

***Cultural Alchemy:
From Minerals to Masterpieces***
The History of the Jesse Peter Museum



February 22nd - April 12th, 2018

**Jesse Peter Multicultural Museum
Celebrates SRJC's 100th Anniversary**



SANTA ROSA JUNIOR COLLEGE
Celebrating 1918  2018

Cultural Alchemy: From Minerals to Masterpieces

The History of the Jesse Peter Museum

*I*t is remarkable to contemplate that 100 years ago, in 1918, the college was born. While the museum was not a part of the initial plan for Santa Rosa Junior College, the seed was planted early on, and the museum celebrates 80 years since it was conceptualized out of a humble collection of geologic samples for the science halls of the college.

This exhibit explores the many chapters of the Jesse Peter Museum, which has served the visions of different directors and reflected the times with each passing decade, from Science Museum to Natural History Museum to Native American Museum to what it is today; a Multicultural Museum. Time marches on, and we now look to the future of the Jesse Peter Museum.

In the Twenty-first Century, Museums no longer endeavor to keep cultures frozen in rigid stereotypes of the past, but to embrace the fluidity of culture as a jumping off point; a place to begin conversations about our heritage and to celebrate the way that culture exists in contemporary times. Today, cultural societies stand shoulder to shoulder: Native Americans to Pacific Islanders and Eritreans to Romanians, each seen with their own deep histories and drawing on traditions that change over time and interweave with each other. We learn that while our rituals and practices are diverse, our values are similar. We maintain the memories; the thread that leads us back to our ancestors, not just to tell the story of how our people used to be, but to embrace the creativity and ingenuity of society and to bear witness to the continuance of our shared humanity. Museums today should be spaces in which we explore cultural issues that challenge us on a local level but also showcase a celebration of diversity on a global level.

Rachel Minor - Museum Supervisor /Curator

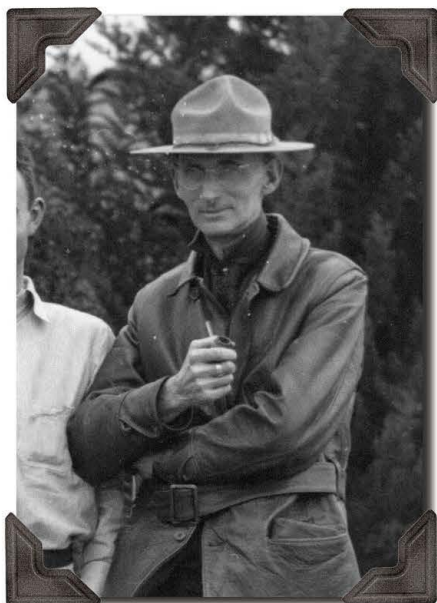
1885-1944

Jesse Peter was a hometown boy, born in 1885 to a pioneer Santa Rosa family and educated in the Santa Rosa Public Schools. An avid collector, Peter was influenced by his father, who was a miner. In his youth, he would gather specimens of geological interest as well as relics on his family's property and in the hills of Sonoma County.

Jesse Peter went on to earn a degree from UC Berkeley as a Mining Engineer. He worked for five years in the Alaskan gold mines and then returned to Santa Rosa to spend some time as a construction worker and contractor. Later, he joined the faculty at Santa Rosa Junior High School, teaching shop ("Manual Arts") for sixteen years.

In the 1930's Jesse Peter was well known for his exciting expeditions, which he called "hunts". He assembled collections of geological specimens and Native American artifacts and donated them to the University of California and other institutions.

A closeup of Peter before embarking on an expedition, 1934. Photo courtesy of George Switzer.



1930's

Before there was a museum, there was a collection of rocks.

SRJC President Floyd Bailey knew that Jesse Peter was a geology enthusiast. In 1931, Bailey asked Peter if he would put together a collection of rocks for the science building of Santa Rosa Junior College. Nobody expected that Peter would throw such enthusiasm and energy into the project. Not only did Peter provide his own collection of rocks, fossils, and artifacts to the college, but he also spent the next nine years taking special trips, writing letters to companies across the world asking for samples, and talking to individuals who were interested in adding to the collection. Soon, the science building was overflowing with cases of minerals and rocks, which spilled into storage rooms. It was evident that the college needed a museum to showcase the collection.



