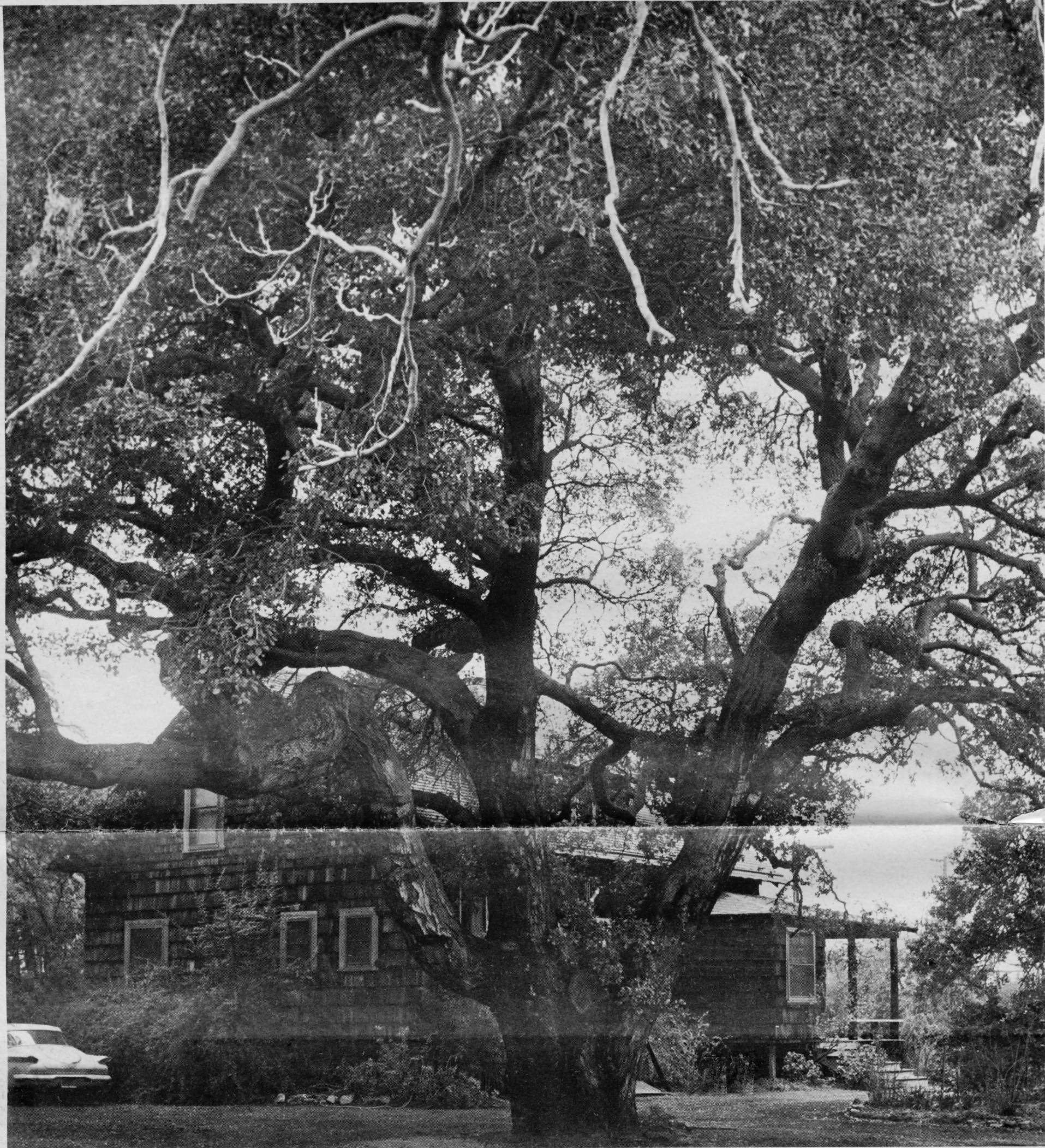




A view of the back of the J. Gilbert Smith residence, as seen from the Hillview School grounds. The house is on the Los Altos Civic Center site, and was designed and built (like a rock) by Smith, himself, who picked the site for its proximity to two, huge oaks.

