

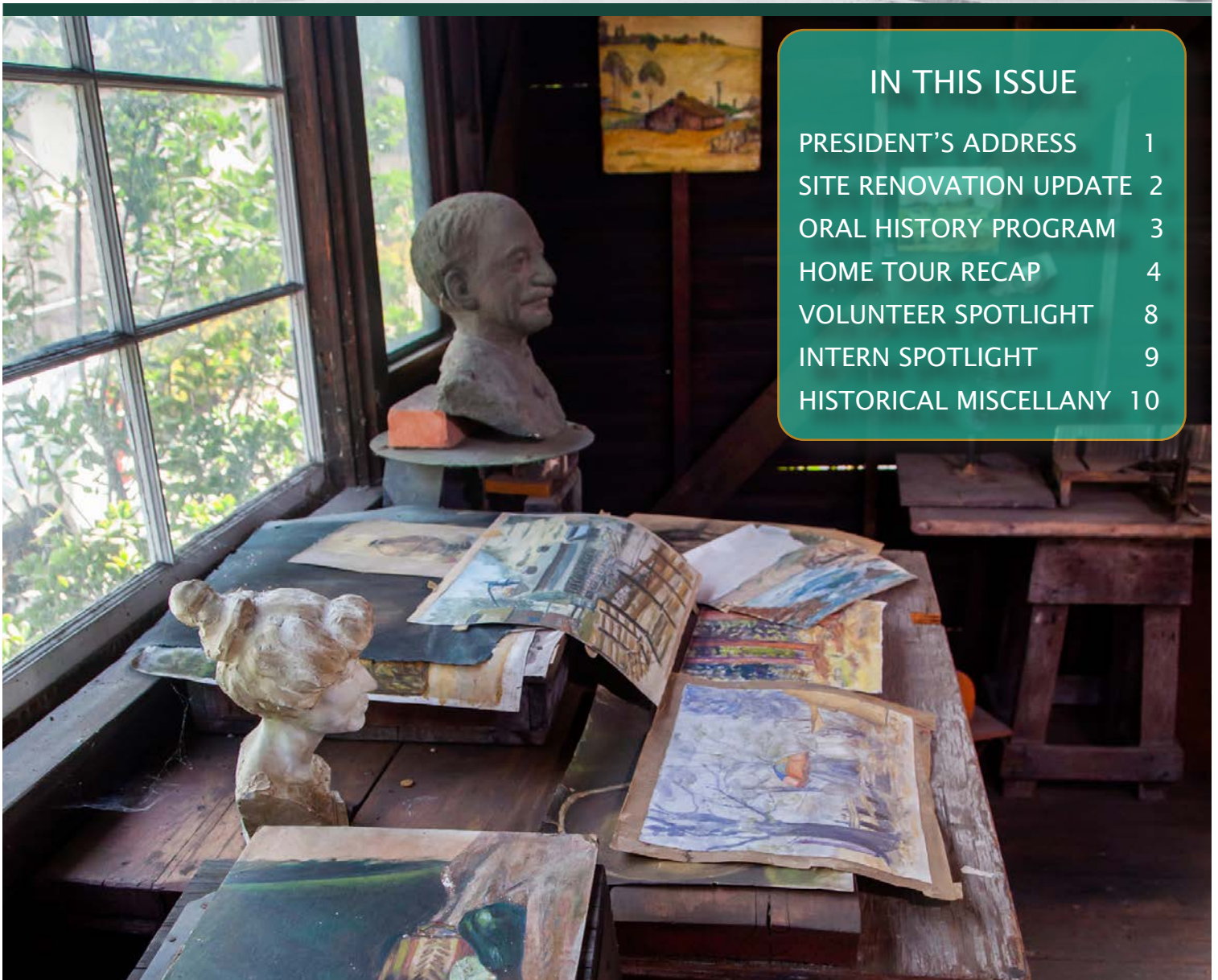
Winter 2024

lookout avenue



IN THIS ISSUE

PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS	1
SITE RENOVATION UPDATE	2
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM	3
HOME TOUR RECAP	4
VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT	8
INTERN SPOTLIGHT	9
HISTORICAL MISCELLANY	10



The NEWSLETTER of the LA MESA HISTORY CENTER

VOLUME 49, #1

PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS

17th Annual Home Tour a Rousing Success

Thank you to all the home owners, volunteers and Board members who worked so hard to ensure that the 2023 Home Tour was a success. Special thanks to St. Martin's Church for opening their original church building and current sanctuary for the tour, as well as for allowing the tour to use their parking lot as the tour bus staging area. Planning is already underway for the 18th Annual Home Tour, so be sure to save the date of Saturday, November 2nd.

