

California Pioneers of Santa Clara County

Essay Contest

Year of Entry: 2020

Title: Recollections of the Book Collector's Club of the Friends of the San Jose Library

If you're an inveterate reader like I am, you'll probably spend some of your time in a book club. They are wonderfully diverse organizations catering to all kinds of readers' tastes. In my 86 years on this earth, I've been a member of quite a few book groups, but there was one that was the most memorable of all.

Simply called "The Book Club," it met at the Rosegarden Library on the fourth Tuesday evening of the month at 7:00 p.m. in January through November. It was born on Oct. 23, 1979 and died on Dec 1st after 189 meetings. Those meetings were fascinating not only because of the topics they chose but because the speakers were well-known Santa Clara residents who had some recognition in the Valley in their own fields as well as in their literary tastes and pursuits.

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Topics and Programs

The members had such diverse interests that no one could have predicted the topics the members would choose for their lectures. Here's a little sample of the variety: book collecting, book auctions, military books, Clyde Arbuckle on his own collection, miniature books, children's books, cookbooks, reference books, railroading books, Women of the Civil War Era, Boy Scout Manuals, Book Conservation, Book Browsing, Satire, Rare Books, Japanese Maps, The Art of Book Collecting, and Book Plates and Dust Jackets.

If these subjects sounded too heavy, they were lightened by evenings devoted to "Show and Tell." Members were encouraged to bring in their own books to share on a

subject. Special treasures from the personal libraries of members were offered for viewing, touching, and exploration.

Writers and Book Dealers

The members also tolerated evenings devoted to the writings of particular authors. Some of the memorable ones were: L. Frank Baum, Jack London, Henry David Thoreau, James Joyce, Ezra Pound, Rockwell Kent, and F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Since I had written four books on John Steinbeck, they tolerated me delivering four lectures on the subject. It even encouraged other members to give their own Steinbeck lectures. There was Ed Schmitz who owned the Book Nook in Los Altos on "Collecting John Steinbeck," Ronald Naymark, who owned an outstanding Steinbeck collection on "The Grapes of Wrath Controversy." One night when I had to miss my lecture due to illness, Alex Shaner filled the spot with "About Harmon's John Steinbeck Guide." Despite these excellent challenges to my Steinbeck research, the members still referred to me as "The Steinbeck Lady."

If it sounds as if stuffy literature lectures constituted the main offerings of the club, you would be mistaken. As much as the members liked to read, they also liked to eat. The program is filled with dates for potluck suppers. They were often held at the library but also in members' homes. There was one important difference. The Book Club's potlucks always were scheduled with a literary theme: "Show and Tell;" "Esoteric Books;" "Share your Latest Find;" "Collecting Comic Books;" "Blow Your Own Find;" "Bring your favorite quotation;" "History of Printing" (by Leonard McKay); "Postcard Din-a-linged;" Silent

Auctions, and Clyde Arbuckle's 90th Birthday celebration. The food and the discussions at the potlucks were so excellent that members rarely missed them.

The club, not surprisingly attracted many writers. Some of them were beginners (like me) and others were well-known. The entire Arbuckle family were members. Joyce Link, the owner of the well-known bookstore in Willow Glen, was an officer and highly visible member until illness forced her out of the club. Oscar Falconi and I paid many visits to her home, as did many other club members, to talk to her during this final chapter of her life. The jovial Leonard McKay was respected for his literary knowledge as much as his successful printing business. He told me a wonderful story about John Steinbeck which I included in my book.

Some well-known book dealers also attended like Jules Greenblatt, Diane Peterson, and Florian Shatsky. There were well-known local writers like Constance Casey who reviewed books for the San Jose Mercury News. There were others like Maury Dunbar who taught Steinbeck classes at DeAnza College; Harry Farrell, who was the author of Swift Justice: Never in a California Town which told the story of our most famous murder; Willys Peck, the well-known historian from Saratoga, described his way of finding out about local history; Vince Garrod whose family were early settlers and farmers in Saratoga; and two well-known professors, Professor Jim Walsh of San Jose State University and Tim O'Keefe of Santa Clara University. Finally there was Tom McEnery who became the mayor of San Jose.

