



**McHENRY
MUSEUM**
& Historical Society



Newsletter

March 2021

Please call us at:
(209) 618-5387

History Lesson



Margaret "Peggy" Boothe Mensinger (1923-2002) was born in Modesto into a farming family. She came from a remarkable line of woman, from a Great-Grandmother who was a single mother in the 1800s, to a mother who attended UC Berkeley. As Peggy's daughter Susan recalls, "she came from a long line of great strength of female fortitude." When the Boothe family moved to Magnolia Ave in Modesto, Peggy's favorite childhood memory was being in walking distance of the library, currently the McHenry Museum. When her father died in 1944 when Peggy was only 22, and with her brothers serving in the war, Peggy ran the family food packing business. She attended Stanford University and graduated with a degree in Political Science and Personnel Administration.

Peggy, born to "the Greatest Generation," was a woman ahead of her time. She married Modesto native John Mensinger (1919-2007) in 1952. Though a married mother of three children (John, Stewart, and Susan), whom she raised strict Unitarians, she wanted her children educated on diversity. Even at a young age brought them to watch Freedom Riders, who advocated for disenfranchised blacks in the Deep South. She excelled beyond the societal constraints and the ideals of the "cult of domesticity." Peggy Mensinger lived with the philosophy of "if you give people a chance to do the right thing, they will."

She became active in civic endeavors, even founding a human rights commission in the 1960s. She worked with the MM&HS in historical preservation and volunteered on the centennial committee in 1970 which published the "One Hundred Years." One of her favorite organizations she supported was the Girl Scouts. In 1973, she was elected to Modesto City Council and ultimately was elected Mayor in 1979 against opponent Harry Kulijian. Kulijian ran ads claiming to be a champion of the Dial-A-Ride program for senior citizen transportation, something Mensinger already advocated.

As Mayor of Modesto, her legacy remains with the revitalization of Downtown and the organization of the building of Modesto Center Plaza. She also championed green energy, ecological causes, and recycling. Peggy protected farmland and the concept of a village type community of ten self-sustaining neighborhoods around the city. Peggy was a quiet friend to historically marginalized communities. She frequently attended BBQs with the Black community in the Monterey Tract of Modesto and judged pageants held by the Owl Empire of Stanislaus County, a local gay friendly organization.

Even after a debilitating stroke five years after leaving office, Peggy continued to stay abreast of local causes. Susan Mensinger told the MM&HS that if you asked Peggy why she was able to accomplish all she did, she would want everyone know she could not have done so without the support of her husband. John, who took great pride in her success.

March signifies the changing of a season, when Winter becomes Spring. The month encompasses a celebration of Irish heritage. However, March is also Women's History Month. Everyone who reads this newsletter is here because of a woman the, giver of life. In reading this newsletter, please reflect on the amazing women who influenced each of your lives.

MM&HS Board member Cece Hudelson, as a young educator in the Central Valley, was asked; "How did you become a strong independent woman in the Central Valley?" She responded by saying, "Look around you, there is an abundance of strong women role models in the Central Valley." The month of February 2021 brought the City of Modesto the end of the life of one of our most prolific female leaders when former Mayor Carol Whiteside passed away on February 19, 2021. On February 23, 2021, Sue Zwahlen became the third woman elected to the office of Mayor of Modesto. Zwahlen follows the legacy of the first woman elected as Mayor of Modesto, Peggy Mensinger (1979-1987) and the second, Carol Whiteside (1987-1991). Recent published articles compare Zwahlen to both Mensinger and Whiteside. However, all of these women are different individuals with with a love of Modesto and all of its citizens. This article reflects that common theme.



Photo of Peggy on the Steps of the McHenry Museum as Mayor for a dedication, courtesy of Susan Mensinger.

*Information taken from various "Modesto Bee" Articles and February 26, 2021 phone interview with Susan Mensinger.

* Other information taken from Caine, Eric. "Modesto Retrograde Motion and Why Peggy Mensinger Matters," *The Valley Citizen*, August 28, 2011.



Carol

Carol Gordon Whiteside (1942-2021), was born in Chicago, Illinois and settled in Albany, California. She graduated the University of California, Davis. After years of working in personnel for retail corporations, including Emporium-Capwell Company and Levi Strauss & Company, she taught gourmet cooking classes.

In 1983, she was elected to Modesto City Council. She succeed Mensinger as Mayor in 1987. As Mayor, Carol oversaw the grand opening of Modesto Center Plaza and saw a modified version of the Village I housing development come to fruition, a slightly modified version of Mensinger's vision.