2024 off to a busy start at the McKinney House and Research Archives

Saturdays have been hopping at the McKinney House and the Research Archives. In addition to a new cohort of San Diego State Interns and the continued efforts of our dedicated volunteers (see Intern and Volunteer Spotlights in this issue for more details), over two dozen visitors and researchers have come by the McKinney House and Research Archives so far in 2024.

Planning underway for 50th Anniversary of the La Mesa History Center

In October 1975, the La Mesa Historical Society was officially incorporated with the California Secretary of State. Work has begun to highlight the early history of the group and ensure that the stories of the founding members are told.

In this Issue

Check out stories on our interns and volunteers, updates on our landscape projects, upcoming events, and our oral history project that was recently launched.



Past President Jim Newland staffed the La Mesa History Center table and provided remarks on the Spring House at the re-opening of Collier Park on February 10th.

Veronica Martzahl, President La Mesa History Center

Upcoming LMHC Events

*April 14 10am-6pm
Booth at Rolando Street Fair*

*April 20 11am-4pm
Earth Day Festivities at the McKinney House*

*May 10 3pm-7pm
Booth at the La Mesa Farmer's Market*

*May 11 1pm-4pm
Meet Me at the McKinney House
"Get Outside and Play" Event*

*June 23
Annual Meeting*

SITE RENOVATION UPDATE

A latest History Center site improvement helps us tell the story of the citrus ranches that were common in the area in the early 1900s. As you may have noticed, we have several healthy lemon trees on the property which are a nod to that history and, in fact, the McKinney's had citrus trees too. The new display is interactive and located outside the perimeter fence on Pine Street. There you will find a fun "crate" full of lemons from our trees for passersby to take and enjoy. Soon it will be joined by an interpretive sign that explains the area history. Walk by and pick one for yourself.



Currently we are also working on a display shed that will allow us to exhibit larger objects from the collection as well as a ramada/arbor to be placed near the southwest corner of the house to provide shade for summer programs. Architect Michele Hottel is helping with the design and permits for those two projects. We are have gotten approval from the La Mesa Historical Preservation Commission and are in the queue for building permits. Those two projects will not be cheap to build since they will both have electricity. If you are able to donate toward those projects please either mail in a check made out to the La Mesa History Center, PO Box 882, La Mesa, CA. 91944 or log onto lamesahistory.org and click on the **Donate** tab. There you can make a **variable donation** and note that you want it restricted to the landscape All gifts are tax deductible and are much appreciated!



Right: Designer Sandra Farrell and volunteer Bob Johnson install the latest addition to the landscape.

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM RESURFACES

After a long hiatus, the Oral History Program has been restarted under the leadership of Board member Sharon Smith with the support of audio recording volunteer David Kesner and Board member Steven Churchill. Donna Niemeier, past President/Board member and longtime dynamo in the La Mesa History Center, was our first interviewee. Her interview as well as the previous recordings can be found via our online archive.

The Oral History Program is a window to the past that preserves the work of those individuals that significantly contributed to the La Mesa History Center and the greater La Mesa community. From past knowledge and observations, we can better understand the present and plan for the future.

If you know someone who has helped shape the La Mesa History Center and/or the greater La Mesa community, we'd like to record their experiences and observations. We are particularly interested in recording less-told and diverse stories. Let us know your recommendations by sending them to info@lamesahistory.com or by accessing the website at lamesahistory.com and filling out the contact form on the "contact" tab.



Donna Niemeier was a community asset long before joining the La Mesa Historical Society. Donna spent her career as a teacher and principal for the La Mesa-Spring Valley School District. Here is a shot of Miss Fleming (later Mrs. Niemeier) helping students at Glenn Murdock Elementary in April 1974. Donna was one of the school's original faculty in 1972. Many thousands of local students were the beneficiaries of her distinguished career in public education..

