

The Echo

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Let's Put On A Show!

Historical Society Theatre Americana Exhibit Opens Saturday, November 3

Ever imagined yourself as a stage star? A playwright? A creative member of stage arts and productions?

People in Altadena had this option for over sixty years.

"Theatre Americana Remembered," the Altadena Historical Society's new exhibit focuses on a locally famous gem which brightened our community for

over sixty years, providing a wonderful outlet for creativity, innovation, and fun for adults and children while showcasing original American plays.



Buddy Ebsen and Actresses From His Play "Champagne General" 1965

How it began

It all began in 1934 when, due to a devastating financial depression, our government instituted several agencies designed to foster arts, provide work for the

unemployed, energize the economy and so forth. One was the Works Progress Administration, commonly known as the W.P.A. It distributed funds to groups who needed help all over the nation and much art was created through that effort.

During the Depression years many people in Altadena were in

desperate situations. Recognizing this, the Altadena Community Theater Association, a local group, which enjoyed meeting to read aloud from plays, joined together with 22 other community organizations, to apply for W.P.A. funds to create a community center that housed a real theater.

They believed that building a live theater would generate some income for the community by providing jobs for unemployed residents. And, they convinced Los Angeles County to use a former nursery at Lake Avenue and Mount Curve Street to create a park and build a home for a theater company.

Mrs. Ruth Thurber, a very dedicated advocate

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President's Letter *by Kathy Hoskins*

Last month we welcomed two new members to the Altadena Historical Society Board.

Eric Mulfinger is a recently retired educator who taught at Westridge and John Marshall schools. He has an interest in the history of the San Gabriel Mountains and has done a great job of reorganizing our map collection. He is also helping with research requests.

Tim Gregory, "The Building Biographer", has been a friend of AHS for many years and has been a valued member of our Archive Committee.



His vast knowledge of the area is a wonderful addition to our Board. Welcome to both!

Your Support is Vital to Your Historical Society's Work.

We are grateful for every bit of support we get from our members and supporters to help us continue the important work of preserving and sharing our history.

Special contributions such as Webster's Community Pharmacy for their \$375 community partnership donation, which reflects a portion of sales of their Beautiful Altadena 91001 merchandise, and Ruth and Bill Dawson's \$500 donation to our museum exhibit fund are enormously helpful.

In kind donations like those mentioned on pages six and seven are always valued. And your membership dues and contributions to our fund drives make a big difference.

Here's another easy way you can help us keep the doors open and the lights on: Participate in give-back programs from businesses you probably already use.

Altadena Historical Society is one of Amazon Smile's spotlighted charities. If you're an Amazon shopper, make your purchases through [amazonsmile.com](https://www.amazon.com/amazonsmile) and select Altadena Historical Society as your designated non-profit recipient. AHS will receive 0.05% of the price of your purchase. The entire shopping experience is the same and most Amazon products are available on Amazon Smile.

Register your Ralphs Card with their Community Contribution program. You'll not only get gas points and card-member prices, Ralphs will send us 1%-4% of total purchases from people who have selected AHS as their designated recipient. Even though we no longer have a Ralphs in Altadena, there are several Ralphs and Food4Less stores nearby.

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Does your label have a \$? If so, we haven't received your 2018 dues. Don't let this be the last newsletter to reach your mailbox. Send us your dues today. Or pay online at altadenahistorical.society.org/membership

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who spearheaded the effort, went to Washington, D.C., San Francisco and other places to lobby for the project. She insisted that the building must have a kitchen, a meeting room and a stage. Original blueprints and documents associated with the funding request for the building are part of our Theatre Americana exhibit. Although she never took an active part in productions, Mrs. Thurber was president of Theatre Americana for many years.

Furnishings weren't included in the WPA project but William D. Davies, President of the Altadena Improvement Association for whom the building was named, generously loaned \$4,000 (in 1933, a very generous amount) for the furnishings, and other equipment was donated by Altadena Women's Circle, Altadena Women's Club and other individuals. The famous author (and Altadena resident), Zane Grey, reportedly donated funds for lighting the first performance, "Peter the Great."

How it blossomed

Theatre Americana was never just a building – nor was it just a little community theater. Over time, it filled many other roles: a place to learn play-writing, stage production, decorating, set design, make-up/costumes, acting and everything else that helped create an entertaining performance.

