

His Sohm words

Photo-historian whose images capture spirit of democracy speaks at Channel City Club

By **BOB ENGSTROM**
NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT

EW Santa Barbara's window on the world, the Channel City Club, opened its holiday season with a presentation by Joseph Sohm of his book of photography and essays spanning his three-decade journey photographing democracy.

Mr. Sohm was the featured speaker at the club's holiday luncheon Wednesday at Fess Parker's Doubletree Resort, where he presented sections of the video version of his book, "Visions of America: Photographing Democracy."

Mr. Sohm said his journey across 50 states shooting thousands of images for the book was an epic journey of

"10,000 days and 1,000 nights in a Motel 6" as he traveled the backroads and byways of the country attempting to capture the embodiment of democracy.

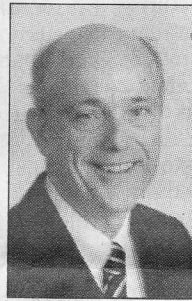
He said the idea of illustrating such an abstract concept arose many years ago after one of his teachers wrote the abbreviation "U.S." on a blackboard.

"We, meaning us, are the U.S.," he said. "Over time, I figured out how to do it."

The book contains 13 chapters with 1,300 photographs and 31 essays written by the photographer to form a mosaic portrait of all the people and places that make up the most multicultural nation in history. He has expanded the book's theme into a series of video presentations narrated by award-winning actor/director Clint Eastwood with original music and lyrics by Alan and Marilyn Bergman.

"It's a beautiful book," said Judy Hill, Channel City Club's executive director. "I've never seen anything like it."

Mr. Sohm is an American history



Joseph Sohm

teacher whose passion for photography led him to become a photo-historian. His work has been published by National Geographic, Time, the New York Times, the Washington Post and the Wall Street Journal and used by numerous broadcasters.

Mr. Sohm's two great loves are history and photography and the question of how to translate the abstract to the concrete by photographing

democracy sustained him during the 30 years he devoted to the project.

He started on the banks of the Mississippi River in his hometown of St. Louis, where he was part of the high school class CBS called "the most typical in America." His heroes include Thomas Jefferson, Alexis de Tocqueville, Benjamin Franklin, Marquis de Lafayette and John Quincy Adams, the first president to be photographed, but Mr. Sohm considers himself a common man. At one speaking engagement, the organizers misspelled his name, making him Joe Shmo, a character in Al Capp's "Lil' Abner" comic strip who embodies the common man.

"I had an appropriate resume to photograph democracy," he said, "but we are all witnesses to history and I became a photo-historian."

American politics was transformed forever by the power of the lens and the camera, said Mr. Sohm. He noted that prior to the advent of photography, many Americans did not know what their president looked like. During the course of his work, Mr. Sohm has photographed thousands of places, people and events, including every president and presidential candidate since Jimmy Carter.

"My story is a love story. There is much about America to love," said Mr. Sohm. "Much is given to us and much is expected in return."

