

Group works to preserve region's history

By Carl Robinette

THE STAR-NEWS CORRESPONDENT

The South Bay Historical Society is fighting to keep the history and culture of South Bay alive as small towns across the United States are disappearing, according to the most recent census data from 2010, said Steven Schoenherr, president of the historical society.

"That's been a trend ever since World War II. Small towns are disappearing," said Schoenherr. "We're all embraced by the San Diego metropolitan center and the small towns are losing their distinctive character and being absorbed into a larger society."

When the Chula Vista Historical Society was disbanded after the death of its founder John Rojas in 2000, membership was about 600 people and its absence left a hole in South Bay's culture, said Schoenherr.

"There was a gap. There was something missing, so a couple of us got together to give it a rebirth," said Schoenherr. "Chula Vista has still maintained some of its character, a main street lined with small shops and parks. People want to preserve that. It doesn't have to disappear. It can be saved, but if you don't do anything about it, it will gradually disappear."

The South Bay Historical Society was established in 2013 and currently has 123 members. He hopes to grow the current society's membership but expects it to take many years to reach the numbers the Chula Vista group saw at its end.

Schoenherr has had a lifelong passion for his-

tory and started pursuing it seriously in college after studying law as an undergrad. Professionally his focus was American history, teaching and researching everything from the American Colonial history to the Civil War and World War II until he retired in 2007.

"Now that I'm retired I still do it; I just don't do it for money," said Schoenherr. "It's something that I find personally fulfilling. It's not a job, it's a career and it's something you do every day. It's like being a detective. You're trying to find out something that has been hidden, and I still enjoy doing it after all these years."

These days his focus is on the small towns of South Bay from National City down to San Ysidro. The historical society's mission is to compile, preserve and educate local residents on the history of South Bay.

The group also works to protect historic artifacts and landmarks such as a Stonebridge farm near the Otay Valley which had been the last remaining farm in Chula Vista. They lost that fight as the property was sold and is currently under private development.

Now they have their eye set on preserving the old South Bay salt works as a historic site. The Salt works has been in operation since 1870 and has been a major part of the area's industrial history.

The group meets quarterly and their next meeting will be April 17 with guest speaker Mike McCoy, a well-known environmentalist and founder of the research reserve at the Tijuana River Valley Estuary.