During a time when radio and films were the only entertainment media, T.A. exposed



Mrs. William D. Davies (second from left) and Others Pose in Costume in Front of the Davies Building c.1934

both adults and children to the enchantment of live theater. People learned to perform all the functions involved in mounting a production and many of them went on to careers in the field.

Responding to Theatre Americana's script contests, authors submitted previously unperformed plays, and a jury chose the best. Four plays were introduced each year, with memberships and series ticket options for fans. Auditions were wildly popular and, over time, a happy culture evolved, including "Hell Sunday," when dress rehearsal took place. The name alone tells you how busy, stressful, and satisfying it was for the cast and crew! (See more information on "Hell Sunday" in our exhibit.)

Altadena Historical Society has much information documenting the difficulty of directing and staging a play which has never been produced. Imagine the great challenge of creating sets and lighting for a new play. Imagine trying to recruit volunteers to sew costumes? Imagine seeking donations from local businesses to fund flyers and place



Everyone Helped Create Sets

advertisements in their stores.

Theatre Americana did it successfully for almost sixty years. They produced over 300 plays – comedies, musicals, and more serious dramas. All remained true to their mission of portraying the American scene, particularly life in Southern California. Perhaps the play that best represented what Theatre Americana was all about was 1965's

“The Champagne General,” a Civil War drama written by actor Buddy Ebsen.

They took part in the Southern California Tournament of One-Act Plays and won three years in a row, beginning in 1947, and continued winning (off and on) into the late 1960s.

ORIGINAL PLAYS TO BE GIVEN TRYOUTS

\$100.00 For Best

Must be of American Scene — Three acts — Not previously produced by professionals . . . First entries received will be considered for fall presentation . . . Your play will be given immediate attention by the Play-reading Committee of

Theatre Americana

now active and glad to consider your entry for the

Frederick Warde Prize

This is the only little theatre in America devoted to the American Scene, offering unusual opportunities for playwrights, actors and directors. A live organization with a theatre-building expansion program. Altadena's Community Theatre is located near Hollywood, Pasadena, Los Angeles . . . Season October to June . . . Awards made after final presentation . . . Annual deadline February first . . .

Send Mrs. to

Mrs. Weldon Heald, President
3126 Rubio Canyon Road
Altadena, California

(Return Postage must be included)

Funding was important, of course, and the group produced one of the biggest social events in Altadena – the Theater Arts Ball. A gala costume affair, held at Altadena Country Club, it generated both fun and funding for events of the year. Another event was held each year to attract new members. Fans

became members and many soon found themselves working on or acting in productions as well as supporting the organization with \$5 dues.

Theatre Americana was very much a part of the Altadena community. It created and produced a “Town Square” Christmas program, (first located at the old post office at Lake Avenue and

Mariposa Street,) with music, children’s participation and a play, which continued at least until 1962. During the 60s and 70s members took part in Altadena’s Old-Fashioned Days Parade, a very popular annual event on Lake Avenue. And they participated in fundraising activities for Kiwanis and other community groups.

Aside from the satisfaction of hearing audience

applause as they take well-deserved bows, more tangible rewards awaited the plays and the players. Each year awards were given for best play, best actors, and best directors. Some of these cherished awards were the “Millis,” created by artist Milli Estey. “Millis” were hand-crafted

ceramic depictions of characters portrayed by winning actors. Estey and her husband Ned were longtime dedicated T.A. members who acted, directed, and offered their home for rehearsals, costume and prop storage, meetings and social functions.

Why it ended

Altadena Historical Society houses the records of this popular endeavor, but the Theatre Americana begun in 1934 is no more. What happened?

Several factors contributed to serious problems for Theatre Americana. Community theaters began to close after interest declined due to the availability of television in homes, videos, movies, etc. Art, drama, and comedy became free and easily at hand in the home. Schools taught the skills once learned at T.A. such as costuming, make-up, lighting, etc. Authors wrote for studios and not for the general public.

Proposition 13 resulted in a severe loss of funding for Los Angeles County's contributions to arts preservation efforts and the County, which had been co-sponsoring the organization since 1960, increased fees for use of the Davies building beyond what Theatre Americana could pay. Security at the building became a problem and T.A. couldn't afford to hire someone to protect their props, sets, and lighting equipment.

