

Cover Story



Photograph by Sean Penello

Buried in this pile of Sunnyvale memorabilia and artifacts are a grand piano and a crystal chandelier that were once a part of the furnishings in the historic Murphy House.

Roots Bound: Sunnyvale's historical society

By Lee Gordon

The Sunnyvale Historical Society owns a grand piano and a sparkling chandelier that once hung in Sunnyvale's first house, but residents interested in the city's history won't find them in a well-lit museum--at least for now.

The grand piano sits in a locked, dark room with concrete floors. It serves as a shelf for random memorabilia such as posterboard reprints of photos and a scaled-down model of the Sunnyvale Town Center Mall.

The chandelier has lived an even more unglamorous life, stuffed in a wood barrel since 1961.

If all goes well, the piano and the chandelier will be liberated from the storage room in May of 2007.

Seeing all that history locked away is a sad sight to some. Laura Babcock, chairwoman of the Sunnyvale Historical Society, stands next to the piano in the dank room and pulls up a blanket to show a musical instrument that

at one time lived up to the adjective "grand."

"This makes me want to cry when I see it," she says. "Here's this piano, and it is stored in such horrible conditions. It's been here for 30 years."

Babcock and other members of the historical society want the public to see the piano, as well as other artifacts from Sunnyvale's history. But space at the current Sunnyvale Historical Museum at Murphy Park make that impossible.

Linda Taaffe, a great-great-great granddaughter of Martin Murphy Jr., the so-called father of Sunnyvale, said the fact that the artifacts have been saved reflects how the community values its history.

"You can't imagine how much this stuff brings people together," she said. "It's pride in Sunnyvale's beginnings."

All that's needed to get artifacts from the city's beginnings into a museum is \$200,000. The historical society has been fundraising for almost four years, and the Sunnyvale Heritage Park Museum is nearing its \$1.6 million goal. Babcock says the building will be a replica of Sunnyvale's first house.

The Murphy House, built in 1850, served as the town's central meeting place and its owners were catalysts for California's growth in the latter half of the 19th century. The home was located at the present Murphy Park location until 1961, when it was bulldozed to make way for a community center and the Central Expressway.

Curtis Black, director of parks and recreation for the city, said it's a great time to start building a new museum.

"The community will finally have a quality, first-rate museum," he said. "There should be some remarkable displays and exhibits for learning."

Today's Museum

The piano and chandelier are just two of hundreds of historical objects the Sunnyvale Historical Society has in storage, including towering trophies from the former Sunnyvale High School's athletic achievements.

The current Sunnyvale Historical Museum is in a room that's smaller than the storage room and located in the same building.

"It's an ugly, small room, but it's free," she said. "It's kept this organization and its dream alive... We're here at the graciousness of the city."

Exhibits at the museum conjure images of Sunnyvale's past.

Hard hats and fruit boxes from the Del Monte and Libby companies recall the days when fruit packing and canning was the cash crop. Another exhibit features an Osborne 1 and a Gavilan Mobile Computer, early symbols of the tech industry that catapulted Sunnyvale into worldwide fame.

The Osborne 1 was one of the first "laptops" in history. It weighs 10 kg and has a 5-inch black and white display.

Sunnyvale was the first California city ever to be struck by a tornado, and the museum features newspaper photos and articles from 1951 chronicling

the aftermath.

A restored painting of Martin Murphy Jr. hangs on another wall, accompanied by cracked and slightly-faded paintings of other prominent Murphy family members.

The society intends to restore them all and hang them on walls in a building that will be virtually identical to the old Murphy House.

Murphy House

The Murphy House holds a special place in California's history. Among its claims to fame, the two-story, 20-room house hosted California's first Supreme Court and the Democratic Party organized there many times, Babcock says.

The Murphys had their home built in 1850 in Bangor, Maine, and then had it shipped around Cape Horn. Leather straps and wood pegs combined the pieces, as there were no sawmills in Santa Clara County at the time. It was the first frame house in the county, Babcock said.

The house was the centerpiece of Martin Murphy Jr.'s 4,000-acre Bayview Ranch, which became Murphy Station and eventually Sunnyvale. It was popular among locals and travelers, and often the site of social events.

In July 1881 the Murphys threw a three-day party, rumored to be the biggest ever in California. Trains came from San Jose and San Francisco transporting some of the estimated 8,000 to 10,000 revelers who came to celebrate Martin Murphy Jr.'s 50th wedding anniversary. Those who attended were treated to a freight car full of champagne and wine, and there was a massive barbecue pit.