I found all of the members to be intelligent and articulate but at different stages of being classified as well-known. Please accept my apology in advance for anyone that I may have missed.

In addition, there were beginning writers just starting to hone their craft. There was Barbara Marinacci who was writing about her family's involvement with the Paul Masson Winery in Vineyards in the Sky; Jim Lyle, a self-published poet who later became the poet laureate of Lake County; and Michael Vaughn, who read to us selections from one of his first novels, Frozen Music. (Vaughn has published several novels since then and still lives and writes in San Jose)

How did this interesting mix of bright, talented, and articulate writers and readers manage to get along? With such a group it was inevitable that great differences existed and controversies would arise. There never was any nastiness involved when strong-minded opinions ran counter to each other. They were dealt with in a civilized manner.

The Great Shakespeare Debate

One of the best examples that I observed in the provocative arena was a passionate debate on who was the author of the Shakespearean plays. Groups of Collector Book Club members divided themselves into groups to plead for their own favorite candidates.

Two debates were scheduled for April and May. The program postcard promised that "we will name the true author of the works of William Shakespeare." Dissenters disagreed and were prepared to argue for their favorite candidate: Sir Francis Bacon (1561-1604) or perhaps Sir Walter Raleigh (1552-1618). The leader of the first debate, Oscar Falconi, promised that he would explain the great difficulties with all the various theories. This fierce debate would take place under the title of WHODONIT? With great confidence he promised to predict how and when he would be proven completely correct.

The next program postcard promised that Anatole Lubovich would prove Oscar completely wrong. The gauntlet had been thrown down! Oscar had concluded that his research proved that the complete works of Shakespeare had to have been written by many persons. Oscar also promised that his view would be vindicated in the future by computer scientists.

In May, Anatole Lubovich, the leader of the opposition, announced on his program postcard that Oscar was definitely wrong. “Not so,” says Lubovich. He announced that Oscar was dead wrong and that only one man, to be revealed in his lecture, “couldadunit.” As a Shakespeare scholar, actor, and director in the theater, he said that he undertook this question to study and research in order to “satisfy my own mind.” He shared his evidence for his opinion which was the opposite of Oscar’s. Both of the presentations were riveting and the members couldn’t stop discussing them. Many meetings transpired before the members had talked out the subject and finally laid it to rest. There had been no bloodshed.

The Last Meeting

Even wonderful things come to an end and the Book Collectors Club came to an end at our home at 3:00 on a Sunday afternoon, on December 1, 1996. There had been 189 meetings in all and the format for this one was similar to the others – everyone brought food to share and a few books for our last Browse Table. There were some significant differences. Each guest received a list of our members and their addresses. The invitation also issued a warning “Don’t miss it. It’s the last time you’ll see many of your friends, and for us to see you.” That turned out to be a true thing.

Recollections of the Book Collector’s Club of the Friends of the San Jose Library

Many of the original Book Collectors Club are no longer with us but their memories of this unique club linger on.

Here are a few of them:

Darlene Carman:

"I read in the newspaper that Clyde Arbuckle was a member and that's why I joined the club. I had just finished my first historical novel of a proposed trilogy and I wanted his opinion as an experienced writer. I admired his ability and his vast knowledge. One night at a meeting, though I was nervous and very shy, I approached him and asked him to read my novel. He was very nice to me and agreed to do it. To my surprise he found only one small error and told me that he enjoyed the book. That encounter changed my life. It gave me the confidence to pursue writing and painting as my two life careers.

"The biggest value to me from the Book Collectors Club was networking. Receiving encouragement from an icon like Clyde Arbuckle clarified my direction. As for his historical knowledge, he seemed like a walking encyclopedia!"

After this inspirational meeting, Darlene polished her novel about a businesswoman who moves West. She found a major publisher who was very interested, but it didn't make the final cut. Since then, she developed a screenplay, because as she says, "it would make a great movie."