Theatre Americana, along with many other Altadena organizations, raised money to create a new Town Hall which would provide them a permanent home, but those



The “Theater Arts Ball” Was a Spectacular Annual Event.

efforts were not successful. They sought space in two community churches, but those venues did not prove satisfactory for long term performance space.

So, Theatre Americana wound down as it began – with readings and staged plays in homes and community venues. And, eventually, it shut down.

But....

In 2008 Theatre Americana re-formed by joining forces with another theater group, Show of Support Productions. Without a home theater of its own, it performs in many venues, and has been a grant recipient of the Tournament of Roses and the L.A. Arts Commission, and a six-year recipient of Pasadena ArtNight.

Though it has had to take a different direction to stay competitive, the mission of today's Theatre Americana is still to produce original work by local playwrights and provide a culturally enriching theater experience for adults and children, and it has done so for over ten years.

— *by Pam Wright*

What's Up at AHS?

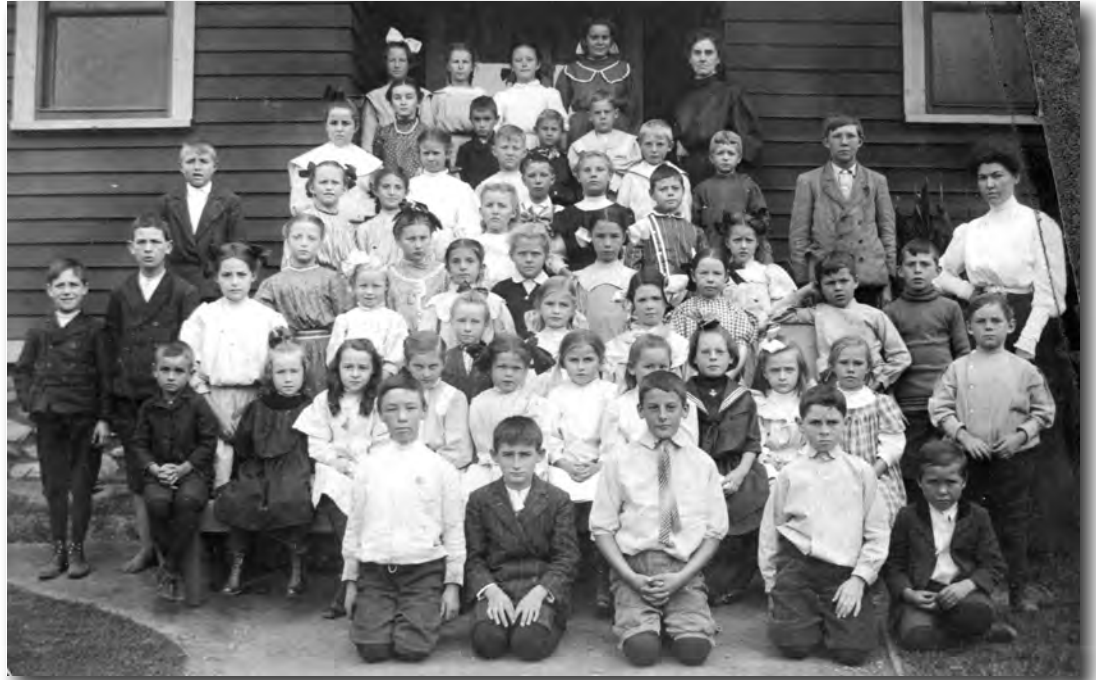
As you can tell from our cover story, AHS volunteers have been very busy getting ready for our next exhibit, due to open on Saturday, November 3, and run through October of 2019. We've also been busy using the updated computers we were able to acquire thanks to our very generous donors.

We're cataloging the results of several years of research requests to make answers to your questions easier to find. And we're adding to our Past Perfect database with a detailed map inventory as well as information about all our acquisitions.

New to the Collection

We have quite a collection of new photos, artifacts, and other objects to report this fall. **Shirley Manning** brought us a 1926 Chamber of Commerce pamphlet, "Altadena the Beautiful." **Diane Lane** contributed three Eliot yearbooks (1961 – 1963) and a copy of the Husky Hi Lites newspaper. A CD of the documentary "Pancho Barnes and the Happy Bottom Riding Club" signed by the director came to us through **Allan Tamura**.

