Step Back in Time at the Fair Oaks History Center and Museum

STORY AND PHOTOS BY LAURA I. WINN

STEP INSIDE THE Fair Oaks History Center and Museum, and you might be greeted by the Fair Oaks Queen herself. Crowned during the Fiesta Days spring festival of 1950, 93-year-old Margge Wood is a museum docent who knows many stories of the town's history because she lived them. And through her volunteer hours — taking docent shifts as often as she can — she has learned even more.

"I learn something every day," Wood said of her time at the center, founded and operated by the nonprofit Fair Oaks Historical Society since 1980.

Currently located in the heart of Fair Oaks Village at the corner of Fair Oaks Boulevard and Main Street, the center is a place where a neighbor headed to lunch at the Sunflower Drive-In next door might make a quick pop in for a look at the newest rotating exhibit, or a longtime resident might take a first-time tour, surprised at all inside.

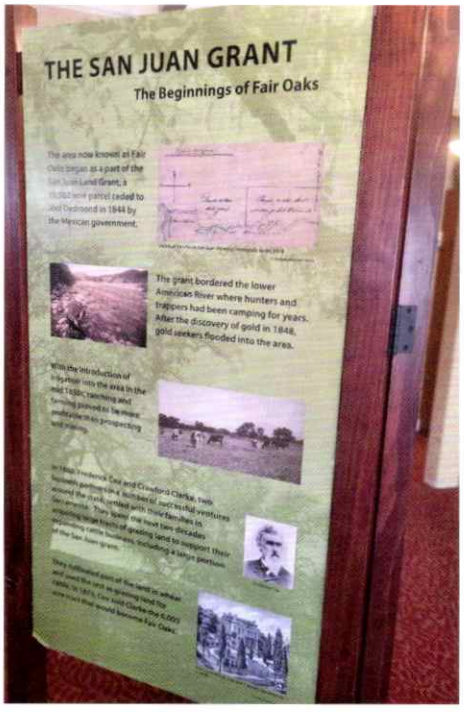
The latter was the case on the day of my visit. Just before I arrived, Wood and Chris Highsmith, the center's operational manager, had spent the late morning listening to stories and learning historical tidbits from a Fair Oaks native on his first journey in.

"You never know who is going to walk through that door," Wood said. "That's the fun thing. Everyone has a different experience."

Small but carefully laid out, the museum houses relics representing the different eras and notable people of Fair Oaks. As I browsed an embroidered wedding dress from the late 1880s, an iron library stamp press from the early 1900s, and an antique rocking chair that was the only possession to survive a fire that destroyed a historic home on the bluffs, Highsmith shared details about each piece, speaking from memory. There's a story behind that chair's unique survival, just as there is with all the pieces in the one-room center. A California history buff, Highsmith connected the separate origins of each item to a broader history of a changing











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town, state and country.

With time on his hands since retirement, 71-year-old Highsmith not only acts as a museum docent, sharing stories and helping residents look up documents related to their homes or families, but he is also a cataloguer. Along with a handful of other historical society volunteers, he photographs each piece of inventory — more than is housed within the museum's walls — for an online database, ensuring history is preserved physically and digitally.

Some artifacts are delicate, like a fabric doll whose legs are filled with something seed-like, and others are hardier, like the colorful wooden train that greets visitors below the welcome desk. Mixed among these simple toys from a bygone era are short written histories and large-scale photographs showing the development of the Fair Oaks area from its rural beginnings.

A place to step back in time, learn some town trivia and reminisce about the good ole days with a friendly docent, the Fair Oaks History Center and Museum is located at 10340 Fair Oaks Blvd. and open to the public on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. and on Saturdays until 3 p.m. Admission is free. ■

For more information, visit www.fairoakshistory.org/center.

