Founded in 1937

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Sonoma Valley History

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Rodeo in Sonoma Valley

Learn about the longest running rodeo in California, long before vineyards took over agriculture in our valley.

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Ada Limón, 2026 Sonoma Treasure Artist

Ada Limón's sense of place shows in her poetry, which honors Sonoma Valley where she was born and bred.

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President's Report

Patricia Cullinan

The museum is buzzing with activity as we continue to create new exhibits and update previous sections. Our devoted "train guys" are producing a train layout that will be fun for all ages. There have been a lot of moving parts to manage in this process, unforeseen delays, funding issues, and other unanticipated hurdles but we now can say that we look forward to welcoming you in to Sonoma Valley History Museum in early October. Stay tuned for our opening date!

SONOMA VALLEY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Sonoma Valley Historical Society

Officers
Patricia Cullinan, President
Charlotte Gallaway, Vice President
Laurie Gallian, Treasurer
Kate Schertz, Secretary

Directors
Mike Acker, Kathleen Hill, Peter Meyerhof, Carol Page, Travis Wagner

Board Meetings
Second Tuesday of the Month, 4:30pm in person and via Zoom.

About the Society
Sonoma Valley Historical Society was formed in 1937 and is dedicated to collecting, sharing, and preserving Sonoma Valley history.

Locations
Marcy House Archives & Research Ctr.
205 First Street West, Sonoma
(707) 343-1335

Sonoma Valley History Museum
270 First Street West (at Depot Park), Sonoma

About this Publication
Sonoma Valley History is published quarterly in print and online. Send feedback of any kind to roytennant@gmail.com

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Cover Image

Two promotional photographs publicizing the Sonoma Rodeo, colorized by Photoshop.

Calendar

Conversations with Historians

Events all are in Sonoma Community Center's room 110 except if otherwise noted; Thanks to a City of Sonoma grant all these presentations will be free.

July 18, 10:30am, "The Great Resistance: The 400-Year Fight to End Slavery in the Americas," Carrie Gibson. This presentation will discuss four centuries of effort by enslaved people in the western hemisphere to gain their freedom. "Freedom is an idea, and the actions of the thousands who fought to escape slavery made clear that "freedom had to be for everyone, otherwise it was a lie."

This panoramic story is that of "the largest, longest-running and most diverse ongoing insurrection the world has ever known": the fight for freedom by enslaved Africans and their descendants in the Americas, from the 1500s to the 1800s.

July 25, 10:30am, "The People of Eldridge," Breck Parkman. From its founding in 1883, until it closed in 2018, the Sonoma State Home in Eldridge (later known as the Sonoma State Hospital and the Sonoma Developmental Center) provided the necessary care for many thousands of the State's wards. At any one time, there were 2,000-3,000 young people residing at the Sonoma State Home, sent there for a variety of reasons. Parkman will share stories about some of the people who worked in Eldridge and discuss a few of the interesting things that occurred there.

August 1, 10:30am, "The Art of Tilden Daken," Bonnie Portnoy. An illustrated presentation featuring Tilden Daken's artwork and the remarkable story of this forgotten California Impressionist whose art and adventures spanned the globe.

Fall 2026 Presentations

September 22, 6 pm, "The Legacy of 1776 - Part 2 - Sonoma and Statehood," Peter Meyerhof. To commemorate the 250th Anniversary of the United States, Meyerhof will give the second part of a two-part series. He will reveal many little-known links between people and events in Sonoma that greatly influenced the California Constitution which led directly to Statehood in 1850.

October TBA, John McCormick presents the ongoing legacy of the Chinese in Napa Valley that mirrors Sonoma the Valley to the west.

October 3,11:00am, Mountain Cemetery Tour.

October 22, 6 pm, "Satirical Wit Meets Prickly Pride: The Sonoma Feud of George H. Derby & Joseph Hooker," Travis Wagner.

October 29, 6 pm, "FIRE: its legacy to Sonoma," Arthur Dawson.

