



The Echo

Volume 94

Number 1

Where the Past is Present

Spring/Summer 2021

Ellen Garrison Jackson Clark Pioneer Civil Rights Activist

In 1955, Rosa Parks became an icon of resistance to racial segregation when she refused to give up her bus seat. But there were many Black women travelers before Rosa Parks who fought for access to "whites only" transportation seating.

One of those was Ellen Garrison Jackson Clark. Her pioneering effort to test the effectiveness of the 1866 Civil Rights Act was later cited in Rosa Parks' historic lawsuit.

Ellen was born in Concord, MA, in 1823. Her paternal grandfather escaped slavery after the American Revolution. He and wife Susan Robbins eventually settled in Concord, an area that welcomed White abolitionists and freed slaves. (The Robbins House Museum in Concord, MA celebrates the family's life.) Ellen's mother was a founding member of the The Concord Ladies' Antislavery Society established in 1837—the first Black member of the organization.

As a young woman, Ellen divided her time between small-town Concord and

Boston. She usually spent her summer vacations in Concord, visiting relatives and staying with her brother's family. During that time, she met John Jackson, a respected



Ellen Garrison Jackson Clark from a Robbins House exhibit poster

gardener in a town of amateur naturalists. He and Henry Thoreau planted a garden at the overgrown "Old Manse" in 1842 when Nathaniel and Sophia Hawthorne moved in to spend their honeymoon years.

Ellen married John on September 15, 1857, with both listed as Concord residents. Five years later she was a widow without children, looking for a job in the post-Civil War Reconstruction era.

Teaching was one of few opportunities available to women of any race at the time,

What's Inside
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President's Letter *by Eric Mulfinger*

Hello again, members and friends! We have survived the year 2020 in good shape. While our archives remained closed to the public, we continued our mission of making our history available to the public and to researchers, and we have worked to upgrade and improve our archives.

Last year we took the risk of automatically extending all memberships for a year and instead asked for donations from those who could afford it. We received substantial and generous support from many of you, for which we

are very grateful. At the end of the year, our income was \$20,460, lower than 2019 but far higher than we expected. As promised, we reduced our expenses to \$16,150, which helped us stay in the black for the year and provide funds for the first months of 2021.

Making history available to the public despite the pandemic has taken several forms: We hosted two virtual presentations in collaboration with the Altadena Library, one in August, another in February, and contributed to a third in December. They are all available on our new You Tube channel Altadena Historical Society virtual presentations. Find the link on our website at altadenahistoricalsociety.org

An email newsletter, 'Notes from the Archives,' is now sent out at the end of each month. In addition, we are posting regularly on our Facebook and Instagram pages.

Volunteers in our archives have worked hard this past year to upgrade our PastPerfect museum software to a web-based



platform so we can now do research from their homes. Eventually, we plan to make our archives securely accessible to all members and the public.

Finally, there are a couple of changes among our volunteers: **Jean Phillips** has stepped down from her paid position as project manager but continues as a volunteer and Board member. She has done brilliant work (and a lot of it!) over the past few years managing our exhibits, publications, and outreach. We have a new Board member: **Deidre Del Re**, an expert archivist and researcher, who is returning as an AHS volunteer. New volunteer **Annika Nelson** is helping with digitization and virtual communication, and **Chris Salvano**, map curator at CSUN will join us once we reopen.

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Coming Soon

Our Spring Virtual Program: *Getting Around in Old Altadena* features trolleys, trains, and automobiles.

-See page 11



Ellen's Uncle Peter Robbin's home; she was born here in 1823. Concord, MA.

and Ellen Jackson was employed almost immediately. When the war ended, freed African-Americans, both children and adults, needed food, clothing, and an education.

The American Missionary Association (AMA), a Protestant-based abolitionist group founded in Albany, New York, was establishing Freedman Schools throughout the south. The Association's mission was the abolition of slavery, education, promotion of racial equality and spreading Christian values.

AMA founded over 500 schools, some that grew to be well known historically Black colleges and universities, including Howard University founded in Washington, D. C., in 1867.

Ellen spent the next 25 years teaching in AMA schools in Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina, and inspiring her community about the necessity of spreading a strong sense of Black unity. She wrote, "I think it is our duty as a people to spend our lives in trying to elevate our own race."

