

THE RECORD

All About Martha by Jennifer Pfaff

SUMMER
VIRTUAL TOUR
“Horsing Around
Burlingame” Aug. 1
Pg. 5



Many people have made great contributions to our society during its nearly 45 years in existence, but one stands out from the crowd – Martha McDowell Rosman May – both for length of service, as well as the impact she made. As we mentioned in our last newsletter, Martha passed away at the age of 98 just as we went to print.

She had a quick wit and an active, curious mind to the end. She was instrumental in everything we did, attending nearly every board meeting and archive workday for well over 40 years. We hope you enjoy reading “all about Martha.” She will be sorely missed.



Martha McDowell and “Robie”, 1925



*Above: The McDowell homestead in Arizona, 1920s
An investment to help pay for the kids' education*

Martha McDowell's pioneer spirit was born in the Arizona desert. Her father, a WWI veteran whose lungs had been damaged by mustard gas, homesteaded a large piece of land outside of Scottsdale, Arizona during the 1920s. Accommodations were rustic at best: a cabin, and later a bunkhouse were constructed for the growing family. Plans for a septic tank and indoor plumbing caused a great deal of excitement, Martha recalled, when dynamiting the rocky space next to the house dislodged a large boulder that flew through the roof.

Below: Enjoying life in the desert



In 1930, at the urging of her mother, the family moved to more civilized digs in Phoenix. They had a gaggle of various pets: dogs and cats, a parrot, newts, salamanders, white rats, goldfish, turtles and ants, among others. On hot afternoons when there was no school, the kids would lie on pillows in the living room, and listen to their mother sing at the piano, or read to them. Robert Louis Stevenson was one of Martha's favorites:

"This world is so full of a number of things. I'm sure we should be happy as kings."



It was her own fondness for creative writing that made her determined to save up for an Underwood typewriter. Her father proposed a plan: If Martha earned half the amount needed, he would pay the remainder. And so Martha's nursery business was born. Cuttings were taken from the

family's oleander bush, and cultivated in old cans that she'd buy for a cent at the dump, while paying her father two-cents a mile to drive her there.

After about a year, all of the 15-cent oleander plants had been sold, and Martha and her father were the proud owners of a typewriter. During the depression, nothing was wasted. Collecting (and paying for) cans at the dump to repurpose for her nursery business was proof enough that one person's rubbish could be another's treasure — a philosophy she espoused her entire life, sometimes simply attributing it to "being Scotch."

Martha wanted to attend art school after high school. Her specialty was depicting the desert, and Navajo Indian figures. Not surprisingly, her parents convinced her that as a career, art would not support



Above middle: Martha at Columbia Presbyterian, 1940s

her, so she headed to Columbia University in New York City for nursing school earning her BS in biology, and becoming a registered nurse concurrently. She was known by her friends as "Arizona" for all the desert images she posted on the walls. Her talent at drawing would come in handy throughout her life.

By 1946, she'd landed her first nursing job, settling in San Francisco and working in the women's ward of SF Hospital, on "pill hill" Parnasus. Much to the chagrin of her colleagues, Martha managed to come down with a bad case of mononucleosis on her first day at work and was placed in isolation, unable to help with the work-load. It was there that she met her future husband, Frank Rosman, a medical student who became a frequent visitor, in protective gear, of course.

Over the next dozen years the Rosman family moved a number of times— from the coast of Mendocino, taking over the small practice of the town's longtime doctor who was headed into retirement, to Earlimart, in the Central Valley, a destination picked out by Martha randomly on a map— with eyes closed and pin in hand. Martha recounted that the area was very poor, without a doctor. The potato crop had failed, and acres of farmland were being plowed under. The couple purchased a home to convert into a small clinic; the garage became the Rosman family's living space. It didn't take long for the locals to start visiting the clinic. A "cash up-front" policy had to be implemented when it became clear the recent economic downturn made it difficult for some to pay

for their visits. An elderly woman would pause by the pharmacy counter on the way out, Martha noted, extending her hand, begging: “pills, please give me some pills”....Martha was observing that everyone had a story to tell.

