

The Evolution of Recreation Programs in Menlo Park *Tim Johnston*

The history of recreation programs in Menlo Park reflects the broader story of the city's growth from a small Peninsula community into a thriving suburban city. Over the course of 100 years, recreation in Menlo Park has evolved from informal neighborhood activities and school playground programs into a comprehensive system of parks, sports leagues, classes, camps, and community facilities serving residents of all ages.

During the 1930s and early 1940s, organized recreation in Menlo Park was relatively modest. Children gathered on school grounds, vacant lots, and neighborhood fields for informal games, while civic organizations and schools sponsored occasional athletic and social activities. As Menlo Park's population grew following World War II, city leaders recognized the need for more structured recreation opportunities and public park facilities.



A major milestone occurred in 1948 when the City Council renamed Menlo Recreation Park as Nealon Park in honor

of James J. Nealon, a longtime advocate for youth athletics in San Mateo County. Nealon had worked tirelessly to promote basketball, baseball, and other opportunities for local youth, and the park's new name reflected the community's commitment to organized recreation.

The 1950s marked the beginning of the city's supervised playground era. Recreation leaders, like the legendary Steve Brennan at Nealon, were often local high school or college students hired to organize activities at neighborhood parks. During the summer months, children would arrive each morning at parks such as Nealon, Burgess and Kelly, where recreation leaders supervised softball games, kickball, relay races, arts and crafts, and countless other activities. The board game, Carrom, was hugely popular.



Programs were inexpensive, accessible, and highly popular with local families.

By the 1960s, Menlo Park's recreation system had reached its peak participation. Inter-park competitions became a highlight of the summer season, fostering friendly rivalries among neighborhood parks. The annual "Rec Olympics" brought together children from across the city to compete in running races, softball throws, relays, and novelty events. For many residents who grew up during this era, like me, these programs created lasting friendships and strong neighborhood identities.

At the same time, the city's park system continued to expand. Burgess Park, acquired by the city in 1948, developed into one of Menlo Park's principal recreation centers and eventually became home to athletic fields, swimming facilities, gymnasiums, and other community amenities.

During the 1970s and early 1980s, recreation programming gradually shifted. While traditional playground leader programs continued, the city increasingly emphasized organized sports leagues, instructional classes, day camps, aquatics programs, and specialized recreational activities.



This transition reflected changing family schedules and growing demand for structured programs.

By 1985, Menlo Park had largely completed its transformation from a community centered on informal neighborhood playgrounds to one supported by a diverse recreation system. Today, the city's recreation department oversees parks, athletic fields, aquatics, sports leagues, classes, and community programs that continue the tradition of enriching community life.



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Tuesdays
Noon–2:00 pm

Located in the Merrill
History Room
(MP Library basement level)

MPHA is a registered 501(c)(3)
non-profit organization.



President's Message

The Menlo Park Historical Association continues to enjoy an active season filled with history, fellowship, and community connections.

On May 16th, members and friends gathered for a delightful potluck BBQ at Frank Merrill's historic home, with approximately 25–30 attendees. Frank shared fascinating excerpts from his grandfather's notebooks, and vintage signs on display added a special historical atmosphere to the evening. It was a wonderful opportunity to enjoy good food, good company, and a meaningful connection to Menlo Park's past. *(Photos on page 7)*

On Saturday, May 30th, approximately 12–15 visitors stopped by the Schapelhouman Fire Museum. Tours were conducted by retired firefighters Tom Carter and Bill Hembey, who shared Menlo Park's firefighting history, historic equipment, and stories of the dedicated men and women who served our community. Their firsthand knowledge and personal experiences brought the museum's history to life for visitors. *(Photos on page 7)*

Events such as these remind us of the importance of preserving local history and bringing our community together through shared experiences and storytelling. Thank you to everyone who attended, volunteered, and continues to support the Menlo Park Historical Association.

We look forward to many more opportunities to celebrate and preserve Menlo Park's unique heritage.