17TH ANNUAL LA MESA HISTORY CENTER HOME TOUR “PRESERVATION HEROES”

Veteran Tour Homes and 1895 Gem

“Preservation Heroes” Home Tour

Featuring Mt. Nebo, Boulder Heights & Porter Hill neighborhoods

The La Mesa History Center Home Tour returned to the hills surrounding downtown La Mesa. The five beautiful and historic homes reflected an eclectic mixture of Folk Victorian, Craftsman, Prairie Style, Spanish Eclectic and Colonial Revival designs emblematic of these historic neighborhoods. The tour properties also highlighted the history of some of the most prominent and fascinating families, individuals, and long-standing institutions in La Mesa history. These include pioneering community leaders the Porters, Todds, Garfields, Packards and Dalls.

Tour guests also were offered another significant and long-standing local institution that has recently celebrated its own centennial, St. Martin of Tours Catholic Church. St. Martin's served as the Tour Shuttle Stop and provided tours of its original, and renovated, original 1921 church building (painstakingly moved to the site in 1948) and its 1965 Modern church.

Thanks to all our Home Tour participant families for opening their homes, our crew of dedicated volunteers, our sponsors and of course all those purchased tickets and supported our efforts!!!

***Special recognition goes to our
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*Tranquility Real Estate Services
& Andrea Flint-Gogek, Realtor*

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Two of the gorgeous homes featured on the History Center's 2023 Home Tour.



La Mesa History Center Home Tour check in staff Steven Christiansen, Veronica Martzahl and Kari Dodson (L) and Donna Niemeier (R.) assist tour guests and docents.



Smiling docents and homeowners such as Susan Stowe (L) and Holly & Dave Fields (R), helped tour visitors maximize their experience, guide them, and answer questions in their explorations.



Tour guests made their way through both indoor and outdoor spaces and landscapes.



Owners such as Alex Moreno (L) and Clark Mires (R) share their home's incredible stories with visitors.



It's the details. Dall House (top L); Roach/Porter House (top and bottom R); Lyster/Garfield (bottom L).



St. Martin's Church served as our Tour Shuttle Center. Thanks again to them for being such wonderful partners. Tour guests provided tours of both the 1965 Church and the relocated 1922 church building.

Home Tour photography by Steven Churchill, LMHC.

VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT

The La Mesa History Center is very fortunate to have four archives volunteers who are helping work through long-term projects in the Research Archives almost every Saturday afternoon.

Julie and Don DeMent are plugging away at updating and enhancing our large collection of quick reference files. A key component of this work is preservation photocopying - taking newspaper clippings that are printed on highly acidic newsprint and copying them on acid-free paper. A list of the quick reference files is available on the LMHC's Online Archive of California page.

<https://oac.cdlib.org/institutions/La+Mesa+Historical+Society>

Charlene and Jim Craig are the LMHC's photo experts who are working to catalog our vast photographic collection while preparing it for digitization. Most of the photos that are sturdy enough to be sent offsite for digitization are nearing completion and they will be progressing on to the more fragile or over-sized images that need special handling and care and will be down onsite.



INTERN SPOTLIGHT

The La Mesa History Center is fortunate to have a strong relationship with San Diego State University which allows us to partner with numerous programs and departments to bring in multiple interns each semester. Some of the students, such as Leeann Jones, are focused on documenting the buildings of La Mesa to help enhance the city's Historic Resources Inventory. Three students are specifically working in the research archives and are focused on archival arrangement, description, and outreach. Many of you may have met Marisol Lomeli last fall at various LMHC events and she is joining us again for the spring semester. She is focused on creating social media posts highlighting collection materials and on researching various La Mesa institutions. Graduate student Laura Scott is researching and processing the scrapbook collection of the La Mesa Quilters. Senior Noel Lawrence is working to associate donor information with the LMHC art collection and is arranging and describing the Thelma Kusche folk art collection.



Marisol Lomeli, Laura Scott, and Leeann Jones make steady progress on their projects on a Saturday afternoon.

