



The Placer

2021 November-December Volume 24, Issue 6

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Administrator's Notes

by Ralph Gibson, Museums Administrator

The Old Auburn Cemetery Tour was a much-welcomed event as some of our programs and activities are finally coming back after a year of shutdowns due to COVID. There were 460 visitors to the Cemetery Tour who were eager to get out of the house and do something fun and interesting. It was, by far, the most people we've ever had for the Cemetery Tour. The Ghost Tours, too, are underway and the tickets sold out in just minutes. But this is the Holiday edition of the Placer, so I need to pivot to Christmas Trees and twinkling lights.

We are preparing for S'mores & Stories at the Bernhard Museum on Friday, December 10th from 5:00 to 8:00 pm. We'll have the museum open for night tours; a campfire where we'll roast marshmallows, make s'mores and tell stories; and serve hot cocoa. But before that program begins, there is going to be a very special ceremony commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the effort to save the Bernhard House by the Placer County Historical Museum Foundation (now the Placer County Historical Foundation) and the Placer County Historical Society. Two plaques will be unveiled. One will be an interpretive plaque that tells the story of the house & restoration and the other will recognize the Bernhard House for being on the National Register of Historic Places. The ceremony will kick off at 4:30 pm.



As always, the Museum spaces on the first floor of the Historic Courthouse will be open from 5:00 pm to 8:00 pm for Old Town's Classic Christmas event on December 11th and 18th. Kids can decorate an ornament and we'll provide free hot apple cider and cookies! We hope to see you at the Bernhard on the 10th at 4:30 and at the Courthouse for Old Town's Classic Christmas!

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Observing the Universe in Placer County

by Kelsey Monahan, Curator of Archives

In 1945 a group of astronomy enthusiasts founded the Sacramento Valley Astronomical Society (SVAS). The Society grew quickly and by 1948 they had 80 active members and 400 associate members. The Society was made up of people of all different ages and professions, all with a passion for star gazing. In addition to holding regular meetings, the group held lectures, viewing events, and telescope maker forums.



In the early 1960s the Sacramento Valley Astronomical Society decided to build an observatory near Colfax, on the property of Bill Fisher, an SVAS member. Society members worked on almost every aspect of the project: designing the telescope, building its machinery, and even cutting and gridding the glass for the telescope's mirror. When completed in 1969, the observatory was dedicated to Carl E. Wells, a charter member of the SVAS and recipient of the G. Bruce Blair gold medal for service to amateur astronomy.



The Carl E. Wells Observatory was in use until about the 1980s, when the Henry Grieb Observatory was built in Blue Canyon. The Sacramento Valley Astronomical Society still uses the Blue Canyon observatory to this day to fulfill its mission to foster interest in astronomy, to encourage and assist members in the study of astronomy, and in the making and use of astronomical instruments.

Sacramento Valley Astronomical Society, c. 1964. Courtesy of Max Heiges

News from the Placer County Historical Society

By April McDonald-Loomis, President

Greetings from the Placer County Historical Society

I missed the last Society Dinner in October but hear it was quite a success. Anne Holmes gave a great presentation on Dutch Flat. This was our first dinner meeting since the restrictions on gatherings due to Covid restrictions. We certainly hope all will be back on schedule from now on. Our next dinner meeting is scheduled for December 2nd at the Veteran's Hall. It is our annual raffle, so if you have anything to donate it would be very appreciated if you could bring it along! We will also hold our long delayed election of Board Officers.

I also missed the annual Cemetery Tour that the Museums and the Docent Guild sponsored. It too was a great success. Our own membership chair, Carol Cramer, is the mastermind behind this terrific event. I understand the attendance was over 400 people! Speaking of Carol Cramer, she is also the recipient of the 2021 History Award. This is a great honor and one richly deserved. Carol has been involved in so many of the museum's programs and is a terrific Walking Tour guide, we are delighted she has been recognized for her many contributions to local history. On December 10th she will be awarded the honor at the 50th Anniversary Celebration of the restoration of the Bernhard Museum. That will take place at 4:30 right before the S'mores and Stories program at the Bernhard Museum. At that event there will be two new books available, one on the Bernhard restoration project and the other on the Bernhard family. We will also be unveiling the two new plaques we helped to fund, one designating the house as being listed on the National Register of Historic Places and another that commemorates the restoration project.



Carol Cramer, photo by John Knox

Those of you who have an interest in the appearance of the Placer High Campus should take a moment to look at the current renderings of the building that is now going up. Then take a look at the non-structural changes being proposed by a local citizens committee led by a highly respected, local architectural firm (pro-bono). Those minor changes would bring the building more in conformance with the historic nature of most of the rest of the buildings on campus. At this point the school board seems reluctant to even consider these small changes. A letter to the school board and/or a letter to the Auburn Journal might help. Maintaining this beautiful campus and holding on to its historic roots is a cause worth taking up!