Warm regards,
Sandy Pachaud, President

Teen Volunteers

The MPHA teen summer volunteers are ready to roll up their sleeves and lend a hand this summer, bringing energy, enthusiasm, and a willingness to help. These outstanding volunteers will assist with projects while earning community service hours for their efforts. Pictured left to right are Grace, Gray, Henry and Jack. Not pictured is our fifth student volunteer, Natalie—a great team helping support the mission of the Menlo Park Historical Association.



Volunteers Needed

The MPHA Board loves it when members ask to create or assist with projects. We need assistance keeping the office open on Tuesdays from noon to 2pm. We are also looking for members to get involved with scanning, organizing photographs, cataloging historical records, and artifacts etc.

Help us, we need you!
Email mphistorical@yahoo.com

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Although the classic “rec leader” era has largely passed into history, generations of Menlo Park residents still remember summers spent at neighborhood parks, where recreation programs helped shape childhood experiences and strengthen community bonds.

(Editor's Note: Shout out to my old pals from Nealon Park: Mark Yob, Terry McCaffrey, Tim Foley, Steve Yost, Dennis Robbins, Don and Jim Winslow, and Marc Nuckolls. Marc and his wife, Nancy, went on to serve in many different roles during their decades of service in the Recreation (later Community Services) department. What a time we had during those 60s summers!!)

A Member's Story Sue Wagstaffe

My father-in-law, Francis Gerard Wagstaffe, known to most people as Jerry Wagstaffe, was a phenomenal lawyer in San Mateo County for over a 50-year period. Dad knew many things about this area two of which stuck with me.

- While my husband, Steve was in law school studying, I would take rides in the car with mom and dad all over the county. One day we were traveling down the 280 Freeway. Jerry told me the freeway was the most beautiful freeway in the world, no signs or billboards of any kind just beautiful nature. He also told me the dividers in the middle of the road were made of a material that would rust so it would fit in with the landscape. Who knew?!
- A most interesting piece of historical information has to do with the tile roofs of the many buildings in Menlo Park and Atherton. Jerry shared with me that In the early days before the clay tiles were manufactured in a factory, they were made by the local Native Americans, likely members of the Ohlone tribe. A slab of clay would be placed across a person's thigh and shaped, and put in the sun to dry. This is why a clay tile roof that is very old has many different shapes to form the roof as opposed to a factory roof. Because of this, I always look at a tile roof to discern whether or not the tiles are totally alike or totally different. It is fun to know I can figure out if I am looking at a very old home or one that is just made to look old.

Jerry also taught me to never be afraid to take something apart to fix it. He used to always have all these Allen wrenches in a little tin box and could pick one out and fix anything with it. I now own that little tin box.

I remember fondly, my dear father-in-law, friend, storyteller, super lawyer to many, and a “fix it man!”

Share a Story

Do you enjoy writing?

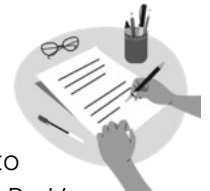
Do you have a story to tell?

The Gate Post invites MPHA members to share short stories connected to Menlo Park's history—perhaps about a family member, a personal remembrance, a former home or building, or another meaningful local connection.

Submissions should be 100–250 words and may include a photo.

Interested? Email mphistorical@yahoo.com.

Thank you for supporting MPHA!



Meet the Student Volunteers

We asked our student volunteers to introduce themselves and reflect a bit on Menlo Park.



Henry Breckenridge

My name is Henry and I live in Menlo Park. I'm a rising 8th grader and I go to Hillview Middle School. I love drawing, playing guitar and many more things that let me express my creativity. I'm interested in helping the Menlo Park Historical Society because it lets me grow closer with the people around me and the people that live in Menlo Park. Menlo Park has many different exciting things to do, whether it's skating with your friends in the skatepark, checking out books at the library, or just simply taking a ride around town on your bike. Don't miss out on all the fun things to do! Living in a community that I know and love makes me feel always at home. I couldn't have wished for a better childhood.