HISTORICAL MISCELLANY: STORIES FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Historical Archives receives many interesting inquiries and donation offers. Research requests are often associated with house histories that can reveal unknown facts on builders, owners and residents, surprising stories, and debunking or verification of local stories and lore. In addition, as we work to inventory and catalog our archival and object collections we run into discoveries of previous donations.

Here are a few of the recent examples of the sometime disparate activity at the Archives.

Time Capsule: Briar Patch School

Briar Patch Elementary School opened in January 1958 to help address the rapidly growing north La Mesa suburbs of the 1950s. With dwindling enrollment, the La Mesa Spring Valley School District closed the school in 1983, later selling the campus to the Grossmont Hospital District. The architect Sam Hamill designed school still exists today, located on Wakarusa Street across from Briercrest Park (original site of the Eucalyptus Reservoir—the terminus of the San Diego Flume).

Our team of Archive volunteers working to inventory our photograph collections ran into a metal box with a large number of signed photographs. The images were of a handful of adults and a large number of children.

Recalling that we had a small collection of archival materials from Briar Patch School (including a signed letter from Walt Disney allowing use of the then popular Brer Rabbit character of the *Song of the South* motion picture), a quick search of the *La Mesa Scout* found an article in the January 23rd edition with the following note on the scheduled January 26,

1958 opening ceremony for the new school:

A week after the public dedication, students will conduct their own dedication at which time they will bury a “time capsule” at the base of the school’s flagpole. The capsule will contain, among other things, signed photographs of all students. Students in 1988 will be directed to open the “capsule” (La Mesa Scout January 23, 1958).

Always nice to have the archival documentation to assist in confirming collections provenance.



Briar Patch School time capsule with faculty and student photographs and La Mesa Scout article.



Briar Patch School and flagpole, c1964, LMHC LMSVSD Collection

Noted Folk Art Artist and Actress' Collection Returns to La Mesa

Back on Halloween 2023 we received an inquiry from Scott Blackmon of Chico, California. Scott had a collection from his "aunt" that he felt belonged in La Mesa. Thelma Dixie Kusche was the lady's name and she was, as he noted, "the gourd lady of San Diego." Hmm, don't hear that too often. Scott also noted that Thelma was an actress in local theater who lived here from the 1930s to the 1950s.

Some quick research indicated that Thelma and her husband John (a retired Naval officer) did live in La Mesa from around 1931 into the 1950s. Thelma's folk art specialty was in carving and decorating gourds (large, round fruits with hard skin). Newspaper articles from the times note her regular awards at the annual Fiesta de los Flores flower show here in La Mesa. In addition, she was a regular cast member of the Little Theater group. This early La Mesa based theater company formed in 1938 and eventually evolved into today's Lamplighter's Theater. Thelma's interest in theater led her to enroll at San Diego State College. In 1950 Thelma graduated with a degree in Drama—at age 48.

Thelma and John moved to La Mesa from Ocean Beach, eventually building a home on their property in north La Mesa (off today's Baltimore Drive) in 1941 before the area was annexed into the city and developed with houses and commercial properties. Sometime in the late 1950s they moved to Butte County in northern California to retire.

After Thelma's passing in 1992 Scott inherited several scrapbooks of memorabilia on Thelma's work with the Little Theater, her artwork, acting, and three of her gourd carvings. Although we are not an art museum, the combination of these historical artifacts and materials is a unique collection. Considering the unsung roll of La Mesa and La Mesans in the local art scene (many will recall our 2022 Home Tour and the

featured La Mesa connections with Lloyd and Ilse Ruocco and the Allied Craftsman of San Diego), we accepted the collection.

These unique pieces of local folk art are truly fascinating in their detail, design and craftsmanship. In addition, her Little Theater collection is a great compliment to the Little Theater Collection donated years ago by one of its founders Austin Cordtz. Thanks to Scott for seeking us out to bring Thelma's work back home.



Three carved gourds (one four feet long) and Thelma's papers and scrapbooks.

Photo of Thelma serving as May Queen for Ocean Beach Women's Club May Day festival.

San Diego Union
May 9, 1930



Many Exhibits Ready for Big Crowds



Mrs. Thelma Kusche, La Mesa, and a few of her 45 gourds.

