

# Modesto History Center Newsletter

## ISSUE #2

## Modesto House History Workshop Now Virtual

By Ben Jameson-Ellsmore

Every piece of property in Modesto has a first deed from the federal government. These documents were usually approved by the president at the time, and Modesto deeds sometimes contain the names of Ulysses S. Grant or Abraham Lincoln. The new online Modesto House History Workshop video will introduce you to steps for you to find this document for your Modesto property. Along the way, you will also be able to access a variety of historic maps and documents and become familiar with some skills and resources to piece together the history of your property.

As you follow along, feel free to pause the video as you complete the steps being illustrated. Not every resource will turn up the documents you are looking for because some records and archives are incomplete. If that is the case, just follow the video to the next step.

In the video, you will be locating the Public Land Survey System (or PLSS) coordinates for your address or property. Then you will enter the coordinates into the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) website to locate your deed. The Bureau of Land Management was formed in 1946 but it descended from other land management organizations dating back to the Land Ordinance of 1785, when the fledgling US government instituted the PLSS system. The PLSS was used to raise money by selling parcels of newly acquired land or giving it away to soldiers, homesteaders, colleges, and railroads to stimulate westward expansion. The BLM website keeps records of many of those first deeds. For Modesto, they are usually from the 1860s and 1870s.



There are multiple kinds of deeds, including purchases, homesteads, military bounty grants, railroad grants, and more. Was your land given by the US government to a soldier of the Mexican American War, or to the Western Pacific Railroad Company which often then sold the land to others? Or was it purchased by a wealthy entrepreneur or a pioneer? This video workshop will help point you to the answers.

These deeds are also colonial documents which legalized the dispossession of the Yokuts Native Americans, the original owners, or stewards of all Modesto land. As such, your deed tells a part of the larger story and is only the beginning of your house and land history research.

The workshop video is here:  
<https://modestoartmuseum.org/modesto-house-history-workshop/>

## Modesto History Center News

By Denise Crosby

As I review the past two months, I am struck by all that has been accomplished since launching the Modesto History Center on May 1<sup>st</sup>, despite interruptions from Covid-19. We had to postpone bringing to Modesto Jean Guy Dube, a nationally respected author and historian who was to lecture on the arrival of the railroad in 1870 and the building of our current depot in 1915. Our popular Modesto House History Workshop had to be cancelled. And then because the county library and city archive were closed, as well as archives in Sacramento and other cities, research for this and future newsletters was more difficult or impossible.

Regardless of these setbacks, I am happy to report that research and writing continued and much got done. Thanks to Ben Jameson-Ellsmore, our assistant architecture curator, we were able to bring online a virtual workshop on how to research the history of homes and properties in Modesto. We shared ways to access Modesto history resources which include historical maps, photographs, and an ebook edition of the 1984 Modesto historic architecture survey. All are available on our web site. Standards have been established and published on the web site to ensure that future history articles are presented from a scholarly basis and accurately represent, as best as possible, our history.

Beginning with this newsletter, and in future issues, we will feature an article about a city building exploring its historical and architectural significance. In this issue and for the next several issues, we will celebrate the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Modesto with articles on the building of the railroad and the early

days of our town. Thanks to research by Bob Barzan, we can say definitively that Chinese men did the hard work of building the railroad to Modesto in 1870.

Watch in future newsletters for an article on the Women's Improvement Club and their significant influence on the progress of Modesto. Watch also for research shedding light on the importance of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century bicycle movement and the role it played in the paving of streets and roads in and around Modesto. Soon we will have an article on the neighborhood racial covenants that restricted access to housing in Modesto for all people of color.

Though we can reschedule our events, the virus continues to rack Modesto and every other city in the world. The remedies for the health, social, and economic issues caused by the virus are still unknown. Our mission is to support the well-being of the people of Modesto and we are examining how we can do that considering the effects of the virus.

The cultural/heritage segment of the Modesto economy is huge and finding a way to safely get it running again is vital to our recovery from the virus. Culture and heritage also do much more for us than feed our economy. They provide recreation, entertainment, and learning opportunities that bring joy and meaning to the place we call home - Modesto.

Modesto History Center  
<https://modestoartmuseum.org/programs/modestohistorycenter/>



In 1962, the Modesto City Council established a citizen's committee to review what had and had not been done in the previous ten years. It was called the Forward Modesto Committee and the above logo is from their report of December 1963.

