

# Maturango Museum News

Preserve, interpret and develop an appreciation for the natural and cultural history of the Northern Mojave Desert.

100 E. Las Flores Ave., Ridgecrest, CA 93555

Open Monday – Saturday 10 am – 5 pm, Sunday Noon – 4pm

760.375.6900 [www.maturango.org](http://www.maturango.org)

Death Valley Tourist Center Northern Mojave Visitor Center

## Museum Director's Notes

*By Debbie Benson, Director*

“Love is the whole and more than all” e.e. cummings

When looking back through my notes of January and February weather, I see words hinting at the confusion between the light frosts in the night with pleasant days and the years where we were held in ice for a time. Once again, waist-high mustard plants with their thick stalks and dark rich leaves are joining with mallow to create a lush jungle. Stickers and grasses cover the ground and are keeping the Museum's volunteer garden team very busy. It's all very interesting and we are optimistic for the wildflowers! A great job was done on the last clean-up and the help is always appreciated! We are looking forward to further progress in the Pollinator garden. The layout and work done by Bernie's Landscaping was amazing and truly opened up a new view in the garden. Many thanks to everyone who is making this happen!

This is an active time of year when we start planning more outside tours and activities. Please watch our website and check our events. If you're planning some outings of your own and would like some ideas on where to go, we have information and books in the Gift Store as well as some great advice. Make sure to have your photo-taking device charged and ready! There is so much to see! The hills are green and some flowers are popping up.

## Maturango Museum's Annual Meeting

Sunday March 1, 2 pm

Gather with your friends at the Museum, meet our new Board members and our Staff.

We hope to see you there!

Thank you for your help and support for these many years and your belief in the importance in what we do and contribute to our community. You make all the difference. We hope you will have a chance to stop by! Be Well! My best to you all!

## Free Saturday: Make Valentine's Cards, February 14, 11am – 2pm



The special challenge this year is to make and write a Valentine to yourself: I will hold them for approximately one month and then mail them. You'll get a special greeting from your “past” self.

You do not need to do the challenge, just make whatever tickles your fancy. Lots of supplies will be available.

All ages are welcome with adult supervision.



## Children's Hour: "Spiders - Spinners of Webs and Catchers of Bugs"

**Friday February 27, 10:30 – 11:30am**



What would it be like to walk on eight legs; to make many kinds of webs, some beautiful and some messy looking; and even to spin a silk line to "balloon" through the air from one place to another? Through the story "The Very Busy Spider" by Eric Carle, other stories, spidery action songs, and a craft, the children will learn about some of these tiny crawly creatures.

Children's Hour is a free program for young children and their families offered from September to May. Begun by a group of volunteer docents in 2009, it continues to encourage both learning and appreciation of books, and the Mojave desert/hearby mountains. Each program theme is explored through storybooks, songs, action activities, crafts and natural history exhibits from the docents' collection. Curiosity and questions from children are encouraged!

More information about Children's Hour can be found on [www.Maturango.org](http://www.Maturango.org) or by calling 760-375-6900. The museum is open every day (except major holidays) Monday through Saturday, 10:00 to 5:00 and Sunday noon – 4pm.

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### Help Us Make Children's Hour Better

We would like to provide a program that meets the needs of our community. Please write an e-mail to [Nora@maturango.org](mailto:Nora@maturango.org) with your comments and suggestions.

- How did you first learn about Children's Hour?
- Can you suggest a more effective way to communicate with the public community?
- Would a different day of the week or time be better for you?
- What do you like about Children's Hour?
- Any other suggestions to get this wonderful program known to our community...

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### Docent Doings

*By Nora Nuckles, Education Coordinator*

Time certainly does fly by! The docents were busy during the month of December and into the New Year. We gave 12 programs to about 265 people, both children and adults. The Children's Hour docents delivered a wonderful program for preschoolers. The program consisted of stories, activities, songs, and crafts! Imagine using a fan to simulate the wind with the children participating in moving a cloud, a white bed sheet overhead. The children also made their very own wind socks to take home.

The next Children's Hour is on Feb. 27 and features "Spiders." For those of you highly afraid of Arachnids, do not worry; we will have no live spiders! The Children's Hour docents, Charlotte Goodson, Shirley Crouse, Sue Parker, Ingrid Carroll and Susan Moore would like to increase publicity so our community can take full advantage of Children's Hour. Please tell anyone you know about this special activity each month.

The art docents under the leadership of Carol Dezellem and Cam Alden have completed teaching their lessons on the art elements to the 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, and 6<sup>th</sup> grade students at Pierce Arts Academy. In case you are wondering, the art elements the docents address are line, shape, form, texture, color/value, and space.

Pierce Arts Academy will have an art exhibit at the Museum in the Sylvia Winslow from May 10-23.

The docents will be teaching Geology and Weather for various classes in January and February. Other requests for February are pouring in.

We thank Mark Pahuta for showing his Hidden Ridgecrest videos to the residents at High Desert Haven. In that way he is also acting as one of our docents. This month, docents Dan and Brenda Burnett and Bob Parker, will give a presentation on winter birds to the residents of High Desert Haven.

If you would like to consider becoming a Maturango Museum docent, please join us at our next meeting in the Coso Room on Tuesday Feb. 3 at 10am. If you have any questions, please call me, Nora, at the Maturango Museum, 760-375-6900.

## Searles Valley Historical Society Museums Field Trip – Saturday March 7

Most of these museums are “appointment only” but we’re in luck! We’ve made the arrangements to visit each of them. We’ll be visiting the Fire Museum, History House, Trona Railway Museum and Caboose, Archives, and the Old Guest House Museum. Docents will be on-hand at each location to guide us through their rich history and their exhibits. Want to peruse at your own pace? You can do that as well during the time we are at each area.

Our journey will start at the Maturango Museum and we’ll drive over to Trona through Poison Canyon. By the way, did you know that the “real name” of Poison Canyon is Salt Wells Canyon?



We’ll make a brief stop at the Trona Pinnacles turn off to view two monuments; John Searles’ Freight Wagon Route Monument and the Epsom Salts Monorail Monument. If you want to learn more about the Epsom Salts Monorail, Maturango Museum has a great book on this subject as well as a great display in the Museum.

From there we’ll continue to the Fire Museum. Inside this museum are two antique fire engines, a 1924 Stutz and a 1938 Ahren-Fox. Displays in the Fire Museum include 20 photographs of major fires in Argus, Borosolvay, and

Trona and other fire memorabilia.

We’ll then make a quick stop at the Trona Rest Stop to take care of business and proceed to the History House, Caboose, and Railway Museum.

The History House is one of the oldest residential houses in Trona (built around 1920) and is a treasure trove of items from yesteryear. The Trona Railway Museum displays artifacts from the Trona Railway and the Caboose will be open to those able to navigate the steep stairs to get in and out.



Be sure to bring a picnic lunch. We’ll head over to the Archives when we are done at the History House. They have tables in the Archive building where we can eat our lunch. Before or after you eat your lunch, you can peruse through the Archives. There is so much to see! If you prefer to eat at one of the local restaurants in Trona, we’ll have a “meet time” at our final stop.



After lunch we’ll head to our final stop, the Old Guest House Museum. This building was built around 1917 and is one of the oldest buildings in Searles Valley. Originally it was built as four apartments and was remodeled as a guest house with twelve rooms for visitors to Trona. The twelve rooms show events in Searles Valley from the early mining days to present plant ownership. Since this is our final stop, once you have finished viewing all the cool “stuff”, you can head back, we just ask that you let the Leader of the Field Trip know you are leaving.

9am: meet at the Maturango Museum for check in. Participants will be required to sign a liability waiver. Car caravan will be organized and for those that want to carpool, we’ll figure it out there.

The cost is \$35 for adult museum members (\$60 for 2 adults), \$40 adult non-members (\$70 for 2). No Pets. Sign up at [shop.maturango.org](http://shop.maturango.org) or come to the Gift Store.

Be sure you have enough gas (less than 100 miles round trip), car and tires in good running order. Usual dress code for field trips applies: hat, sunscreen, comfortable walking shoes, layered clothing, water, camera (although some of the buildings ask no photographs). It is better to have these items and not need them, than need them and not have them.



Bring a picnic lunch to eat while we are at the Archives.

Cancellation Policy: If the Museum cancels your trip, you will be given a full refund or you may transfer the money to a different trip. No cash refunds will be given if you cancel.



## Our New Curation Building

By Elaine Wiley

It all started in August 2018 with a generous donation from the Jack Shrader Trust. Dr. Jack Shrader was a highly respected and compassionate medical doctor in Ridgecrest. He was also a generous supporter of the Maturango Museum. Since the museum's mission is to preserve, interpret, and develop an appreciation for the natural and cultural history of the Indian Wells Valley, it was decided to use this funding to protect and preserve many large historical artifacts by relocating them to a covered building. Therefore, in 2019, the museum allocated this donation for a building to safeguard these large outdoor historic items, along with other curatorial pieces.

In May 2019, the museum contracted with Abilities Unlimited to begin constructing a 40' x 60' metal building. However, the earthquakes occurred, and Abilities Unlimited was overwhelmed with work at the Naval Air Weapons Station.

In February 2021, the museum contracted with James Bell for the same type of metal building. Construction started in 2024 and finished later that year. To meet county requirements, access to a bathroom was necessary. The museum decided to connect the building to the main museum with a sidewalk for bathroom access. That's why we have the charming curved pathway from the gazebo through the garden!

To provide a structure to mount items for display and protect the building's insulation, we decided to cover the interior walls with Oriented Strand Board (OSB) up to 8 feet high. We also wanted electrical outlets throughout the building. The interior finishing work began on December 13, 2025, starting with framing, then electrical wiring, OSB installation, and finally painting the OSB in an off-white shade. The interior work was completed by mid-January 2026.



We had an excellent team of volunteers assisting with the interior finishing. Their skills, talent, and willingness to contribute are invaluable. Thank you for your dedication to this project and to the Maturango Museum! Thank you to the following volunteers – Debbie Breitenstein, Dan Burnett, Jay Chun, Dorie Cornell, Steve Farmer, BJ Holden, Peter Lesniak, Renee Lesniak, Howard McCauley, Bob McGowan, Terry McGuire, Tom Roseman, Tom Sakai, Larry Sawyer, Bob Westbrook, Peter Wiley, Elaine Wiley, and Peter Woodman.



Also, the Kerncrest Audubon Society, with the help of Maturango Museum volunteers, has installed antennas and associated receivers on the new curation building, which will become a Motus Station. Motus is an international research community working together to study the movement and behaviour of birds, bats, and insects. These animals carry miniaturized tags that transmit information to stations placed across the landscape. This powerful conservation tool transforms how we understand and protect biodiversity. (Motus.org)

### Mark Pahuta's Photo Exhibit: "Ridgecrest and Eastern Sierra"

Exhibit runs through March 3, 2026



Mark received a B.A. in History at Humboldt State University and an M.F.A. in Cinema at the University of Southern CA. A filmmaker and still photographer, he came to the Indian Wells Valley in 1976 for a career of more than 40 years at China Lake in the Film and Video Branch. Many of his photographs are in the permanent collection of the Maturango Museum. The Museum has also published his audiovisual productions, "Between Two Worlds: Rock Art of the Cosos" and "Indian Wells Valley: Somewhere on the Edge of Nowhere". Mark has created numerous video productions for other organizations, including the Ridgecrest Chamber of Commerce. The Museum has published two books, "Ridgecrest Retrospective" and "High Desert Double Exposure" with Mark as photographer.

## Natural History

By Sherry Brubaker, Natural History Coordinator

There have been some interesting questions from visitors lately. One being what happens to the extra items that come into the museum?

In Natural History the question regarding a donated item, usually a bird that has been killed due to a window strike, is do we need that particular bird species? This goes for mammals and reptiles as well. If the species is needed in the collection, (it's something we don't have) or the docents don't have or need to replace, the item is placed in the freezer with a copy of the donation form. This form includes as much information possible about the critter; such as where it was found, circumstance of demise, what the critter is, date, time found, and how long the critter has been in the freezer already.

The donor is advised that once the critter is in museum possession it belongs to the museum. Some donations are taken before the curator sees the critter. When the determination is made that the critter is needed either by the docents or for display, arrangements are made with a taxidermist to have it prepared and mounted. This alone is a lengthy process.

If the critter is not needed or is too damaged to use it is disposed of properly and with dignity. The museum's ability to take (salvage) dead critters is through a process of permitting both through the State of California and through the Fish and Wildlife Service (Federal). The critters cannot be sold, or given to other organizations. Through the taxidermist, who has more extensive permits, the museum has traded or passed on extra items for other more needed species as our permit allows.

## Wildflowers

By Elaine Wiley

Throughout December 2025 and January 2026, certain wildflowers took advantage of the abundant rainfall in the fall of 2025 and the mild temperatures to flourish and bloom. Currently, in the Rademacher Hills, you can smell the sweet scent of Lacy Phacelia (*Phacelia tanacetifolia*). The Lacy Phacelias are clustered around the creosote bushes, along with another common phacelia, Yellow Throats (*Phacelia fremontii*). Yellow Throats are one of the early spring flowers seen in the Rademacher Hills. Mustards are another wildflower that benefited from the fall rainfall and mild temperatures. They grow everywhere—in yards, open areas, alongside roadways, and in the desert. Then there's the hardy and invasive Storkbill, also known as Filaree (*Erodium cicutarium*), which is also spreading rapidly everywhere. The plant has a delicate purple flower, but the seeds tend to get into socks and dog fur and can be poky and irritating. Desert plants follow their own schedule; some species bloom early, while others prefer mid-season, and still others wait until May or June to bloom.

So, where are we at with spring flowers? Will we have a super bloom? Will the wildflowers bloom in early March instead of the typical blooming season of April? Will the blooming plants last until the Wildflower Exhibit during the weekend of April 10-12, 2026? Good questions. The fall rains show great promise for a good wildflower season. Let's hope the wildflowers show their colors in mass this spring!

Regardless of when the wildflowers decide to grow and bloom, the Wildflower Exhibit date is set for April 10-12, 2026. Our collectors always find them, as many wildflowers in the Sierra canyons bloom later than those in the valley.

We look forward to a colorful spring and a great showing of wildflowers at the Wildflower Exhibit!



## Janet Westbrook Obituary

Janet Westbrook, well-known Naturalist and Biology Professor Emeritus at Cerro Coso College, passed away peacefully in Ridgecrest on 24 August, 2025.

She was born in Riverside, CA, to John (Wally) and Ruth Gerhart, grew up in Long Beach. Early evidence of her lifelong interest in nature and outdoor activities was initiated by family travels to national parks and as a Campfire Girl. She attended Long Beach City College, followed by receiving her Bachelor's Degree from UC Santa Barbara. She then went to UC Berkeley for her Master' and teaching credentials.

Janet started teaching 9th grade Science at Burroughs High School in 1966. At that time, single teachers were eligible to live on base, which she did. There was almost no "town" of Ridgecrest in those days. She then taught at Bakersfield Community College, Ridgecrest Campus. She became a plank holder when Cerro Coso Community College was created in 1973 with a faculty of 12. She taught biology, botany, zoology, chemistry, first aid and backpacking. She led many field trips for Cerro Coso covering subjects like wildflowers, meadows, the Owens Lake, and one of her favorites Death Valley. Her tours were always popular, and well attended. She retired from Cerro Coso in 2012 and was awarded Professor Emeritus.

She was formerly married to Bob Westbrook.

She was an ardent environmentalist, loving deserts, mountains and trees. She participated in and supported many environmental causes and organizations. One of her pride-and-joy items was her adobe house with a central atrium that she designed and helped build, then lived in for over 40 years. Traveling was one of her interests, especially nature-focused trips. She has visited all 7 continents, over 115 countries, and has seen everything from polar bears in the Arctic to penguins in the Antarctic. She was proud of having seen every species of penguin.

She gave regular lectures and slide shows at the Maturango Museum sharing her world adventures. She became involved with the Maturango Museum when it was still on the China Lake Navy base. Her first job there was to stuff an eagle for display. She served on the Board and contributed untold hours of ideas, time, effort and financial contributions. She kept doing her field trips, now through the Museum. She thoroughly enjoyed railroad outings, especially if they included steam engines. She had a number of close friends who were also railroad enthusiasts. She would drive quite some distance to see the Union Pacific's giant steam locomotive, the Big Boy, number 4014. She liked paddle-wheelers on the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers and fall colors in the eastern USA. She was a long-time supporter and member of the Utah Shakespeare Festival, proudly wearing a special pin denoting how many years she had been attending. Closer to home, she was a long-time supporter of the Indian Wells Valley Concert Association, and later the Ridgecrest Chamber Music Association. She was a founder of the Kennedy Meadows First Aid Team, and a well-respected first aid teacher for them. She also obtained their first radio communications license for that team. She also earned a pilot's license.

For over 50 years she was a member of the China Lake Mountain Rescue Group, amongst other duties teaching first aid and CPR, as well as being one of the callout coordinators. She was editor of their newsletter, The Talus Pile, for years. She has been honored by the Kern County Sheriff's Office for her work with the CLMRG.

Another interest was photography, including having a custom darkroom built in her home. She did like being a member of a wine tasting group. Quote: "One of the fun things about being in this valley was opportunities galore. I can do more things here that I couldn't do in a [city]. I intend to stay. I love this place."

Janet is survived by her brother Bego Gerhart and his wife Lisa De Rees, of Moab, Utah; her cousin Tom Mason and his wife Sophia of Tucson and Hawaii; and her special friend Dr. Edwin Royce of Kennedy Meadows, Ca. She is also survived by her beloved cat, Kittie.

A Celebration of Life will be planned for a future date, likely in the Spring of 2026.

In lieu of flowers, donations may be made to Maturango Museum. See their website for ways to donate: <https://maturango.org/>

An estate sale at Janet's house is planned for Friday April 17 – Sunday April 19. More information later. All proceeds will go the Maturango Museum

**Maturango Museum  
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100 E. Las Flores Ave., Ridgecrest, CA 93555  
Open Mon - Sat 10 am – 5 pm  
Sunday noon – 4pm (except major holidays)

**Staff**

Debbie Benson, Museum Director  
Maureen Goff, Store Manager/Buyer  
Barbara Bane, M.A., RPA, Archaeology Curator  
Nadia Mohsen, Curation Technician  
Terry McGuire, History Curator  
Sherry Brubaker, Natural History Curator  
Andrea Pelch, Art Gallery Coordinator,  
Newsletter Editor  
Nora Nuckles, Education Coordinator,  
Museum Assistant  
Barbara Ingle, Membership, Donations,  
Museum Assistant

Leslie Layfield, Accounting Bookkeeper  
Heidi Farmer, Accounting  
Addie Reyes, Website

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Bob Westbrook, Strategic Planning  
Bev Hill, Gardens

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**Donations**

Francina van der Hoek

**Year End Appeal**

Jeanette Davis  
Gretchen Whisenand

**New Members**

Michelle L Moore

## Upcoming and Ongoing Events

- **Free Saturday:** Make Valentine Cards, Saturday Feb 14, 11am – 2pm
- **Children's Hour:** “**Spiders**”, Feb 27, 10:30 – 11:30 am
- **Mark Pahuta's Photo Exhibit “Ridgecrest and Eastern Sierra”:** exhibit through Mar 3
- **Searles Valley Historical Society Museums Field Trip:** Saturday March 7
- **Wildflower Exhibit:** April 10 - 12

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