A MUSEUM IN LOS ALTOS' FUTURE

BY LU MITCHELL

While some towns are busy leveling old buildings and residences to make way for modern, multi-storied structures, Los Altos is carefully preserving one of its early homes for eventual conversion into a museum of Los Altos artifacts and records.

No one could be happier over Los Altos' plans for a museum on Civic Center property than Mrs. J. Gilbert Smith, whose 66-year-old house will be the permanent home of the pages of Los Altos' past.

The house, built by her husband, quite naturally fits into the museum category, particularly since the property surrounding the home is now the Civic Center site. What was formerly orchard land planted by Smith in 1901, now is the locale for City Hall,

the Youth Center, Library, the soon-to-be-completed police department, and eventually will include a council chamber-community center.

When J. Gilbert Smith offered his 10-plus acres to the City in December, 1954, he retained a lifetime acre estate around his home plus his remaining orchard, which he cared for quite painstakingly, until his death in 1966.

George Estill, mayor at the time the City purchased the land, recalled that the city paid about \$117,000 for the 10 acre-plus parcel, which included a contribution from the late Arthur Fowle, who was one of the donors of the Los Altos Hills Town Hall site.

Smith was a frequent visitor around City Hall. His stories about Los Altos' earlier

years and reminiscences of his own experiences always found eager listeners, according to George Sanregret, city administrator.

Sanregret recalled that about a year before Smith's death, he strolled into the office and asked, "what's to become of my home when we're gone?"

Before Sanregret could answer, Smith added, "if you could just figure out a way to preserve it . . . it's solid built, you know, not a shingle loosened in the '06 quake."

The idea of preserving the home grew from that remark and in 1965, the Civic Center Master Plan was revised to include the preservation of the Smith home as a museum.

Mrs. Smith, who was 90 on her last birthday, still lives there, sharing it with companions. She has a lot of nostalgia for the past, as did her husband, and remembers

*Our
grandchildren
will be able
to look back,
and see
the way
it once
was*



The Smith front steps. A wide porch goes completely around the front and one side, and the roof is supported by rough, redwood logs. The porch keeps the interior cool and dusky.



Mrs. Smith, at home. Her husband designed everything, and carefully selected the redwood wall panels for grain.

the wheat fields and orchards that were once so abundant.

"Gilbert was very disappointed to see the orchards slowly disappearing from the valley," she said.

She said her husband came to Los Altos in 1901, purchased five acres of what later became a 15-acre parcel, put up a tent where the house now stands, and planted his orchard.

Sanregret recalls Smith told him once that he'd been told to plant his apricots 24 feet apart, but by altering the figure to 23 feet, 6 inches, he managed to get an extra row of trees.

He was a carpenter by trade "and a darn good one," according to his wife. He began building his two-story house in 1902, and often worked well into the night, after returning from his regular job.

The seven-room house was originally built for Gilbert, his mother and sister. He was proud of its construction, and often remarked how well it withstood the San Francisco earthquake, while other nearby homes had toppled chimneys.

Although the Smiths did not marry until both were in their 50s, they had been lifelong friends and playmates, since Mrs. Smith's mother and Gilbert's mother were school friends.

Margaret Smith's family moved to Los

Altos about the same time Gilbert's family arrived here, renewing their friendships which began prior to Gilbert's birth in 1876.

There was little entertainment in those days, Mrs. Smith recalled, but the women managed to socialize at sewing circles, the hub of activity at the time. From these gatherings the San Antonio Woman's Club was formed under the leadership of Mrs. Smith's mother, Julia Hill. Mr. and Mrs. Hill donated part of their land to the club, and the men built the clubhouse in 1907. The same building is used today by the San Antonio Woman's Club and Mrs. Smith is still active in the group, which sews for charity. She quite proudly admits being the oldest member, both in age and years of service.

But Mrs. Smith wasn't content to settle in Los Altos for long. After her graduation from Cal, she spent the next 30 years teaching in various locations, ending up in Susanville.

She shyly admitted Gilbert found the commute from Los Altos to Susanville a little more than he could stand, and she agreed to marry him in October of 1931. She finished out her term the following June and retired to the home she saw her husband build nearly 30 years prior.

