



COMMUNITY

Co-founder of Los Altos Hills recalls his role in town history

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Written by Ellie Van Houtte - Staff Writer/ellievh@latc.com



Photo By: Ellie Van Houtte/Town Crier
Photo Ellie Van Houtte/Town Crier Rex Gardiner reviews documents from the early days of Los Altos Hills.

Although multimillion-dollar homes owned by high-tech entrepreneurs are common in today's Los Altos Hills, it was a completely different story when Rex Gardiner moved to town in the 1950s.

The young PG&E sales engineer felt a bit out of place in the rural environs. But he stayed and fell in love with the area. He ended up being one of the town's founders - by

daughter Vicki Taylor's estimation, the last surviving founder of Los Altos Hills.

Attracted by the climate and rolling terrain of the hills, Gardiner, now 90, in 1950 secured a home loan and purchased a 1-acre parcel of land in the original Oneonta neighborhood for \$3,200. With the vision of building a home that overlooked the valley, he worked with Bay Area developer Joseph Eichler, who became famous for his modernist homes, to create a model that would fit his sloped site. For a total cost of less than \$14,000, he built his dream home - one that sold for approximately \$1.5 million five years ago.

Gardiner recalls the day his neighbor William Simrell - an architect and co-author of Los Altos Hills' Green Sheets on incorporation - approached him about the prospect of incorporating the area known as Los Altos Hills as a town. Because the city of Los Altos had completed incorporation several years earlier, at first Gardiner was a bit reluctant to support establishing another new town. Simrell explained why the unincorporated community of Los Altos Hills should not just append itself to Los Altos.

"They have quarter-acre lots," Simrell said. "We should have 1-acre minimum lots."

Motivated by the vision of creating a town that resisted commercialization and preserved its rural feel through strict zoning, Simrell and Gardiner joined an incorporation committee. At 33, Gardiner was the youngest committee member. PG&E shared his eagerness to incorporate Los Altos Hills, allowing him to spend most of 1954 working full time on the project. The company offered to supply any support needed. There was a major reason for that support. The city of Palo Alto, which had its own power company, was rapidly expanding toward Los Altos Hills. PG&E was concerned that Palo Alto might absorb the Los Altos Hills area and take away the company's service connections. It was to the company's advantage to assist Los Altos Hills to remain separate from Palo Alto.

Mapping it out

One of Gardiner's first endeavors was surveying the town's power lines, telephone connections and roadways to draw a town map. Using an incorporation report generated by professional engineers for the town of Los Gatos as his guide, Gardiner prepared the paperwork needed to define the future city of Los Altos Hills.

Over the next year, Gardiner traveled every road in the community alongside the county roads commissioner - who admitted that the county would be relieved to get rid of the roads in the area as they were the most expensive in the county to maintain - before drafting the town's first map in 1955.

Taking advantage of the advice of the roads commissioner, Gardiner drew the proposed town lines strategically. To avoid the possibility of the founders being outvoted during the vote for incorporation, he excluded densely populated areas. He defined the boundaries for Los Altos Hills on the inside of Arastradero Road and other heavily trafficked streets to prevent the young town from assuming expensive maintenance costs.

The original town map included 29 public roads encompassing 9.5 square miles, and recorded 1,167 registered voters who represented a population of 2,500. Gardiner's initials are easily spotted in the corner of every page of that first survey and map.

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Although Gardiner's training as an engineer helped him technically, he was quite unfamiliar with the overall process of creating a city – from raising money and votes for incorporation to determining rules of governance and tax structures.

"When you form a town, you need to know lots of things," he said.

In accordance with state law, the committee received approval of the proposed town boundaries from Santa Clara County. Then they prepared for incorporation with the required Green Sheets, a manifesto outlining why incorporation was necessary, how the new town would structure its government and a petition with the signatures of at least 25 percent of the total property owners.

The county Board of Supervisors had to review and approve the boundaries to complete the incorporation process.

After the first steps were fulfilled, committee members hand-stuffed ballots into envelopes in preparation for the official incorporation election Jan. 27, 1956.

Although the majority of residents voted to incorporate the city of the Town of Los Altos Hills, Gardiner said two recall bids from opposition groups challenged the vote. Both efforts proved unsuccessful in deterring the town's bid for autonomy.

Gardiner said he might have been one of Los Altos Hills first councilmembers had he not acquiesced to his boss' concerns. After his nomination for a council position by the incorporation committee, Gardiner's boss threatened to fire him if he didn't withdraw. Feeling too young to appeal to his supervisors, Gardiner withdrew his name from the first city council ballot without ever explaining the reason to his committee colleagues.

Although he didn't become a founding councilmember, Gardiner was appointed road commissioner – his newfound knowledge of every nook and cranny of the town qualified him as the obvious expert.

Nearly 57 years later, Gardiner is pleased that the town retains much of its original character despite some changes that are a bit unsettling.

"The hills were all open back then," he said. "Now there are steel fences up everywhere."

For a slideshow of images depicting Los Altos Hills in the early days compiled by Rex's daughter, Vicki Taylor, click [here](#).

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"The Orchards were our playgrounds; we were rich and didn't know it..." Enjoy more Los Altos Area Photos from the 1950s to present by clicking on the URL below (or cut and paste it into your web browser):
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I understand the Town Crier is printing a correction to its article regarding the change in home prices:
1950: \$ 17,200 total purchase price house & land
2003 \$1,353,000 Purchase price for lot & house (then bulldozed)
2012: \$3,600,000 Newest owner's purchase price for same acre lot with a new house. It all pretty clearly underscores the three most important things about real estate that my Dad (Rex) has so frequently quoted to me: It's location, location, location. However, it's also true that all kinds of things can make a great location, and Home is where the heart is!

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