Geary Hall in 1934- The Science Building, where Peter's mineral collection was housed prior to the building of the museum. The building was demolished in 1970.

Photo courtesy of the Santa Rosa Junior College Archives

1930's

“Wanted: Ten Explorers!” So spoke the announcement in the University of California Alumni Monthly. The year was 1933, and the country was in the grips of the Great Depression. The ad was posted by Ansel F. Hall, the first Chief Forester of the United States National Park Service. It was a call to naturalists, geologists, and anthropologists to join an expedition to explore the Rainbow Bridge/Monument Valley in the Four Corners area of the United States.



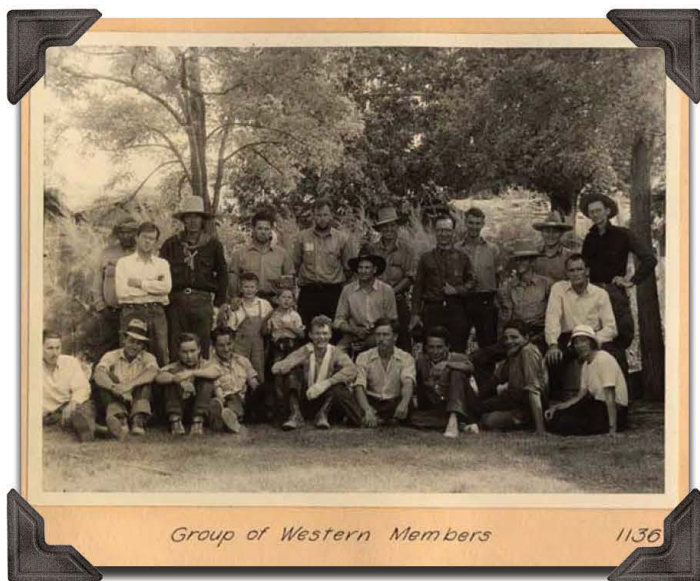
Photo by
Robert B.
Branstead,
from Jesse
Peter's
collection.

Hall's project received immediate and widespread response from university men, both students and instructors across the country, who were willing to pay their own way for an opportunity to explore, excavate, and document the ruins of the Anasazi people and to study the Navajo people, who called this area home.

The Rainbow Bridge and Monument Valley Expeditions

1933-1934

Jesse Peter was among the many men who joined the expeditions during the summers of 1933 and 1934. Using pack mules to traverse the rugged terrain, the explorers mapped and photographed the land and excavated ruins. Their findings, which were given to National Parks and universities, were also shared with the Santa Rosa Junior College, so that the museum has a very valuable collection of potsherds and pottery. This was a time when the belief was that important objects had to be gathered and put in museums for future generations due to the mistaken belief that Native Americans were disappearing. While museums will neither contribute to nor condone this type of plunder in our modern era, we are grateful to have these objects in our care to tell the story.



Jesse Peter is standing at far right.
Photograph by (Grace?) Hoover, 1934.
Courtesy of Center of Southwest Studies, Fort Lewis College Digital Archives

The Rainbow Bridge and Monument Valley Expeditions
1933-1934



Jesse Peter seated in center. All photos attributed to
Robert Branstead; from Peter's collection

The Rainbow Bridge and Monument Valley Expeditions
1933-1934



All photos attributed to Robert Branstead;
from Peter's collection

1930's

During the Great Depression, millions of men and women in the United States had no prospects for work during the worst economic crises in our country's history. The Works Projects Administration, or WPA, was one of the New Deal programs implemented by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. At its peak in 1938, the WPA provided paid jobs for three million Americans. Seizing the opportunity to create both jobs and a museum to house the impressive mineral and rock collection amassed by Jesse Peter, Santa Rosa Junior College President Floyd P. Bailey and Jesse Peter applied for and received a WPA grant in 1938.