Dave Boucher, who gave a well-received talk about fire department history, provided us with an award given to Altadena's first fire captain by a



Altadena School - 1907

grateful community, aerial photographs showing the reservoir on the Cobb estate, a 115-year-old letter describing a trip to Alpine Tavern, and a portfolio of San Gabriel Mountain photographs taken by photographer Roy Murphy. Three

wonderful photos of Altadena Elementary class pictures from 1907, 1911-12, and 1913 feature **Francine Smith's** grandmother and her classmates.

Mariene Matthews gave us a huge marquee sign from Theatre Americana's days at the Altadena Community Church, which you'll see prominently

Silver-plate artifact found from Marcell Inn



displayed in the upcoming exhibit. But probably our most intriguing acquisition is a silver-plate artifact with “Marcell Inn” engraved on it, found in a landfill near Paxton Street in the Sunland/Tujunga area by **James Castary**. We think it is a cover for food waiters delivered to your table, but we don’t know for sure.

What do you know about the Mount Lowe Railway?

The Disneyland of its day, Mount Lowe Railway drew visitors from all over the nation and the world to little Altadena, a small town below the foothills of the San Gabriel

Cottages at Ye Alpine Tavern (right) Lobby of the Echo Mountain House (below)



Mountains. Its story is not only a history of the resort itself; it is also a microcosm of America from the late 1800s to just before World War II.

Do you know who designed the Railway’s cable system? How many hotels served tourists who rode the railway? How the founder of Torrance, California was connected to the resort? The price of dinner at the Alpine Tavern in December 1933? The local writer who honeymooned on Mount Lowe?

You can find this information and much more on the Historical Society’s Mount Lowe Website. Just go to our website www.altadenahistoricalociety.com and click on the link for Mount Lowe. It tells the history of this remarkable endeavor, from its beginning at Altadena Junction to its final days in 1936, with a focus on the people

who built and rode the railway. And it provides links to many other sources of information about this significant part of Altadena’s past.

And don’t forget to like us on Facebook

where you’ll find new historical tidbits posted nearly every day. Share the stories you like, and you’ll help spread the

word about AHS.

From Our Readers:

Reader **Nick Curry** responded to last spring’s Echo with more information on the Auto Club’s road map. The Ross Field Balloon School shown on that map was built on what is now the golf course at Arcadia County Park in 1918. At that site Army soldiers were to receive training in balloon observation skills. However, due to the Santa Ana winds,

observational training took place at Mt. Wilson instead. The field was abandoned in the summer of 1919.

— by Jean Phillips

Farnsworth Park and the William D. Davies Memorial Building

Reminiscent of America's National Park buildings, the William D. Davies Memorial Recreation Center in Farnsworth Park, located near the top of Lake, is one of Altadena's eleven National Register Historic Sites, listed in 1997.

Designed in the lodge-like "American rustic-style" by Charles H. Kyson in 1931, and financed by the Work Progress Administration (WPA,) the building represents typical structures once found throughout the Angeles National Forest. Most are now gone.

Characterized by use of native arroyo stone and wood shingles, the genre conveyed a philosophy of conservation and a respectful relationship between building and natural setting.

Stone walls, curbs, and stairways crisscross the park to compliment the building, adding to its rustic style. But the park, also protected by National Register status, has historical significance beyond the current use.

Conservation

Between 1900 and 1910, twelve percent of California forests burned, when primary growth trees covered almost half the state.

Alarmed naturalists advocated for watershed protection, and in 1916 the Los Angeles County Forestry Department launched a reforestation nursery on the land.

Within a little over a decade, the nursery

had produced more than a million trees, all planted in fire damaged watershed areas throughout L. A. County. To accommodate increasing demand for seedlings, in 1929 the



Early Photo of the Davies Building c. 1934

nursery was moved to a larger site at Henninger Flats in 1929.

The property remained dormant until 1931 when Altadena citizens championed the idea of creating a park and recreation center in hopes of

putting some of the 900 unemployed Altadenans back to work. By then Altadena had exhausted all available sources and could no longer raise public money to provide for destitute families affected by the Great Depression.

Local Visionaries

Three influential residents were responsible for creating the Farnsworth Park we know today.

General Charles Farnsworth, who served 42 years in the military and retired to Altadena in 1925, is credited with raising community awareness and managing park construction, grading, and landscaping.