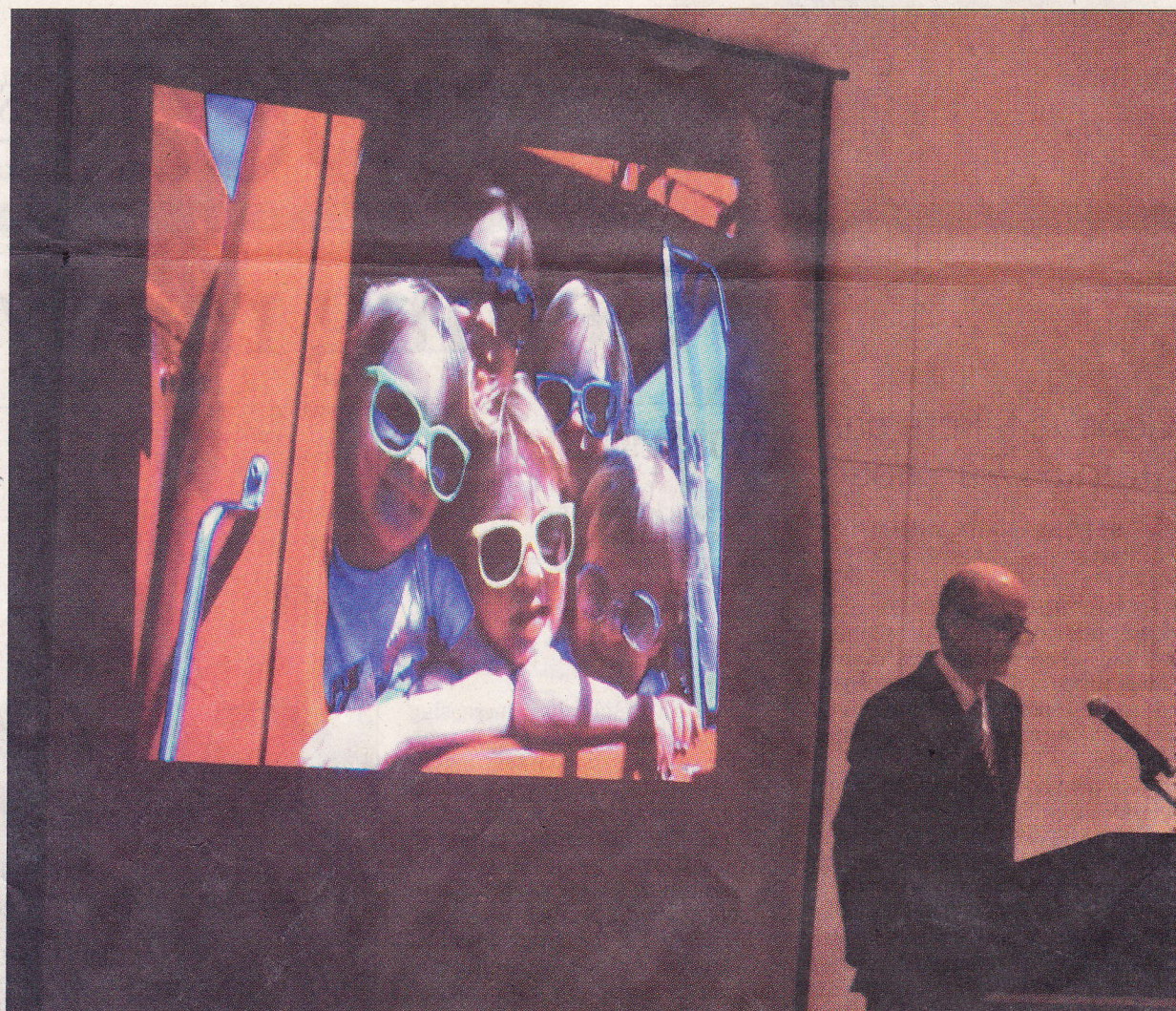
The chapters of the book he presented at the luncheon ranged from Main Street America, the American family and the natural wonders of the country that all Americans own.

"Democracy cannot be captured in a single picture," he said. "Democracy is deep within the hearts of us — it is the story of we the people."

The Montecito Union School Choir, directed by Pam McLendon and accompanied by pianist Anna Abbey, entertained the 125-plus attendees with Christmas carols and Hanukkah favorites.

Mr. Sohm and his wife, Leslie, live in Ojai, where they run a photography and production studio. For more information about Mr. Sohm, his books, and photography, visit his Web site at www.visionsofamerica.com.

e-mail: bengstrom@newspress.com



STEVE MALONE / NEWS-PRESS

Photo-historian Joseph Sohm talks about the images in the Main Street USA chapter of his book "Visions of America: Photographing Democracy" during the Channel City Club's holiday luncheon.

December 2009

Dear Mr. Sohm:

As a valued speaker mentioned in our recent newsletter we want to thank you, again, for your time and excellent presentation to members and their guests of the Channel City Club.

Very best wishes.

Cordially,



Judith Hill
Executive Director

*Wonderful program
for our Society! Good
Luncheon! You travel
across the Country
with your inspirational
message and pictures!
J.*