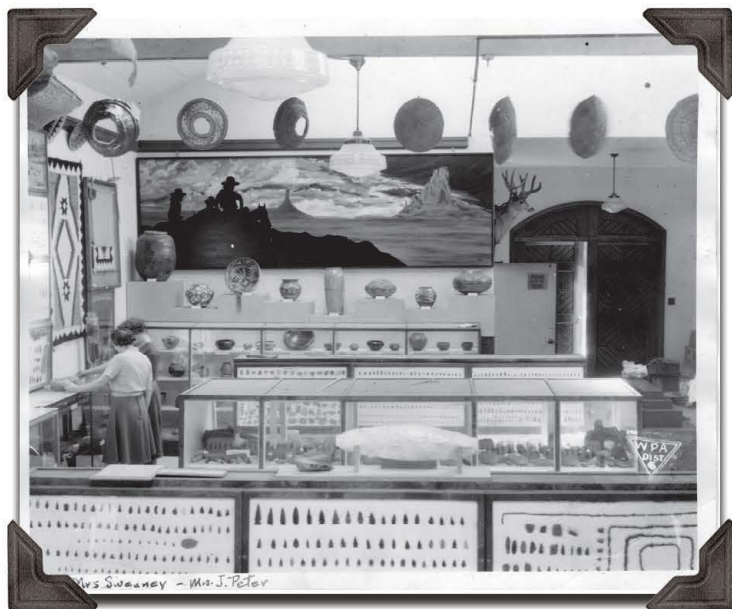
Bussman Hall
Groundbreaking
ceremony, 1938.
President Floyd
Bailey on left with
shovel.
Photo courtesy of
Santa Rosa Junior
College Archives.

The building was completed in 1939, and then the task of assembling exhibits began. Eleven skilled workers including carpenters, a taxidermist, artists, and clerks worked under the supervision of Jesse Peter's wife, Mabel Crane Peter, from December 1939 to May 5, 1940, when the museum was formally opened.

1940



WPA workers creating exhibits for the museum.
Photo from museum collection.



Mrs. Sweaney and Mrs. Mabel Peter working in
the museum, 1940. From museum collection.

1930's -1940's

The beloved black dog sculptures that guard the museum today have a storied history that traverses the country. This pair is one of only five sets that were cast from iron in a foundry in Baltimore, Maryland in 1850, and were modeled after the foundry owner's own Newfoundland dogs. This pair was purchased by a family on Lake Street in San Francisco in the early 1900's. The dogs were both damaged in the 1906 earthquake, so they were sent to a foundry owned by William James Yandle on 3rd and Wilson Streets in Santa Rosa for repair.

Evidently, after the repairs were made, the San Francisco owners never claimed them, so they became the property of the Yandles and were installed in front of their home in Santa Rosa. This photograph shows the granddaughters of W.J. Yandle sitting on one of the dogs.



Billie Firpo, who went on to work at the Santa Rosa Junior College in the Child Development Department from 1999-2003, is the younger of the two sisters pictured on the back of the iron dog. She provided this photograph.

1940's

In 1940, W.J. Yandle died, and his wife Lily, Ms. Firpo's grandmother, moved to a smaller house and rented out their home, where the dogs remained for several more years.

undated photo
of Museum
Courtesy of
the Santa Rosa
Junior College
Archives



In 1941, the United States entered World War II, and there was a shortage of metal due to wartime production. The government called for scrap metal drives. Communities melted down Civil War cannons and tore down wrought iron fences, sacrificing their history for their future. From Gaye Lebaron's July 18th, 2015 Press Democrat article: The Santa Rosa Plaza saw "...war bond rallies in the '40s; the Civil Defense "spotters' " shack on the roof in World War II, which followed not so far behind the big decision to take the cannon off the lawn and sell it for scrap metal (to Japan!)." Mrs. Lily L. Yandle, afraid that her dog sculptures would be stolen and turned into tanks, offered to loan them to Santa Rosa Junior College in 1943. Here the dogs have remained ever since, guarding the entrance to the museum, and under the care and feeding of our Facilities department.

How is SRJC Connected to the Smithsonian, NASA, and the Hope Diamond?

George Switzer, an SRJC student in the early 1930's, was born in Petaluma, California on June 11, 1915. Switzer accompanied Jesse Peter on the Carson City expedition in 1934 in search of dinosaur prints. In the late 1980's, Switzer donated several collections of photographs of historical importance to the Jesse Peter Museum, including the photo to the right.