November 14,10:30am, "First Fruits," Linda Ziedrich.

Ada Limón, 2026 Sonoma Treasure Artist

Kate Schertz

Photo by Kent Porter

Some say she's come home. I'd argue she never left. She never forgot where she came from, where she was formed, where she was first kissed. Sonoma is in every volume of poetry Ada Limón ever wrote.

In her first volume *Lucky Wreck*, the poem "13285 Arnold Drive" begins

"Shadows black my moon-white legs where,
in the back seat of the car, I lie facing upwards
in my favorite game, eyes to oak tree
branches, to telephone wires.
Now we're on Dunbar Road, now Arnold
Drive, Warm Springs."

In "Overjoyed," from her 2010 volume *Sharks in the River* she again blends thoughts of Sonoma with nature

"What's the drunk waxwing supposed to do
When all the day's been an orgy of red buds in the winery's archway off Gehricke Road and it's too far to make it home, too long to fly, even as the sober crow goes.""

One of my favorites of her poems is "Ancestors" from the 2018 volume *The Carrying*. It speaks to the roots of her identity

"I've come here from the rocks, the bone-like chert, obsidian, lava rock. I've come here from the trees-
Chestnut, bay laurel, toyon, redwood, cedar,
One thousand oaks
That bend with moss and old man's beard.
I was born on a green couch on Carriger Road between the vines and the horse pasture."

And it ends "I do not know where else I belong."

In the poem "Hell or High Water" in the volume *Startlement* she comes full circle blending family, nature and place:

"Not churchgoers or joiners, still my people sang, up Highway 12 or Arnold Drive, depending on the traffic. "Blue Moon, you saw me standing alone," my maternal grandfather would croon in a big put-on cowboy voice like Marty Robbins as we barreled up
the 29 from Julian…"

And she continues

"I remember driving up from Glen Ellen,
The drive interminable, my brother's pugilistic tendencies bruising me on the back seat 's sticky vinyl; even then we could be swayed to sing."

And she has sung, her voice becoming bigger, louder, wider until now it is flying through space… reaching for the unknown. Always seeking, always reflecting, always honoring where she comes from.

We are so happy you are here, Ada Limón, back where you have always belonged.

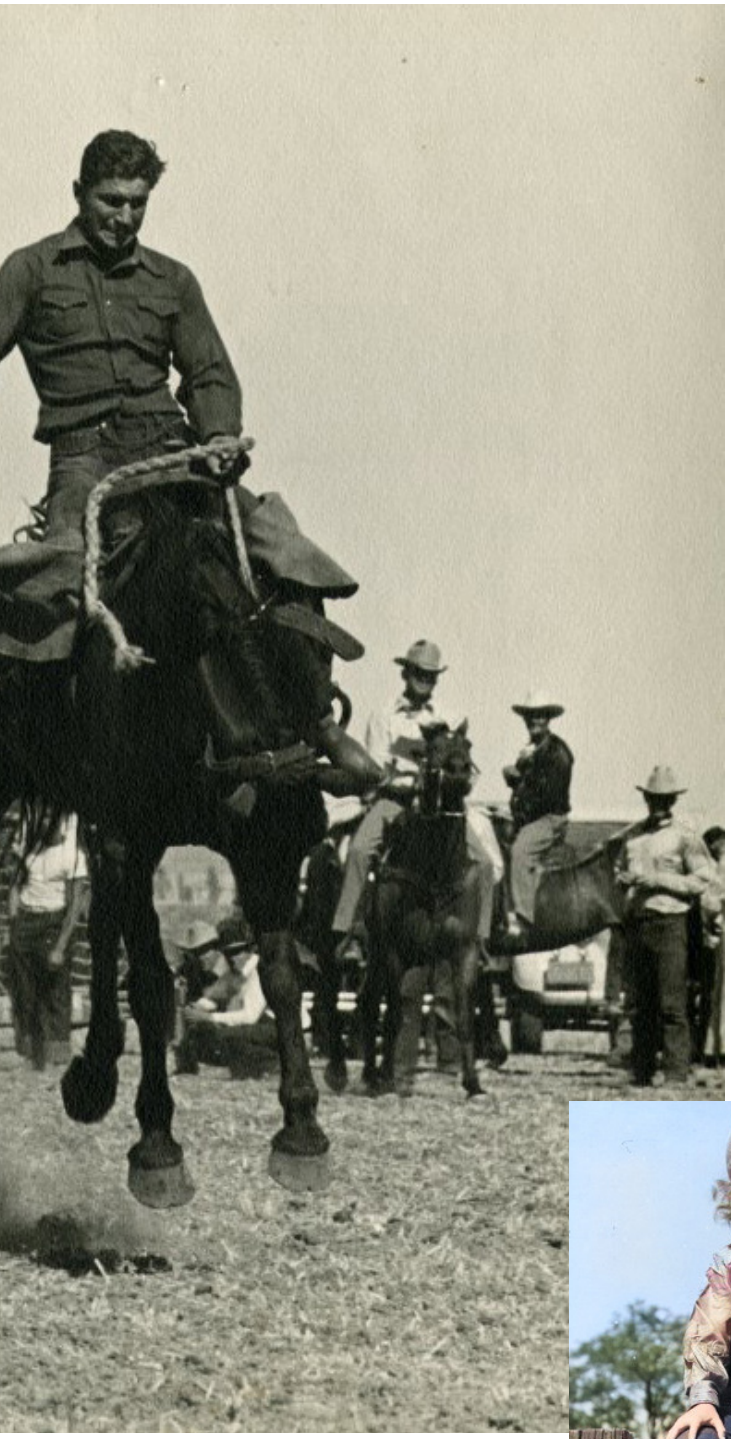
Out of the Archives:

A bucking bronco with a brave buckaroo.

A confident cowpoke ropin' a calf.

It's not the b

Rodeo in the Valley



uck that's hard, it's the landing.

Plugging your ears isn't going to help much, tenderfoot.

The seat is hard, but the view is great.

Rodeo in Sonoma Valley

Mike Millerick and Editorial Staff

The history of Rodeo in Sonoma Valley was inextricably connected with the agricultural life here and the tourism that brought additional income to the area. Sonoma Valley in the early 1900s was rural and agriculturally diverse. Dairying and beef were an integral part of the economy. Additionally, during the 1920s, Boyes Hot Springs was a bustling resort destination. To entertain guests and boost local tourism, the resorts frequently hosted Wild West exhibitions and outdoor pageants such as festivities on June 25, 1922, that showcased cowboy culture, horsemanship displays, and the historical acts that were deeply popular in California at the time.

Wade Wilson, Jack Millerick, and Luisa Vallejo Emparan

Michael Millerick emigrated from Cork County Ireland in the 1880s and settled in southern Sonoma Valley where he and his wife, Catherine, raised five children. The Millerick Ranch grew into a major livestock provider including race horses that ran in competitions throughout California in the early 1900's.

Eventually, they shifted to the lucrative rodeo business, raising livestock for rodeos from San Diego to Klamath Falls. In 1921, son Tom Millerick provided all the stock (16 train carloads) for Reno, Nevada's first annual state Rodeo and served as Rodeo Director for the event. The Millericks also bought a bankrupt Wild West Show and toured it throughout California.

In 1922, the Millerick family began hosting an annual Rodeo on their ranch. They built an arena and grand stands on the east side of the property with a long promenade from the road and the family home. Tom and his brother Jack operated the annual rodeo for more than twenty years, and in its heyday had as many as 10,000 people attending.

Among the celebrities who attended were rodeo trick roper Monty Montana, bronco rider Ty Stokes, and rodeo-performer-turned-actor Slim Pickens, who had lived in the ranch bunk houses off and on in his youth. Actor Andy Devine, and humorous social commentator Will Rogers visited the ranch several times over the years. General Vallejo's daughter, Luisa, was also a supporter.