Jack Breckenridge

My name is Jack and I'm a sophomore at Menlo Atherton High School. I love math, baking and all things musical theater. I love

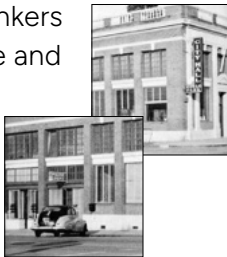
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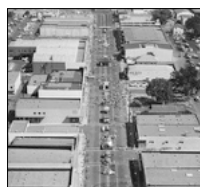
Did You Know?

- From 1939 – early 50's Menlo Park moved its City Hall operations from the old Doyle Street City Hall into what is now the British Bankers Club building at Santa Cruz Avenue and El Camino Real. The building housed:
 - City Hall
 - Police Department
 - City Jail
 - Library
- Within the city limits of Menlo Park, there are no fewer than 17 officially recognized city parks and open spaces, ranging from small, leafy neighborhood spaces to expansive nature parks. The city's park system includes the following notable locations:

- Bedwell Bayfront Park	- Willow Oaks Park
- Burgess Park	- Meta Park
- Nealon Park	- Hamilton Park
- Sharon Park	- Karl E. Clark Park
- Fremont Park	- Tinker Park
- Jack W. Lyle Park	- Seminary Oaks Park
- Joseph P. Kelly Park (Kelly Park)	



- The City of Menlo Park is officially a Tree City USA community, a designation awarded by the Arbor Day Foundation. Menlo Park has held that designation for 27 consecutive years as of 2025–2026.
- The Sharon Heights neighborhood takes its name from the Sharon family. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the rolling hills southwest of Menlo Park were part of the approximately 600-acre estate of Frederick William Sharon and his wife Louise Tevis Breckinridge Sharon. The property stretched across much of what we now recognize as Sharon Heights.
- The Dibble General Hospital swimming pool, built in 1943 became the nucleus of the original Burgess Pool.
- Menlo Park has been hosting summer street festivals on Santa Cruz Avenue since the mid-1960's, under earlier names such as Santa Cruz Avenue Days.



Later festivals such as the most recent Menlo Summerfest and earlier Connoisseurs' Marketplace, trace their lineage to Santa Cruz Avenue Days.

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to work with the Menlo Park Historical Association because I get to look at all these artifacts that reveal how the places I visit on a day to day basis have evolved over time. Menlo Park holds a special place in my heart because it is where I grew up and has so much to offer. The best part about our city is the sheer amount of trees we have. It truly demonstrates this city and for that reason it is on our logo.



Natalie Hargreaves

My name is Natalie, and I have spent my whole life in Menlo Park. This place is important to me because it is safe and welcoming, allowing me to call it home. The Menlo Park community is so amazing, with so many opportunities for events that I have attended as I've grown up. I have been able to take lessons at the pool and the gymnasium at the Burgess Center. Also, something that is special about Menlo Park is their education systems, which are so supportive to students of all different backgrounds and have allowed me to get to know so many other kids that have been friends with me for so many years. I have so many memories that I will cherish like class parties, the STEM fair events, spirit weeks, and so much more. Menlo Park will forever be considered a special home to me because of the people, opportunities, and a sense of safety it has provided.



Gray Hargreaves

Hi, my name is Gray Hargreaves, I am an incoming 9th grader at Menlo Atherton High School, and one thing I enjoy about Menlo Park is the amount of trees in the area. I first realized this when I was hiking on skyline a few years ago, and when we reached the summit, I thought it would be fun to try

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to find my house. Little did I know, it was virtually impossible to see the whole area, much less our house. I enjoy this because it makes the city feel less urban and more like somewhere where the city really cares about the look and just how natural feeling the city is.



