A Year in the Life of Lake Merritt

The Lake Merritt Institute wishes everyone a happy, safe and sustainable holiday season!

LMI says goodbye and heartfelt thanks to Dr. Wong (1933-2017). If a lake could have guardian angels, Lake Merritt’s would be Mr. Andrew K.C. Wong and his wife Magdalene, who have been watching over the aeration fountains for nearly twenty years.

“K.C., as he liked to be called, was as generous, personable, and gracious a person as you will ever meet,” recalls LMI founder Dr. Bailey. Born in China, Mr. Wong was accepted to Purdue University to study engineering, but was not allowed to enter the U.S. after immigration restrictions were implemented after Pearl Harbor. So he stayed in China and wisely invested in real estate. His early work in the tech industry allowed him to travel the world. But when it became time to retire, he chose Oakland because of his love for Lake Merritt.

Mr. Wong loved to gaze out his apartment window at the first aeration fountain installed by the city at the Embarcadero in 1995—however that fountain was soon moved to the Glen Echo arm of the lake. In 1999, the Wongs donated two beautiful new fountains to the City, one to replace the moved one at the Embarcadero and the other at Bandstand Beach. The boulder near Bandstand Beach (above right) commemorates their gift with the only plaque in Lakeside Park inscribed in both English and Mandarin.

Mr. Wong knew how expensive and time-consuming it is to keep the fountains going. In 2003, he and his wife donated a replacement fountain for Bandstand Beach. Their philanthropy continued with offers to assist with LMI’s electric bill for the fountains, and replacement of a motor for the LMI boat.

He LOVED OUR LAKE. He will be greatly missed. Now it’s up to us to follow his example of citizenship and environmental stewardship.

LMI IN NOVEMBER: 3,420 lbs. of trash were removed from the lake totaling 24,200 pounds removed year-to-date.
James Robinson and LMI Staff hosted 228 volunteers and made one educational presentations. (2.99” rain)
Now’s the time to subscribe or renew your membership to The Lake Merritt Institute!
Closed, But Not Forgotten -- The Rotary Nature Center

Oakland’s Parks and Recreation Department closed the Rotary Nature Center nine months ago for “deep cleaning” and possible “rededication” to a broader array of offerings that would provide income for the City (The Tidings-May issue). Very few details have been shared with the community about what this entails.

Voices of concern are being raised in support of the Nature Center by the generations of Oaklanders who benefitted from its natural history programs throughout its 64-year history. You can read comments by Jim Covel (son of RNC founder Paul Covel), Rex Burress, Jim Carlton and others below (on page 7).

Hopes were raised when it was announced at the Nov 13th meeting of the newly-formed LM Advocates that OP&R would hold a public open discussion of the future of the RNC -- the very next day! But, sadly, that meeting was called off just an hour later. Promises were issued to schedule a well-publicized community meeting in January. Check lakemerritt.org>Calendar and Community for Lake Merritt for updates.

You can let Oakland’s City officials know your thoughts about the future of the Rotary Nature Center by emailing Nicholas Williams (Director) Oakland Parks & Recreation at jnwilliams@oaklandnet.com, Supervisor Karis Williams at kgriffin@oaklandnet.com, Mayor Libby Schaaf at lschaaf@oaklandnet.com and City Councilmember Lynette McElhaney at lcmcelhaney@oaklandnet.com.
You can also sign an online petition at RE-OPEN THE ROTARY NATURE CENTER

TRASH, TRASH, TRASH -- Speaking of the City’s commitment to the trash reduction at the lake, LMI Director James reports “the wheels are turning to get Glen Echo and storm drain outfall #51 booms replaced. I had a meeting today with several individuals from Public Works. They have found money, now the next hurdle is finding a contractor.” Fingers crossed.

