



## Notes from the Archive

### Seaver Center for Western History Research

### Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County

### April 2020

Welcome to Notes from the Archive, a publication of the Seaver Center for Western History Research, a section of the History Department. If you are informed by what you read here, please share it with a friend or colleague.

#### THE WORKING-FROM-HOME ISSUE

Once the museum announced on Friday the 13th a temporary closure due to COVID-19, Seaver Center staff prepared to work from home the following Monday, March 16th. John Cahoon rushed to fill photo orders. Staff were hoping to return to the museum during the week, pick up additional paperwork, or scan images for their projects before returning home to hunker down. Any plans to visit the building were foiled for non-essential employees when the museum complied with Governor Gavin Newsom's March 19th executive order to "stay at home." This issue will profile how staff is adjusting to working from home.

This issue also highlights a Chinese American photograph collection and its connection to the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. The 114th anniversary of the disaster is April 18.

#### THE COLLECTION: ELLEN SOO MOON PHOTOGRAPH ALBUMS

Two photo albums comprise of the Ellen Soo Moon collection. They were donated in 1970 to the museum by a family member living in Los Angeles, yet very little information existed except for the general description: "Photographs and clippings pertaining to the Moon's, a Chinese family, ca. 1904-1958. Photographs are from Texas, Missouri, and California."

Last June, sleuthing by a Soo descendant from Massachusetts led her to the Seaver Center. After several email exchanges she confirmed that some of the children pictured in the albums were related to her. Furthermore, from family lore she believed the children were orphaned from the San Francisco earthquake that occurred immediately after dawn on April 18, 1906. The children were raised by White Presbyterian missionaries in San Leandro, and they all graduated from high school.

Now after 50 years since the albums were deposited at the museum, there is a glint of the story behind the collection. And the collection record will need to be corrected to emphasize the Soo family name rather than Moon.



GPF.5859 Ellen Soo Moon

## THE RESEARCHER

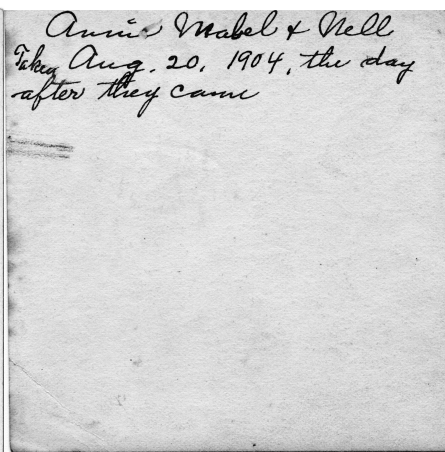
Naomi Dunson was ecstatically happy to piece together her family history with the assistance of the Seaver Center by obtaining photocopies of the contents in the two albums. She provided us with more background information. Her relatives pictured in the collection were three Soo siblings, Walter, Nellie and Mabel. They were born in San Francisco, and Walter died in 1923. Naomi said Ellen was known by her family as Nellie, and she resided as an adult in Los Angeles. Mabel Soo was the great grandmother to the researcher, and one of Mabel's surviving children, Ida, is Naomi's grandmother. Relations between the families of Nellie and Mabel became fractured after Mabel entered into an interracial marriage.

Naomi added that there was a third daughter, Minnie, who lived with Donaldina Cameron, a San Francisco-based missionary who rescued Chinese girls from prostitution rings. After marriage, Minnie Soo Chan settled in Minneapolis. Donaldina stayed in touch and made trips to visit her, according to archival clues collected by Naomi.

However, an album photo with an early date, August 20, 1904, seems to contradict Naomi's understanding that the siblings were orphaned after the quake nearly two years later. Who was Annie in the picture? Were the Soo children actually living in an orphanage *prior* to the big quake?

Naomi provided an explanation: Annie was a resident at the home and unrelated to the Soo's. She was given the name Sitton - by the family who ran the orphanage. Annie Sitton, Naomi offered, eventually graduated from Berkeley.

As for the Soo children, Naomi explained that their mother may have died in 1904, a circumstance which caused their placement in the home. Then the father died in the 1906 quake, thus leaving the children orphaned.



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The following are photographs supplied by Naomi Dunson from her own collection



A photo of a photo showing four of the children of Mabel Soo. Dorothy (top left), Gladys (top right), Robert (bottom left) and Naomi's grandmother Ida (bottom right.) Image courtesy of Naomi Dunson



Mabel Soo, seated, is pictured with her grown daughters and daughter-in-

## AT HOME WITH THE COLLECTIONS MANAGERS OF THE SEAVER CENTER

Kim Walters wrote:

It has been at least 25 years since I had an extended period of time to work at home – This was due to the Northridge earthquake, prior to that it was the 1992 riots. The difference today is that we have electronic access to our files which allows me to be more efficient with the work that I can perform at home on a daily basis. Some of this work will allow me to edit records that I created over the last year, and I have found spelling mistakes. My husband also works at the Natural History Museum, so we now have workspace on our dining room table for my laptop, his laptop, a scanner, a second screen and files.