## Chinese Men Built the Railroad to Modesto

By Bob Barzan

After they completed the transcontinental railroad in May 1869 and the Western Pacific Railroad from Sacramento to the Oakland Wharf in November 1869, the crews of Chinese graders, carpenters, masons, blacksmiths, cooks, and track layers moved back and forth working on both the California and Oregon Railroad in the Sacramento Valley and the San Joaquin Valley Railroad here. These were the men who did the major share of hard work building the rail line from Wilson's Station, now called Lathrop, to Modesto in 1870.

A map of their route for the San Joaquin Valley Railroad was first mentioned in a letter from Edwin Crocker to Collis Huntington on February 3, 1868 (1). In the letter, he says that the railroad had been secretly organized to build a line through the San Joaquin Valley to the Kern River. Two days later, the railroad was incorporated (2).

By June 1869, the survey of the route was completed (3) and in November 1869, surveys for the bridges over the Stanislaus and Tuolumne Rivers were underway (4). The January 21, 1870 *Sacramento Daily Union* reported that more than 800 Chinese laborers were working on the San Joaquin Valley Railroad near Wilson's Station. They were supervised by James Strobridge, Superintendent of Construction. Strobridge had world-wide fame for supervising the Central Pacific Railroad portion of the transcontinental railroad. By February 18<sup>th</sup>, the Chinese crews had reached the Stanislaus River near where Ripon is today (5). Strobridge's Camp, as they were referred to, then moved to work on the California and Oregon Railroad (6). For their back-breaking efforts, the *Tuolumne City News* of June 17, 1870, reported that they were paid twenty-one dollars a month and they had to provide for their own meals.



On August 22, 1870, the San Joaquin Valley Railroad and the California and Oregon Railroad merged into the Central Pacific Railroad Company (7). Soon after, on September 6, 1870, the *Marysville Daily Appeal* reported that a special train of 35 cars under conductor and engineer William Sippy had left the California and Oregon Railroad to resume work on the San Joaquin Valley line. The *Tuolumne City News* of September 16, 1869, reported that a crew of 100 Chinese workers had started grading on the south side of the Stanislaus River.

About October 10<sup>th</sup>, the first train crossed the bridge over the Stanislaus River and by the 20<sup>th</sup> the rail line was completed to a point about five miles south of the river. It was on that day that Mr. Philipps received the first rail shipment to Stanislaus County; "several tons of general merchandise, principally groceries," shipped to the end of the rail line and then hauled by wagon to Tuolumne City (8). On October 28, the *Tuolumne City News* reported that on the 27<sup>th</sup>, the first trainload of wheat was shipped from the town of Ralston directly to Oakland. By October 28<sup>th</sup>, the

Continued Page 5



## Germano Milono Building - 1960



By Bob Barzan

The Germano Milono Building at 1008 12<sup>th</sup> Street in downtown Modesto is an attractive and fun 1960 Modernist structure with beautiful breeze block screens. It is one of only a few buildings remaining downtown constructed during the cruise era and in the architectural style of that time. The building is also an example of our own Modesto or Central Valley Modernism, an architectural style that originated here and is a variation from Bauhaus Modernism.

Prominent and impressive are the pumpkin colored breeze brick or decorative concrete block screens across the front and side of the building. The front screen is made entirely of Maltese blocks and the side screens are sunflower design.

Breeze block screens were a popular design element of buildings in this period along with the enclosed front courtyard. Ron Marshall, author of *Concrete Screen Block: The Power of Pattern* (1), writes this about the blocks at the Milono Building. "Screen block's use in the 1950s and 60s, like on the Milono Building in Modesto, represents a tangible expression of the softer, more organic and decorative strain of



American Modernism which gained popularity as many rejected the more austere and cold-European (or Bauhaus) strain of modernism. These types of screens are valuable and worth preserving." (1)

In a wider context, the building was designed by a well-known and respected Modernist architect, Germano Milono, and has value as part of the Modernist collection of buildings in downtown Modesto. Modesto has a growing national reputation for its Modernist architecture.

Milono designed dozens of other projects including churches, office buildings, educational facilities, and houses mostly in California. This building opened as the office of Griffin, Conway & Jones. It now houses the Modesto Visitor Center. In Modesto he also designed a house for Paul Seely (905 Carolyn) in 1955, and a house for J. E. Griffin (1015 Brady) in 1956. Plans for this building and for many other Milono buildings are in the archive at UC Berkeley (3).