Ironically, Mrs. Smith's first teaching job was in Mountain View, but her wanderlust got the best of her, and she left the area

in search of new vistas.

She didn't waste any time getting back into the San Antonio Woman's Club after her marriage, and she had plenty of work around the house to keep her busy. The 15 acres of orchards (later reduced to 10½, when Hillview School took part of their property) meant a lot of hours spent canning.

"We canned 400 to 500 quarts of apricots a year," she said, adding, "and we ate apricots for breakfast, lunch and dinner the year 'round."

Admittedly independent, Mrs. Smith walks to town at a moment's notice, still puts in her time at the San Antonio Woman's Club, and proudly rode to Santa Clara last week, to pick up a brand new sewing machine she won in a contest.

"I'll keep making clothes for charity with it," she said proudly, then matter of factly, added, "after I get one more demonstration on how to use it."

ASSOCIATION HAPPY

Equally happy over the idea of having a permanent home for Los Altos' historical records is Joe Salameda, president of the Los Altos Historical Association, who has managed to store all of the town's artifacts and records at his home since the city's incorporation.

It was largely through Salameda's efforts in preparing the Historical Association's first annual report, that the following reminiscences of J. Gilbert Smith were compiled and made part of Los Altos' permanent history.

In recalling early days in Los Altos, Smith wrote in 1957:

"The area of the present triangle, bounded by what is now San Antonio Road, Edith Avenue and the railroad tracks (now expressway) was at that time nothing but a field of poppies and lupin with a few trees scattered around. There was no Hillview Avenue and, of course, no San Antonio School building.

"The original plots for Los Altos had been laid out in 1864 but the town of Los Altos was not laid out until 1908.

"In those days of no automobiles, I remember San Antonio Road as an excellent road terminated where Giffin Road and El Monte Avenue now meet. El Monte was apparently the earliest of the roads in the Los Altos area and a fair number of the older homes are still standing there.

"A railroad which used gasoline motor cars was put into operation about 1908 and ran from Mayfield through Los Altos to Los Gatos. Later, around 1915, the San Jose to Palo Alto electric car system was put in.

A generator power house was erected. This power house was the building between First Street and the railroad tracks and is now occupied by the Los Altos Library. (At the time Mr. Smith compiled his notes, it was prior to the library's move to State Street and eventually the Civic Center.)

"The first post office was a boxcar at the railroad station and later the post office was moved to the back end of the Shoup Building at First and Main Streets.

"At that time groceries were delivered by horse-drawn wagons from Palo Alto and Mountain View. There were also vegetable and meat wagons as well as occasional fish wagons.

"In approximately 1908 a Mr. Berry built a barn for the stabling of horses on the site where the present garage across from the Whitecliff Market is located.

"The house of Frank Rathbun was at Third and State streets on the property where the Purity Store is erected. This house was moved in 1954 to 620 Lincoln Avenue. He and his father ran a plumbing business on the site presently occupied by the Associated Oil Service Station on First Street between the present garage and the alley paralleling Main Street. The building they occupied was used for a short time later as a restaurant. Frank was here at the time the town of Los Altos was laid

out.

"It was a number of years before many business establishments started to locate in Los Altos. When they did start, a hardware store was built on the site of the present Los Altos Hardware . . . I remember the horse-drawn bakery delivery wagon as part of the early Los Altos scene. At a later date, a portion of the Shoup building was occupied by the first movie theater.

"Bill and Joe Urban, later known as the Urban Brothers of the well-known building materials company of Palo Alto, lived on San Antonio road, north of Almond avenue. Bill and Joe and their sister were considered the best apricot cutters in this area. I also remember paying Joe Urban 10 cents per gopher for the gophers he could catch.

"Today, (1957) our once quiet little village teems with activity. Where orchards, open fields, and an occasional building once stood are modern business establishments and streets of attractive residences. Mostly, I remember the few hundred people of 50 years ago who were the nucleus of almost 20,000 today."

. . . and a grateful Los Altos will find it far easier to remember those few hundred — and the Gilbert Smiths — when the Smith homestead, preserved, becomes a city museum.