The Placer County bumper crop that you never heard of - Soap Root

By John Knox and April McDonald-Loomis

If you have read much Gold Rush history or Native American history you might have come across the mention of soap root. The Native Americans used it for washing clothes, shampoo, bathing, food, fishing, as an antiseptic and many other ways. The 49er's used it also, a practice they learned from the Native Americans or from the local Spanish. Below is Henry B. Livingston's recollection of his 49er days from the *San Francisco Call* in 8 Dec. 1895.

Doodle. By common consent no work was done on Sunday. But the boys would blow out the black sand from their pans of gold dust, wash and mend their shirts and spread them on the rocks to dry. An abundance of soaproot furnished the material. Red flannel was worn during the week and blue shirts on Sunday, out of respect for the day.

Less known is that by 1867, Placer County was producing vast amounts of soap root, the fiber was used for stuffing mattresses, cushions, sofas, chairs and the like. It replaced horse hair. It was still used for soap and toothpaste but also for one very unusual use – a cure for baldness.

On June 8, 1867, the *Sacramento Bee* reported that there was a factory in Dutch Flat on the Little Bear River. It employed twenty-two men. The factory was 70' x 30' and the owners had plans to enlarge it to twice that size. The raw material grew in abundance all over Placer County. The harvesting was mostly done by Chinese workers. The roots were dug out of the ground and bound in bundles of about one hundred pounds each and brought on poles to the factory. It was not easy work, soap root is notoriously hard to dig out of the ground.

SOAP ROOT.—The Sacramento Bee of Friday says:
 There arrived to-day on the train from Alta 1,500 pounds of the prepared soap root, which is calculated to take the place of curled hair for stuffing mattresses, sofas, chairs, etc. One thousand pounds of the importation were shipped this afternoon for San Francisco, and the remainder is to go to Marysville. The article referred to is an excellent substitute for curled hair, and comes two-thirds cheaper. As all parts of California abound in SOAP-ROOT, and the process of manufacturing it is simple, the new article must soon come into general use among upholsterers.

Sacramento Bee 19 Feb. 1869

Local men involved in the soap root industry included Allen Towle of the Towle Brothers Lumber Company, Nathan W. Blanchard a very successful lumberman from Dutch Flat and James L. Gould who supervised hydraulic mining efforts near Gold Run and Dutch Flat.

For an idea of the volume of product, the *San Francisco Examiner* reported on June 15, 1872, that there

were 250 tons of soap root baled and stored in Colfax awaiting the decision in a pending law suit. The value of the 250 tons was \$8,621. 19.

Hittle's *Commerce & Industries of the Pacific Coast of North America* in 1882, noted that 700 tons were exported to Europe in 1876. The article stated that the best soap root was grown "near the snow belt of the Sierra, and on the shaded side of the mountains." The soap root plant can still be found in our area growing wild. The Effie Yeaw Nature Center in Carmichael has some growing along their trails and it can be seen from spring to autumn. The root goes dormant in the winter.

Other uses of soap root:

The glue made from soap root was used to waterproof baskets, to attach feathers to arrows and to hold together brushes, that were also made of soap root.

For fishing, the pulverized bulbs were thrown into slow moving streams or damned waterways to temporarily stun fish so they could be gathered. This is now illegal.

The juice was used for tattoo ink.

Medicinal uses included laxatives, as an antiseptic, a diuretic or a pain relieving rub.

The sap was used for tanning hides.

The root was slow cooked overnight for food. An interesting note, although soap root is found below 5,000 feet, when the Donner Party was camped high in the Sierra that fateful winter, an Indian man passed by carrying a heavy pack of roots and gave stranded people some of his cargo, it was soap root. One of the survivors, Patrick Breen, wrote in his diary that the roots tasted like a sweet potato.



Photos from Baynature.org



SNOW Sports Museum Coming to Tahoe

by Katy Bartosh

The SNOW Sports Museum is slated to open in Placer County's Olympic Valley in 2025-2026. I was excited to learn about this new project that will encompass the history and spirit of our region's winter sports. Jill Short Milne, the museum's Executive Director, was able to share a bit about the new museum:

The SNOW Sports Museum will showcase the 1960 Winter Olympics and 200 years of Sierra Nevada Ski History, plus a Western Ski Hall of Fame to honor California and Nevada athletes and entrepreneurs from over 32 ski resorts. Located at the entrance to Olympic Valley, the proposed state-of-the-art, 20,000 sq. ft. environmentally sustainable building will also be a center for arts and culture, providing the community and visitors with the technology and space necessary for lectures, films, classes and special events. The reception area will include a North Lake Tahoe Visitor's Center, a café, and a museum store. Outside, the original Tower of Nations will be part of a landscaped "Olympic Park". Milne shared the museum's 2021-2022 Vision Report, which was enlightening. Their vision is to "establish a place where the evolution of winter sports in the Sierra Nevada and the Olympic Winter Games 1960 can be researched, studied, and displayed in an environmentally harmonious building." Curious about the name? "A new name, Sierra Nevada Olympic & Winter Sports Museum, better represents the geographic region and core values of the museum. The catchy acronym will resonate with all generations: The S.N.O.W. Sports Museum."