In addition to her writing, this burst of creativity extended into other areas very quickly. This is how she remembers it: "I've always loved hiking. A friend and I were hiking in Sunol and painting pictures of cows in the foreground. She asked me to get some vegetables and drinks for lunch out of a camper. As we ate our lunch, I had an idea. Who

says we have to paint with brushes? Why not vegetables? I took some sticks of broccoli and painted trees and bushes into the background of the cows. It occurred to me that I could rub them out the next day if I didn't like the effect. When I looked at them the next day, I was pleasantly surprised." This experience turned Darlene into the "Vegetable Artist!"

Her paintings have appeared in many art shows and she has won a number of awards. This unique style has appealed to all kinds of buyers. "I sold my first one to an accountant," she says. One of her earliest, a painting of daffodils, still hangs in her living room.

Darlene also was attracted to using animals in her paintings. One of her most exciting adventures was photographing a family of moose in the Tetons. A man drove by in a car shouting at her that she was in danger. "Luckily, he didn't spoil a really beautiful picture. I never feel any fear when I am in the outdoors capturing my images, sometimes pictorial and sometimes mental, for my paintings. I have no trouble in communicating with subjects in nature."

She has taught painting classes for children and they were delighted to use vegetables as their brushes. While writing a book on this subject she found that children were more interested in the stories behind the paintings rather than just the "how to."

That gave her another idea for a book. Like Van Gogh and other famous artists, she took notes on what she was thinking about when she began each painting. Since 1993 she compiled these notes into six binders. In re-reading them she discovered what she considers a basis for a book of memoirs.

For many of her paintings, she has also written poems to accompany them. A favorite painting occurred when she met a crippled dog in San Francisco named “Fletcher” who used a handmade wheelchair. She was moved to do this painting after she saw Christopher Reeves tell of his heroic coping with disease on TV. The resulting painting won a first place award. Darlene feels that a collection of these special feature paintings accompanied by poems would make a wonderful coffee table book.

Darlene’s two special talents of writing and painting came together in a 15-year stint in Community TV, one studio in Palo Alto and two studios in San Jose. At one time she was producing four shows a month. At first she interviewed mainly artists under the title of “The Painting Gourmet.” Then she revised the show to a variety of guests and called it “Darlene Carman Presents.” Her shows can still be watched on You-Tube. She won two National and five Regional Community TV awards.

Since Darlene loves animals, she had many animals on her show. Once she had a horse on the show, and the worst was a goat who left a puddle on the stage.

The creativity that Clyde Arbuckle discerned in the young Darlene continues to this day. The enthusiasm and energy that she brings to her painting and writing projects are just as strong as ever. What is the secret of her boundless energy? “I’m never bored,” says Darlene. “Each day I expect to see something to paint or write about.”

Hyland Baggerly

“My dad, John Baggerly, was the editor of the local newspaper in Los Gatos and a member of the Book Collector Club. One night he invited me to be his guest at a special

lecture on the Civil War. We were both Civil War buffs because my Great Grandfather had served in the army for the North.

“Bob Thompson gave the lecture that night and he did a terrific job. He was so knowledgeable and an excellent speaker. It’s a night I’ve never forgotten and I’m still a Civil War buff to this day.”

Audry Lynch

One of the ‘perks’ of my job as program chairman of the Book Collectors Club was meeting members who had met or known my favorite author, John Steinbeck. One night Leonard McKay told me about his own meeting with Steinbeck. He had been walking in the hills above Los Gatos when he discovered Steinbeck’s house with the author at home. Steinbeck invited him in when he heard that Leonard had been trying to do an author interview for his high school class at Los Gatos High School.

Leonard reported that he liked Steinbeck and they had spent a delightful afternoon talking together. Leonard was anticipating an “A” for his paper. Instead Miss Mendenhall, his teacher, tore up his paper in front of the class saying, ‘I won’t read any more of this author’s trash.’ Mr. McKay told me sadly that he regretted not having a copy of his paper right to that day.

I had many interesting interactions with members about their own involvements with Steinbeck who lived in Los Gatos while writing two of his major works, Of Mice and Men and The Grapes of Wrath.

The members of the Book Collectors Club dubbed me “Steinbeck Lady” because of my enthusiasm and curiosity about Steinbeck. It was funny to me at the time. Now a

lifetime later, I'm the author of seven published books and four of them are about John Steinbeck. The members did their work well. I became a "Steinbeck lady" in real life.

