

Atascadero Historical Society

A BRIEF HISTORY OF ATASCADERO

In 1913, St. Louis publisher E. G. Lewis purchased a 23,000-acre working ranch known as Rancho Atascadero from Jason Henry. This was the first step in Lewis's plan to develop his new model community and eventually relocate his publishing business to California. In choosing this location, Lewis bought a prime piece of real estate halfway between Los Angeles and San Francisco. The railroad was already in place, skirting the eastern edge of the property, and the main state highway ran right through the center. Lewis got started hiring experts in design, building, real estate, infrastructure, and all the other disciplines needed to create a community from raw ranch land. First they subdivided the ranch, creating an attractive civic center grouped by both civic and business buildings, surrounded by small orchard estates and residential sections, all specifically adapted to the automobile. The centerpiece of the civic center was the Administration Building, which stands today as Atascadero City Hall and which was recently described as "the most architecturally significant building on the Central Coast, with the exception of Hearst Castle."

Since Mr. Lewis was a major publisher of the time, he created a series of "bulletins" about this new community called Atascadero. These bulletins, which were initially printed in the St. Louis facilities, went way beyond just advertising brochures. They not only defined a new lifestyle, they identified all the potential this area had to offer and even created business opportunities for those who bought here. The bulletins were sent all over the world and were a great success.

In 1913, Atascadero was a working ranch. By 1917, it was a community of over a thousand residents with a rich agricultural foundation and unlimited potential. That was the beginning of Atascadero. Today the city has over 28,000 residents and is looking forward to growing to over 30,000 in the 2020 census.

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THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

In late 1964, long after the death of E. G. Lewis, the ten-acre plot with the house, outbuildings, and gardens where he had lived, known as Headquarters House, was sold to a developer. Not wanting the house, the developer offered it for free to anyone who would move it. In January 1965, a citizens group was formed to try to save the house, but they did not have the resources necessary or the time required to move it, and this initial effort failed. So the Atascadero Volunteer Fire Department burned the house to the ground as a training exercise.

The citizens group then refocused their efforts and, in April 1965, created an organization known as “The Treasure of El Camino.” The group immediately started collecting artifacts and photographs from the colony period of Atascadero (1913–1924). Later the organization was renamed the Atascadero Historical Society. In 1967, the society opened a museum in the lower rotunda of the Administration Building in Atascadero, which at that time was called the San Luis Obispo County Veterans Memorial Building. In 1979, when Atascadero residents voted to make Atascadero an incorporated city, the county sold the building to the city and it became the city hall. In 2003, as a result of the San Simeon earthquake, the city hall was deemed unsafe and the Historical Society had to close its museum. Fortunately, the society had previously been given a colony period home (built in 1919), which was moved to a lot directly across from the city hall. Up to this point the house had been used for community meetings and functions. Undamaged by the earthquake, in 2009 it became our museum of today.

In 2013, after extensive renovations, the beautiful Atascadero City Hall was reopened, and the Historical Society was given two rooms on the main floor for exhibits. We also created





pictorial exhibits throughout the second- and third-floor hallways, depicting different aspects of the development and rich history of Atascadero. The society also provides docents for scheduled tours of this historic building. We are an all-volunteer organization. Everything we do depends on volunteers doing all the work.

OUR DECISION TO ARCHIVE

Under new leadership in 2009, there was a strategy session to decide where to focus the energies of the society and how to better serve the community of Atascadero. An obvious choice was to take the thousands of photographs that were sitting in file cabinets and make them available to the public. This led to two key questions: one, was there software available that would support this effort; and two, how would we pay for the necessary equipment and software?

After creating a subcommittee for archiving, the effort to find a software archiving product became our first priority. After reviewing what other local museums were doing and looking at the field in general, it was determined that we would use the PastPerfect Museum Software product to support our archiving efforts. The society was very lucky in our funding efforts, as the estate of a former member was looking to make a contribution to “significantly enhance the community presence of the Historical Society.” When presented with the plans for the archiving effort, the executor agreed that our archiving effort met the wishes of the estate and then provided the funds necessary to get started.

Once we had the funds, the society got started immediately. After additional research into the archiving process and techniques, we bought a desktop computer, a laptop, a scanner, the PastPerfect software, and archival sleeves and folders. We were ready to go.

OUR INITIAL PROCESS

Currently our focus is on archiving our photographic collection. Our first major effort was to start to assemble the photographs by subject so that similar photos would be found together. Once we had a significant number of photographs assembled, using established museum identification guidelines, we created a numbering system to affix to the back of each photograph a number as its unique identifier. This unique number would then be the “key” for the PastPerfect system to catalogue the photographs.

