



THE LGBTQ HISTORY OF STANISLAUS COUNTY

BY DAVID SEYMOUR

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Prior to the mid-twentieth century, it is inextricably difficult to name any particular Stanislaus County residents who were affirmatively lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ). It is not for the lack of existence of those who would have personally identified as such. Rather, it is predominantly because the societal framework in place during this time made it practically for most to state publicly for themselves anything other than a hetero-normative persona.

There are certain circumstances and historical life patterns which, in retrospect, lead us now to believe that some people *did* claim their 'queer' identity, but we cannot definitively name names. Additionally, the common language we use to describe LGBTQ people and their personal relationships today is incompatible with spoken and written word of earlier times. As our 2023 worldview is vastly different than anything prior to the sexual revolution of the 1960s – 70s, this is mainly where the more verifiable LGBTQ history of Stanislaus County begins.

HISTORY beyond Stanislaus County – *The descendants of the first peoples of North America today generally use the umbrella term 'Two Spirit' to describe those who occupy traditional gender-variant ceremonial and social roles. While the term does not directly correlate to the Western concept of LGBTQ, it does provide a context for first peoples' cultural understanding of gender and sexuality beyond dominant duality structures*

The 'Lakisamni' are the sub-tribe of (one of 40 – 50 total) Yokuts people who inhabited present day Stanislaus County through the early 1800s. They largely lived along the now-Stanislaus River close to the area which became Knights Ferry CA.



'STANISLAUS GAY ALLIANCE' LOGO, LATER USED FOR 'HAND-TO-HAND' HIV/AIDS CARE GROUP

The Yokuts concept of Two Spirits *loosely* translates to 'undertaker'. The pronunciation in English of female-bodied names remains unknown. Some male-bodied names are believed to be known as (with referring Yokuts sub-tribe):

- Tonoo'tcim (Kocheyali); Tono'cim (Paleuyami);
 - Tonochim or Lokowitnono (Tachi [Tulare]); Tono'cim (Michahai); Tongochim (Yaudanchi)
- It is not known which (if any) the Lakisamni in particular used. Perhaps, though, it was similar to, if not one or more, of these listed.

When Stanislaus County was formed as a carve-out of western Tuolumne County in 1854, all the way through today, same-gender couples have lived together locally. Also, other could-be and/or would-be LGBTQ people remained single throughout their lives. Looking back at records with a 2023 lens from the 1850s – 1960s, it appears that some notable local residents may have privately proclaimed a different sexual or gender identity than they were constrained to portray publicly during their lives. With no goal to 'out' anyone posthumously, more research could be done in this area. We mention all of this 'LGBTQ pre-history' to give context for a comparative look to the latter part of the twentieth century through today.

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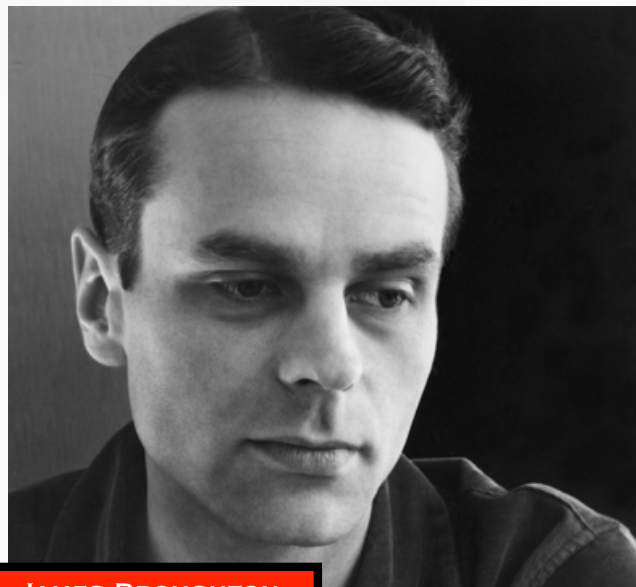
HISTORY beyond Stanislaus County – The terms LGBT, LGBTQ, gay, and gay and lesbian, are used somewhat interchangeably throughout this article. The goal is not to confuse or exclude anyone, but different contexts (sometimes due to different time periods) can call for the use of different descriptors. Also, the term ‘queer’ was formerly a derogatory term, and has now been reclaimed, so it is used affirmatively.

1960s

An early known openly bisexual resident of Stanislaus County was Modesto-born famed American poet, James Broughton (1913-1999). Broughton came to prominence during the ‘San Francisco Renaissance’, which was a precursor to the ‘Beat poets’ era. His aunt was Modesto’s Esto Broughton (1890-1956), who was the youngest of the first four women elected to the California Assembly in 1918, and whose life the McHenry Museum & Historical Society (MM&HS) has documented previously.

Prolific contributors to the MM&HS, Merlin ‘Mel’ Nomann (1928-2021) and John Crabb (1936-2023), lived as a local couple for fifty-five years. When interviewed in 2021, they shared about gatherings of gay men and women at local homes, and their roles in founding a group known as ‘Birds of a Feather’. This group seems to have started in the late 1960s, and was later more prominently expanded by another MM&HS contributor, Dr. R.J. Moriconi (1933-2023), a professor of Education at California State University, Stanislaus. Moriconi’s long-time friend, Carol ‘Bonnie’ Feuer, flocked with the ‘Birds’, and shared insight into the group.

Feuer said Birds of a Feather consisted of working professionals who gathered in a common cause in a way they deemed provincial (different). The early group met once a year at the Oasis Restaurant, located at McHenry and Kiernan avenues in Modesto. Moriconi later moved the gatherings to a grand ferry boat at the Port of Stockton. The group raised funds for scholarships and cultivated community involvement and acceptance.



JAMES BROUGHTON



MEL NOMANN & JOHN CRABB



BIRDS OF A FEATHER AWARD FOR DR. R.J. MORICONI



DR. R.J. MORICONI

In 1967, Hunter Creasman (1932-2012), known more popularly as ‘Chris Hunter’ (or by his female-impersonating/‘drag’ persona, ‘Christina’), founded the ‘Owl Empire of Stanislaus County, Inc.’ (OESCI) in Modesto. The OESCI was the second chartered ‘International Imperial Court System’ chapter (the San Francisco branch was first, in 1965). This nonprofit group fundraised and provided a venue for gays – and drag performers in particular – to express themselves freely and openly in a safer and supportive (yet still somewhat private) environment. A yearly ‘coronation’ took place.