On March 19, 1991, Carol resigned as Mayor when she was appointed Assistant Secretary for Intergovernmental Relations under California Governor, Pete Wilson. Her lasting legacy to the Central Valley came with the opening of The Great Valley Center (GVC), a think tank to affect change for all Central Valley counties in 1997. Carol's organization was an ardently inclusive one. In fact, though not widely known, Carol was also a quiet friend to other historically marginalized groups in the community. She carved out space for the then-Stanislaus Pride Center, a predecessor to the current Central Valley Pride Center, our community's local LGBTQ organization, to use half of the lower level of the GVC for their work. In fact, staffers whom she guided at the GVC contributed significantly to the development of the Pride Center, and others in the area, including the Greater Merced Chamber of Commerce, United Way of Merced County, and the Center for Human Services.

Peggy Mensinger and Carol Whiteside exemplified progress even if not in keeping with then popular assumptions of women and marginalized communities. Newly elected **Mayor Sue Zwahlen**, when asked to contribute to this piece, feels honored to follow in these remarkable women's footsteps. "I never knew their political party. Back in the day, and for many even now, it does not matter what party people are registered to vote in. They just want the type of respected leadership that Peggy and Carol provided." Zwahlen follows two remarkable women, but for all three of these women it is easy to see they all wanted to make a difference and leave a legacy simply because it is Modesto.



Carol and Peggy in the McHenry Museum.



Carol and Peggy.



Sue

Peggy's Album



*Information from Carol Whiteside Article comes from various "Modesto Bee" Articles and from community members. Mayor Sue Zwahlen contributed her quote and photograph directly to MM&HS. Photographs are courtesy of Susan Mensinger and used with her permission. Main image of Carol Whiteside found in public domain.

We thank the Mensinger Family for all the images they shared of Peggy and Carol, Please visit our McHenry Museum Facebook Page for more images and captions of these posted

A Message from your President



Renee Ellis under the street her Father Lance Named for her, Renee Drive, February 4, 2021.



Back: David Seymour, Mayor Ted Brandvold, Deputy City Manager Scotty Douglas
Front: Attorney John Peltier. February 23, 2021.

Members, I hope all of you are doing well and staying safe. I wanted to include this message to let all of you know how hard your board is working behind the scenes while we wait in anticipation for the McHenry Museum to re-open. Due to our recent staffing difficulties, our website still remains unfinished. I have personally been on the phone numerous times to get it up and running, hopefully by the next newsletter I can give you all some good news.

February was a very productive month for me and our society. I am very touched by the wonderful feedback I received from my newsletter and my article on Lance and Carol Ellis. I want to offer my thanks to Renee Ellis for all of her help in creating this article. The article was very personal to me as my late mother grew up on Carol Street and it was her memories which gave me the idea. To my surprise, the Ellis family was my family's corner neighbor and the Ellis children played with my mother as youngsters. On February 4, 2021, Renee Ellis took me on a tour of the subdivisions and other structures her father built. I look forward to sharing this story in the future. I learned a lot.

February also brought many more meetings with the City of Modesto. On two occasions, outgoing Mayor Ted Brandvold met with me to discuss future exciting projects. Our last meeting was February 23, 2021, four hours before he left office, I want to thank Mayor Brandvold for all of his work with our Society. I have also started a dialog with our new Mayor Sue Zwahlen, and she looks forward to working with us. Please stay tuned.

February also brought two Zoom meetings of our board to discuss future projects. I want to thank all of my board but especially the Executive Board: Vice President Don Scott, Treasurer Michelle Gallagher, and Secretary Benjamin Sivils for all of their hard work. Just know that exciting things lay on the horizon for MM&HS.

Thank You

David Seymour

President

McHenry Museum & Historical Society

Updates

Happy
St. Patrick's
Day

- The Museum still remains closed due to COVID-19, Follow the MM&HS on Instagram and Facebook for updates.
- Website is still under construction.
- Messages sent through website will be answered as soon as possible.
- Former Board member Cece Hudelson has re-joined the board with hopes to work on the next issue of *Stanislaus Stepping Stones*.
- A meeting with the Parks & Recreation Department occurred February 17, 2021 to discuss ideas of the City's archival material stored in the McHenry Museum.
- A generous donation was received by the estate of Jacqueline Foret to our society. We are very thankful.