Grace Grundy

My name is Grace and I was born and raised in Menlo Park. I feel so lucky that I get to call this city my home. I truly think this is the best place to grow up. It's safe, welcoming and has so many amazing opportunities. I've grown up in the Willows where many of my friends live too. I was a Laurel Squirrel, a Hillview Hawk and now I am an M-A Bear. There are so many amazing things about this town but a big one is the community. I grew up with block parties, where they would close off the street and kids would be running around while parents chatted. Every walk around the block people wave and say hello. Another one of my favorite things is the location with the mountains and Tahoe only a few hours away. I love that I can easily walk or bike places in town. Everywhere I go, I am reminded of childhood memories. I know when I go to college I am going to miss this place so much. The people and this town have shaped me to be the person that I am. Menlo Park will always have a special place in my heart.

Cook's Seafood Sam Sinnott

The oldest restaurant in Menlo Park turns 100 in 2028. *Cook's Seafood Market and Restaurant* was founded at its current location in 1928 by Bill Cook, a local police officer. Most recorded history has Cook's as both a restaurant and market. Originally, the business had 3 large boiling pots in front of an open air eating area to cook crabs. In the 1940's, the business was sold to Robert Rahe. After his death, the business was again sold in 1963 to Roy Crumrine. Roy began working at Cook's in 1955 as a 15-year-old Sequoia High student making \$1 per hour as a dishwasher. By 1963, at age 23, he saved enough to buy Cook's for \$1500. He met his wife, Josephine, at Cook's where she was a waitress.

Sons Roy Jr. and Mike took active leadership following their father's retirement and subsequent passing about 10 years ago.

Roy Sr.'s development of Cook's into a multimillion dollar enterprise was a long process of investment, experimentation and commitment to Menlo Park. Although the business is technically a tenant on leased land—he invested millions to make it better.



Cook's Bibb N' Tucker opened next door about 1964. It was a large, sit down restaurant with a beautiful buffet run by chef Lee. Fantastic roast beef sandwiches.

Bib N' Tucker was replaced by Arby's in 1976 in a new building designed by Goodwin Steinberg, until 2006.

The original Cook's open air building was completely rebuilt in 1990. The shed roof in the center of the dining room is the only part remaining. As the architect, we created a new theme associated with east coast fishing villages. Horizontal, lapped siding, storm proof light fixtures and wood crate stencil letters. At a glance it reads as a seafood market and restaurant. Although the building predates the Americans with Disabilities Act, it conforms with most of its requirements and still thrives today as a roomy, comfortable, contemporary building.

The Arby's building next door still stands. Following its closure, Roy attempted to convert it into a grilled fish takeout operation. The remodel and addition became very expensive. Frustrated, Roy never opened Cook's Grill and it sits completed and closed to this day.

Eventually it became clear, the Crumrines should focus on what they do best—fried fish and chips with a beautiful seafood market.

Well done guys—congratulations!

2026 Events

November 7: Menlo Park Holy Cross Cemetery walking tour

Begins at 11am. Reservations not needed.

November 15: Annual business meeting and speaker event

2:00 – 4:00pm

Library speaker: Heather David

Honoring Menlo Park's 100th Anniversary

We welcome ideas on how to celebrate the 100th anniversary of Menlo Park's incorporation in 2027.

Please call or email us with your suggestions: (650) 330-2522 or MPhistorical@yahoo.com

The latest information about our events can be found by visiting our home page at: <https://www.mphistory.org/>

Celebrating Bo Crane

MPHA held a dedication ceremony in honor of Bo Crane. A memorial bench was installed in Fremont Park across from Peets coffee. About 25 people were in attendance and several shared fond memories of Bo. A big thank you to Nick Szegda and Doug Monterosa from the City of Menlo Park for ordering and installing the bench.



What the heck is a QR Code?

We're glad you asked! A QR code, short for quick-response code, is a type of two-dimensional matrix barcode invented in 1994. QR codes are now universally utilized for digital menus, ticketing, contactless payments, and app downloads. You can use the camera on your smartphone to scan it, or use a QR code scanning app. Both will automatically take you—in this case—to a designated website. Think of QR codes as digital magic carpets; they take you wherever the creator wants you to go.