Thelma and her 45 gourds at the Fiesta de los Flores, San Diego Union Oct. 7, 1936.



Kusche, Thelma Dixie
Degree: B.A.
Major: Speech
Minor: English
Activities: Anthropology Club, Theater Guild, Radio Guild (Sec'y), Skull and Dagger

Thelma's SDSC graduation photo, SDSC Annual.

**NOTE: on the same page was graduate James R. Mills, later State Assemblyman and Senator, author of the Mills Act that provides property tax reductions for historically listed properties. Six degrees of Thelma?*

When did La Mesa's Oktoberfest Start Again?

It seemed like a fairly straight forward question. Can you provide some background on the origins of the first La Mesa Oktoberfest. City staff and La Mesa Village Association representatives asked this last October. The press is calling to learn more about the 50th anniversary of the city's biggest, and longest standing, public event.

When I first saw the billboards announcing the 50th Anniversary several weeks earlier, I cringed a bit. A similar question had previously come some years before, but beyond the somewhat surprising and direct answer I responded back then, after researching this question further, several years after the publication of my 2010 La Mesa history book. However, I realized that I had not followed through publicly with explaining the discovery of that specific, and different answer from previous publications including my book.

The question back ten years ago was more direct. When was the first La Mesa Oktoberfest event? That answer being different than the date published in the Society's 2001 *La Mesa Through the Years* book. Which is the source I had used in my 2010 book. Further study to answer the "event" and "origins" questions however reveals a slightly different answer depending on how one interprets the facts, defines what is the "Oktoberfest event"—and what is the question to be answered "origins" or "event"?

Page 175 of *La Mesa Through the Years* clearly states Oktoberfest was the biggest event to hit town in 1974. Hmmmm? Closer examination of the supporting evidence revealed an interview cited on page 177 with Gordon Austin, long time Chamber of Commerce director.

Austin claimed that a Chamber "merchants committee" had suggested some new promotion to help with the downtown merchants' annual

Sidewalk Sale. The idea was reportedly brought up by German born merchant Willie Gora and storeowner Arlene Moreau. Gordon noted that on the Friday night before the 1974 Sidewalk Sale, in back of the Florence Arts store parking lot (4400 Palm Avenue—across the street from Collier Park), a German oom-pah-pah band and a beer keg drew a crowd of about 300. Perhaps not the biggest event to have hit La Mesa in 1974, and not technically in downtown.

So I searched both the *La Mesa Scout* and *San Diego Union-Tribune* newspapers to find any documentation of this origin story. Searches of both in 1974 found no reports of any “Oktoberfest” marketing or advertisements or mention of the Friday night “Oktoberfest” in La Mesa (and yes, I searched both spellings). Only Saturday’s Sidewalk Sale was featured.

Of course, this isn’t proof that what Austin recalled didn’t happen. If it was just a “non-dry run” (yes, cheeky, thank you), it is possible there was no organized marketing effort for their trial concept.

Austin notes that the next year the event was moved to a Palm Avenue parking lot near La Mesa Boulevard with small dance floor for the next few years. Finally in 1978 the event had grown enough to warrant a permit to shut off part of La Mesa Boulevard. And subsequently La Mesa’s Oktoberfest grew rapidly into what is the now three-day public street fair with numerous bands, beer gardens, and craft and food booths.



La Mesa's Oktoberfest, c1980

Ok, so even if we accept that the small “kegger” behind a merchant’s store down across from Collier Park is the “origins” of La Mesa Oktoberfest, how do we account for how the 1975 Oktoberfest event was described and marketed?

The featured advertisement headline in the *San Diego Union* on October 3rd for the 1975 La Mesa Oktoberfest held on October 3rd and 4th is fairly clear: “LA MESA HOLDS ITS FIRST OKTOBERFEST.”

1974 Sidewalk Sale advertisement, La Mesa Scout October 17, 1974



LA MESA HOLDS ITS FIRST OKTOBERFEST:

The excitement and color of Germany's world-famous Oktoberfest comes to La Mesa this Friday and Saturday (October 3 and 4) as part of the La Mesa Downtown Businessmen's Association's twelfth annual sidewalk sale.