The Glen Echo boom at Grand and Harrison broke during the first big rainfall a.k.a "The Big Flush" (of the City’s storm drains) -- giving trash a free pass into the lake. After the boom broke, trash also pummeled the aeration fountain until a 3 foot strand of plastic wrapped around the propeller causing the fountain to shut down.

At left, Gen Stern of OPW inspects broken storm drain #51 outfall boom.
Official Bird of Oakland Bid - The third and fourth graders at Park Day School in Oakland are campaigning to make the Black-crowned Night Heron the OFFICIAL bird of Oakland! You can help simply by watching their adorable 2-minute video and signing their petition online! There are lots of reasons why this is THE BEST bird to choose for Oakland's official bird. One of the kids said it best, though. "It's a cool and funky bird just like Oakland, so it should be our official bird!"

Sign petition here: Official Bird of Oakland Petition

More Black-crowned Night Herons may be coming to Lake Merritt if a plan to relocate ones ousted from the Oakland Public Library nesting colony (heronry) is successful. The herons wore out their welcome downtown by depositing of guano on the sidewalk and parked cars below their nests.

Bellevue Club Celebrates Mural, Community and Beauty of the Lake

You might easily stroll past the Bellevue Club, without seeing the elegant French chateau nestled among the other buildings from an earlier time on the 500 block of Bellevue Ave. However, last September, LMI was invited inside this private social, cultural and fitness club for a long-anticipated view of the splendid murals painted by local artist Cleo Vallett (completion celebrated in May 2016). The work was funded by an anonymous donor. The murals surround the Club’s indoor heated swimming pool and recreate the avian biodiversity and wonder of the Lake Merritt Wildlife Sanctuary (photo by K Noonan).

A Brown Pelican floats by the Bellevue Club in Cleo Villett's evocative mural series.

Officer and member Jana Hardy explained that the Bellevue Club was built in 1929 and is on the National Register of Historic Places. Once a retreat for high society, the club now attracts a diversity of members from the community -- students, families, business leaders and professionals. The building provides beautiful spaces for relaxation, fitness and appreciation of the arts to members with all of the modern amenities.

The Bellevue Club welcomes local nonprofits that are associated with members to use their conference rooms and halls for meetings and other functions. LMI held Board meetings at the Club in previous years. Read more about the Bellevue club and enjoy the photo gallery on page 10 of this issue.

Ray* of Hope – Advocates for Lake Merritt

… in honor of late Tidings Editor. Ray* Perman

A big thank you to retiring Oakland Parks Director Tora Rocha and Weed Warriors’ leaders Jennie Gerard and Mary Ellen Navas for organizing a coalition of 30+ organizations, both formal and informal, to coordinate the rich variety of programs benefiting the lake and surrounding Lakeside Park. The group, called Advocates for Lake Merritt, met for the first time Nov 13th. Its goal is to boost volunteering and participation through more communication and to create a one-stop location to inform interested citizens. Groups participating represented popular activities including the arts, recreation, education, gardening, natural history, science and community service (more information at https://www.lakemerritt.org/lm-advocates.html).

Key to the success of the Advocates will be the generous contributions by John Kirkmire, who created a LM Advocates page on his website lakemerritt.org. Now you can find out what’s happening at the lake by
going to this page and clicking the Calendar link. John provides the current month’s issue of The Tidings and a link to LMI’s website (lakemerrittinstitute.org). LMI’s weekly Clean Lake Program clean-ups and special events are posted on the Calendar as well. A big thank you to John as well.

**Update: The A’s Speak to Measure DD Coalition** - Oakland A’s President Dave Kaval and VP for External Affairs Taj Tashcombe sought to address the Coalition’s environmental concerns at a Nov. 13th meeting. The A’s reps stated that the stadium was in early planning stages and promised to seek advice from the coalition about ways to protect the Wildlife Sanctuary and Measure DD improvements to LM.

Many attendees felt that the execs’ presentation lacked the details they had expected in response to the very thoughtful letter sent by the Measure DD committee. According to one Coalition member, “There were surprisingly superficial (even flippant) responses, primarily in the form of benign reassurances to ‘trust us’.” Stay tuned for updates in next month’s Tidings.