HISTORY beyond Stanislaus County – Police raids at gay and cross-dressing bars were commonplace across the United States for decades. On June 27, 1969, police staged a raid at the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village, New York City. Led mainly by drag queens, the bar’s patrons fought back, and a three-day battle ensued. ‘The Stonewall riots’ are now memorialized with June being designated as ‘LGBT Pride Month’ globally.

Modesto’s James McCall (also known by his drag name ‘Kevi’, which means “oneself”) shared more about the early days of the OESCI. McCall said that unwritten, casual laws were enforced by law enforcement as code locally during the 1970s. These policing rules obliged drag performers to don at least three items of male clothing in order to avoid arrest.

In 1975, Chris Hunter was the first to be crowned locally, as ‘Empress Christina I’, in a coronation ceremony held at The Mustang Club. In following years, an emperor was also crowned. The Modesto coronation event was always held in November, and some early ones were held at the Holiday Inn in Modesto. Featuring an indoor atrium and pool, out-of-town event attendees would book rooms at the hotel for the weekend, making Modesto an early drag tourist destination.

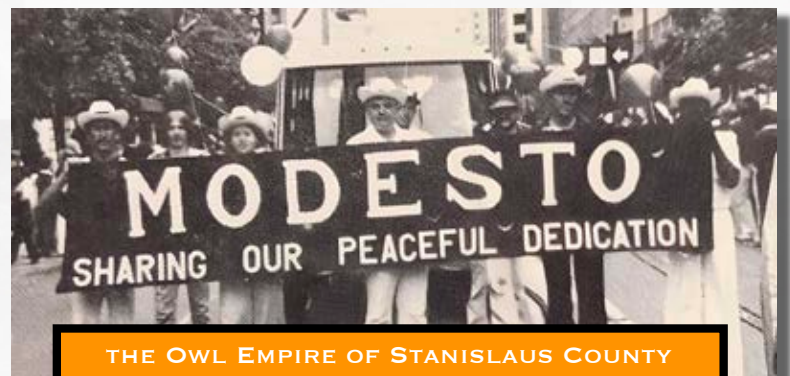
The public has always been invited to cast their votes for Emperor and Empress, and local businesses have provided support over time. Peggy Mensinger (1923-2002), Modesto mayor from 1979-1987, presented a crown during her tenure in office, and Stanislaus County sheriff Les Weidman also sat on the judging panel one year. The OESCI hosted many events at local gay bars, which were – and in some ways remain – instrumental in acting as places of refuge for LGBTQ community members. The coronation of the Emperor and Empress was a community-invited event, but was halted by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. As of June 2023, it has yet to make a return.



CHRISTINA I



HUNTER 'CHRIS HUNTER' CREASMAN



THE OWL EMPIRE OF STANISLAUS COUNTY INC MARCHING IN THE



KEVI & CHRISTINA

1970s

The woman who opened the first 'gay bar' in Stanislaus County is fondly remembered: Florence "Shirley" Owens (1920-2001). A previously married mother who came out as a lesbian later in life, she opened The Mustang Club as a 'sanctuary' for the local gay community in 1970. Located at 413 North 7th Street in Modesto, the club had previously operated as an unofficially segregated 'blacks only' establishment. McCall shared that Owens installed a switch behind the counter to flash an overhead light if a stranger walked in, fearing law enforcement action at the time. When activated, this light alerted same-gender couples on the dance floor to immediately switch to opposite-gender partners. Owens participated with the OESCI also, and won the title of 'Empress Shirley VI' in 1980.

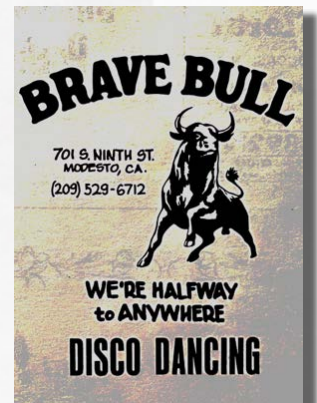
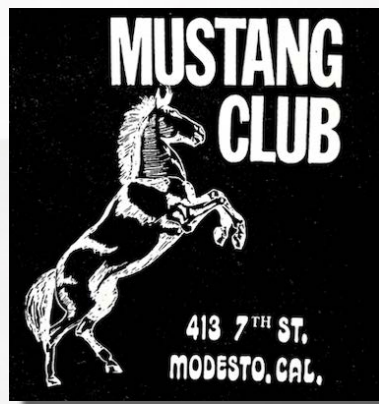
'The Brave Bull' opened on Modesto's South 9th Street in 1973, and became a gay bar in 1974. It was owned and operated by Mr. Casey Lubbers. Fifty years later, 'The Bull' remains in business today. Modesto resident, Scott Pike, said The Bull was renowned worldwide for its early superior sound system. Pike said people came from as far as Europe simply to get a Brave Bull t-shirt. Gay celebrities including drag performer Divine (1945-1988) and San Francisco gay-rights activist Harvey Milk (1930-1978) can be counted amongst the patrons of this bar.

In November of 1978, the OESCI crowned John LoCoco (1932-1988) and his partner of fifteen years, Donald Baldwin (drag name 'Laura') (1944-1988), as Emperor and Empress. In an October 1979 article in *The Modesto Bee*, LoCoco, a San Francisco native and local realtor, discussed the formation of Stanislaus County's first active gay and lesbian support and social organization, 'The Stanislaus County Gay Alliance' (SGA).

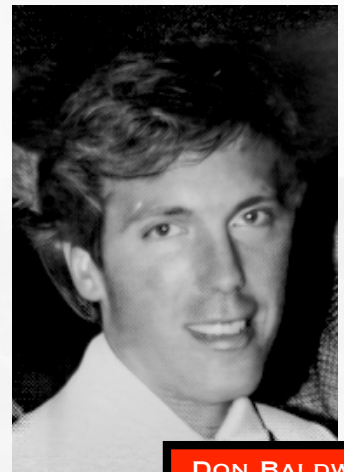
Founded in Modesto, Jo McCarthy and her then-partner Connie McIlroy, were early members of the SGA. Others active with the group included Jeff Krueger (1955-1997), Ralph Ascoli (1957-1994), and Joseph Fiore (1952-2003). The SGA met regularly (including at the City of Modesto's now-gone Morris Building [which was originally John Muir Elementary]), organized social gatherings, and hosted a weekly Alcoholics Anonymous group called Gay Alcoholics Together. The SGA attracted attendees from as far as Manteca and Stockton. McCarthy launched *The Stanislaus Gay Alliance Newsletter*, a monthly periodical, with the help of Melissa Reiter and Laurie Sacknitz. Krueger was responsible for the printing of them. The SGA's newsletter covered topical items and announced gay-friendly activities in the area.



