

The Man of History

Lafayette resident keeps California history alive

By Diane Claytor



Robert Chandler, Ph.D., stands in front of one of his many collections. Photos Diane Claytor

Walking into the back rooms of Bob and Sue Chandler's lovely Lafayette home, you're not sure if you've entered a museum or a library. There are books, papers and artifacts everywhere. It's hard to know where to look first.

Chandler describes himself as a historian and a "pack rat." He's also an author, having just published "San Francisco Lithographer: African American Artist Grafton Tyler Brown," in addition to numerous magazine articles. His business card states "Dr. Robert J. Chandler, Western American History, Stagecoaching, Mining, Banking." None of that begins to describe this extraordinary man, who, according to Californiahistory.com, "is acclaimed by many California historians to be the premier authority on California in the Civil War and, in particular, San Francisco."

An "army brat," his family moved every few years when Chandler was young. "Sometimes it was hard to make new friends," he said, "so I got interested in where we were and learning everything I could about the area." He started reading history books and over the years, amassed quite a collection. He earned his Ph.D. from UC Riverside; his dissertation was "The Press and Civil Liberties in California during the Civil War."

A trip to an antique shop in Port Costa in the '70s introduced Chandler to the world of historical items. "I found a letter having to do with the California State Telegraph Company from 1864 and it was \$10. My first article was on the Overland Telegraph, so of course I had to buy the letter," he noted. "I suddenly realized that history wasn't found only in books."

And the rest, as they say, is history. Chandler admits that while he still buys books, "I spend more money on photographs, pieces of paper, letters, something that will tell me a story. I'm on a first name basis with booksellers, antique and paper dealers everywhere."

To say Chandler is proud of his collections doesn't accurately express it. Spending an hour with him was like an historical show and tell. He showed off his collection of coral, decoys, mining equipment, crucibles for assays, Chinese ginger jars, candlesticks, tea pots, license plates, election posters, miniature German soldiers, lithographs, billheads, historical postcards and posted envelopes. He has a slide viewer from 1900 and San Francisco city directories dating back to the 1870s. And then there are his books – 9,000 of them, according to his wife.

Chandler is a longtime member of The Ancient and Honorable Order of E Clampus Vitus, a fraternal organi-

zation dedicated to preserving the American West heritage. The group often honors historical structures with one of its bronze plaques. However, as Chandler explained, "no one knows for sure if it's a drinking society interested in history or a historical society interested in drinking. And no one has ever been in any condition to resolve this debate."

Chandler spent 32 years as senior historian for Wells Fargo Bank, retiring in 2010. In that role, he said, he was "essentially the answer man" within the bank, dealing with both employees and consumers. He also wrote numerous articles on Wells Fargo's history.

Chandler is a prolific speaker, offering presentations on California history, stagecoaching, mining, banking, military and postal history. He is the secretary of the Western Cover Society which specializes in early Western postal history and is a regular contributor to The California Territorial Quarterly, a magazine dedicated to California's past. He sits on the Board of the San Ramon Valley Museum and has loaned the organization items from his gold rush collection.

The family moved from Concord to Lafayette 16 years ago. "We had to find a house that could accommodate Bob's mistress – California history in all its forms," Susan Chandler said.

Describing her husband, she said, "When we first started dating, mutual friends told me Bob was eccentric; fortunately, I didn't know what that meant. Bob is constantly making history new. It's fascinating to watch him find something old and get excited about it. It is such a gift."



An envelope from the 1870s shipped by Contra Costa Express



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