

Don't just walk by the Hattie Weber Museum, stop in!



Learn more about Davis' history at the Hattie Weber Museum, 445 C St., which is operated by volunteers under the auspices of the Yolo County Historical Society. Hours are 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Wednesdays and Saturdays. Courtesy photo

Mary Lee Thomson

An often-heard comment by visitors to the Hattie Weber Museum of Davis in Central Park is, "I've walked by here hundreds of times but this is the first time I've been in."

Almost everybody who says this promises to come again after seeing

what the museum has to offer. Many do just that; the museum counted 2,520 visitors in the fiscal year ending June 30, up from 2,270 last year and 2,121 the year before.

Located at 445 C St. in Central Park, the museum building is owned and maintained by the city of Davis. Outside of museum hours — 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Wednesdays and Saturdays — it can be rented for meetings, parties and ceremonies. For reasons we explain below, the building is misleadingly labeled "Library."

Opened in 1992 at the instigation of the Davis Library Club, and operated by the club, the original Davis Library building was moved from Second and F streets to 445 C St. Several of the Library Club members, including Phyllis Haig and Jane Van Sant, were granddaughters of members of the Bachelor Girls, who founded, staffed and promoted the original Davis library at the turn of the 20th century.

In 1911, the Bachelor Girls collected and raised funds to buy the lot and construct the building, which also housed a branch of the Yolo County Library. Title to the library was passed to Yolo County so that a librarian could be paid by the county. Hattie Weber, a Bachelor Girl and a very colorful figure (check her out at the museum), was the first paid librarian, serving from 1911 to 1953.

When the new library on 14th Street was built in the 1960s, title to the old property was transferred to the city of Davis.

Today, the Hattie Weber Museum is operated by volunteers under the auspices of the Yolo County Historical Society. Jim Becket, Davis Citizen of the Year for 2010, is the director. Dennis Dingemans, retired geography professor and soon-to-be co-author of a book on Woodland, is the assistant director. Mary Lee Thomson is exhibit coordinator and Stella Dinger is collections manager.

Senior docents Virginia Isaacs and Roberta Stevenson have been volunteering and contributing great expertise since 2002 and 2006, respectively. Isaacs has logged close to 3,000 hours at the museum. Our computer specialist is Adrian Gabriel, who serves a similar function in the Elk Grove School District.

Merrily Dupree and Margaret Hill help with special projects and Mary Ann Harrison coordinates special events and celebrations. Alyssa Scott is helping at the museum for the summer before resuming her college studies with a year abroad. The “new” staff is striving to make the museum more “user-friendly” and connected to the community.

Permanent exhibits at the museum give a glimpse of the Native Americans in the area; show the Davis family after which Davisville was named; and detail the coming of the railroad and the University of California Farm School, the efforts of the Library Club, the moving of the building and Hattie Weber herself.

The Davis family exhibit recently was augmented by the addition of a Sharps “buffalo gun” rifle of a type they might have used. It attracts quite a bit of attention (mostly males of all ages).

Temporary exhibits highlight other aspects of Davis. Last year’s major exhibit was “Davis Industry: Windmills to Robotics: Phase I.” Many visitors were surprised to learn there was a windmill factory in Davis in 1870 and a “celebrated” (according to a publication of the day) cocoonry and mulberry orchard not far from town. (Unfortunately, the silkworms perished in an extended heat wave after a few years and the effort was not renewed.)

Other temporary exhibits included “Davis in Winter” with photographs of rare snowstorms and not-so-rare (in the early days) floods. A January exhibit, contributed by Tansey Thomas, honored Martin Luther King and the Freedom Riders from Davis who traveled to the South to march with him. Surviving riders were honored at a reception.

John Lofland contributed an exhibit showing interesting and famous residents of a block in Old North Davis. He also has contributed a current exhibit on the evolution of a Second Street block downtown from residences to retail establishments.

In February, the museum tapped its extensive collection of antique valentines from the Gordon family for an exhibit. In March, we celebrated Women’s History Month with an exhibit of women in past and present public service in Davis, Yolo County and the state of California. In April, we featured a Picnic Day exhibit featuring the innocent and not-so-innocent celebrations.

The museum also participated in two Second Friday ArtAbout events. Friends of the late Arthur Heeler honored his memory with an exhibit of his extraordinary photographs of Yolo County landscapes and Davis woodworkers Jay Bradbury and Todd Juchau displayed their

exceptional work in November. We honored area veterans from World War I to Afghanistan in a November exhibit.

Less serious occasions also were celebrated. On “Pig Day” in March, 112 visitors came to see a portion of Roberta Stevenson’s pig collection, including “Percy the Dancing Pig” who also sings (but not too well). The Easter Bunny includes the museum on his route and young visitors found plastic eggs filled with jelly beans there.

Christmas was celebrated with a re-creation of an 1890s community celebration that includes a tree decorated with “candles” created by youngsters and traditional “goodie bags” containing an apple, orange, nuts and candy which were distributed to 45 young visitors.

Mothers, grandmothers and other exceptional women have been honored by bricks laid in a border to the memorial rose garden next to the museum for the past several years. We added bricks honoring individuals, families, organizations and businesses this year. This is a significant fundraiser for the museum, which receives no public operating funds.

Becket’s “Kiddie Korner” in the museum, stocked with old-fashioned toys, has faithful weekly visitors as well as others who can play while adults view the exhibits.

The museum also entertains third-graders and Scouts with programs on Davis history. We had one group that split the morning between us and the U.S. Bicycling Hall of Fame to the pleasure and enlightenment of all. The Birch Lane Brownie troop returned the favor by planting the flower boxes in front of the museum this spring.

Phase II of the “Davis Industry” exhibit is in the works. The blacksmith tools of Phase I will be replaced by pictures of the Schilling Robotics underwater equipment that explored the Titanic and mapped the bottom of Lake Tahoe. High-tech as well as individually run industries also will be featured.

A rearrangement of the display cases will allow for an extended exhibit on the University Farm. Lofland is working on a new exhibit.

Mothers, grandmothers and other exceptional women will be honored with an exhibit and reception. We are exploring ways to tap into our extensive collection of oral history videotapes. Events to celebrate the museum’s 20th anniversary next year also are in the planning stages.

On Saturday, Aug. 6, we’ll serve coffee and pastries in the morning, have a short dedication at 2 p.m. in the garden and then enjoy refreshments and the exhibit in the museum.

There is every reason to believe the Hattie Weber Museum of Davis will continue to be a happening place. Don’t pass us by!

— *Mary Lee Thomson is a resident of Davis and a volunteer at the Hattie Weber Museum.*