By 1957, three school-aged children later, the couple headed to Palo Alto, close to the Menlo Park Veteran’s hospital, purchasing a brand-new Joseph Eichler home for \$24,000. Martha was immediately smitten with the open floorplan, the light through the big windows and radiant heat. She immersed herself in her children’s school activities and P.T.A. A few years later, divorced, but thrilled at her new part-time job with Sunset Magazine in Menlo Park, she used her longstanding interest in art and photography to relay the stories of people, their homes and lifestyles in the West. It was another chapter in her life that undoubtedly influenced our archive’s diverse collection. By the early 1970s, she’d



Martha's bungalow at 215 Burlingame Avenue, 1972

landed in Burlingame, contemplating the purchase of a circa 1909 bungalow for \$42,000—architecturally, the polar opposite of the Eichler she’d left. But the home, located at 215 Burlingame Avenue had been a rooming house, with a long history of tenancy upstairs and a separate entrance. The decision to buy was a good one—she’d later say the home was “the goose that laid the golden egg.” It didn’t take long for her to get her realtor’s license and become fully engaged in the community. As is the case today, a favorite activity for getting to know people in the 1970s, was volunteering with the library. It was there that Martha became friendly with various residents, including a group she

referred to as “the Old Timers.” The desire to capture their stories, along with the great anticipation of the Nation’s Bicentennial, inspired Martha and a few others to go about organizing the Burlingame Historical Society in December of 1975. Martha used her illustration skills to design the organization’s logo, based on the most historic building in town, the Burlingame Avenue Railroad station. Martha’s illustration is still used by the Society today.

Over time, Martha’s bungalow housed all kinds of artifacts, stored in every nook and cranny. The burgeoning group met in the library, in various banks and other buildings where space had been provided them. They designed walking tours, wrote a book, and were a regular fixture at Art in the Park for years.

By the mid-1980s, Martha and her partner, Bob May, had invested in the old bungalow at 211 next door. The longtime home of the Hower Family, it was designed by

architect Norman Richard Coulter in 1909. A labor of love, the pair undertook the entire restoration work themselves.

In May 1986 after lobbying the City Council for desperately needed space, the Burlingame Historical Society was granted use of the upper story of the historic Gunst Carriage House in Washington Park for \$2 a year.

The first several months were spent cleaning up and organizing their space; gradually items stored at Martha’s bungalow were moved to the Carriage House archive, and catalogued. Other items from various places around town that were on their way to the dump were “rescued” by the group’s concerned

volunteers, prompting longtime

archivist, Marilyn Short to proclaim: The Biggest Threat to History is the Dumpster.”

Throughout the years Martha supported each Historical Society endeavor she thought had merit, while engaging in very spirited debate when she disagreed— and she was usually right. Both the publication of Joanne Garrison’s Burlingame Centennial book—the second book published by the Historical Society, as well as the opening of the Burlingame Hillsborough History Museum by then President, Russ

(All About....cont. page 5)

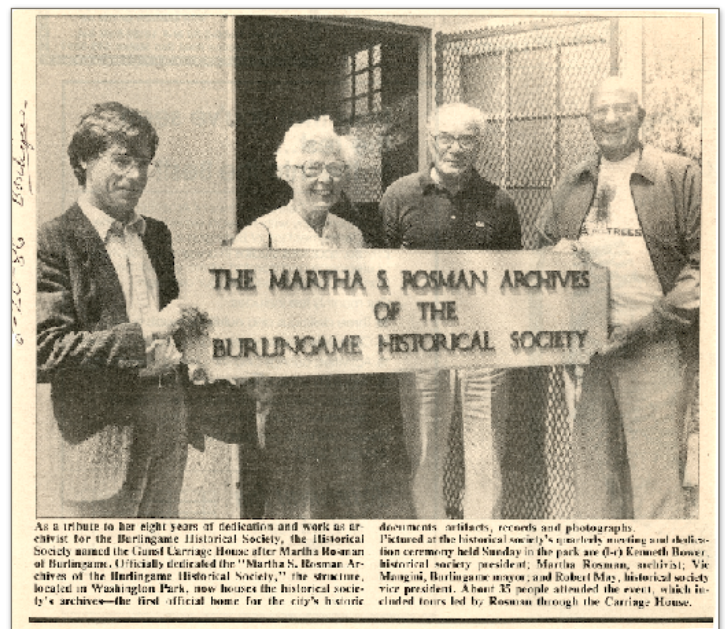


In the early years the Burlingame Historical Society met at variety of locations, holding interviews with "old timers" and displaying photos and artifacts.

At left: Martha with fellow founder (and future husband) Bob May presenting a Burlingame Historical Society exhibit at Home Savings and Loan in the 1970s (Norel Madsen, branch manager, shown at right).