1. Marshall, Ron and Barbara, *Concrete Screen Blocks: the Power of Pattern*, Palm Springs Preservation Society, 2018, <https://pshistoricalsociety.org/products/concrete-screen-block>

2. Email communication, June 20, 2019

3. For more information about Milono, see the UC Berkeley Environmental Design Archives web site: <https://archives.ced.berkeley.edu/collections/milono-germano>

## Fun Facts about Modesto's Past

KOQ, Modesto's first commercial radio station, went on the air at 6:30 pm, Wednesday, April 19, 1922. The 10-watt station had a range of 300 miles and was broadcast from the fire department in city hall on 10<sup>th</sup> Street between G and H Street. A week later, the call letters were changed to KXD. *Modesto Herald*, April 19, 1922, page 1, and *Modesto Herald*, April 27, 1922, page 2

The first lunar new year celebrated by Modesto's Chinese community was in February 1871, when Modesto was less than four months old. *Stanislaus County Weekly News*, February 24, 1871, page 3

Paramount actors Thomas Meighan, Theodore Roberts, Lois Wilson, and 50 other Hollywood actors and actresses spent several days filming *Our Leading Citizen* in Modesto in March 1922. More than 200 Modesto residents, many with their cars, participated as extras in a huge parade scene along 10<sup>th</sup>, I, and 12<sup>th</sup> streets. Unfortunately, the movie is lost. *Modesto Evening News*, March 14, 1924, page 3

Professor C. A. Heath billed as the "colored Caruso" sang at a temperance rally that began in the afternoon at the Modesto Coffee Club and then in the evening to a large crowd at the auditorium in Modesto. *Modesto Morning Herald*, June 3, 1914, page 1, and *The Fresno Morning Republican*, June 3, 1914, page 9 (Note: This is new information that a Black man used the facilities of the Modesto Coffee Club.)

Chinese Railroad Workers  
Continued:

Chinese crews went back to the California and Oregon line (8). Their work of building the railroad to Modesto was done.

Learn more about the Chinese railroad workers at

<https://modestoartmuseum.org/chinese-workers-built-the-railroad-to-modesto/>

1. Crocker to Huntington, February 3, 1868, Series I, Box 1, Huntington Papers, Bird Library, Syracuse University

2. *Sacramento Daily Union*, volume 34, #5260, February 6, 1868, page 2, accessed May 8, 2020, California Digital Newspaper Collection, <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=SDU18680206&e>

3. *Daily Alta*, volume 21, #7025, June 13, 1869, page 2, accessed May 8, 2020, California Digital Newspaper Collection, <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=DAC18690613.2.34.4&e>

4. *Sacramento Daily Union*, volume 38, #5820, November 22, 1869, page 2, accessed May 8, 2020, California Digital Newspaper Collection, <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=SDU18691122.2.10&srpos=6&e=>

5. *Stockton Independent*, volume 18, #16, February 18, 1870, page 3, accessed May 8, 2020, California Digital Newspaper Collection, <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=SDI18700218.2.13&srpos=12&e=>

6. *Sacramento Daily Union*, volume 38, #5917, March 15, 1870, page 3, accessed May 8, 2020, California Digital Newspaper Collection, <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=SDU18700315.2.16&srpos=1&e=>

7. *To the Bond Holders of the Central and Western Pacific Railroad Companies*, January 2, 1871, page 8, accessed May 8, 2020. [http://cpr.org/Museum/Books/I\\_ACCEPT\\_the\\_User\\_Agreement/Digitized\\_by\\_Google/Bondholders\\_CPRR-WPRR\\_1871.pdf](http://cpr.org/Museum/Books/I_ACCEPT_the_User_Agreement/Digitized_by_Google/Bondholders_CPRR-WPRR_1871.pdf)

8. *Marysville Daily Appeal*, volume 22, #93, October 30, 1870, page 3, accessed May 8, 2020, California Digital Newspaper Collection, <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=MDA18701030.2.14&srpos=5&e=>

Modesto History Center is  
a project of the Modesto  
Art Museum.

[modestoartmuseum.org/](https://modestoartmuseum.org/)

CC 2020 Modesto Art Museum