Businessman William D. Davies was primarily responsible for coordinating delegates from 19 organizations in the social, civic, welfare, arts, educational and service fields to speak on behalf of the community.

Ruth E. Thurber raised \$50,000 from the



The Nursery Produced Over a Million Trees Between 1916 and 1929

WPA to fund the project. As president of Theatre Americana’s board, Thurber advocated for a stage in the main part of the upstairs hall and the outdoor amphitheater that was added in 1937. Thurber raised an additional \$5,000 to furnish the building.

The Dream Realized

The county donated the land, valued at \$7,500. The project employed about 100 local residents on and off for the better part of a year, boosting the local economy.

Building materials were supplied by Johnson Lumber Company of Altadena, “a local firm of high repute”, located at the corner of Lincoln and Woodbury at a cost of \$7,455.

To save money, 500 tons of Arroyo Seco boulders along with gravel and sand were trucked to the site.

More than \$22,000 went to local laborers. Skilled workers received union scale - 80 cents to \$1.10 an hour; unskilled 50 cents an hour. Because workers lived nearby, they furnished their own tools.

Upon completion of the building and park in 1934, day-to day-management fell to the original 19 council delegates, until 1954 when the County lease expired. Los Angeles County Parks and Recreation now manages the property.

In 1939 the 8.5-acre site, originally designated Altadena Park by the county, was renamed after General Farnsworth. The Altadena

Community Recreation Building was renamed to honor William B. Davies in 1943.

Unfortunately, Ruth Thurber was not officially recognized for her efforts; however, she was awarded an honorary membership in Theatre Americana.

— by Jane Brackman



Davies Building Groundbreaking Ceremony. Mrs. Ruth Thurber (in light coat) and William D. Davies Wield the Shovel - 1934

Book Notes

Altadena Historical Society has a reference library (non-lending) which is available for browsing, research and entertainment. You're welcome to stop in to read, question and enjoy.

Magic for Magicians by Nightingale the Mystifier

If you've ever watched someone make a coin disappear and wondered "How did he DO that?" this book is for you.

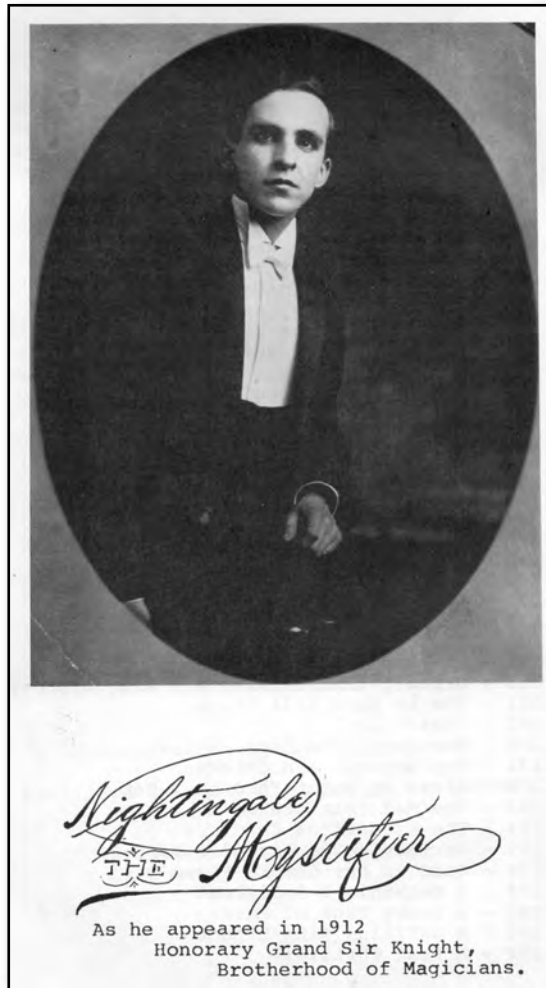
"Magic for Magicians by Nightingale the Mystifier" was written by F.B. Nightingale, a man of many talents and interests who was featured in our "Interesting Altadenans" exhibit last year.

A self-titled "Illuminating Engineer" of garden lighting, he founded the first company to exclusively manufacture garden lighting equipment. He published the first catalogue on the subject and built the first studio to display uses of the artistry.