**LATE-BREAKING NEWS!** Laney College board halts ballpark plans with Oakland A’s, team ‘shocked’.

**Not Enough Birds at Lake Merritt**– Hilary Powers – Golden Gate Audubon

Lots of kinds of birds showed up for the 35 birders on the November 4th-Wednesday Golden Gate Audubon walk... but the numbers were way down. We saw most of the expected species, the notable absences being House Finches (the little brown and red guys), Golden-crowned Sparrows (as named), and possibly Lesser Scaup. No Great Egrets, either, but they come and go; they weren’t at the lake because they weren’t at the lake – off somewhere eating something but sure to be back.

The absent scaup were especially worrisome; they’ve got to be in trouble somewhere. There should have been hundreds of them, both Greater and Lesser, close enough to shore to tell them apart. Instead, we spotted only about 10 pairs, and the few that could be identified were all Greater Scaup. (The differences are mostly a matter of head shape and bill markings, hard to see from a distance, and nobody rose up out of the water and flapped his wings to reveal the amount of white, which is the other way to tell.)

Two Canvasbacks (a red-headed drake and a sandy duck), one Eared Grebe, a few pairs of Bufflehead... it just isn’t supposed to be that way. But it wasn’t all bleak. The Ruddy Ducks were out in the expected dozens or scores – and one drake was even still sort of ruddy. The goldeneyes actually seemed to be more numerous than usual; there are seldom many of them, but the five or six pairs of the rare Barrow’s Goldeneyes – the black and white drakes with the crescent moon on their cheeks and the gray-and-brown ducks with orange bills – seemed like a lot, and the Common Goldeneyes (full moon, black bill) were also pleasantly, er, common. (Unlike most birds with “common” in their names, Common Goldeneyes live up to the term. The majority of so-called common species brought their names from far away, and in North America they’re apt to be scarcer than others in the same family.)

The trees across Bellevue from the Nature Center provided some special treats: a Downy Woodpecker (the one with the
tiny bill and the white patch between the shoulder blades), a Brown Creeper, a burglar-masked Townsend’s Warbler, and a full-grown raccoon moseying along an upper branch. The path beside the oaks leading to Children’s Fairyland was closed off for some reason, but the garden provided the chickadees, titmice, and sparrows we might have seen there, plus an Orange-crowned Warbler (the dullest, drabbest warbler in the book, despite the lively name), which we almost never see near the lake. Lesser Goldfinches were enjoying the flat-rock fountain in the sensory garden, at least until a California Scrub Jay cruised in – looking rather like a jetliner landing among Piper Cubs – and scattered them.

All told, counting the pigeons and the Cooper’s Hawk that chased them off the top of the dome cage, we saw 41 species. Except for concern about the feathered population, it was yet another good day at Lake Merritt, where every day....

NEXT AUDUBON BIRDWALK on DECEMBER 27th! Join bird expert Hilary Powers on Wednesday December 27th. Muster at the geodesic bird cage near the Nature Center at 9:30.***

CLIMATE CORNER**THE CASE FOR A CARBON TAX
A Guest Editorial by Dr. Richard Bailey

What? Now they want to tax carbon! No way, you say; I’m not in favor of any more taxes. But wait; doesn’t the gasoline tax pay for the roads you drive on? Didn’t increased taxes and prices of cigarettes lead to less smoking? Don’t your taxes pay for national defense, police, schools, health care, help for the needy and parks? Maybe you should take a better look at what a carbon tax could do, and why we need it.

A superb summary of this issue can be found in the 2011 paperback book “The Case for a Carbon Tax: Getting past our hang-ups to effective climate policy” by Shi-Ling-Hsu (Professor of Law and Associate Dean for Environmental Programs at the Florida State University College of Law). Here are a few nuggets from the book:

“There is no policy instrument that is more transparent and administratively simple than a carbon tax.”