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It's Time to Renew Your
Membership

As of this printing, we still have some 2025 members who have not yet renewed their membership. Your membership renewal demonstrates your love of Menlo and continued interest in its history. Please note for those members who renew their membership yearly, you will find in this issue a renewal envelope for your convenience. Remember your support is tax deductible. Membership dues to the Association not only help defray office expenses during the year, but helps pay for preserving information about the history of Menlo Park.

MPHA thanks you for your continued support.

Menlo Memories By Dick Barbour

Dick Barbour, archivist and past president of the Menlo Park Historical Association (1980-82) wrote an entertaining column in the Menlo Atherton Recorder about the history of Menlo Park. His columns covered local personalities, events, issues, or just happenings that shaped Menlo. Below is one of his articles dated July 21, 1981.

There will always be those who are understandably curious about the origin of the name Alameda de las Pulgas, which translates into a tree-shaded avenue of the fleas. Why would any early county planner be so impressed by these long-leaping little parasites to name a prominent thoroughfare after them? Why indeed?

The answer is that the Alameda got its name from the rancho of the same name. Rancho de las Pulgas was a 35,000-acre spread that extended from San Francisquito Creek north to include what is now Menlo Park, Atherton, Redwood City, San Carlos, Belmont and part of San Mateo. But what about its curious name?

One well-accepted version dates the origin of the name as October 27, 1769. That was just a week before Captain Gaspar de Portola's hardy expedition looked across from Sweeney Ridge, back of today's Pacifica, to discover something mighty interesting—San Francisco Bay. On their way the expedition camped along Purisima Creek near the ocean and some of the soldiers in the party used abandoned tule huts as shelters. During the night they were accosted by fleas and with more than a little justification, named an Indian village on the other side of the creek Rancheria de las Pulgas, or village of the fleas.

The name, and apparently the fleas, endured, for when Governor Sola granted Don Luis Arguello the right to remain on what had been a part of the San Francisco Presidio's Ranch del Rey. Luis occupied the land with his own herds and herdsmen and it became known as Rancho de las Pulgas. That was in 1821, and he lived there until his death nine years later. In the interim he served as the first native born governor of California and the first to hold that office after Mexico's separation from Spain.

After 1830 the grant was maintained by Don Luis' widow, Dona Soledad Ortega. She was described by peninsula traveler Don Alfred Robinson later that year with "I found her a beautiful woman and mother of three or four children. She was very lady-like in her manner and treated us with utmost courtesy. After dinner we bade her adieu and proceeded on our way...." Although Don Luis did not register the grant with the Mexican government, years later U.S. courts confirmed his right to Rancho de las Pulgas. With these names of early explorers and rancheros of our part of the Peninsula may become hazy in history, they succeeded in perpetuating the memory of pioneer fleas, some of whose descendants are yet among us as this writer's long-haired Sheltie can at times attest.



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Photos from the potluck BBQ at Frank Merrill's home



Photos of Menlo Park Fire Department Museum Day



Photo taken by member Gail Blesi.

Unless otherwise noted, all images are courtesy of MPHA and the Menlo Park Planning Department Flickr page (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/menloparkplanning/>).



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E-mail: mphistorical@yahoo.com

OUR MISSION STATEMENT

The purpose for which this association is formed is to collect, preserve, and disseminate historical data, information, relics, and objects or records of historical interest relating to the City of Menlo Park and environs.

Become a Member of MPHA today!

To All Members

Please send all inquiries to mphistorical@yahoo.com. Remember to check junk/spam folder for group emails.

Annual membership/renewal

Residential..... \$ 30
Business..... \$ 100
Lifetime..... \$ 200

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Mail (use the enclosed form)

If you prefer you can mail a check made out to "MPHA" and mail to:

MPHA, 800 Alma St.,
Menlo Park, CA 94025

Please include your mailing address. Also, consider including your email address to help us save on postage costs and to receive documents electronically.



The iconic oak tree used as the model for the City's official logo was located in Burgess Park close to the Little League baseball field.