This will be a welcome addition to the plethora of museums and historical organizations in Placer County.

50th Anniversary of the Effort to Save the Bernhard House

by Donna Howell

On December 10th at 4:30pm there will be a program commemorating this important anniversary and the unveiling of two plaques. In December of 1971, articles of Incorporation were filed to create the Placer County Historical Museum Foundation with the purpose of preserving the Bernhard House and turning it into a museum. With help from the Placer County Historical Society and Community leaders, over \$300,000 was raised, including over \$100,000 from the sale of pickets which were engraved with the donor's name.

The restoration was completed in 1982 and the museum opened to the public on July 2, 1982. The original board for the Placer County Historical Museum foundation were: Wendell Robie, President; Dan Higgins, 1st Vice President; Lauren McCann, 2nd Vice President; Berenice Pate, Secretary; and Harry Rosenburg, Treasurer. The current board, now under the name Placer County Historical Foundation, are: Hal Hall, President; Donna Howell, 1st Vice President, Karri Samson, 2nd Vice President; Mike Lynch, Secretary; and Al Stohl, Treasurer.

Placer County Historical Organizations & Calendar

Colfax Area Historical Society

Dirk Gifford, President, (530) 346-8599
colfaxhistory.org

Donner Summit Historical Society

Bill Oudegeest, (209) 606-6859
donnersummithistoricalociety.org

Foresthill Divide Historical Society

Troy Simester, (530) 367-3535
foresthillhistory.org

Fruitvale School Hall Community Association

Mark Fowler

Gold Country Medical History Museum

Lynn Carpenter, (530) 885-1252

Golden Drift Historical Society

Sarah Fugate, (530) 389-2121

Historical Advisory Board

Glenn Vineyard, (916) 747-1961

Joss House Museum and Chinese History Center

Larry Finney, (530) 305-9380

Lincoln Area Archives Museum

Elizabeth Jansen, (916) 645-3800
laamca.org

Lincoln Highway Association

Trey Pitsenberger
vice.president@lincolnhighwayassoc.org

Loomis Basin Historical Society

Karen Clifford, (916) 663-3871
ppgn.com/loomishistorical.html

Maidu Museum & Historic Site

Kaitlin Kincade, (916) 774-5934
roseville.ca.us/indianmuseum

Native Sons of the Golden West Parlor #59

Dave Allen, (530) 878-2878
dsallen59@sbcglobal.net

Newcastle Portuguese Hall Association

Mario Farinha, (530) 269-2412

North Lake Tahoe Historical Society

Phil Sexton, (530) 583-1762
northtahoemuseums.org

Placer County Genealogical Society

Diane Fishburn
pcgs.pcgenes.com

Placer County Historical Society

April McDonald-Loomis
 (530) 823-2128
placercountyhistoricalsociety.org

Placer County Museums Docent Guild

Craig Norris

Placer Sierra Railroad Heritage Society

Chuck Spinks
Psrhs.org

Rocklin Historical Society

rocklinhistorial@gmail.com
rocklinhistory.org

Roseville Historical Society

Denise Fiddymont, (916) 773-3003
rosevillehistorical.org

S.N.O.W. Sports Museum

Jill Short Milne, (415) 254-5686
thesnowmuseum.org

Calendar of Events

Please confirm all meeting times and locations which each organization

Foresthill Divide Historical Society Meeting: Monday, November 15th at 6:00pm

Golden Drift Historical Society Meeting: Monday, November 1st at 7:00pm

Historical Advisory Board Meeting: Wednesday, December 15th at 5:30pm

Loomis Basin Historical Society Meeting: Wednesday, November 17th at 6:00pm; Wednesday, December 15th at 6:00pm

Placer County Historical Society Meeting: Thursday, November 4th at 2:00pm, **Dinner Meeting:** December 2nd at 6:00pm

Placer Sierra Railroad Heritage Society: Tuesday, November 23rd at 7:00pm

Placer Genealogical Society Meeting: Monday, November 22nd at 7:00 pm

Rocklin Historical Society Meeting: Monday, November 8th at 6:00pm; Monday, December 13th at 6:00pm

Roseville Historical Society Meeting: Tuesday, November 9th at 4:00pm; Tuesday, December 14th at 4:00pm



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