SHIRLEY OWENS



JOHN LOCOCO



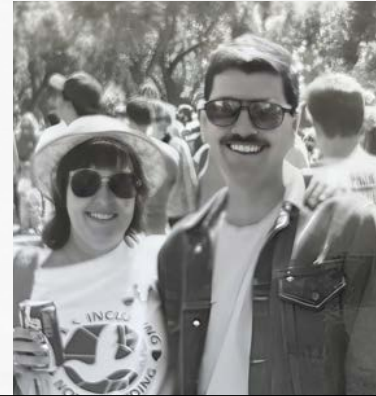
DON BALDWIN

HISTORY beyond Stanislaus County – Gay culture continued to ‘come out’ across America as the 1970s progressed, but there was pushback. In 1977, Harvey Milk was the first openly gay man elected to public office in California, as a member of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. In 1978, American singer and anti-gay activist Anita Bryant aided Orange County legislator John Briggs (1930-2020) with CA Proposition 6, which would have allowed for the immediate termination of gay and lesbian teachers in public schools. Leading the fight against the Briggs Initiative was Milk. In Stanislaus County, the OESCI raised funds and sent out flyers against Prop 6. On November 8, 1978, California voters defeated the initiative.



CONNIE MCILROY & JO MCCARTHY

Nineteen days later, Harvey Milk and San Francisco mayor George Moscone (1929-1978) were assassinated in City Hall by a then-former (recently resigned) San Francisco Supervisor, Dan White (1946-1985). During the trial of these murders, White’s legal team argued in his defense that he had suffered from temporary insanity due to his mass consumption of junk food prior to the murders. Now known as the “Twinkie Defense”, this allowed for White’s conviction to be voluntary manslaughter, rather than the more punitive first-degree murder. The only plausible explanation for such an outrageous defense to achieve a lower penalty for Mr. White was due to Mr. Milk being gay. The double-murder sent shockwaves through the country, and became amplified when the verdict came down. Protests erupted across the country, and were mainly led by the gay community. San Francisco in particular experienced widespread violence as a result. Marian Martino lived in the Bay Area and moved to Modesto in 1979. She told MM&HS that the Milk murder and verdict were a flashpoint for her, and for many in the nascent gay rights movement at the time.



JO MCCARTHY & JEFF KREUGER



SGA NEWSLETTER MAY, 1983

1980s

Father Richard Forti (1941-1988) moved to Turlock in 1979 to organize a Catholic group at California State University, Stanislaus. Forti belonged to the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales, an order which emphasized education and community service. Forti did not have a parish, but contracted through the Diocese of Stockton, and was designated official chaplain of the college by 1983. At CSU Stanislaus, he founded the ‘Catholic Campus Community’, and began a gay-friendly Catholic organization called ‘Dignity’. One of the founding members of the organization was CSU Stanislaus’ aforementioned, Dr. R.J. Moriconi.



FATHER RICHARD FORTI

The year 1981 saw the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) open its doors in Modesto, welcoming the local gay and lesbian population to its pews. Modesto’s College Avenue Congregational Church (CACC), which is part of the United Church of Christ (UCC) movement hired a lesbian minister in Diane Darling that same year. This was the first-ever gay or lesbian minister hired by any UCC church in the country. CACC attracted more gay and lesbian churchgoers when it officially adopted an “open and affirming” stance in 1987. The Universalist Unitarian Fellowship of Stanislaus was also early to adapt with more inclusive LGBTQ language. Several other local religious groups did the same later.

The year 1981 also witnessed the Modesto murder of a popular Downey High School instructor, John Crahan (1930-1981). He was gunned down in his driveway by three youths who had schemed to kidnap and extort money from him. *The Modesto Bee* reported that Crahan was perceived to be “homosexual”, having lived a “flamboyant” lifestyle. The three killers were released from prison in 2010, 2012, and 2021.

On a positive note, by 1982, circulation for *The Stanislaus Gay Alliance Newsletter* grew from one-hundred forty (140) the year prior to four hundred (400). The SGA was holding spaghetti dinners (Fiore was the cook), bingo nights, and an annual dance at Eagle’s Hall in Modesto. The SGA’s McCarthy and Kreuger became invited guest speakers at Modesto Junior College’s (MJC) human sexualities classes, taught by Marylou Hacker.

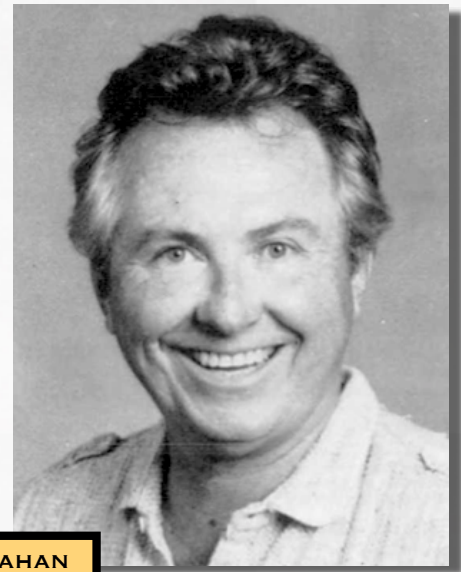
In 1984, a Modesto gay-oriented Alcoholics Anonymous group, ‘Friends Coming of Age’, was founded in an apartment. Since 1987 through today, it has operated at its same location, 1203 Tully Rd in Modesto. Coming up on forty years in 2024, it is believed to now be the longest continuously operating LGBTQ organization of any kind in the Central Valley.

By 1985, the SGA celebrated five years, and highlighted with a presence in the SF Pride Parade. The group’s purpose was changing drastically, though, as the AIDS Crisis began to hit. SGA ultimately ceased to exist when the crisis overcame the gay community locally.