Our day starts out as it always did with coffee and breakfast. Then working, responding to email and deciding what to tackle for the day. For a break I get to walk with my son and his dog. Getting exercise and fresh air is important during this stressful time.

I am concentrating on the photographs from the William S. Hart Photo Collection. I have scanned the images and now can index them and describe them in preparation for when we are open again to have them loaded on a database and then make them available on the Seaver Center's online digital gallery.

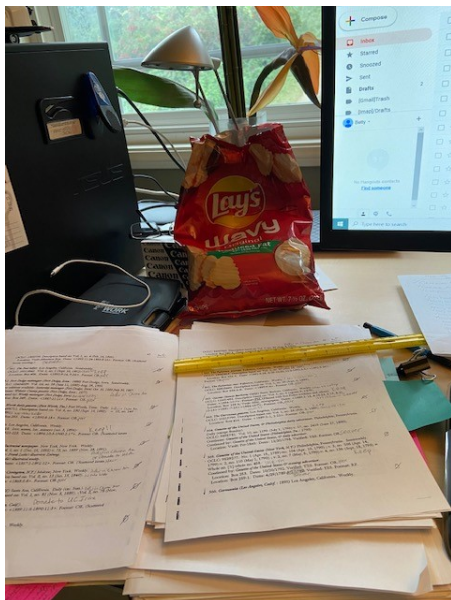


View of the San Gabriel Mountains during Kim's work break

Betty Uyeda wrote:

I was able to put together this newsletter from home - having anticipated this I quickly saved a couple of images to my flash drive. I found out later that I have remote access to all of our digital files. As I tend to be a homebody, I am not feeling stir-crazy like other members of my household. I also had the presence of mind to bring home a large stock of dirtied white gloves to launder. If I run out of work projects I suppose I could iron them. All kidding aside, during my stay-at-home I can continue a newspaper inventory project that is doable in or outside of the office.

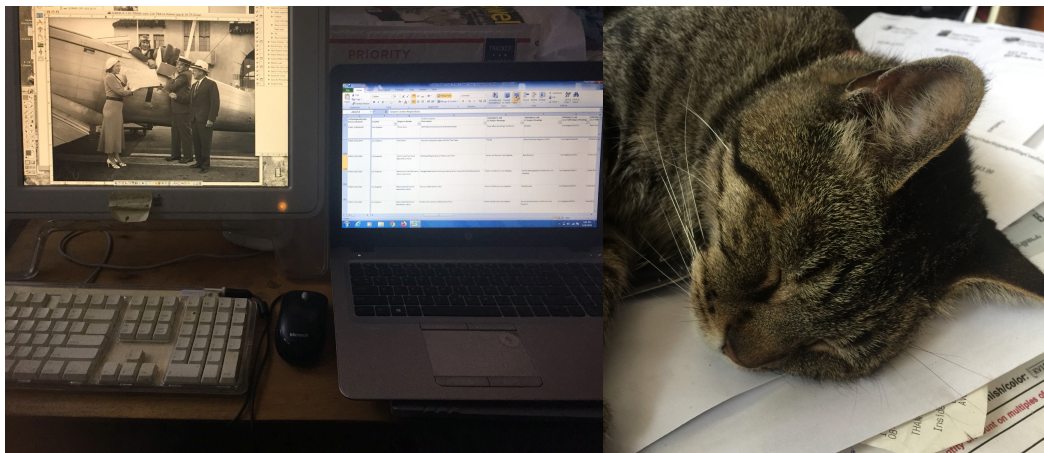




View of Betty's home office

Brent Riggs wrote:

Telecommuting to work allows me to start my day around 7:30 a.m. I make coffee in a French press, feed my two cats, and get back in bed with a laptop and coffee. I check my email and start planning my workday while the coffee kicks in. Then I take my laptop to the kitchen table, where I have setup my old iMac to process digital scans of Seaver Center photographic collections. Using the iMac somewhat mimics the two screen computer set-up I use at NHM and allows me to write and edit catalog data in Excel spreadsheets on the laptop without having to toggle back and forth between images and Excel on the laptop.



Brent's work view and Tiger

performs paperweight duty



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Currently closed until further notice

## The Collections

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Over 290 photographic collections

## Digitized Collections

[Search over 34,000 images](#)

The collections are a part of the History Department of the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County.  
The Seaver Center opened in 1986 through a generous grant from the Seaver Institute.

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