Above left: Ruth Jacobs and others "man" the Burlingame Historical Society booth at Art in the Park, 1978



Above right: Burlingame Mayor and longtime educator, Vic Mangini (to the right of Martha at center) helps out with the tribute to Martha's work, as the Burlingame Historical Society moves into the Gunst Carriage House, Summer 1986.

THE BURLINGAME HISTORICAL SOCIETY

(All About.....cont. from page 3)

Cohen, became pivotal events that took place during Burlingame's Centennial Celebrations. Nobody was happier than Martha to have new ways to share the collection she and others had assembled for decades. Humble to a fault, she was surprised and astonished to be the recipient of Burlingame's first *Walk of Fame Award*, that same year. Always up for a new adventure, in the early 2000s Martha began helping Robert Sherman on his ship, the S.S. General Frank M. Coxe, moored in the Sanchez Channel on Burlingame's Bayfront. She was intrigued by the ship's history, and that the vessel was just 4 months younger than she. There were a number of artifacts found on the ship, and working with Mr. Sherman, she developed a beautiful museum in the entrance of what would become a popular restaurant—*The Sherman*—one in a line of many that had come and



gone during the ship's long life.

When Mr. Sherman passed away in 2008, the ship changed hands, followed by bankruptcy during the recession.

The collection on which Martha and Robert Sherman had worked so laboriously was donated, with Martha's blessing, to the Golden Gate National Recreation Area Archives of the National Parks Service, for use at the Maritime Museum. The ship itself had no home. Its time

was coming to an end. First "she" was towed to Stockton where she had once been moored, with hope of a new life as an Indian casino (the plans of which fell through), and then to Mare Island—each time Martha hoped the ship would live on to see another chapter in its life, but it wasn't to be. By early 2020, the ship had been completely gutted and scrapped in Vallejo. And about 4 months later, Martha, too, had passed.

SPECIAL THANKS TO:

John and Diane Geer for their very generous donation made **in Memory of Martha May:**

"We will miss her friendship, smiling face and talking with her weekly at the archives."

MEMBER UPGRADES! History Buff(s): Vicki Jacobs, Mary Griffith • **Anson Burlingame:** John Geer
IN MEMORIAM: Mary Shafer and Geraldine O'Connor McConnell

"HORSEING AROUND BURLINGAME"

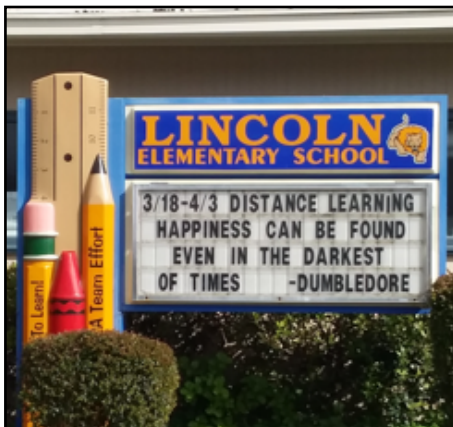


Covid-19 cancelled our Spring Quarterly and it is impacting our Summer Quarterly as well! Normally, we offer walking tours in August in conjunction with the San Mateo County Historical Association's Victorian Days. This year, due to the uncertainty of holding large gatherings, those tours will be held virtually. Burlingame's tour "Horsing around Burlingame" explores our equestrian past. **Mark your calendars for Saturday, August 1** when our video will be released for viewing on the San Mateo County website <https://historysmc.org/victorian-days-walking-tours>.



ACQUISITIONS: *With thanks to...*

Linda Field and others for photographs (*some of which appear here*) taken in and around Burlingame from mid-March to mid-May, including places of worship, neighborhood yards, schools and businesses, depicting various displays and messages related to social norms during the Covid-19 pandemic; **Jim Kelly** for dozens of electronic clippings from the San Mateo Times dated from the 1930s to the 1960s related to



Burlingame and Hillsborough residents, businesses and contemporary events; to **Lee Livingston**, **Jessica Willey**, **Linda Field** and others for photos, memories and information

related to Martha Rosman May's early days growing up on the homestead in Arizona, and her rich and varied life; **Ray Tyler** for a video of Burlingame downtown, Recreation Center & Burl.High School, all shut down, April, 2020; SF Water District Archive, kindness of **Bill Walsh**, for a 1906 Davenport Bromfield map (digital form) showing City of San Mateo, Town of Burlingame, including public and private roads; **Cheryl Jones**, **Ed and Frank Rosman** for photos, notes and a biographical manuscript



of and by **Martha May**, chronicling her life by the decade; **Julie Johnson Haas** for two ticket stubs to