HISTORY beyond Stanislaus County – *In the 1980s, AIDS was first rampant among gay men, and later spread to all groups of sexually active people. Prejudice against the gay community became heightened. The public did not understand how HIV/AIDS was transmitted for some time. Stigma was so great that many AIDS patients used aliases in public articles. Some victims’ obituaries even ran without ever disclosing AIDS as the cause of death.*



DIANE DARLING (RIGHT) WITH COLLEGE AVENUE CHURCH MODERATOR DORIS SCANLON (1930-2014)



JOHN CRAHAN



MARYLOU HACKER



FRIENDS COMING OF AGE

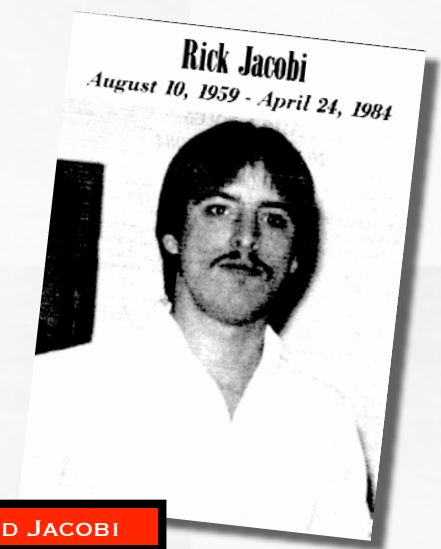
An early reported AIDS-related burial in Stanislaus County was that of Richard Steven Jacobi (1959-1984), who had been a local KVIE radio disc jockey. Jo McCarthy was a medical social worker at Scenic General Hospital, then Stanislaus County's public hospital. The county saw an influx of former residents who had contracted HIV/AIDS elsewhere and essentially came home to die. McCarthy met with some doctors and nurses in a park to decide how to proceed. In 1985, she was one of three volunteers to begin training with 'Hand-to-Hand', which launched at the old methadone clinic within the hospital. This group's volunteers offered support to community members in need, and efforts refocused into 'Stanislaus County AIDS Project' (SCAP).

In 1985, the early version of SCAP began with four primary goals: give voice with ongoing communication to educate the community; create hand-to-hand volunteer projects to provide direct services; host community forums; and maintain a telephone hotline. The group became more formalized as an officially registered nonprofit in subsequent years. The ongoing contracting of AIDS spread to more rural and suburban areas. By 1991, the CDC listed Modesto as one of the American cities with the highest rate of AIDS cases.

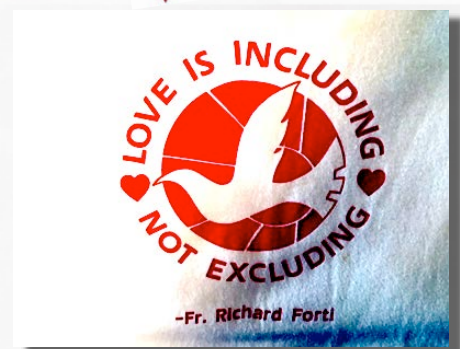
A well-publicized 1987 panel on gay and lesbian issues at MJC brought more formal public awareness for the local LGBTQ community broadly. Speaking before a crowd of twenty-five people, counselors on the panel participated in the first of a series of discussions held by the school's Gay-Lesbian Student Union. Panelists had concerns about themselves being outed, so local therapist Patricia Sherman (1930 - c. 2019), a divorced straight woman, stepped up as the face of the cause.

In 1988, CSU Stanislaus' Catholic community experienced the loss of Father Richard Forti. A year and a half later, Lewis Forti revealed the cause of his brother's death when he announced to Father Forti's congregation that his name would be memorialized on the NAMES Project's 'AIDS Quilt'. Father Forti only learned the diagnosis himself five days prior to his death. In May of 1998, another product of Forti's early efforts came to fruition with the opening of CSU Stanislaus' 'All Saints University Parish.' It is located at 4040 McKenna Drive in Turlock (the number of the address is '4040', ironically sounding like "Forti, Forti").

In the late 1980s, Marian Martino co-founded the local chapter of Bay Area Career Women (BACW), a lesbian-focused social organization. The local chapter of BACW first held TGIF dinners at local restaurants in Modesto. The group hosted dances and comedy nights, including at least one sold out a show at the State Theater. The BACW fundraised to support its local chapter activities. The local chapter operated locally through early 2000s.



RICHARD JACOBI



FATHER RICHARD FORTI'S DEATH ANNOUNCEMENT

A 1989 notification ran in the *Oakdale Leader* for a group called 'Family and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (F-Flag)' to "meet with gays to share their concerns and questions". MCC church member, Sindi Raya (born Uribe, and now McGuire), started the chapter after her sister, Princess Collins-Uribe (yes, her first name is Princess), came out as a lesbian. *The Modesto Bee* ran an article in 1993 on Raya's work, when she launched a Modesto chapter of the group. Raya also helped Brian Vowell, a then seventeen year-old student at CSU Stanislaus who had been kicked out of his family home for being gay, in his attempt to coordinate a related gay youth services group.

The mid-late 1980s and mid-1990s saw two gay bars experience brief runs in Modesto. John Drab's 'Grapes' bar opened on "H" Street, near Highway 99. It operated from about 1985 to 1990. Floyd Wiltz's 'The Castro' was on West Orangeburg Avenue near Highway 99 and saw limited success from May to December of 1994.

1990s

Over at the Mustang Club, Shirley Owens' health began to deteriorate. A fire damaged the club in 1994, and Shirley died in 2001. The Mustang may have been the oldest continuously operating gay club in the state when its doors closed permanently in 2007. The building was sold the following year.

CSU Stanislaus formed the 'Gay and Lesbian Student Alliance' during this time, with Cary Friedman as its spokesman in the early 90s. He led the group with a march for gay rights on campus in 1993. At MJC, Marylou Hacker became the advisor of the LGBTQ-oriented 'Rainbow Generation' club. On October 11, 1994, MJC celebrated its first campus-wide 'National Coming Out Day'.

In 1994, a branch of 'Parents & Friends of Lesbians and Gays' (PFLAG) was started in Modesto. Retired Beyer High School Spanish teacher and SCAP board member, Norman Rostad (1939-2017), had long looked for someone with whom he could start at local PFLAG chapter. He found that person in Linda Warden (1941-2011), who had struggled over the coming out of her daughter, Tracie. PFLAG Modesto held a regular support group, maintained an answering service helpline, and marched in Modesto's annual 4th of July parade. They also posted LGBT-positive billboards in the County for a time.