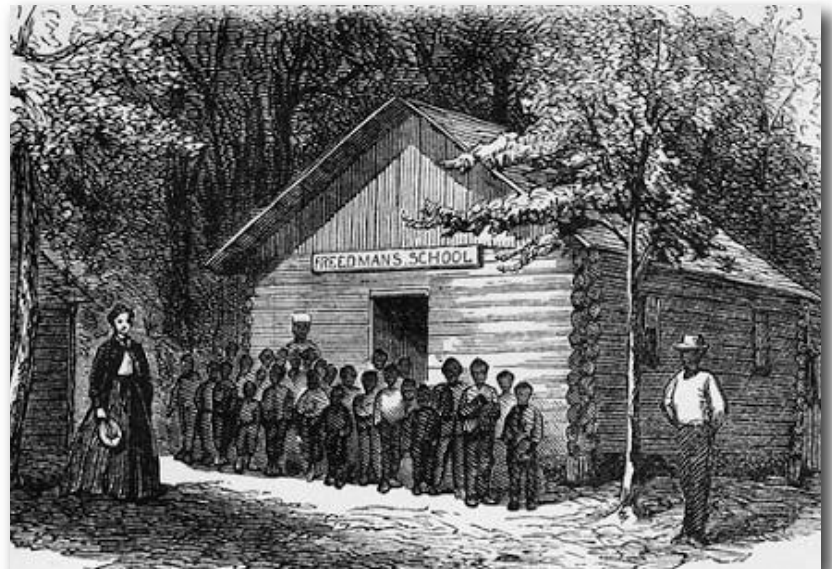
We get a glimpse of exactly who Ellen was when she agreed to sue the Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Wilmington Railroad over a segregation issue after the Civil War. Ellen and her friend Mary J.C. Anderson, both Baltimore, Maryland schoolteachers had been forcibly ejected from the all-white ladies'

waiting room at the Baltimore depot after citing the Civil Rights Act Of 1866 and refusing to leave.

This Act was the first federal law declaring that African-American citizens had the same rights as White citizens. Civil rights groups asked the women to sue the Railroad and Station Agent Adam Snyder to test the effectiveness of this legislation, which had not yet been ratified (and wouldn't be until 1870).

Despite worries that such public agitation was "unladylike", to Ellen the principle was more important than old-fashioned ideals of proper behavior. "We were thrown out. We were injured in our persons as well as our feelings for it was with no gentle hand that we were assisted from that room."

The women felt they had a chance of winning when their case was scheduled to be heard before a judge, but the defendant



An 1868 engraving of a Freedman School in North Carolina.

requested a jury trial. Believing no Southern all male White jury would vote in their favor, they withdrew their suit.

However, as time would tell, their case had lasting consequences, both as a precedent for Rosa Parks and as a reflection of Black women's long history of civil rights activism.

Although the Civil Rights Act made it illegal to discriminate, it did not provide recourse for victims, until the second half of the 20th century with the passage of related civil rights legislation.

Ellen moved to Kansas in the 1880s with the great migration of Black Exodusters. Thousands of freed slaves were encouraged to homestead land in the Midwest. Brand new schools were built in Exoduster towns like Nicodemus, Kansas, a small town founded by newly freed slaves as a refuge from the Reconstruction-era South. (Nicodemus is restored and is a National Register of Historic Places site).

Not only did she find rewarding work as a teacher, she also met and married her second husband, Harvey Clark of Barton County, Kansas.

Ellen, her husband, and sister continued west, making their new home in Pasadena California. Ellen suffered from tuberculosis (consumption) and it's likely that one



reason she came to Pasadena, like so many others, was for her health. Southern California's mountains offered warm winters, dry air, and sanitariums for patients with lung diseases.

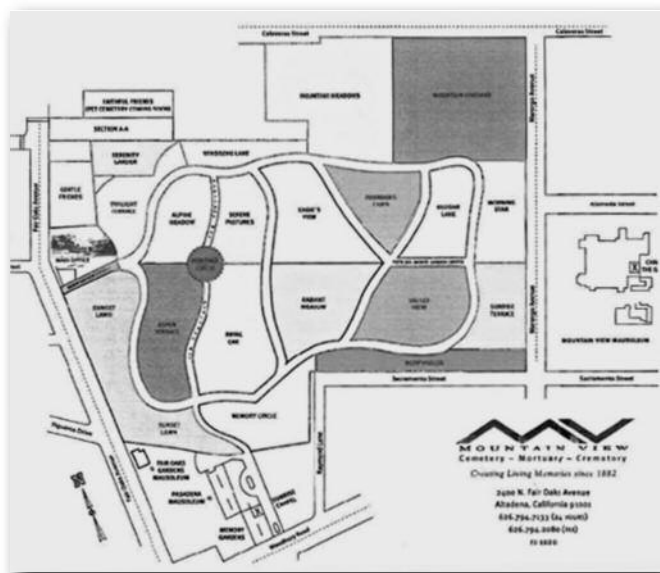
Ellen died of consumption on December 21, 1892. Her husband Harvey Clark died five years later.