Our initial effort of actually entering the photographs into the PastPerfect system now seems comical. Imagine three or four folks in a small room. The first person would take a photograph out of a folder and write the unique identification number on the back. The next person would scan the front and back of the photograph (that way we would have the identification number as well as anything else that was written on the back). The scanned images would be assigned their own filenames by the scanning software (in order to keep fronts and backs together, we added an A or B to this name to manually ensure that both sides had the same scanner name assigned). The next person would enter the two photographic files into the PastPerfect system under the key identification number written on the back of the photograph, then usually with “help” would enter all known descriptive text about the photograph as well as any information from the back of the photograph. Other information entered included the photograph’s size and whether it was black and white or color. Once the photographs and descriptive text had been entered into PastPerfect, the next person would place the photograph in an archival sleeve and put it back in the folder. This was the process we started with. It didn’t take long to recognize the flaws in the approach.

WHAT WE CHANGED ONCE WE HAD STARTED

Once the team understood the power of the key number we assigned, and the PastPerfect system’s search capabilities, the concept of keeping like photographs together was out the window. Imagine, with our initial approach, finding a photograph that belonged in the first folder we scanned. What to do—rescan or renumber everything in order to keep photographs together? Not a viable option.

Our first change to the process was to define the number of photographs we would put in one folder. We found that groups of thirty photographs in their sleeves were easy to handle and store. We then decided to create a workflow to eliminate one volunteer waiting on any other volunteer. So now, when putting photographs in sleeves, our volunteer writes the next unique key number on the back of the photograph before putting it in a sleeve (we bought special archival pencils for this task). Now that we have photographs in sleeves and folders, the process is easy. Either the volunteer who is scanning or another volunteer (thus far the lead archivist, who to date has entered all the data into PastPerfect) can take a folder and complete their task with this folder. When we started, the scanning effort was way ahead of the data entry effort. Due to other priorities, the scanning effort has slowed down, so currently the data entry is ahead of the scanning.

THE DECISION TO ADD OUR ARCHIVE TO THE WEBSITE

Once we started our archiving effort, we realized we needed a vehicle to make our efforts available to the public. To that end, with another donation, we hired an outside firm to create a website for us, based on our requirements. Once we had the website, it became very easy to use the PastPerfect interface to publish our photographic archive on the site. Once there, all photographs on the site are searchable and thumbnails are available as well. Our website is www.atascaderohistoricalsociety.org. Once on the site, go to the Archive tab at the top to search our collection.

A very good feature of the PastPerfect system is that it allows us to only place entries that have photographs on the web. We can also watermark these images to protect these valuable assets.

OUR BEST PRACTICES

Our first best practice was the creation of a workflow that allowed the different tasks necessary to enter the information into the PastPerfect system to be completed independently of each other. Additionally, recognizing that the system is the index to our files, the effort to try to keep related things together is gone. With the PastPerfect system, we can find any photograph in any folder. We are at the point now that we almost never go into the physical files for research. The photograph and all its associated information are in the system.

We also created a master indexing system that allows us, over time, to enter the other physical assets of the collection into the system. Our indexing system has allowed us to receive historical photographs from members of the community, scan them, enter them into our system, then return the originals and a CD of the photographs to their owners, who now have direct digital access to these materials that they would not have had otherwise.

OUR FAVORITE THING

With all the amazing photographs in our archive, as well as the bound copies of the Atascadero newspapers we have made available to the public and our many physical artifacts, including a blacksmith's bellows, an old horse-drawn carriage, and other memorable items, it is very difficult to decide on a single favorite thing. Nevertheless, we have come to the conclusion that our favorite artifact predates the founding of Atascadero: the 1863–1868 San Luis Obispo County Criminal Court Docket, a handwritten, 250-page document of all the criminal court proceedings in the county for this period. It is fascinating reading. Our archival team has digitized this asset but has not put it on our website. It has been transcribed into a searchable Word document, which we hope to make available in the future. Its overall historical value, beyond just Atascadero, makes this our favorite thing.

THE FUTURE

The Atascadero Historical Society has acquired a new site, almost three acres, very near the Atascadero Library. To date, two historical buildings have been donated to us: a log-cabin-type

structure (the logs are actually a type of siding) and an original colony house built in 1915 (one of the first houses completed in Atascadero). Both buildings have been moved through the city streets to our new location, which we call the Atascadero Colony Heritage Center. Now that these buildings are on site, we are required to bring them up to 2016 building standards, a nontrivial task.

The cabin was a building used by the youth of Atascadero for many years and will be our Natural History Museum when finished. The colony house is to be our Archival House and, when completed, will house all our paper and photographic assets. It will be the new home of our archiving system and processes. We will have some computers available so that the public can access our files more directly. We also will have over a hundred years of our local newspaper, the *Atascadero News*, bound and available for research.

We are now in a major fund-raising mode to make the Atascadero Colony Heritage Center a reality, and to have the resources to move more historic homes and buildings to the site.