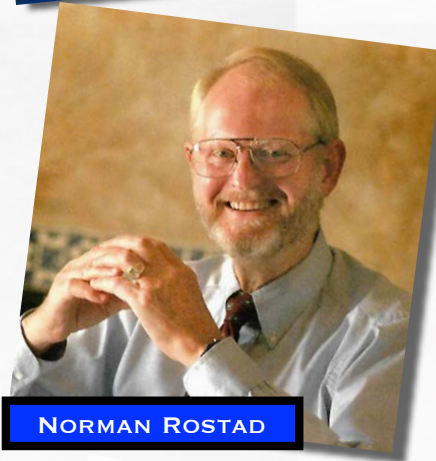
In the mid-1990s, Modesto teacher Tom Martin started a local branch of the Gay Lesbian Straight Teachers Network (GLSTN), which became the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network (GLSEN). The organization helped Modesto City Schools (MCS) send professional staff to an educational conference on LGBT issues; no previous formal training on the topics had even been provided locally. GLSEN then brought awareness of related issues to literally thousands of MCS' professional staff, school board, and students, with its 'Teaching Respect for All' video guide. Books and teaching materials were also sent by GLSEN to all the junior high and high school curriculum directors, superintendents, and principals in the county. Finally, the group helped coordinate a policy change at MCS, with the school board voting 6 – 1 to extend formal protection to perceived LGBT students from being bullied or harassed.

F-FLAG SUPPORT GROUP
Family and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (F-FLAG)
meet with gays to share their concerns and questions.
For more information, contact Sindi at 848-8408, evenings only.

Grapes



LINDA WARDEN



NORMAN ROSTAD



KEVIN JENNINGS (NATIONAL GLSTN FOUNDER) & TOM MARTIN



The mid-1990s also brought the arrival of gay-friendly clubs on high school campuses in Stanislaus County. Debbie Favalora Soro was asked by a student to advise the first Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) club at Johansen High School, in 1996. In order to win support for the club to form, she arranged for *thirty* other teachers to sign up as co-advisers.

In a first, MCS required that students get permission slips from their parents/guardians to join the JHS GSA. Seeking fair and equal treatment, Soro approached the school board and advocated that this same requirement apply for all clubs. She was successful. The GSA changed names over time, and similar clubs popped up at Beyer, Ceres, and Oakdale High Schools during this same period.

In September of 1996, *The Modesto Bee* ran a large article with photos covering the wedding of Tracie Warden to her partner, Robin Gagos. While this marriage predated *legal government* recognition for same-gender couples, it importantly provided for the seedlings of change in the wider public mindset locally.



**SPECTRUM CLUB
BEYER HIGH SCHOOL (1999)**

SPECTRUM CLUB

SPECTRUM CLUB - Front Row - Amanda Wood, Marci Livingston, Michelle Bebout, Dien Diep. Back Row - Jessalyn Curchi, Candace Akers, Ingrid George.



**WEDDING OF
TRACIE WARDEN
& ROBIN GAGOS
(MODESTO BEE
1996)**

2000s

The turn of the millennium brought forth new education on LGBTQ life. Born out of speaking engagements at various Modesto high schools' 'Day of Respect' presentations, David Barbaree, Phil Langlois, and others, were invited to do more formal talks at CSU Stanislaus and Delta College campuses. These 'Homosexuality 101' presentations were mainly given to sociology classes, to students who were on track to become counselors, and to campus counselors themselves. Most of the audience members were straight, according to Langlois. He said the "cutting edge, avant-garde" work was "forward thinking", and pre-dated wider textbook teaching on LGBTQ life. Many audience members had "no concept of 'gay and lesbian anything'," but had "their 'aha' moments" during the talks, and came away more enlightened. Langlois said the last such talk given was around 2017.



**CURRENT PHOTO OF
JEFF GIANELLI
(RIGHT) WITH
HUSBAND, TONY
MARTIN**



**BOBBIE GOODNIGHT
(RIGHT) WITH
CURRENT PARTNER,
JAY KOLVOORD**

In the early-2000s, new political efforts ensued. Bobbie Felser (now, Goodnight), who had been a previous BACW board member, and the late Christy Minehart (later, Costa) organized a chapter of the Human Rights Campaign (HRC). Initial meetings were held at Perko's Cafe at Geer Road and Monte Vista Avenue in Turlock. Their HRC efforts transitioned into a branch of Marriage Equality USA, and then later Equality California, which was co-chaired locally by Jeff Gianelli. An offshoot of PFLAG Modesto emerged, called 'Liberty Action Network'. Marian Martino and Kelly Huston led more political-oriented aims with this organization. All of the groups did work on marriage equality.

Along with increased political activism, a broad, and more outward and purposely public self-proclaiming of the LGBTQ community by its members came into being during this time. In October of 2004, the Modesto Gay and Lesbian International Film Festival debuted at the State Theatre in downtown Modesto. Founded by Bob Barzan, with assistance from Martino and Randy Siefkin, the film festival returned three more times. Then-partners Robert VanTassel and Barry Jackson launched a social group called 'The Birdcage'. Playing on the name of the title movie, this group traveled monthly to various restaurants with bars in Modesto, and gained a steady following.

Greater acceptance of gay culture came into being locally in the mid-late 2000s. The local gay bar scene changed radically, becoming more integrated with mainstream nightlife culture in the area. The change started in September of 2005 when Cyriakus 'Gus' Wagner became manager of Modesto's long-running 'Tiki Cocktail Lounge'. At the time, two of the Tiki's owners were the late Mitch (1957-2014) and Tammy Maisetti. There were also part owners of downtown Modesto's venerable 'Tresetti's' restaurant and bar. Wagner was working at Tresetti's and was tapped by the Maisetti's to revamp the then-dusty Tiki Lounge. Wagner developed rapport with some gay clientele, and "by Halloween (of 2005), it felt like a gay bar", he says.

On November 1st, he started to market the bar as such, seizing the opportunity to cater to an underserved community. Of the planned change in focus of the multi-decade long-running establishment, Wagner says, "Mitch and Tammy were actually easy to convince". He elaborated, "I think the idea had been there on the back burner for a while". The other co-owners of the Tiki were also on board. The venture became greatly successful, and the Tiki remains a mainstay of the local gay bar scene today.

The LGBTQ community gained greater and more permanent visibility when the nonprofit Stanislaus Pride Center (SPC) was established as a community resource center in 2005. After being involved with PFLAG Modesto, Keith Highiet, along with Bobbie Felser, Jeff Gianelli, and Lisa Verigin, founded the organization. Dr. R.J. Moriconi, who was concluding the hosting of his annual Birds of a Feather event, became the group's board advisor. Amongst its many activities, the SPC hosted the first publicly marketed transgender support group in the county; operated a GLBT lending library; and worked with Dr. Gina Pallotta, chair of CSU Stanislaus' psychology department, to conduct more than 10,000 hours of free counseling for area LGBTQ people in need of such services.