Like its Old World counterpart, the **La Mesa Oktoberfest** is intended to generate fun and community enthusiasm.

Festivities will get under way Friday evening with dancing to the oom-pah-pah music of the Bavarian Beer Garden Band and German refreshments from 8:30 p.m. to 12 midnight at Los Novios, "Chapel of the Sweethearts," in La Mesa.

Admission is \$2 at the door, but special \$1 discount tickets are available with minimum purchase at most shops in La Mesa.

At noon on Saturday "Burgomeister" Mayor Paul Fordem of La Mesa, and the La Mesa City Council, will kick off the outdoor festivities.

Palm Avenue from La Mesa Boulevard to Allison Avenue will be closed off for continuous entertainment by authentic German folk dancers and Heinz Zirken and his Bavarian Lederhosen Band from Los Angeles. German refreshments will again be available.

Drawings will be held throughout the afternoon for over \$1400 in merchandise being given away by the La Mesa merchants.

The La Mesa Downtown Businessmen's Association consists of 40 merchants located along La Mesa Boulevard between University Avenue and Jackson Drive.

La Mesa Chamber of Commerce is co-sponsoring the Oktoberfest celebration. Left to right are: Lori Riggins, Miss Oktoberfest of La Mesa; "Burgomeister" Paul Fordem, Mayor of La Mesa; Kathy Moore, Miss La Mesa; and Kathie Hauser, co-Chairwoman of the La Mesa Downtown Businessmen's Association Oktoberfest Committee.

*La Mesa's First Oktoberfest,
San Diego Union October 10, 1975*

The La Mesa Scout reported of the activities of La Mesa's downtown merchants committee during Summer 1975, led by Terry Hayford, on the planning for the Friday night dance and Saturday Oktoberfest Sidewalk sale with bands and booths (the reported 12th annual Sidewalk Sale) as well.



—Photo By Gordon Nicholson

LA MESA OKTOBERFEST DANCERS PERFORM

The Bavarian Schuplatler dancers, children dressed in German costume, bring the dances of Germany to the streets of La Mesa in the Oktoberfest held over the weekend. A German band also performed.

*La Mesa's First Oktoberfest,
San Diego Union October 10, 1975*

The October 9, 1975 Scout reported "Oktoberfest A Success in Downtown La Mesa" but there is no mention of any previous Oktoberfest or if it was the first.

Lake Murray Fletcher Hills

The La Mesa Scout

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Number 41, October 9, 1975 La Mesa, California 92041

WILLIAM GORA—Owner of the European Imports was costumed in his authentic Alpine Lederhosen for the Oktoberfest. Mr. Gora, one of the La Mesa Downtown Merchants Association members, was very pleased with the celebration and hopes next year will be even better.

Oktoberfest A Success In Downtown La Mesa

The OKTOBERFEST in downtown La Mesa was a success. Hundreds of people from all over San Diego County came to take advantage of the tremendous sidewalk sales up and down La Mesa Boulevard, "Main Street USA". The Scout contacted several of the merchants for comments. Mr. Ralph Hopkins of La Mesa Camera and Sound said that he had hundreds of people in and out of his store all day and that the attitude of the shopper was very gratifying. Mr. Gora of European Imports noted that not only east county residents, but people from Coronado, National City and Del Mar shopped "Main Street".

The Lincoln Band played lively German folk songs, refreshments were plentiful and delicious and the merchants had decorated their shops with colorful European flags.

The only criticism that we received was from a few of the merchants west of Spring Street. They felt that all the activity was centered in one location and that there had been several attractions up and down the boulevard that their businesses would have benefited greatly. The flow of traffic seemed to stay east of Spring," said Clara Reed, manager of Craft Gardens.

Mr. Hopkins' opinion was that if more merchants would come to the La Mesa Downtown Merchants meetings and participate in the organization and planning of the scheduled premiere, greater rapport would exist between east and west La Mesa Boulevard merchants.

Each year the Downtown Merchants Association grows and promotes increase in business and good relations with the people in the community. Involvement is the key to our making a success of the Association and its functions. There will be much activity downtown at Christmas time, more sales and settlement with Santa arriving by Fire.