“A carbon tax is also the best first step because it does not preclude any future alternative policies.”

“… the carbon tax offers the best chance of getting that elusive international buy-in.” Indeed, fifteen countries are implementing or have passed legislation for a direct carbon tax.

“Carbon taxes … have supporters at both ends of the political spectrum.”

“Oil industries have led the call, perhaps reckoning that a carbon tax would be less obnoxious and costly to their industries than alternatives.” They also like the predictability of a carbon tax.

What is a tax on carbon? A carbon tax targets fossil fuel carbon emissions, but is typically not charged at the gas pump, cash register, or on your tax bill. Instead, it is levied only at the coal mine, oil, or gas well, or port of entry before fossil fuels enters the market. This means that oil companies and mining conglomerates would be the ones paying the tax. The amount is based on the carbon content of the product, which is widely known and reported.

Why a carbon tax? Because it enables almost all other solutions. Climate change threatens to destabilize entire economies, countries, and regions. To slow its progress, according to Shi-Ling-Hsu, “an incentive must be found in every nook and cranny of everyday life in which fossil fuels are burned, to empower literally everybody in the world to find ways to reduce or eliminate the amount of carbon dioxide emitted.” A carbon tax does this.

What to do with the money? There are as many answers as there are political persuasions. Some want the money given in equal shares to everyone with a social security number. Some want reductions in other taxes.
Some want it used to subsidize low carbon innovations (but which ones are the best?). Some want it to help displaced industries or low income people. Some want more funding for infrastructure. How would you spend it??

**In summary:** Climate policy does not have to be based on regulations that end up in court or are based on the “technology of the day”; on cap and trade schemes with wildly varying prices, and partly controlled by the regulated industries; on subsidies for solutions that have limited influences; on repairing fire, flood, drought damages; on sea walls that will soon be out of date; on voluntary initiatives by a small number of people; on a carbon price guessed at by administrative agencies; or energy conservation alone. The instruments are all valuable, but not as effective as a simple carbon tax. Now, are you still opposed?

**REFERENCES in Newsletter articles:**

**Night Herons**


**RNC**

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

**Lake Merritt Advocates**

List of stakeholders attending organizational meeting of LM Advocates

- Adams Point Neighborhood Group
- Alameda County Master Gardeners
- Autumn Lights Festival
- Bonsai Gardens
- California Center for Natural History
- Camron-Stanford House
- Children’s Fairyland
- Cleveland Cascades
- Community for Lake Merritt
- Friends of the Garden at Lake Merritt
- Gardens at Lake Merritt
- Junior Center of Art & Science
- Lake Merritt Breakfast Club
- Lake Merritt Institute
- Lake Merritt Joggers & Striders
- Lake Merritt Weed Warriors
- Measure DD Community Coalition
- Oakland Croquet Club
- Oakland East Bay Garden Center
- Oakland Lawn Bowling Club
- Oakland Municipal Band
- Oakland Museum of California
- Oakland Parks and Recreation
- Oakland Parks and Recreation Foundation
- Oakland Public Library Lakeview Branch
- Oakland Public Works
- Oakland Public Works Adopt-a-Spot
- Pollinator Posse

**A’s Stadium**


StAyTheRightWay (Laney) Protest at Laney Dec 12 at 6 pm
CHECK TO SEE IF PROTEST STILL ON
[https://www.facebook.com/StAyTheRightWay/?hc_ref=ARRw Hv0LUuqtLXDJD-BeizwG_04h3LaQC38hpF1gsX7Xi0LDY3WC6s9GCPEm3sk](https://www.facebook.com/StAyTheRightWay/?hc_ref=ARRw Hv0LUuqtLXDJD-BeizwG_04h3LaQC38hpF1gsX7Xi0LDY3WC6s9GCPEm3sk)
sign petition -tinyurl.com/StAyTheRightWay
SALUTE OUR NOVEMBER VOLUNTEERS!
LMI appreciates our November’s volunteer groups who came out to clean the lake as the weather got colder and rains started the Big Flush of trash from city storm drains into the lake. They are: The Athenian Middle School in Danville, St. Joseph’s Middle School, Clark Construction Company (working on Highland Hospital), the Antea group, and St. Paul’s Middle School. We appreciate their efforts and community spirit immensely! Photos of the groups are below:

St. Joseph’s Middle School

Saint Paul’s Episcopal School – 6th Grade
In addition to weekly shore cleanup, St. Paul’s also tests water at Glen Echo with teachers Ryan Faulkner, Anthony Bald and Susan Porter.

more St. Paul’s Middle School

Brook Levin and Tora Rocha saved a duckling while cleaning the lake!
Campaign to Re-open the Rotary Nature Center Launched!
Scientists, naturalists, regular citizens and educators are speaking up, letting Mayor Schaaf, Oakland Parks and Recreation Director Nicholas Williams, and the City Council know that the Rotary Nature Center needs to be re-opened as the science, natural history and education center it was meant to be.

FOR ONLINE PETITION CLICK HERE: RE-OPEN THE ROTARY NATURE CENTER

I grew up in that nature center and it was certainly my father (Paul Covel)'s pride and joy. The Rotary Club raised the funds to build it and presented it as a gift to the people of Oakland. The Lake Merritt Breakfast Club funded the programs in the early years. This was also the first municipal naturalist program in the West. Lots for the city to be proud of!

I did a lot of that taxidermy work that was on display at the center. In fact that got me started in museum prep work, and from there I worked my way through UCD as a preparator for the Museum of Wildlife and Fisheries Biology on campus. Anyhow—I have lots of stories tied to the science center. There are some fairly prominent alums from the group of junior naturalists that used to hang out there, including Jim Carlton who is a prominent marine biologist today. Let me know when you might have a meeting scheduled with the OPR folks and I’ll try to get there. Seems like the powers that be need a reminder of just how important that place and that program have been through the years.

-Jim Covel, Director of Guest Experience Training & Interpretation, Monterey Bay Aquarium

Over many decades, the Rotary Nature Center has influenced, shaped, and inspired a great many young lives! At age 69, I am now entering my 55-th year studying marine biology because of the Rotary Nature Center and such remarkable naturalists and educators as Rex Burress and the late Paul Covel. Were it not for the Nature Center, we would not have been able to launch a 50 year retrospective study of the Lake in 2016. The Nature Center has been, remains, and will be an absolutely critical element in public nature education in California!

-Jim Carlton, Williams College and Smithsonian Environmental Research Center

The Rotary Nature Center represents great amounts of environmental history, tremendous effort through the years to establish a refuge interpretive program in conjunction with the National Historic Sites declaration. As you know, nationally prominent park leader William Mott created the program and hired Paul Covel to guide the effort. This (closure) is a blow to Nature Centers and scientific purpose everywhere. I gave a good part of my life toward "enticing others to look at nature's beauty with understanding." [John Muir].

-Rex Burress, RNC Refuge Naturalist from 1960 to 1993, artist and photographer, Conservation Legacy Award /John Muir Association
In the 1960s and 1970s, Lake Merritt was the birthing ground for a new field of science—the study of biological invasions in the sea—and the Rotary Nature Center was a critical part of that. The Center did what every nature center in the world hopes to do, it assisted and inspired a budding young scientist who went on to have a celebrated and path-breaking career that changed the world. If OPR and the decision makers in Oakland aren’t aware of that, then it’s time we told that story.

-Dr. Andrew Cohen, Center for Research on Aquatic Bioinvasions (C.R.A.B.) and San Francisco Estuary Institute

This important historical nature center is needed now more than ever as Oakland schools are struggling financially and the community needs to stay in touch with the natural environment. Rise up and speak out now so they understand the need. The unique space of Lake Merritt in the center of the city ties the Bay and all its waterways together. Don’t let it go! Call the city and let them know what it means to you.