The SPC operated virtually at first through a website. Patrick Pokorny and Todd Kerkoff approached the center in hopes of having a local 'pride festival'. In June of 2006, the SPC hosted the first 'Stanislaus Pride Night' at the Fat Cat Music House & Lounge in downtown Modesto, chaired by Felser. The Fat Cat location is now the soon-to-be site of the Modesto Children's Museum.

The SPC opened the doors at a permanent fixed location on 15th Street in Modesto in December 2006 across from the Modesto main branch of the Stanislaus County Library. In June of 2007, the organization hosted the first free, fully public pride festival in the county with 'Stanislaus Pride Day' at Graceada Park in Modesto.

The SPC had significant impact beyond Stanislaus County. Prior to its existence, the four largest cities in the United States without a GLBT community center were all in the Central Valley of California: Bakersfield, Fresno, Modesto, and Stockton. The center's success in Modesto inspired confidence for locals in those other cities to initiate having their own such community center organizations and permanent locations.



ANDREW THOMLINSON (CURRENT TIKI OWNER) AT 2009 PRIDE IN GRACEADA PARK



PATRICK POKORNY AT 2009 PRIDE IN GRACEADA PARK



SPC BOARD PRESIDENT KEITH HIGHIET GREETES CAROL CLAYTON, MEL NOMANN & JOHN CRABB AT THE OPENING OF THE STANISLAUS PRIDE CENTER, FEBRUARY 16, 2007 (MODESTO BEE)

An LGBTQ youth-oriented Modesto group formed as 'The Place' in the mid-2000s by Ed and Elizabeth Plata. After one of their children came out as gay, the Plata's started this social and support group as an outlet for LGBTQ youths beyond school campus life. The group continues to operate today. Another organization which started was the Stanislaus County intra-government LGBTQ 'Collaborative'. This group later inspired the late-2010s 'LGBTQ Collaborative', a public health and wellness resource provider for the community.

In 2007, Debbie Soro, now at Grace Davis High School, helped organized the first local 'National Day of Silence', to combat anti-gay discrimination. Participating students wore blue painters' tape across their mouths, raising awareness on campus about LGBTQ bullying and harassment.

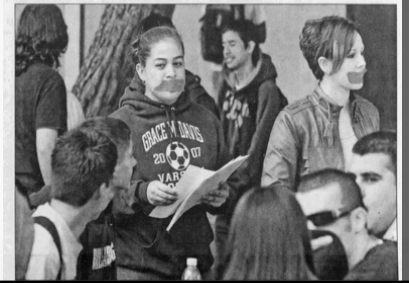
HISTORY beyond Stanislaus County - *The backdrop to all this local self-organizing was the coming of same-sex marriage nationally; the growing prominence of 'drag culture' in the western world; and the rise of greater transgender visibility and rights globally. In March of 2000, same-sex marriage became a polarizing topic for Californians when voters passed Proposition 22. This stated that marriage was between a man and a woman. San Francisco mayor Gavin Newsom allowed for same-sex marriages in his city beginning on February 12, 2004; this lasted for a month. On August 12th of that year, the California Supreme Court nullified those marriages. On May 15, 2008, the ban on same-sex marriage was lifted in the state and a window would open for same-sex marriages: California issued its first legal marriage license to same-sex couple at 5:00 p.m. on June 16, 2008, as a result of the Supreme Court of California decision.*

On June 17, 2008, Stanislaus County issued marriage licenses to eleven same-sex couples. The first such license was issued to Beth Holden and Cynthia Soto. *The Modesto Bee* covered their civil ceremony, and their religious ceremony at the nearby College Avenue Congregational Church, which immediately followed. The Holden-Soto's later faced harassment and even death threats at their home from never-identified persons for some time. The first two men to marry in Stanislaus County that same day were Mark Mitchell and Jay Wright.

In November 2008, California voters passed Proposition 8, banning same-sex marriage. Marian Martino and her wife, Joanna Cusenza, joined a lawsuit shortly after Prop 8's passage, which had now questioned the validity of their recent marriage. Already legal domestic partners, they wedded on the auspicious day of August 8, 2008. (The date '08-08-08' was a worldwide popular day to marry, same-sex or not).

Prop 8 was stuck down in federal court in 2010 and was bound as law when the United States Supreme Court declined to hear the appeal case in 2013. The US Supreme Court would decide the fate of same-sex marriage for the nation in 2015 when it considered arguments in *Obergefell v. Hodges*. The highest-ranking political figure to ever come from Stanislaus County, Ann Veneman, signed the historic amicus brief in support of same-sex marriage for the case. Veneman, a Republican, had been the first and so-far only woman to serve as United States Secretary of Agriculture. She did so under President George W. Bush from 2001 to 2005, and later served as the director of UNICEF from 2005 to 2010.

SOUNDS OF SILENCE



NATIONAL DAY OF SILENCE
(MODESTO BEE 2007)



SOTO-HOLDEN WEDDDING



JOANNA CUSENZA &
MARIAN MARTINO



ANN VENEMAN

2010s - PRESENT

For the LGBTQ community socially, the late 2000s and 2010s brought more gay bars. 'Jalito's' on Crows Landing Road, a bar and dance club, was the first locally to cater to a predominantly Spanish-speaking gay crowd. Rachel Baxter's 'Climax Bar & Nightclub' opened on Seventh Street at the former Fajardo's restaurant location (not far from the old Mustang Club). It ran successfully for some time and closed in 2018. Most recently, the 'Splash Video Dance Bar', part of a chain of northern California gay bars, opened. 'Splash Modesto' fills the site of the former 'Minnie's' Chinese-American restaurant and bar.

Katalina Zambrano, an openly trans-woman and drag performer, said drag changed from female impersonating into character creation in the 2010s. Zambrano shared that drag became recognized as an art form, with more performances suitable for family-friendly audiences. In 2014, Zambrano started 'Under the Gender Umbrella' group at Josie's Place, a youth drop-in center. The group now meets at the MoPride community center.

The 'LGBTQ Collaborative' established a 'Rainbow Resource Center' in Modesto, and more recently the 'Somos Familia Valle Center' in Merced. The Rainbow Clinic was founded to find doctors who were trans-friendly. Zambrano became the first out trans-woman to become a member of the Kiwanis Club's local branch, and shared that local law enforcement now engages in proactive and positive talks with Trans-groups to improve interactions with members in the community.