Nighty (as his friends called him) also created the Star of Palawoo (a large star which stood in the mountains above Christmas Tree Lane for

many years.)

Nightingale had a lifelong interest in a very different art – magic – and as "The Mystifier," he created stage presentations of illusions to amaze and



baffle his audience.

In 1889, at age 14, he presented his first show. The tickets were hand-cut cardboard from shoe boxes and admission was five cents. This show included over 25 tricks. A bargain!

He worked with George E. Closson, "The Original Manufacturing Magician," who established the

Brotherhood of Magicians and created many of Nightingale's apparatus.

Today's illusionists have scores of pre-packaged tricks, which make the field more accessible for young people.

Nightingale did it the hard way, studying and creating on his own.

In 1964, he published this book discussing his career as an illusionist.

It was written to encourage amateur magic, with wonderful descriptions of the illusions, the hand preparations needed, and the thoughts of the person performing the trick. In it he also recounts trips to Japan, China, India, Egypt and the Philippines, during which he astonished many new friends, and apparently "scared the dickens" out of many more. (Swallowing his knife at breakfast apparently sent the waitress in his hotel out

of the room...QUICKLY. But the "Leaning Tower of Pisa" glass of water brought all the wait staff back into the room!)

We think you'll enjoy this interesting look into the mind of a man with many diverse talents and many life experiences.

— by Pam Wright

Coming Events

We have a fantastic line-up of events for history lovers in the coming months.

● ***Fox's Restaurant memorabilia*** will be displayed in the lobby of the Community Center until October 26.

● ***"Theatre Americana Remembered"***

Our new exhibit, opens Saturday, Nov. 3 with a reception from 2pm to 4pm at the Altadena Community Center. See the exhibit, hear memories from former TA members, and enjoy light refreshments.

● ***"Curtain Up"***

The new Theatre Americana returns to its old home at the Davies Building in Farnsworth Park for a performance of "Curtain Up," an evening of music and dancing to popular tunes from some of our most famous composers. Saturday, October 27, at 7:30 pm. (Reception at 6:30 pm). You must make a reservation to attend this event. Contact Donna (626) 840-3551 or email donna8461@sbcglobal.net.

● ***"Five Men and the Mountains"***

Our 2018 exhibit, moves to the Altadena Library on Nov. 1 for a one month run. If you haven't been able to see it at the Archives, visit it at the Library's community room.

● ***December's 1st Saturday***

AHS 1st Saturday open house will feature Christmas Tree Lane memorabilia and rescued figures from Story Book Lane in celebration of Christmases past.



FREE

Appalling Altadena – 100 Years of Scary Stories

Frighening, odd, and interesting stories from Altadena's past will come alive at Altadena Historical Society's October lecture on Monday, October 22 at 7:30 p.m. in the Community Center located at 730 E. Altadena Drive (next to the Sheriff's station.)

Just in time for Halloween, crime historian Joe Walker will speak about crimes and events that might surprise you - Communist spies, cross burnings, Nazi dogs, police shootouts, and just plain bizarre events that have happened in Altadena during the past 100 years. All his stories have exact dates and locations—Do You

live in a haunted house?

"We hope people will enjoy a slightly different look back at Altadena" said AHS President Kathy Hoskins, "especially during the week before Halloween."

Mr. Walker has been a crime analyst with the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department for the past 32 years. He is the past president of the Southern California Crime and Intelligence Analysts Association and is also on the Sheriff's Department Museum and History Committee.

A crime historian whose presentations tailored to cities and community organizations have been enthusiastically received. Walker also conducts walking and driving tours of famous crime locations.

The program is free to Historical Society members and the public. Donations are appreciated.



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VISIT OUR BLOG!
altadenahistoricalsociety.blogspot.com

Altadena Historical Society (AHS), a non-profit organization, was founded to gather, preserve, and make available information about the people, places and events that have shaped the community in the past. The Altadena Historical Society is proud of its history. Founded in 1935, we are one of the oldest volunteer organizations in the community.

Please join or renew today!

Name _____

Address _____

Phone _____ Email _____

_____ \$25 Membership

_____ \$50 Premium Membership (includes booklet with 51 pictures
of interesting Altadenans)

You can now join online <http://www.altadenahistoricalsociety.org/membership.htm>