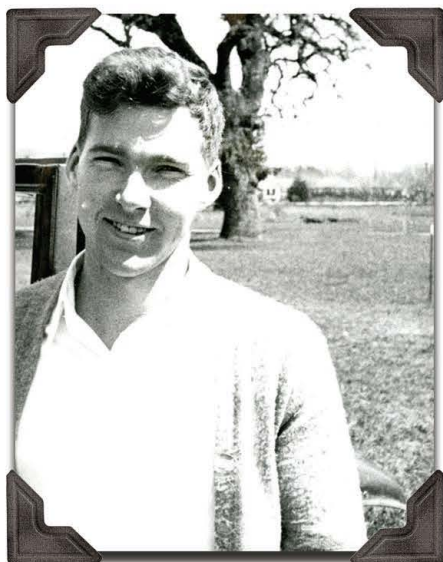
Switzer, having interests in both geology and photography, went on to become the Curator of Mineralogy at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C. Switzer became a major force behind the Smithsonian's research division. He applied for and received a grant from NASA, which allowed the Smithsonian to obtain an electron probe micro-analyzer for minerals during the 1970's. Switzer and other mineralogists used the micro-analyzer to examine samples of rock from the Moon which were brought back by the crews of the Apollo 15 and Apollo 16 missions. Switzer's research put the National Museum of Natural History at the forefront of geology.

Switzer orchestrated the donation of the famous 45.52 carat blue Hope Diamond to the Smithsonian in 1958. The acquisition of the Hope Diamond started the national gem collection at the museum.

Switzer's story illustrates how a quality education at Santa Rosa Junior College can lead to great things!



1934 Expedition to Carson City. Pictured left to right: George S. Switzer, Ed Lyman, William Nisson, Jesse Peter. photo courtesy of George Switzer.



George Switzer in the 1930's.
Photo Courtesy of the Santa Rosa Junior College Archives

1950's - 1960's



When the Jesse Peter Museum first opened its doors in 1940, the primary focus was on exhibiting the large collections of minerals and geological samples that had been accumulated and displayed in the SRJC Science Halls. Mrs. Mabel Peter oversaw the creation of exhibits of Native American pottery and projectile points that had been brought by her husband from the Southwest, in addition to mortar and pestles and baskets from Northern California. A collection of mounted birds and small animals, butterflies, moths, and other insects rounded out the Natural History aspect of the museum. In the words of Ernestine Smith- P.E. Teacher at SRJC from 1938-1973, "The Museum had a modest but interesting collection of items. There were shells, Indian baskets, insects, a two-headed calf, minerals, birds. The museum was used by I don't know how many thousands of Sonoma County school children." (from Santa Rosa Junior College; The Years of the Presidency of Randolph Newman 1957-1970)

Billie Firpo, who worked at Santa Rosa Junior College in the early 2000's and whose grandparents loaned the two black dog sculptures to SRJC, recalls visiting the museum as a teenager in the 1950's, and remembers the "rather grisly" two-headed calf exhibit.

By the late 1960's, the museum had been dismantled, and all of the artifacts were placed in storage.

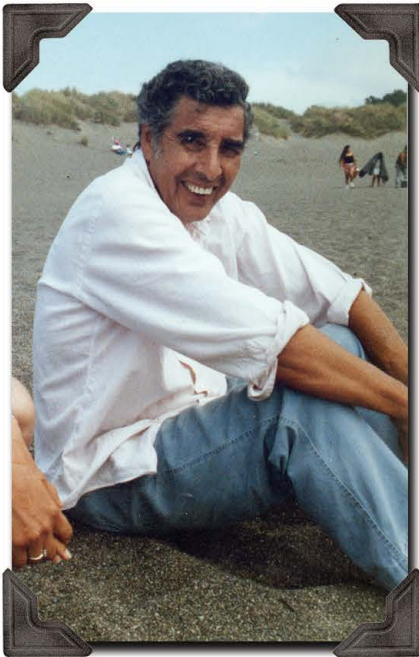


Jesse Peter Museum in 1940.
Photos from museum collection.

