alto historian Steve Staiger. People have called the association to relate personal and family connections to certain photographs, while others have offered to donate more photographs of a certain type or subject.

Organizers ultimately hope to post 10,000 historic photographs online.

The association wanted to post its photographs on its Web site since the mid-1990s, but the unavailability of software that could easily handle both images and text stalled the project. The archive is kept in Palo Alto's Main Library.

Now, photographs are accompanied by brief descriptions of what they portray. Users can run keyword searches of these descriptions, making it much easier for historians, students, genealogists and journalists to find what they are looking for.

"Photographs used to be filed by subject, like schools, bicycles, etc.," Staiger said. "But if you had a picture of a school with a bicycle in front of it, you might never find it. Now, we can cross-reference the photographs and find them with keywords."

For example, a search using the single term "house" in the current collection returned 24 results, including photos of a wagon in front of the Girl Scout House dated 1939, the Delta Tau Delta fraternity house collapsing in 1976, and the Emerson family posing in front of their Mercer street residence sometime around 1900.

The Web site also allows users to browse the collection, and there is even a feature for marking and saving personal favorites.

The laborious process of identifying and posting all the photographs starts with giving each a title and a description. Volunteers mostly do this work, and they consult with each other to determine as best they can the location, date, and subject of each picture. A photographer then makes negatives from the hard copies, digitizes the negatives, and delivers the images for uploading to the association's Web site.

Two professional cataloguers have been hired to record each photograph and description in the database.

When the project began, Staiger thought the archive included about 6,000 photographs, but he has since revised that estimate to at least 10,000. Thus far, only about 500 photographs have been posted online, but Staiger hopes another 300 will be uploaded by the end of May, and another 3,000 by the end of the year.

Funding for the project was provided by the City of Palo Alto and from a grant of more than \$50,000 from the dissolved Mid-Peninsula Cable Co-op. Staiger believes current funds will last for another two years. He hopes that when they run out, the visible results will make it easier to raise the money needed to complete the job.

In fact, Staiger hopes that better access to the collection will increase the community's appreciation of it. He scoffed when asked if he is worried about being inundated with pictures from every closet in town.

"I'd love to be overwhelmed," he said. "Each photograph is like a little Monet. Chances are, if it's 20 or 30 years old, that's the only copy."

Rare and old photographs are not the only ones the association would like to acquire. It has more photographs from the '20s and '30s than more contemporary decades, because people have not yet tired of their more recent photographs and may not consider them worthy of a historical project.

"We compete with the dump," Staiger said. He hopes that the online archive will make the community more aware that the historical association does not just preserve dusty memories from the distant past, but also chronicles history as it happens.

"The history of the community is anything other than today," he said. "Yesterday is history."

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