Ricci's trick bike "Little Big Game" at Washington Park, June 15, 1946 at 8pm "Laughs Galore" as Lomita Park and Burlingame Fire Depts.

played bicycle baseball; to **Greg Williams** for an undated, original *Easton Addition to Burlingame* (Easton 1) sales pamphlet, circa 1907; **Beverly Conrad** for several



Above: Enjoying a "Covid" lunch break

negatives made from vintage 8" x 10" photos of Burlingame scenes, dating from the 1890s, that adorn walls of the Burlingame Public Library; **Douglas F. Lambert** for several clippings and other paraphernalia related to local history, people and places, including a photocopy of a 1929 McKinley School photo belonging to Astrid Vogel; **Michael Carey** for 4 vintage postcards of the area, including two early images of Crystal Springs Lake; and

Georgette Naylor of the Burlingame Chamber of Commerce for historic photos and misc. paraphernalia related to the Chamber of Commerce activities dating back to the 1940s.





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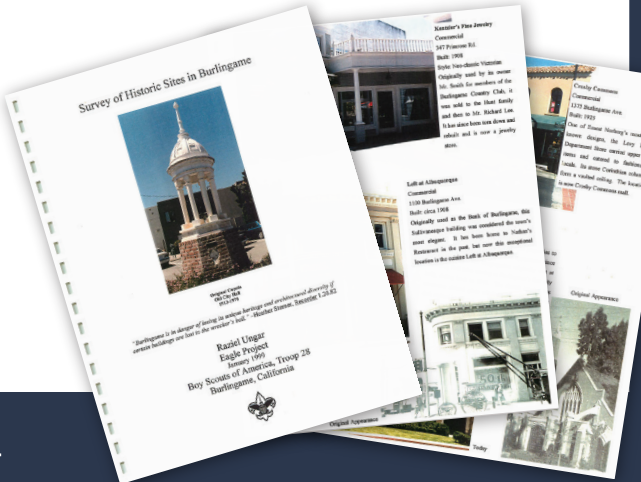
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to support the Burlingame Historical Society
and its mission to preserve the history of Burlingame.*

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**RAZIEL UNGAR IS PROUD TO SUPPORT
THE BURLINGAME HISTORICAL SOCIETY.**

I've been a member since I was 17 years old when Martha May collaborated with me on my Eagle Scout project
'A Survey of Historic Homes in Burlingame'.



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Burlingame Historical Society
P.O. Box 144
Burlingame, Ca 94011
www.burlingamehistory.org
650-340-9960

Address Service Requested - Time Dated Material

Martha Rosman May's Burlingame
Historical Society Logo circa 1975
(shown above)

Calendar:

**Burlingame Hillsborough
History Museum 1-4 pm 1st
Sunday of the month***

***Note:** Due to Covid-19, our museum
is closed. Please check our website for
updates.

**"HORSEING AROUND
BURLINGAME"-**

Saturday August 1, 2020

see pg. 5

*Please remember us
in your trust or will!*

President's Message



*"Leave it better
than you found
it", a variation
of Robert
B a d e n -
Powell's well-
known Scout
quote, was a
favorite of
Martha's that*

wove its way through all aspects of her life. In the context of the archives, it typically meant unfurling dog-eared clippings, or organizing out-of-order files. But it could also mean reusing a beat up old bag she'd insist "still has some life in it"...Martha made an impression on every volunteer she trained over the course of more than 40 years; the life lessons came along as an added bonus. With big shoes to fill, we'll keep our noses to the

grindstone, knowing she would have wanted us to always move forward.

Over the past two years, we've received lots of positive feedback on our expanded newsletters that allow us to share more in-depth material with you, our members. After deliberating the topic for several months, we have decided to offer *limited* advertisement space in 3 of the 4 newsletter editions we publish— Two of our longtime members who are business owners were thrilled to have the opportunity for the 2020-1 cycle. Keep us in mind if you are thinking of running an ad in the future. We hope this will be a way to expand our membership to help offset our considerable operating costs, while encouraging you to support our local businesses.

-Jennifer Pfaff

Current Officers 2020:

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*VP Technology and
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