The La Mesa City Council last night voted 3-2 to support Olay Mesa as the primary airport site.

The vote will serve as a guideline for Mayor Paul Fordem, when he votes at the Board Meeting of the Comprehensive Planning Organization (CPO) on Monday.

San Diego City Councilman Jim Ellis spoke before the La Mesa City Council favoring the Lindbergh Field site. Mayor Paul Wilson backed the Olay Mesa choice.

New Postal Service To Start October 11

The U.S. Postal Service first-class mail service improvement program will go into effect at La Mesa Post Office on October 11, officer in charge, L.B. Knight said today.

Under the program, first-class mail will receive services that is equal to or better than airmail.

The major, new service step will extend to all first-class mail weighing 13 ounces or less. "In practical terms, what this service improvement means is that domestic, first-class postage now will purchase the level of service that previously only airmail could buy," said Knight.

"Under the new program, there no longer will be an advantage in purchasing airmail postage for domestic delivery," he said.

Priority mail (now starting at weight in excess of 13 ounces), which includes air mail service, and international airmail are unaffected by the improvement program and continue in their present form, the postmaster said.

"Airmail stamps will be sold for use on priority and international airmail," he said.

Customers can exchange airmail stamps, and stamped envelopes and cards at full postage value for ordinary stamps, stamped envelopes and cards. Stationery bearing airmail indicia will be allowed to be mailed at the first-class rate, Knight said.

To aid postal customers, maps showing the cities and areas targeted for first and second day delivery for mail from La Mesa will be on display in the post office lobby.

While tap collection boxes, now used exclusively for airmail, will be removed or converted to use for other purposes, Knight said.

La Mesa Scout, October 9, 1975

So, we have direct marketing that 1975 was the first official La Mesa Oktoberfest event, and the first in downtown. And we have the less documented story about the 1974 origins as a parking lot kegger next to the long-gone art store and Los Novios Wedding Chapel (Ukrainian Church for many years before its demolition a few years ago).

Seems like a logical conclusion then, that the first official La Mesa Oktoberfest was October 3-4, 1975.

Ok, then what about all the hub-bub of 2023's Oktoberfest being the 50th Anniversary. As noted, 1974 was the published date in two La Mesa history books. This date has been floating around for a while, so give the promoters some slack.

So, before we get all technical about the facts, a logical conclusion could come down to some creative thinking. I mean if we take Gordon Austin's word for it, 2023 would be the 50th Anniversary of "an Oktoberfest" in La Mesa. But if you are into two-year celebrations, there seems to be plenty of opportunity here to extend this 50th Anniversary celebration another year into 2024 to observe the 50th Anniversary of the first official La Mesa Oktoberfest public-invited street fair. And of course, there wasn't an Oktoberfest in 2020—so the 50th Oktoberfest event would be in 2025. Maybe we should go for a three-year party!

So don't sell off all those leftover 50th Anniversary tee-shirts and beer steins just yet! La Mesa appears to deserve to keep on celebrating its long-standing institutional street party—and do a little more chicken dancing—even if it is to a Cheap Trick tribute band these days. Maybe they will play Auf Wiedersehen...

Jim Newland
La Mesa History Center

Don't Miss the La Mesa History Center Booth at the 2024 Rolando Street Fair.

Come learn about the history of your homes and communities, especially the College Neighborhoods, along with the rest of Greater La Mesa.

Sunday April 14th 10am to 6pm, on Rolando Boulevard south of El Cajon.



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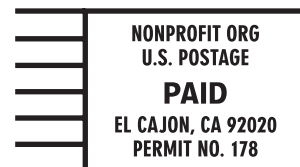
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The La Mesa History Center is an all-volunteer non-profit 501c3 corporation charged with preserving the history of the greater La Mesa area. The La Mesa History Center operates the Rev. Henry A. McKinney House, a 1908 House Museum and the History Center Archives Research Facility located at 8369 University Avenue in La Mesa, California.

The ***Lookout Avenue*** is the official quarterly publication of the La Mesa History Center. Closing dates for submitting contributions are the 1st of every March, June, September, and December. Word document and jpeg image files preferred.

Submit contributions via email, or email the Editor at info@lamesahistory.com