Politically, Stanislaus County's first 'out' LGBTQ mayor arrived in the form of Turlock's Gary Soiseth. Coming out while in office in June of 2018, he subsequently defeated when running for re-election. Oakdale's Cherilyn Bairos became the first LGBTQ person to win a mayor's race in the county as an out person in 2021. She remains mayor today.

In the summer of 2019, the anti-gay 'National Straight Pride Coalition' sought to hold an event at Modesto's Graceada Park. Dozens packed the Modesto City Council Chambers in opposition. The leader of the coalition, Don Grundmann, who has never even lived in Stanislaus County, addressed the council and declared, "We're a totally peaceful racist group!" The permit was denied, and the group began annual organized protests the last weekend of each August in front of a Planned Parenthood office on McHenry Avenue. *The Modesto Bee's* Marijke Rowland covered the initial event extensively, and has documented many of the activities affecting the local LGBTQ population for more than twenty-five years.

In early May of 2023, Dr. Moriconi, who had done much to further local LGBTQ life locally, was placed in Hospice care. On May 6, 2023, his friend Bonnie Feuer shared with him that this article was being written, and on that day, he then stated, "I think that the gay culture has changed for the positive in that we can be recognized, appreciated, and valued."

EDITED BY KEITH HIGHIET

Dr. R.J. Moriconi died on May 12, 2023, and this article is dedicated in his memory.



KATALINA ZAMBRANO



TONY ALONZO, R.J.
& GRANDDAUGHTER CORA



DR. R.J. MORICONI
(1933-2023)

*Information and photographs contributed by the following people: Tony Alonzo, Cherilyn Bairos, Robert Barzan, Dr. Jeffrey Buechler, Matt Bowers, Joanna Cusenza, John Crabb (1936-2023), Diane Darling, Bonnie Feuer, Jeff Gianelli, Bobbie Goodnight, Marylou Hacker Rousseau, Keith Highiet, Beth Holden, Phil Langlois, Tom Martin, Marian Martino, Connie McLroy, James McCall, Sindi McGuire, R.J. Moriconi (1933-2023), Merlin Nomann (1928-2021), Scott Pike, Patrick Pokorny, Marijke Rowland, Robert Rudholm, Gerad Slayton, Debbie Favolora Soro, Don Strangio, Ann Veneman, and Katalina Zambrano. Other information taken from various *Bay Area Reporter*, *The Modesto Bee*, and *Oakdale Leader* articles, and *The Origin and Early Development of All Saints University Parish* by Edward Aubert (2020).

MODESTO'S SOUTHERN PACIFIC DEPOT OF 1915

BY ROBERT BARZAN

IN JUNE 2023, THE CITY OF MODESTO WILL RE-DEDICATE THE SOUTHERN PACIFIC DEPOT FOLLOWING THE RENOVATION IN PREPARATION FOR THE ACE TRAIN.

On March 7, 1914, the Modesto Chamber of Commerce filed a complaint with the California Railroad Commission claiming that the depot in the city was “insufficient for the use of the public and the transaction of the business of the Southern Pacific Company; and that it is necessary for the public convenience and for the transaction of business that a larger depot be constructed.” Railroad Commissioner Alex Gordon came to Modesto for the hearing on April 21, 1914. The commission decided in favor of the city and ordered the railroad to build a new depot costing no less than \$15,000.

Though the railroad commission’s decision was in May 1914, it was more than a year before construction started in part because the people of Modesto could not decide on a site for the new depot and in part because the mayor and city council were not able to move the project forward. In 1915, it took two votes of the electorate of the city to decide to close J Street and place the depot where it is today.

The ruling suggested a Mission style for the design of the depot. Mission Revival was popular in California at that time, and other structures in the style were being built in Modesto. The railroad relied on its own architect and assistant chief engineer, John Quincy Barlow, and his team to design the Mission Revival style depot. The Modesto depot is a near twin of the depot in Porterville. The depots are so similar that the railroad used photographs and drawings of the Porterville depot in its publicity for the Modesto depot.

Barlow announced on July 9th that the railroad had hired George A. Bos, a well-known San Francisco civil engineer and contractor, to build the depot. The contract price was \$9,720, significantly less than the mandated minimum of \$15,000. Construction began Monday, July 12, 1915. Though the building was finished, the opening was delayed several weeks because furniture for the waiting rooms was delayed. The depot opened for service at 4:00 p.m., December 11, 1915.

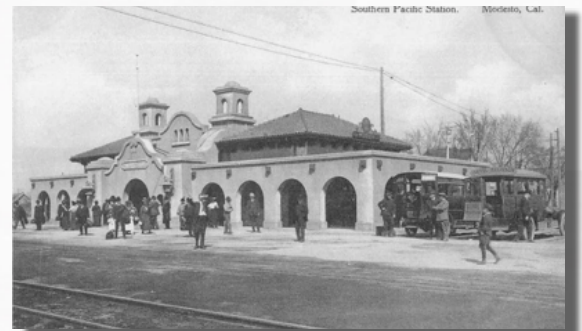
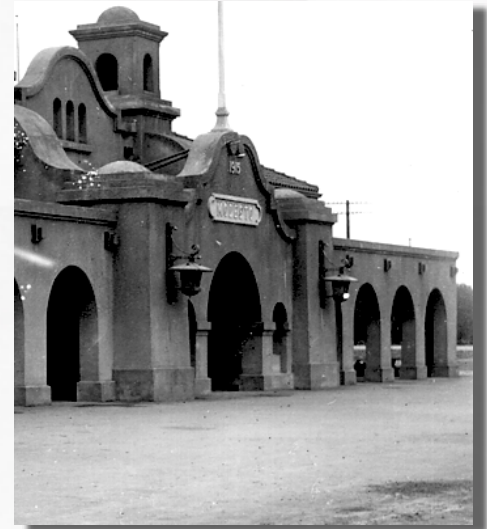
The building is best seen from the trackside, which is considered the front of the depot. The two prominent features greeting arriving passengers are the arch colonnade and the twin towers. In 1915, when passengers entered the building, they saw panels of photographs of Mt. Shasta, Lake Tahoe, the Mariposa grove of big trees, and Yosemite National Park.

The completed depot sat in the middle of the block with no landscaping, walkways, or lighting between it and the adjacent streets. The citizens of Modesto and the railroad battled over what to do with the depot landscaping for the next twelve years. It was 1928 when the city and the railroad reached an agreement to landscape part of the blocks and provide paved areas for automobile parking.

Rail passengers used the depot until 1971 when Southern Pacific ended service to Modesto.