1970's

New life for the Museum.

William Vance Smith founded the Native American Studies program at SRJC in 1972. Smith, whose parents were Dry Creek Pomo and Bodega Bay Miwok, spent his childhood on the Dry Creek Rancheria. An extraordinary hands-on instructor, Smith determined that a Native American museum would be an ideal teaching tool. The Jesse Peter Museum, which had been closed for years, seemed the perfect solution.



After long discussions with the school administration, it was decided that the old museum building would be used to house both a fine arts gallery and a Native American museum, with a wall separating the two spaces. A wall was erected, and the Art Department took over the majority of the space. The much smaller, now walled off back area of the museum was given to Smith for the creation of a Native American museum.

Bill Smith in the 1970's.
Photo courtesy of Sherrie Smith-Ferri.

There was one small problem with the new museum: there was no door! After some persuasion with the administration, a hole about five feet high and a little less than four feet wide was cut out of the side of the museum, with a piece of plywood tacked up to act as a door for the next three months of summer break. Smith, with help from his sister Kathleen, several of his Native American students, and other members of the Pomo community, began the formidable task of hand building exhibits and office space in this small area. Two days before the formal opening, cement was poured for a walkway and a big double door was installed. The museum would become a reality at the beginning of fall semester, 1975.



Tribes, tradition in SRJC exhibit

A Native American exhibit emphasizing tribes of northwestern California opens with ceremonies from 2 to 5 p.m. Saturday at Santa Rosa Junior College.

The exhibit is the first phase in the restoration of the Jesse Peter Memorial Museum and is being coordinated by William V. Smith, coordinator of Native American studies at SRJC.

The opening will include dances by local groups and other traditional ceremonies.

Regular hours will be Sunday, 1 to 4 p.m., and Monday through Friday, 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Nine alternating displays are planned. They will include the history and development of money and trade among local tribes, a Pomo basket-making display, a one-quarter scale reproduction of a roundhouse, and a display of dance costumes.

The ethno-history of local tribes, tracing arrival and social organization, will be shown in another exhibit which draws on resource material from studies by the

Army Corps of Engineers.

The Lake County Pomo, who developed tule-balsa boats and houses, will be the focus of another display.

Artifacts from the Pashia Indians of the Southwest and from the Northwestern tribes also will be displayed.

The exhibit is housed in the Jesse Peter Memorial Museum, constructed as a Works Progress Administration project and completed in 1941. Peter collected the bulk of specimens in the old museum inventory. Some of the collection was acquired on expeditions to Rainbow Bridge and Monument Valley in 1933 and 1934. The Peter collection contains many specimens of arrowheads, baskets, pottery, cooking utensils and clothing. Smith said about one-quarter of the collection is from local tribes.

The Native American display will share the museum space with a contemporary art museum.

The museum is to have an advisory board representing six Pomo tribes, the Woots, and the Maidu Valley tribes.