Exodusters in Nicodemus, Kansas

Ellen is buried at Altadena's Mountain View Cemetery near her husband and sister, their names appearing in the records, their graves unmarked.

— by Jane Brackman



Ellen Clark gravesite (unmarked) is located in the Sunset Lawn section (to the right as you enter the cemetery) Lot 1046, Grave 2

Donate to the Ellen Garrison Clark Fund

Help us give Ellen Garrison Clarke the honor and recognition she is due. Altadena Historical Society has committed to raise funds to mark her final resting place in Altadena.

Please take this opportunity to be a part of history. Any donation amount is welcome and is tax deductible as allowed by law. Thank you.

Contributions can be mailed to
Altadena Historical Society
Ellen Garrison Clark Fund
730 Altadena Drive
Altadena, CA 91001-2351

Altadena's First Commercial Center

The Webster Shopping Complex

La Mariposa Hotel and Tavern, Altadena's first commercial building, was erected on Lake Avenue in 1902. Here's the story of how that first building grew into a popular multi-business shopping center operated by the Webster family and fondly remembered today.



La Mariposa Hotel c.1902

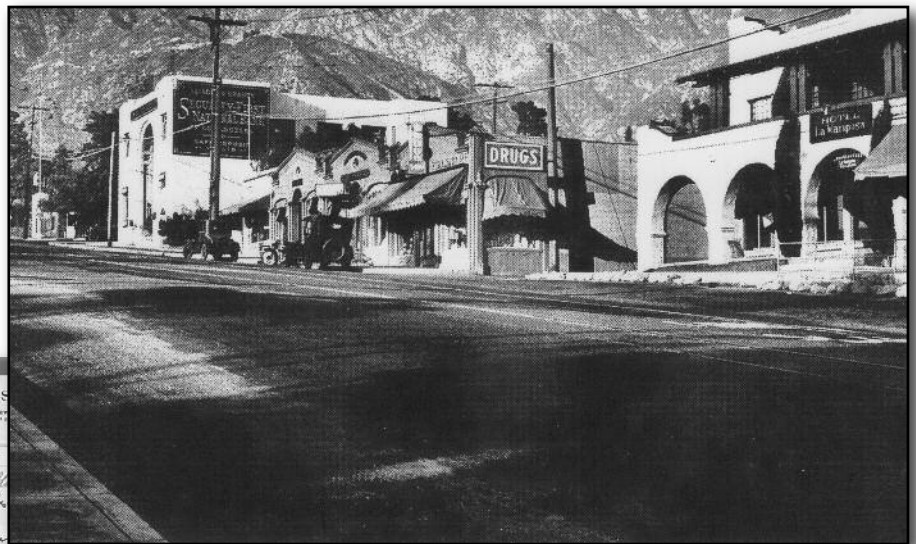
the southern part of the building, near where Marcheta is today – despite the protests of local residents who objected to having a retail business in their back yard.

In the early 1920s the Model Grocery (renamed Altadena Grocery) moved to Mariposa street

With the tavern occupying the ground floor and hotel rooms on the second story, La Mariposa was a popular spot for tourists traveling on the Mt. Lowe Railroad to Echo Mountain and, in later years, to the Alpine Tavern. The hotel's register (part of the Historical Society's William Webster Collection) provides a record of guests coming from all over.

By 1907, the tavern shared space with the Model Grocery Store, which took up business in

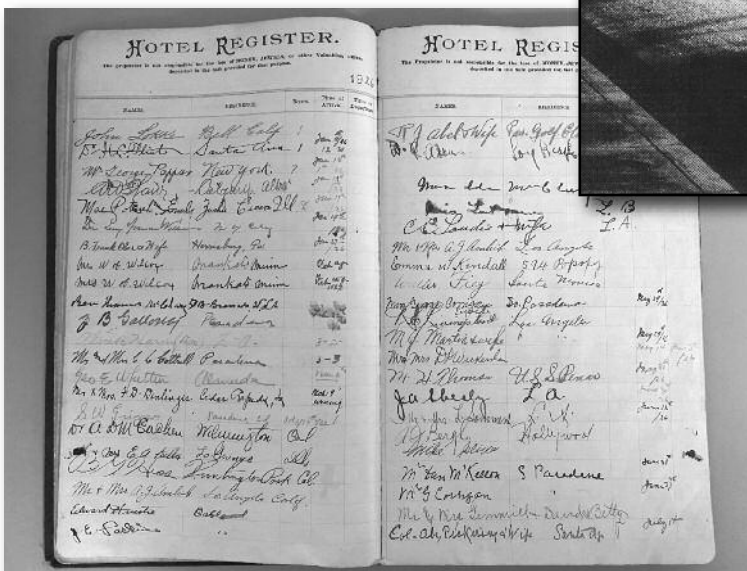
(where Altadena Hardware is today) and the U.S. Post Office took over their space. At some point, the hotel likely provided long-term lodging and then converted to