-Patty Donald, Founder and recently retired Director of the Shorebird Nature Center Programs at the Berkeley Marina.

I was dismayed to learn of the neglect and closing of the Rotary Nature Center in Lakeside Park, Oakland. In a world with so many environmental crises and so many people stressed by crowded, urban life, Oakland should follow California's leadership in taking positive action for nature and the environment by supporting and promoting public education on such issues, and promoting the peace of mind or "urban relief" that being in a natural setting has provided to people throughout history.

While I understand that budgets are tight, Oakland has this tremendous resource of Lake Merritt as a renowned wildlife refuge teaming with birds large and small, plus the Rotary Nature Center facility right in the heart of the city. San Francisco and New York may have their groomed Golden Gate and Central Parks with little more than pigeons and invasive English sparrows, but no other great city has a major stopover for the year-round and annual migrating geese, pelicans, herons, ducks, and myriad other waterfowl and shorebirds that Oakland has. This is one of the great spectacles of nature right on our doorstep, and a sad opportunity to loose for education and spiritual enlightenment! Without staff and facilities to interpret and excite children and adults alike, such wonders are often overlooked or taken for granted as mundane.

-Kurt Rademacher, Naturalist, Educator

CURRENT HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS:
I was born and raised in Oakland, and my family didn't have a lot of money to go to the Oakland Zoo or Six Flags every other weekend. They would take me to Lakeside Park to chase the geese and play on the swings. Rotary Nature Center was one of the few places I would go to every weekend when my parents don't have work. Lake Merritt, along with the Rotary Nature Center, is my childhood.

- Jimmy

My most vivid memory of the Nature Center was when they graciously permitted us to use their back room for Oakland High’s Sea Lion Bowl to Meet for a practice match. I’d hate to not have the chance to do that again. -Bryant

The Nature Center was always a place where you would instantly be fascinated with no matter how many times you go. Each display was unique and full of information. I hope I will be able to take my cousins the Nature Center so they can also be charmed by the place. -Angela

The Nature Center had something about it that captivated me. I still remember going there with my ESA family and being astonished by all the beautiful animals that represent Oakland. It was a place that brought out my curious George. It’s sad to hear that the center is being closed but I hope it bounce back soon! -Win
The Bellevue Club Mural Celebrates Our Lake
The Bellevue Club is a unique private social and fitness club situated in a stunning French Chateau overlooking the Lake Merritt Wildlife Refuge. The club has been a strong supporter of the Refuge and the local community. Cleo Villett’s beautiful paintings of Lake Merritt Birds complete with their scientific names (seen below), grace the walls of an indoor pool. Cleo Villett is a well-known muralist who has created murals on many science and natural history centers. The Club has beautiful public rooms that can be reserved for a variety of events and rooms for use of its members. All the modern amenities for relaxation, sociability and fitness are provided. See the Bellevue Club website at http://www.bellevueoakland.com/
Tora Rocha’s Retires

Tora Rocha, Public Works Park Supervisor, retired this fall after 36 years of civil service to the people of Oakland. She will be greatly missed, but we are pretty sure she will remain active in all her favorite projects from the Garden to the Pollinator Posse. The Lake Merritt Institute presented Tora with a Certificate of Excellence and an arrangement of flowers in appreciation.

This article in the East Bay Express describes some of her many contributions: https://www.eastbayexpress.com/oakland/best-garden-whiz-and-butterfly-savior-victoria-tora-rocha/Content?oid=8368022

Tora, with the help of Jennie Gerard, Mary Ellen Navas and John Kirkmire, organized a meeting of “stake-holders” to make sure that the different programs in Lakeside Park park will continue to run smoothly, coordinate their activities and meet new challenges together.

LMI wishes Tora a very happy retirement!