When the Murphy house was 100 years old, the city of Sunnyvale purchased the estate in 1954 for \$70,000. Plans were in the works to make the house and property a monument, Babcock says.

But the home fell into despair, and the Sunnyvale Historical Society formed in 1956 for the purpose of saving it.

The windows were covered with boards, and the society succeeded in getting the house designated a historical landmark by the state, a first step to securing restoration funds.

However, Babcock says transients and termites soon took over, and a small fire damaged the unoccupied home to the point that the city and county began looking for other uses for the estate.

The home's contents were auctioned off by 1953.

"This stuff was scattered all over the country," Taaffe says, motioning her hands across the storage room. "Everything from lawnmowers to Tiffany clocks."

Babcock says the people who owned these may not even have a connection to Sunnyvale.

The home was bulldozed in 1961, in part to make way for the Central Expressway. Through some of her research, Babcock said she found there

were plans for the expressway that attempted to keep the Murphy House in its entirety.

"When it was bulldozed, people were taken by surprise," Babcock says.

Taaffe said that some felt the city and county worked behind residents' backs

"There was a sense that some people thought the city was sneaking around," she said. "[The house] was their treasured piece in Sunnyvale."

Murphy name

During her childhood, Taaffe heard stories about her relatives' accomplishments.

There were stories about how Martin Murphy Sr. led the first wagon train over the Sierra Nevada in 1845. There were stories about how Martin Murphy Jr. rescued what was left of the Donner Party, a legendary pioneering group that resorted to cannibalism to survive a Sierra winter. And there were stories about kin who went on to become lawyers, landowners and politicians.

There was another story about how Martin Jr. could ride a horse from Sunnyvale to San Luis Obispo without leaving his property.

"Growing up, I had heard so many stories," Taaffe said. "They sounded so fantastic that I thought they were exaggerated."

The stories relate more than just the accomplishments of the Murphy family. They tell how the family helped shape California's growth in the late 19th century.

"The Murphys played a huge role in the history of California," Babcock says. "A lot of our state's history has ties [to Sunnyvale]."

Martin Murphy Sr. founded the south-county community of San Martin, while Martin Murphy Jr.'s son John founded Murphys, a mountain community in Calaveras County.

Martin Murphy Jr. settled in what is now Sunnyvale and helped establish the Convent of Notre Dame and Santa Clara College (now Santa Clara University). He donated land to the railroads and had a station named after him.

Martin Murphy Jr. died as the state's largest landholder. Some of his holdings included the 39,000-acre Asuncion Ranch in San Luis Obispo County, and the 12,000-acre Point Concepcion Rancho in Santa Barbara County.

"It's a very illustrious family," Babcock says.

Future digs

The Sunnyvale Heritage Park Museum has a location, and soon it will have a design, Babcock says. The society needs to raise \$200,000 before the six-month designing and permit phase can begin, she says. After that, construction on the \$1.6 million project will commence.

"This is the final push," Babcock says. "We'd sure like to break ground before [the society's] 50th anniversary next year." The society hopes to open the museum doors in two years, Babcock says.

To garner enough cash to begin construction, the society is offering donors a chance to leave a lasting memento of their support. Donors will be able to have names, messages or symbols engraved on bricks or tiles. The bricks and tiles will be located in a plaza near the new museum's entrance.

The society has already raised more than \$19,000 through the brick and tile program.

Four rooms of the new museum will have genuine artifacts from the original Murphy House and will replicate the late 19th century time period, Babcock says.

"This will not be a stagnant museum," Babcock said. "It's not a place that you go once and don't come back until your mother-in-law comes to town."

The society plans to educate 3,000 students in the fourth and fifth grades who study California's history. One program will place students in 19th-century Sunnyvale for a day, Babcock says.

The new museum will stand next to 10 acres of apricot trees. The surroundings at the Orchard Heritage Park and Interpretive Exhibit will take visitors back to the time when Sunnyvale was covered in orchards, Taaffe said.

Babcock has been spearheading the museum project as a volunteer for more than three years. Her efforts to gather Sunnyvale's history have led her to ranches up and down California's Central Coast, to meetings with philanthropic organizations and even to poorly-lit, clammy basements in Sacramento where the state stores historical documents.

Because she volunteered her time and effort to the project, Babcock won't be bringing home a paycheck, but she said her reward will be intangible.

"Since we've come this far, the sense of accomplishment will be my pay," she said.

And if all goes well, her efforts will help move a piano and a chandelier out of the dark and into a well-lit museum.

For more information on donations for the museum, contact Laura Babcock at 408.736.4713 or visit the website www.heritageparkmuseum.org. Forms for the engraved bricks and tiles can also be downloaded there.