Webster's Shopping Complex and La Mariposa Hotel - 1920s

apartments. Eventually, the apartments were converted to office space for a variety of local businesses.

The hotel building remained a civic center for the Altadena community, especially once the post office moved in, and also served as a backdrop to the annual "Christmas in Our Town Square"



La Mariposa Hotel guest register - 1926



Interior view of Webster's Pharmacy c.1930

pageants that took place in Altadena's early decades.

Another commercial building with three storefronts was built just north of the hotel on Lake Avenue, with an alley separating the two buildings. One of the businesses in the southern portion of this new building was occupied by a drug store where Frank Webster worked while attending U.S.C.'s Pharmacy School. In 1926 he purchased the store, eventually developing it into Webster's Pharmacy Drugs, Sundries and Fountain Stores, and Frank Webster became one of Altadena's leading citizens.

Prior to World War II Mr. Webster bought the entire building north of the Hotel building. It included two shops just north of his own pharmacy. He moved the soda fountain to the middle store and expanded it into a restaurant with counter service. The third store at the top of this building was converted to a liquor store which Frank Webster also operated.

Founder Frank Webster died at an early age in 1950 and his widow managed the

successful family business until son William (Bill) returned from service in Korea. During the mid-1950s, the Webster family purchased and tore down the La Mariposa Hotel building. They then expanded and created a larger business complex with three distinct, connected stores within the footprint of the two former buildings.

The location of the original alley between the Webster's drug store

building and the hotel building became the internal staircase between Webster's Pharmacy and Stationary sections after 1956. The address for The Webster Shopping Complex was now 2450 North Lake Avenue. Previously, it was listed as 2718 N. Lake*. According to Scott Webster, portions of the original Webster building roof line is still visible behind the facade added during the 1950s expansion and renovation.

* Note that addresses (not locations) changed regularly over the years so a google search today may yield a different location. One can carefully track address and street name changes via city directories.

Bill Webster's children became active in the Webster Corporation in the 1970s and 80s and sons Gary and Scott planned careers with the stores. Their siblings Jim and Sue worked at the store as youngsters, but both eventually moved out of the area. During the 1980s, The Webster Corporation considered revitalizing the 1950s architecture of its complex with a

return to an earlier Spanish Colonial Revival style approved for Lake Avenue storefronts but decided against the plan.

By 2007, Bill Webster decided to retire and planned to split the businesses among his children. Son Gary decided not to purchase the wine and liquor store; daughter Sue chose not to purchase the pharmacy. Son Scott and his wife Lori Webster purchased the Stationary Store, and stepdaughter Karen and her husband purchased the Hallmark store.

