

# HAVENS OF HISTORY

'Old' is on a roll as area museums preserve the past for the future

BY FRANK ROBERTSON

*When they opened the new Cloverdale historical museum last fall there was a parade and birthday party to celebrate Cloverdale turning 150 years old. People were excited because the 19th century Gothic Revival Victorian Gould-Shaw House had undergone a million-dollar renovation complete with a climate-controlled environment designed to keep its historical artifacts in good condition.*

"Things were deteriorating at an alarming rate," said Cloverdale Historical Society director Bonnie Asien. A decent museum had saved artifacts and memories. It was time to party. The invitation said, "We're building on our past for a brighter future."

History is on a roll in Sonoma County. Maybe it's because Baby Boomers are starting to retire and finding time to remember when. Maybe it's because change has come on a little strong due to the Northern California building boom of the last 30 years. The new Cloverdale museum "means more than ever because we're so busy tearing things down," City Councilwoman Carol Russell told the local newspaper as the town prepared to celebrate.

In Guerneville, the Russian River Historical Society hopes to move a boarded-up 19th century cabin called the Marshall House out of the flood plain this year and transform the boarded-up building into a museum of historic River lore. The exhibits will surely include the historic flood photos now tucked away in the historical society members' dry barns and attics.

The Windsor Historical Society opened its museum last year in the Hembree House, a restored former doctor's home built in 1931, which often seems about as old as anything could possibly be in the state of California.

The historic Hembree House is now called the Hembree House Cultural Center, where the Windsor Historical Society shares space with the Windsor Arts Council and its gallery.

Windsor is the county's newest city, so the juxtaposition of the Hembree House on Foxwood Drive across the street from a residential subdivision underscores the sense that in Windsor, "people didn't know there was any history," said Windsor museum docent Jan Lehman. She and her husband, Steve Lehman, the Windsor Historical Society's president, have been instrumental in making old Windsor's history accessible.

"We've been working 20 years to get this for the Historical Society," said Jan, showing a visitor around the Hembree House.

The Hembree Cultural Center seems happy to be there, restored and reno-

vated in its new role. It's an extraordinary old house where you can browse the George Greott collection, the work of the 99-year-old Windsor resident who has carved, constructed and collected remarkable artifacts over a lifetime of ranching in Windsor. Greott's arrowhead collection is housed in a glass cylinder from an antique gas pump that rotates on a pedestal Greott improvised from materials found around his ranch. You have to see it to really appreciate it.

Having a museum located in a historic building where people (white people, at least) first settled, and being able to see what's happened over the last 150 years—much of it development visible from the Hembree House living room—makes a visit there a comprehensive experience. How completely different it must have been in pre-World War II California, still a frontier full of wide-open spaces.

You don't have to be old to discover a tranquility that comes with looking at old stuff—an awareness of mortality that comes with browsing used things no longer in use. Does a fondness for history have

something to do with becoming obsolete yourself? Why is there a certain exhilaration and curiosity that accompanies aging? It's not that you're feeling useless. It's more about the opportunity to simply be an observer and to be glad that not a lot more is expected.

What makes a history museum good may depend on what you hope to find there, and maybe what you didn't expect. I didn't expect to learn at the Healdsburg Museum, for instance, that Healdsburg always considered itself a destination for people of taste and sophistication.

It was called "The San Francisco of the North" in the late 19th century when the city grew from 300 people in 1857 to 2,000 by 1880, says the information on display. Even then, "downtown Healdsburg and its people had a sophisticated flavor."

The museum itself attests to that, housed in the historically impressive neo-classical Carnegie library building designed by noted Bay Area architect Brainerd Jones. A portrait of Jones shows a dapper-looking man wearing a three-piece suit, high collar and a checkered tie. Brainerd's building





is “as important as the collection it houses,” says the Healdsburg Museum and Historical Society’s web site, which is also gaining importance as volunteers digitalize photos and documents to make them accessible by computer.

It may be ironic or even poetic justice that a miraculous new way to access history is with a new technology that enables online virtual museums where digitalized pictures and stories of the old days can be experienced on web sites and online blogs. (One of the better ones is the Russian River Historical Society’s web site, [russianriverhistory.org](http://russianriverhistory.org).)

But being able to see history first-hand is its own reward, thanks

to these community historical societies and the supporters they attract. “We have a huge bevy of really talented volunteers,” said Ann Howard, a Healdsburg Museum volunteer docent.

The museum has a new executive director, Sue Ross, and a thoughtful research curator, Holly Hoods, who oversees the museum’s ambitious research archives, where anyone can come in and explore the history of Healdsburg. One of the rewards of her work, said Hoods, is when people discover the museum for the first time—“people who are connected to the area, who wander in and are delighted.”

[This page] top left— *The Hembree Cultural Center in Windsor houses the Historical Society and the Arts Council*, top right— *Healdsburg Museum*, bottom— *West County Museum, Sebastopol*; [Page 24] *Archived documents from the Healdsburg Museum*; [Page 25] *Old railroad car behind the West County Museum*; [Page 27] *Holly Hoods, Healdsburg Museum*.

## GETTING TO KNOW YOUR LOCAL MUSEUM

Being a history buff, it seems natural that Dick Van Aggelen would be drawn to the Western Sonoma County Historical Society’s West County Museum located across the street from his old bus stop.

Van Aggelen, who came to Sebastopol from San Francisco in 1995, used to catch the commuter bus to San Francisco on South Main Street in Sebastopol just across from the museum, where he’s now one of the docents. After he retired in 2002, “I came over and started talking to people,” said Van Aggelen.

He talked to Jim Nagy, a museum volunteer and docent, and was impressed with Nagy’s knowledge. Nagy, who died two years ago, “was encyclopedic

about the people in the area,” said Van Aggelen, showing a visitor around a recent exhibit entitled “Sebastopol from A to Z.”

The West County Museum occupies



Sebastopol’s restored Petaluma and Santa Rosa Railway depot, a building that was designed by architect Brainerd Jones and is on the National Register of Historic Places. The museum has a good selection of books, such as Sebastopol writer Frank Baumgardner’s *Killing for Land in California*, *Sebastopol Walks*, by Sebastopol trail advocate Richard Nichols, and *Sebastopol’s Historic Cemetery*, volumes one and two, by Sebastopol writer and historian Evelyn McClure.

“This museum is one of the best kept secrets in the county,” said Van Aggelen.

That may be said for them all.

— Frank Robertson

# WHERE TO BROWSE THE PAST

(All area codes 707)

GOULD-SHAW HOUSE MUSEUM  
215 Cloverdale Blvd., Cloverdale  
894-2067  
Thur. - Mon., 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.

HEALDSBURG MUSEUM  
221 Matheson St., Healdsburg  
431-3325; healdsburgmuseum.org  
Wed. - Sunday, 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.  
Research Archives,  
Thur. - Sat. by appointment

HEMBREE HOUSE  
CULTURAL CENTER  
9225 Foxwood Dr., Windsor  
838-4613  
Fri. - Sun., 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

WEST COUNTY MUSEUM  
261 Main St., Sebastopol  
829-6711  
Thurs. - Sun., 1 to 4 p.m.

THE HAND FAN MUSEUM  
327A Healdsburg Ave., Healdsburg  
431-2500; handfanmuseum.com  
Wed. - Sun., 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.; closed  
holidays and rainy days.

*Note: This is the only historic hand fan museum in the United States. It's located in the Hotel Healdsburg as of press time, but it is slated to move this spring into the new h2 Hotel down the street when construction is complete.*