ILLUSTRATION BY KEVIN MILLER



MM&HS NEWS



MCHENRY MCMOBILE MUSEUM



CERES MAYOR JAVIER LOPEZ
ENJOYING THE MCMOBILE
MUSEUM AT THE CERES STREET
FAIRE



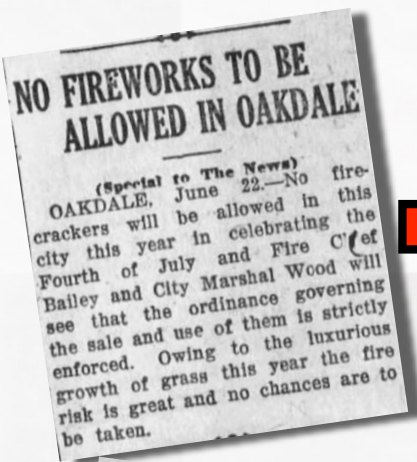
MARTHA MARTIN & NANCY NORTON



MAY 13, 2023 LECTURE ON 'THE
MCHENRY LIBRARY HISTORY'

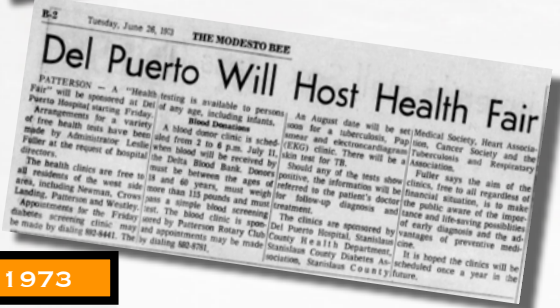
- The Annual Meeting for Members of the MM&HS will be held on Tuesday, June 27, 2023, from 5:00 to 7:00pm in the Museum. Invitations will be sent out shortly. Please save the date. Members may RSVP to david@mchenrymuseum.org as soon as possible.
- The McHenry McMobile Museum made its third appearance at the Ceres Street Faire May 6th and 7th.
- We thank Lauren Bone, Chris Nunes, Nancy Norton, & Chris Nunes for their help with the McMobile Museum at the Ceres Street Faire.
- New docent committee officers were sworn in May 9th with Martha Martin as president, Nancy Norton as vice president, Doug Nutson as treasurer, Chris Nunes as secretary, and outgoing president Kaye Osborn as parliamentarian. We thank Kaye for her years of service as president of the docents.
- On May 13th, executive director David Seymour presented a lecture on the 'History of the McHenry Library' to an audience in the Museum Auditorium.
- We welcome new recent Patron member, Jennifer Guerrini. Supporters who give \$100 or greater are recognized on our web site at McHenryMuseum.org/supporters
- The Board of Directors of the MM&HS met on May 24th.
- The MM&HS has been asked to update 1971 Stanislaus County History teaching and activity booklets by the third-grade teachers from Lakewood Elementary. The 1971 book which is still being used as their teaching guide was sourced from an earlier 1941 research publication. The new booklets will be available as downloads from our web site, and will be announced to curriculum providers and schools countywide.
- The McHenry McMobile Museum will make its next appearance at the Patterson Apricot Fiesta, June 3rd from 12:00pm – 5:00pm & June 4th from 9:00am – 5:00 pm.
- Memberships will be mailed out later this month. Now is the time to join or renew, www.mchenrymuseum.org
- We are looking for ideas for monthly historical articles, and for more to participate in researching and writing fresh articles. Message us on our website if you are interested in sharing contributions, www.mchenrymuseum.org
- In addition to seeking new docents ongoing, we are looking for volunteers in other capacities: help at the in-museum store, at the McMobile Museum, behind the scenes with research, and at other MM&HS Events. Please email: david@mchenrymuseum.org
- An in-museum talk is being planned on this month's article topic, 'The LGBTQ History of Stanislaus County'. Please check our website in the coming days to confirm the date and time. We look forward to seeing you at the in-person presentation.
- We are planning an October fundraising event. Look for our updates in the upcoming months.

IT HAPPENED WHEN...



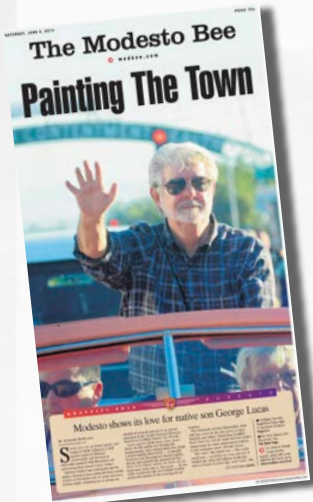
1923

- In June of 1923, the City of Oakdale banned all fireworks from the 4th of July festivities. There was a fear that the growth of long dry grass gave higher risk to potential fires.



1973

- In June of 1973, the Del Puerto Hospital in Patterson hosted a health fair for the community. Fifty years ago Del Puerto Hospital was their closest medical facility. The hospital has since closed, and the building burned.



2013

- In June 2013, Modesto native George Lucas made a rare public appearance to serve as grand marshal for the North Modesto Kiwanis American Graffiti Classic Car Parade. This coincided with the 40th anniversary of Lucas' 1973 film, "American Graffiti" which is set in Modesto.



GET INVOLVED TODAY!

The McHenry Museum & Historical Society (MM&HS) is the support organization of the McHenry Museum, *your* community museum. We bring Stanislaus County history to life!

- Volunteer!** Our docents volunteer in four-hour increments to greet and guide guests and visitors during the museum's open hours. Our acquisitions committee explores and evaluates items for the museum to obtain and retain. Volunteer staff runs our in-museum bookstore and gift shop, *Stanislaus Selections*, and help at the intra-County destinations where our McMobile Museum visits. There are more behind-the-scenes opportunities to help as well! Email david@mchenrymuseum.org or visit <https://www.mchenrymuseum.org/contact>

- Become a Member!**
MM&HS members are invited to our annual summer meeting & donor dinner, and our December Soup & Sandwich supper. Donors who give \$100 or more are recognized on our website for their contributions. Join now: <https://checkout.square.site/buy/Y3HL6WU4QLSOHPNPGXWHIDU>

- Get the Newsletter!**
Discover more ways to connect with local history regularly with our free, monthly newsletter, featuring fresh articles on local history, the *MM&HS Museum Monthly*. Did we mention that it's free?
<https://www.mchenrymuseum.org/contact>

Your participation helps bring local history to life. Get involved. Today!