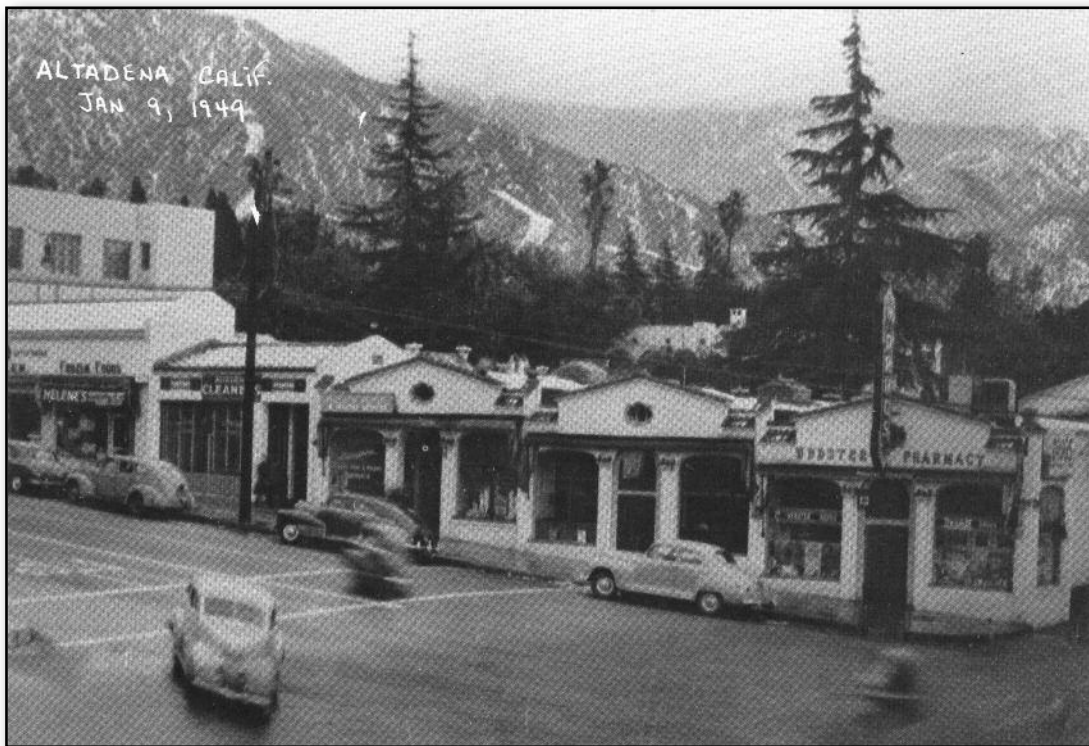
But as the saying goes, “the best-laid plans of mice and men often go awry”. The absence of a solid transition plan, competing interests among family members and a failure to communicate changes with a formerly faithful shopping community led to more changes.

Michael Miller was hired as part time Chief Pharmacist in 2005. Mike Miller and his wife Meredith took over the pharmacy operation in 2010 and still operate Webster's Community Pharmacy and serve the community today. Meredith Miller operated women's clothing store Meredith M out of the former Webster liquor store space from 2014-2019.

In 2013, Bill Webster sold the building, parking lot and adjacent apartments without creating a grandfathered scenario for the two stores operated by son Scott and step-daughter Karen. The

new owners' lease demands made it impossible for the remaining Webster store owners to stay when the rents increased sevenfold.

In 2014, Scott and Lori Webster created Hoopla! Emporium and moved Webster's Shipping & Supplies (formerly Webster's



Webster Shopping Complex - January 1949

Fine Stationers) to 2591 Fair Oaks. These vibrant merchants continue their 100-year Webster family tradition as Altadena retailers and recently were awarded recipients of Altadena's Chamber of Commerce Business of the Year Award.

Today, sections of the Webster complex house a gym and a realtor's office, but the original stationery and Hallmark stores remain empty. Several years ago, a gastro pub food court was in the works for the complex, but those owners sold the building before moving forward with their plans. Time will only tell what the future holds for the site of the once popular and vibrant Webster Shopping Complex and La Mariposa Hotel.

— by Deirdre Del Re

The Balian House

From Candy to Christmas

When in 1922 Burnell Gunther commissioned the building of a winter residence for himself and his widowed mother Jennie, little did he know that within two generations 1960 Mendocino Lane would become an Altadena landmark, known throughout the region for its magnificent Christmas light displays.

A Chicago resident, as were so many of Altadena's early settlers, Mr. Gunther purchased a prominent 6 ½ -acre triangular parcel at the entrance to the Altadena



Front View

The Balian house in 1955 (photos from the Altadena Heritage collection)

Country Club Park tract where Mendocino Lane and Glenview Terrace came together. It overlooked the golf course which was located on the other side of Allen Avenue.

Mr. Gunther hired the Postle Company of Los Angeles, a father-and-son architectural firm, known for their large handsome residences, to design a V-shaped two-story tile-roofed house in an Italian Renaissance style. Victor Falkenau, a well-known Altadena contractor, was the builder. (Interestingly, the Postle Company would also design one of the homes Falkenau built in Altadena in 1923.)

The eleven-room interior was ornate, with hardwood floors, arched colonnades and

windows, imported Italian walnut paneling, six fireplaces, and a large semi-circular foyer with a dominant curving staircase and black-and-white checkered tile floor. Its 5,000+ square feet contained four bedrooms and four bathrooms. The rear sunken gardens were noted for a central fountain surrounded by lush flowers, including roses, camellias and azaleas.

The house was featured in *The Architectural Digest* and many local newspapers. Mr. Gunther, newly divorced, paid \$85,000 for the property and its improvements—a small fortune in 1922! A three-car garage with a five-room second-floor apartment was added to the property in 1924. Living in the apartment were the Gunthers' chauffeur Edward Reynolds and his wife Mary.