Locals entered these contests as well. Prominent veterinarian and local legend Dr. Dario Marioni vied in these competitions, becoming a life-long friend of Tom Millerick's son, Jim. Winemaker August Sebastiani even competed in the events, as did Sonoma physician Dr. Carroll Andrews.

Rodeos in the 1980s

- Sonoma County Stampede at Sears Point Raceway—April 24 and 25, 1982
- Second Annual Wine Country Weekend and Rodeo June 19 and 20, 1982 at the corner of Watmaugh and Arnold Dr. where Watmaugh Strawberry is now, sponsored by Sebastiani Vineyards and the Sonoma Valley Rodeo Association.
- Sept 10 and 11, 1983 Wine Country Rodeo at Maxwell Park.
- June 1 and 2, 1984 Wine Country Rodeo at Maxwell Park.

Rodeo in Sonoma Valley, cont'd

In 1946, Jack passed away and his nephew Jim took over the reins and operated the ranch and rodeo until 1952 when he shut it down. However, the rodeo spirit did not end with the closing of the Millerick Rodeo. The 1970's brought a few rodeos, but the agricultural focus was changing to vineyards.

Gone today are the hay and grain fields of Carneros that fed the dairies of the Sonoma Valley, and the smaller but active cattle industry here and beyond. Gone, too, are the days when many of the children of Sonoma had horses that were ridden unrestricted in the hills and streets of Sonoma, trail-riding or going to town for an ice cream treat.

People who had enjoyed the pastimes of the rodeo era still rode horses and competed. Barrel racing was a popular pastime for women at local ranches. Don Canevari and some other locals had a roping club into the late 1970's, with Wednesday evening competitions at the Flying Arrow Ranch.

In 1980, the Sonoma Valley Rodeo Association was founded by Jim and Bev McCombs, owners of the Triple tree saddle shop on West Napa Street. Millerick's nephew Sam Sebastiani was a member of the association, and helped to bring the rodeo back to life.

The Rodeo Association supported finding a permanent place for the event and felt Maxwell farm would be an ideal place. Several rodeos had already been held there during the height of the resort era. Despite local support for the event, Sonoma County had other plans for the Maxwell Farm site, and in 1984 began planning the development of the site for uses that would serve a broader demographic.

The Millerick/Larson family now grows grapes on their ranch and makes wine. A few years ago, the barn/tasting room at the Larson Winery that sits on the site of the rodeo grounds burnt down. Sadly, the extensive collection of the Millerick family's rodeo memorabilia was destroyed. Fortunately, some photos and mementos can be found in our archives.

For more on the Millerick Rodeo, scan the QR code:

Two Board Members Published in *New York History Review*

Travis Wagner and Peter Meyerhof, members of the Sonoma Valley Historical Society Board, co-wrote a scholarly article called "New York Theater Invades Pioneer California," which was just published in *New York History Review*. There has been a long-standing debate about the location of California's first theater, and Travis and Peter found evidence that it opened in Sonoma in the summer of 1847. The story of this theater is really fascinating because it involves early New York City theater, nativism, economic depression in the northeast, the arrival of the 1st New York Volunteers in Sonoma, and life in late 1840's Sonoma.

New York History Review

You can read the article here: https://bit.ly/NYHReview.

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Membership Renewal & New Memberships

Sonoma Valley Historical Society *has recently transitioned to a new membership system* that allows memberships to run for a full year from the date you join or renew. This replaces our previous July 1–June 30 membership cycle and eliminates the need for prorated memberships.

If we have your email address on file, you will receive an automatic renewal reminder when your membership is due to expire. We encourage you to review your contact information and let us know if your email address has changed.

Not yet a member? We invite you to join today and help preserve, share, and celebrate the rich history of Sonoma Valley. Membership support helps fund our museum, archives, educational programs, exhibits, and community events. Whether you are a longtime resident, a history enthusiast, or simply someone who values preserving our community's heritage, we welcome you to join us.

To join or renew, visit https://sonomavalleyhistory.org/donate/#membership or scan this QR code with your smart phone's camera: