By Sean T. Kelly
Special to the Times

Carlton B. Craighead stands on his unique property in the Evergreen foothills retirement community, giving an informal historical tour to about 30 people.

He points toward a unique architectural element of the property's almost 120-year-old mansion, pauses for a moment and then smiles as if he's revealing a secret.

"Few people know the significance of the architects who designed this place," he says. "There are stories to tell here—many, many stories."

The real-estate specialist owns the Wehner Mansion, also called the "Cribari Mansion" for the Cribari wine family who lived there between the 1930s and 1950s. However, Craighead—a resident of The Villages himself—has come to learn this place was known far earlier by yet another name, "Villa Lomas Azules," or Blue Hills Estate.

While Craighead discovered the name fairly easily, the most interesting details about the property and its residents emerged only after he poured through stacks of public records he pulled together from around the country.

What Craighead has uncovered, he believes to be of great historical importance to not only the Evergreen community, but to Silicon Valley as a whole. "This house was central to the valley's wine trade," he says.

"Its architects, its residents—all had a significant impact on
local history, if not the entire world." As such, he has brought these people here to share the story and gain support for a significant restoration effort.

**Mansion's original owner**

Craighead, briefly explains the site's history with a genuine affection. "The first owner of the mansion, William Wehner, paid $20,000 for 718 spring-watered foothill acres in the Evergreen area of San Jose in 1887," he says.

"The original estate comprised a three-story, Queen Ann-style, 6,500 square-foot building with a full basement, and two detached buildings of 500 square feet each, known as the Summer Kitchen and Garden House," he continues.

Although rundown and in desperate need of repair, all three buildings still stand on the property.

He goes on to explain that William Wehner is known best as the creator of the world's largest painting, a "cyclorama" on display in Atlanta. The painting measures an incredible four stories high and nearly 400 feet long, and displays the entire scene of the Battle of Atlanta in 1864.

It was, in a sense, a precursor to our modern movie theater—a notable achievement even by today's standards. Wehner eventually moved here to develop vineyards and make wine.

**Mansion's architect**

The mansion architect, David Burnham, became perhaps the most influential modern architect in the world, on par with Frank Lloyd Wright. He designed the world's first skyscraper and created the "White City," the Chicago site of the legendary 1893 World's Fair.

Incredible details about Burnham can be found in the gripping non-fiction book "Devil in the White City," by Erik Larson, which tells the true story of Burnham's World Fair efforts side by side with those of another man—a serial killer who used a hotel near the World Fair site to lure his victims.

Later, the Cribari wine family did own the estate from 1933—when prohibition was lifted—to 1959. Another famous area winery, Mirassou, stored wines in a cellar on the estate.
On Oct. 17, 1989, the Mansion was designated a historic landmark building by the city of San Jose. It has also been nominated for the National Registry.

Raising support
The fate of the estate, however, depends mostly on Craighead's ability to raise interest and support from various organizations and individuals, from the City of San Jose and the Villages to private donors—which may not be easy.

He has already given a number of presentations summarizing the history of the storied mansion to members of The Villages, suggesting the community can receive revenues from the Historic San Jose City Landmark Building, once fully restored, if it will allow visits to the mansion by outsiders.

Many tourist sites generate significant income not only from visitor fees but also from secondary sources, such as donations, private dinners, and weddings. Craighead explained that some of the profits gathered from the site might be distributed in some form among community residents, perhaps directly toward reducing the cost of monthly housing dues.

Some Village residents have expressed concerns that a tourist location within community borders might create problems typically associated with public use, including increased traffic and noise.

Craighead, however, suggests that he could alleviate these concerns by providing tourists guided transport to the site from an offsite staging area, thereby restricting traffic to only one or two additional vehicles. The guide would provide essential monitoring of public activity.

He also suggests that this plan would provide the ideal scenario for the mansion, seeing that its rightful place in history is preserved.

Craighead says that's the most important thing to him. The place has even inspired in him a new career in historical restoration.

"The history, the research, the lives that lived here—being part of preserving their story appeals to me right now like nothing else," he says. "And this is just the start."

An ambitious man, Craighead says he's also working on a plan to restore all the missions in California. If he can do that, he may just secure his own spot in history.

To find out more about Villa Lomas Azules or to provide support, email Carlton Craighead at wehnermansion@webtv.net.