Burnell Gunther (1871-1926) was the son of Charles Frederick Gunther, whose

Gunther Confection and Chocolate Company of Chicago was a major manufacturer and supplier of candy to stores and restaurants nationwide. He was supposedly the inventor of



Back View

caramel candy. He was also politically active as a Chicago alderman and had acquired a number of works of art and rare books, some of which remained in the Altadena house when the family left it. Burnell, who served as the general manager of his father's company, probably inherited a fortune upon Charles Gunther's death in 1920 which enabled him to build his ornate Altadena home.

Following the death of Jennie Gunther in 1928, the family sold the property to Charles Benjamin Corser. He shared the house with

his wife Jeannette H. Corser. Mr. Corser (1860-1954), a native of New York, had made his fortune in the wholesale shoe trade. He was well known for his philanthropic work, especially in aid of Caltech and the Huntington Hospital. In

Club. His widow survived him by two years, passing away in 1974. Eventually, the area around the Balian house became almost a family compound as three Balian sons built homes adjacent to it east along Mendocino Lane.



Christmas time at the Balian house

fact, he willed his residence to the hospital with the proviso they could sell it. Mr. and Mrs. Corser were remembered for the lavish fundraisers and social events they hosted at their home.

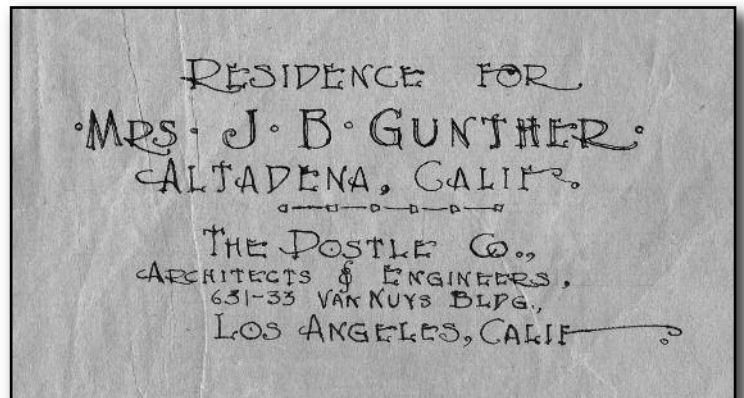
Habib A. Balian and his wife Kalmouni Balian purchased the property in 1956. At that time, Mr. Balian (1890-1972) was the president of an ice cream company. Living with Mr. and Mrs. Balian were their five adult children who all had official job titles in the family firm: Agnes, Alexander, Fred, George, and Jack.

Mr. Balian was a native of Syria and had come to the United States in 1909. After their marriage and the successful running of a rug-cleaning company in Brooklyn, Mr. and Mrs. Balian moved to Southern California in 1928. In that year, Mr. Balian founded the Alympia (sic) Ice Cream Company, later known, as of 1962, as the Balian Ice Cream Company, Inc., based in East Los Angeles.

Balian Ice Cream was the main supplier to the Los Angeles Unified School District for many years. Mr. Balian was active in the civic life of Altadena, including the Rotary

Habib Balian had the idea of decorating the house for Christmas in 1955. As the years went by, the light strands and tableaux became more and more ornate, enveloping the house in holiday cheer. As many as 10,000 light bulbs were used in the display. The house was visited every December by tens of thousands of tourists.

Brother and sister George Edward Balian (1930-2019) and Agnes Housana Balian (1928-2000), known to friends as “Auntie Agnes” and said to be the powerhouse of the Balian company after Habib’s death, continued to live in the house and maintained the Christmas lighting tradition begun by their father until 2020. George is remembered as a talented organist and orchid-grower. The Balias also



Cover of the book containing the architectural plans provided by The Postle Company

continued the Corser family’s practice of opening the house and its grounds to many community groups, tours, and other functions, including, appropriately, ice cream socials.

As of this writing, the house is still owned and being restored by the Balian family.

— by Tim Gregory

What's Up at the Archives

New to the Collection

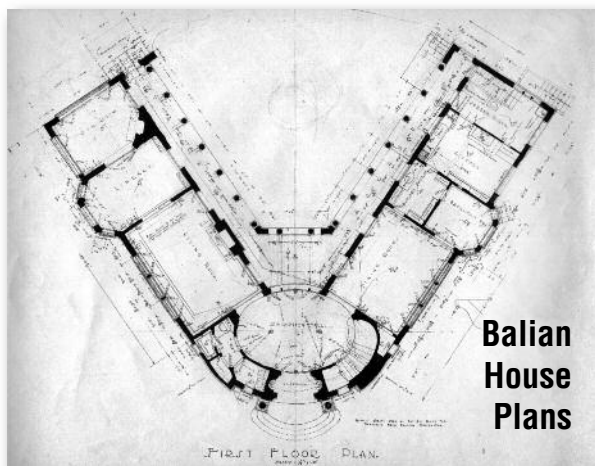
The Historical Society's collection continues to grow with donations that enrich the history we hold.