Michael Vaughn:

"I remember the book club as the place that launched my third novel (and first published one) into the domain of the reading public. It was called Frozen Music and it's still in circulation. The encouragement that I received from the book club members made the difference for me.

"There were many things that filled me with dread. As a young novelist, I had used several experiences from my own life as material. I loved music and had been in the choir at San Jose State University. One of the biggest scenes centered on a clearly recognizable St. Joseph's Cathedral in San Jose. Would people recognize themselves and resent it?

"Then there was the question of my publishers. Even though I was young and naive I felt uneasy about them. My feelings were correct and they were in jail before my book tour even began.

"A book tour around the country sounded terrifying. One of the high points of the trip was stopping at my birthplace in Brunswick, Maine, where I met many of my relations. My car broke down in Boston but I managed to get it fixed.

"Years later I re-read the book and saw the usual mistakes of a beginning writer and revised it a little. Then I read a review of the book by a critic who said she loved it. That's when I re-read it and republished it as an e-book. I'm pleased that people are still reading it.

“The members of the book club talked other people into reading it too. They were always flattering to me and my work. Now I’m the author of 23 books.

“How do I support myself? I worked in the English Department at Mission College for a couple of years. I also did public relations for Montalvo. During that time I had a small part in a Clint Eastwood movie called “The Rookie.” In the movie I played the part of a waiter. I was photographed over Charlie Sheehan’s shoulder. Unfortunately, a big storm came along and I lost my job to an earthquake.

“Mostly, I’ve supported myself as a house painter. It’s my day job. I just returned from a paint job in the western part of the state where I repainted a wall for Calder Lowe. She and her husband were the editors of Dragonfly Press which published many of my early works.”

Mr. Vaughn is working now on a book in the speculative genre which he describes as a “giant flood hitting San Jose which meets the Handmaid’s Tale.”

Looking back on his career, he gives credit to the book club. “They made me a novelist. They encouraged me when I was a young, unsure young guy, starting out on my maiden voyage as a writer. Without their praise and support I never would have made it .”

Louise Webb

“The person that I always enjoyed seeing at the meetings of the San Jose Library Book Club was Willys Peck. We both worked and wrote for the Saratoga News at that time and I also was fond of reading his articles in the San Jose Mercury News. His history articles were amazing and his lectures were equally absorbing. I wasn’t surprised at all when he published a book on Saratoga’s history after his retirement.

“In addition to the book club, I was always a ‘Willys Watcher.’ I even liked to see him light up his pipe. When he and Betty, his wife, who was renowned as a kindergarten teacher, walked around in town in their later years holding hands, I couldn’t take my eyes off of them. They were self-appointed town ‘characters’ and everyone loved them. I went to the ceremony where this famous couple in our town were immortalized by a beautiful sculpture in Blaney Plaza where future generations can see them and hear their story.

“I was a close friend of theirs so I was privy to their thoughts and activities. I remember that Willys once confided to me that ‘Betty wouldn’t agree to marry me until I had a house so I went out to find one to buy.’

“As a friend I was invited to their home which surprised me as much as their personalities. For example, they had a stuffed peacock in their fireplace. I rode on the train in their backyard, which was one of Willy’s favorite possessions. He also took great pride in his own hand-press where he printed his own pieces.

“Often, they put on plays, preferably by Shakespeare, which featured their family in starring roles. The guest list was often as intriguing as the decor. They knew Joan Fontaine and Olivia De Havilland who had also grown up in Saratoga. Other guests were drawn from all the various organizations they belonged to. I remember one night when an important Ambassador was the main guest of honor. As we started in the door, Willys turned to me and said, “Louise, who are all these people?”

Willys spent so much time at the Saratoga Library that a library bench was dedicated to him and, Louise says, “My favorite memory is of Willys sitting on his bench to

read.” He was also active in the Saratoga Men’s Club, the Saratoga Historical Foundation and the Saratoga Federated Church.

Is it any wonder that whenever it was announced that Willys Peck was the speaker of the night, the club’s supply of chairs was immediately filled.