POMO TULE-BALSA BOAT CREATED
Bernard Oandasan, Milton Lucas

— Jeff Lee Photos

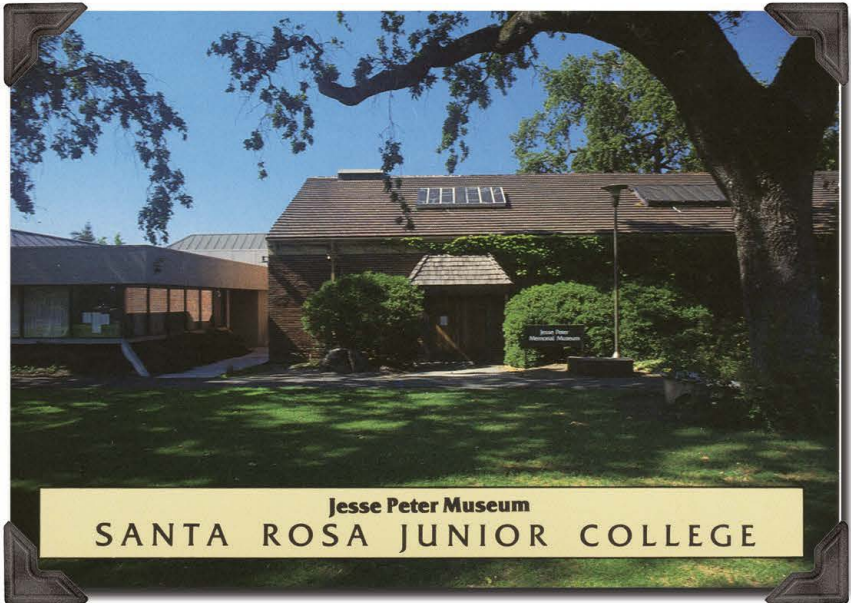
Empire

Weekend

Through Bill Smith's vision and persistence, the Jesse Peter Museum acquired one of the finest collections of California Native art in the United States.

1970's

In this small space, members of the local Native American community came to support Smith's efforts and create exhibits for the museum, including Elsie Allen, Laura Somersal, Milton "Bun" Lucas, Bernardo Oandasan, and many others.



Photograph of the museum entrance
From a postcard in the museum collection.

The museum became a major contributor to Santa Rosa Junior College's annual Day Under the Oaks; drawing the community to the college to enjoy and participate in Native American Dances, and giving voice and visibility to Native people through the Living Wall, an ever growing and evolving collection of photographs of contemporary Native Americans from across the country who have participated actively in our local community.

1970's - 2000's

Reclaiming the Museum

Benjamin Foley Benson, a full time Anthropology Instructor, stepped up to the plate to become the museum's longest sitting director, from 1979 into the mid 2000's. Benson continued the Native American focus, building a Southwest Pueblo display and deepening the relationships with local indigenous tribes.



Benson and an employee in the 1980's. Museum collection.

Under Benson's direction, the museum received several valuable donations, including a collection of Navajo textiles and other Native American artifacts from the Koncocti Girl Scouts Council in 1980, The Sonoma County Historical Society's collection of Native American art in the 1985, and the historically important Elsie Allen Basket Collection in 2003.

An extensive remodel of the museum took place in 2007 from Benson's own designs, adding new exhibit display cabinets, professional humidity and temperature monitoring, and a fresh new look. In the fall of 2008, the Jesse Peter Museum reclaimed the full museum, with a growing donor base and accreditation from the National Alliance of Museums. The inventory was computerized, and modern archival cabinetry installed for the preservation of the collection, which now exceeds 5,300 individual artifacts.

Looking to the Future

Today as we celebrate the 100 Year Anniversary of Santa Rosa Junior College, The Jesse Peter Multicultural Museum endures as one of the many gems of SRJC, contributing to the creative, aesthetic, and cultural development of our diverse community. Under the Direction of full time Anthropology instructor Theresa Molino, the museum continues to expand in a multicultural direction, entrusted by donors to preserve, cherish, and exhibit their collections from all over the world. As a venue of exploration and learning for students from SRJC and surrounding colleges, school children and the community, thousands of visitors pass through the doors of the museum each semester for enrichment and inspiration. We are indebted to the Santa Rosa Junior College for supporting us, and in return we open our arms in celebration of the diversity of our school, our community, and the world.



School children on a Museum Tour, 2017

Acknowledgments

Thank You

This history project has been made possible through the shared enthusiasm and assistance of many people. I would like to mention several super heroes who took the time to point me in the the right direction, dig up archival documents, give oral histories, scan old slides and negatives for the museum, and loan personal items to help put together all the pieces that illustrate this story.

The Santa Rosa Junior College Archives

Benjamin Foley Benson

The Press Democrat

Sherrie Smith-Ferri

Billie Firpo

Jesse Hilsenrad

Adrienne Leihy

Amy Malaise

Theresa Molino

Josh Pinaula

Simona Stefanescu

To individually name each person who has donated their knowledge, talents, or collections to the Museum over the last eight decades would be nearly impossible, but we appreciate each and every one and are filled with gratitude for their contributions to the Jesse Peter Multicultural Museum Collection.

Rachel Minor - Museum Supervisor / Curator



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Jesse Peter
Multicultural
MUSEUM



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