Jim Walser purchased the original plans for the Balian House on eBay and generously donated them to AHS – inspiring the Balian House history included in this issue.

Two Octavia Butler books have been added to our library: **Daria Topousis** contributed Lynell George's *A Handful of Earth, A Handful of Sky*, and **Eric Mulfinger** gave us the American

Library publication which includes Butler's novels *Kindred* and *Fledgling*, and her collected stories.

Former Altadenan **Paul Rollins** sent us *Letters from the Sphinx*, a copy of his biography of the William Allen family, owners of Sphinx Ranch, and **Jean**



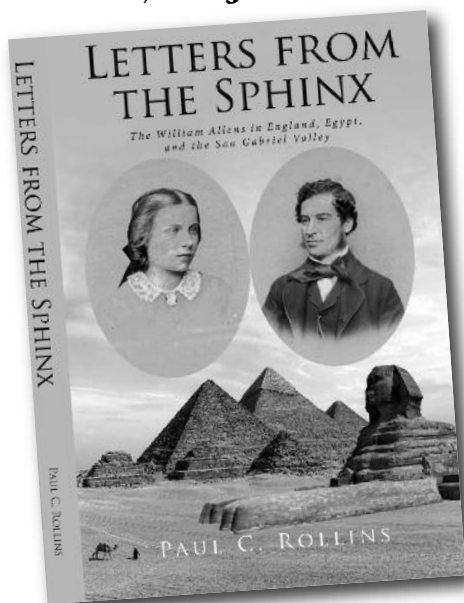
Hiking Backpacks at the Library

In another collaboration with our Altadena Libraries, Altadena Historical Society provided historical descriptions and old photographs of five of our nearby hiking destinations: the Arroyo Seco, Millard Canyon, Rubio Canyon, the Cobb Estate/Echo Mountain area, and Eaton Canyon. These histories were incorporated into the library's "Hiking Backpacks" which will be available in April.

The Altadena Library's "Library of Things Hiking Backpacks" are ready to hit the trails, just in time for some spring hiking and exploring!

Each backpack includes tools, safety supplies, literacy resources centered on local history and the Tongva language, along with some creature comforts to make hiking our local trail systems an enjoyable experience!

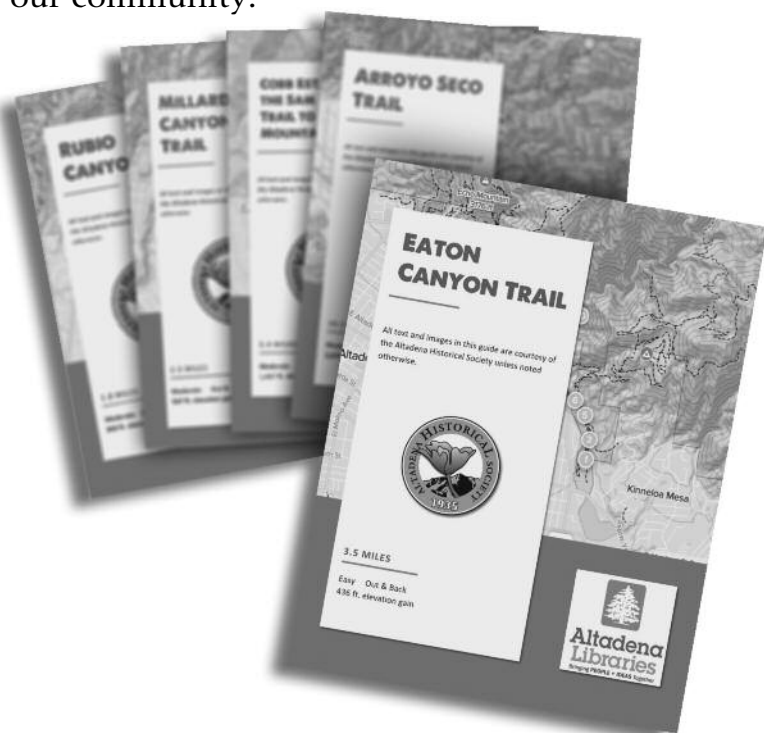
The local history trail guides included in each hiking backpack, were created by the Altadena Historical Society and give a rich narrative and visual history of Arroyo Seco, Millard Canyon, Rubio Canyon, Cobb Estate/ Echo Mountain, and Eaton Canyon. These reference guides serve as an educational tool that will enhance your hiking experience and connect you to the history of our community.



Phillips added to our information about local Black history with Lynn M. Hudson's *West to Jim Crow*.

Mitch Brainard sent us Mrs. F.W. Kellogg's 1954 special award for outdoor Christmas tree lighting, **Tim Gregory** gave us a printed copy of a Facebook post

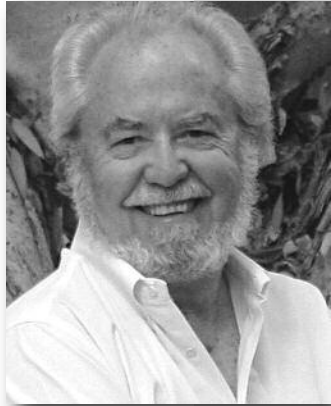
featuring the Marcell Inn, and **Mrs. William Webster** added additional documents to our William Webster collection.



New Virtual Program Features Trains, Trolleys, and Automobiles

FREE

— 7:00 P.M., May 10, 2021



Richard Bale

Altadena Historical Society's Spring Zoom program, *Getting Around in Old Altadena*, features author Richard Bale's virtual tour of public and private transportation from the 1880s through the 1950s.

He traces the history of public transportation in Altadena: horsecar companies, steam engines, electric trolleys, the Mount Lowe Railway, and more; and shows memory-jogging examples of automobiles and delivery wagons.

Bale, whose memoir, *An Altadena Boyhood*, highlights his youth in Altadena during the 1940s, brings a personal touch to his descriptions of cars owned by family, friends, and other Altadena acquaintances.

Facilitated by the Altadena Library, this Zoom program is free, but reservations are required to

reserve your space. Donations will be gratefully accepted.

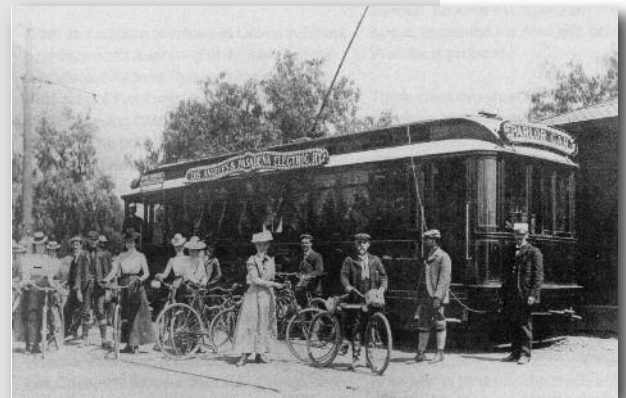
If you haven't already purchased Bale's *An Altadena Boyhood*, it is available on the AHS website, altadenahistoricalsociety.org.



48-foot Mount Lowe car near Poppyfields en route to Lake Avenue circa 1908-10



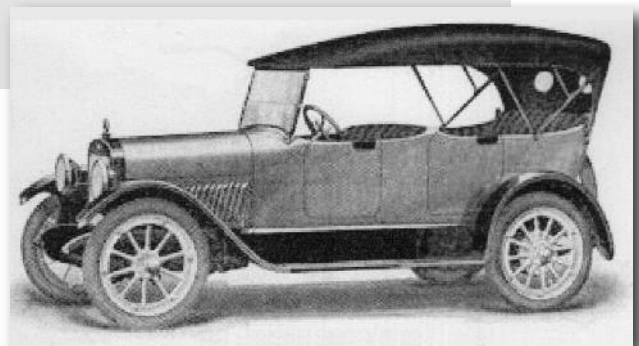
Divco truck. Adohr Creamery delivered milk to Altadena homes — 1930s



Chartered parlor car has arrived at Altadena with a group of bicyclists circa 1898-1902



1942 Ford Convertible — Very few had been built before the government shutdown production of civilian cars



1916 Elcar — One of the first private automobiles in Altadena we know something about was a 1916 Elcar owned by Frederick Popenoe



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altadenahistoricalsociety.org

VISIT OUR BLOG!

altadenahistoricalsociety.blogspot.com

Altadena Historical Society (AHS), a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization was founded to gather, preserve, and make available information about the people, places and events that have shaped Altadena's past.

Please join or renew today!

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