

# The Sierran

— A Publication of the Sierra County Historical Society —

## Editor's Note

After printing Part 1 of the article titled "We Go Above" in the last issue, we have been contacted by Laura Thomas, the great-niece of the young girl, Mabel Thomas, who wrote the narrative of traveling from Nevada City to Sierra City to live.

Laura gave us some interesting background facts about her great-aunt Mabel. "Mabel was born in Grass Valley in 1878, the child of Stephen Thomas and Sarah Joslin Thomas. Her father was a Cornish immigrant, who was hired by the Sierra Buttes Mining Co. as a miner and band leader to provide a diversion for the men working the mine. He took over as superintendent in 1890 and the family moved into the Buttes Mine office in town. By 1896, they moved down to Oakland. My aunt also attended UC Berkeley, graduating in 1901 and worked for the Oakland public library for over 40 years as Head Reference Librarian."

Laura is planning to print a complete memoir of her great aunt's life which should be a great read judging by the excerpts we have been able to include in the Sierran. She also provided the portrait photo of Mabel below which was taken upon her graduation from San Jose Teacher's College in 1897.



Mabel Thomas, 1897

## We Go Above - Part 2

Could I ever forget my first sight of the Sierra Buttes Mountain as I stood with brother the next morning in front of Scott's Hotel? We were still in shadow, but the sun was shining on that peak overhead which seemed so near the roof of the Busch building across the street. This was Sierra City's finest, but we had eyes only for the giant rock which topped the summit of the mountain.



Scott Hotel across from Wells Fargo Building

"Oh, Papa!" I exclaimed as our parents joined us, "I want to go to the big rock. Please take us there before breakfast."

"Quite a climb!" replied my amused father. "Do you think we could be back in time for breakfast?"

"Just how far is it?" Mother inquired.

"Well, it's a 9000-foot peak. That would make it about a mile if we could fly straight up from here. Walking the trail would make it quite a few miles farther. They don't usually figure on less than a whole day for the trip up and back. Once you are there, you want to stay a while to take in the magnificent view of mountain ranges and lakes and river, and the Sacramento Valley with its trains running and the smoke from the engines, and Mt. Diablo and the Coast Range way off in the distance. It's a sight you can never forget."

We Go Above - Part 2 - (Cont. on Page 3) —

— THE SIERRA COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY —



The Sierra County Historical Society is an organization of people interested in preserving and promoting an appreciation of Sierra County's rich history. The Society operates a museum at the Kentucky Mine in Sierra City, holds an annual meeting, publishes a newsletter and conducts historical research. Members are sent notices of Society activities, receive THE SIERRAN, and are admitted free of charge to the museum and stamp mill tour. If you would like to become involved in these activities or would just like to give your support, please join us!

### Officers and Executive Board of The Sierra County Historical Society

- |  |                                    |
|--|------------------------------------|
| Mary Nourse, President   | James Connolly, Director           |
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| Dianne Bruns,<br>Museum Curator                                |                                    |

If you have any suggestions or comments, feel free to contact any board member or email at [info@sierracountyhistory.org](mailto:info@sierracountyhistory.org)

### Become a Member!

Membership in the Sierra County Historical Society is open to any interested person, business or organization. Members need not be residents of Sierra County. Dues are due and payable each January for the calendar year.

Membership categories are as follows:

- INDIVIDUAL ..... \$20.00
- FAMILY & INSTITUTION..... \$25.00
- BUSINESS & SUPPORTING..... \$35.00
- SUSTAINING..... \$50.00
- LIFE (per person/couple) ..... \$300.00

In addition, Museum Renovation Project donations are gratefully accepted.

Please send dues and donations to:  
S.C.H.S.

c/o Don Yegge, Membership Chair  
PO Box 336, Loyalton, CA 96118

### President's Message

*By Mary Nourse*

Lots of things have been going on since our last issue. In April Sierra County Historical board members met with staff of the Truckee Donner Land Trust at Webber Lake for a tour of the hotel. As a stage stop on the Henness Pass Road, it provided an important connection to both Gold Rush and Comstock Lode history. The structure is truly an historic gem. Our organization has been asked to play a supportive role by helping collect artifacts, photographs, and period furniture for the restoration. We can also help by networking about anything from funding sources to in-kind work. If you would like to be involved, contact KV Van Lom at [kv@tdlandtrust.org](mailto:kv@tdlandtrust.org) or me at [mnourse46@gmail.com](mailto:mnourse46@gmail.com).

Other SCHS events and activities are shaping up nicely. After a series of work parties to put the Kentucky Mine Museum back together, we are down to our usual spruce-up day on Saturday, May 16. Then we move on to opening day, followed by a number of spring and summer events: a Cornish pasty luncheon with Black Bart, a Night at the Museum reception, the Mumbo Gumbo concert, and the "Great Verdi Train Robbery" sharing the bill with local talent, "The Stringalongs". For details about these events, go to the Sierra County Historical Society website or watch the local newspapers.

I'd like to thank our amazing volunteers and board members for all that you do for SCHS.

Mary Nourse

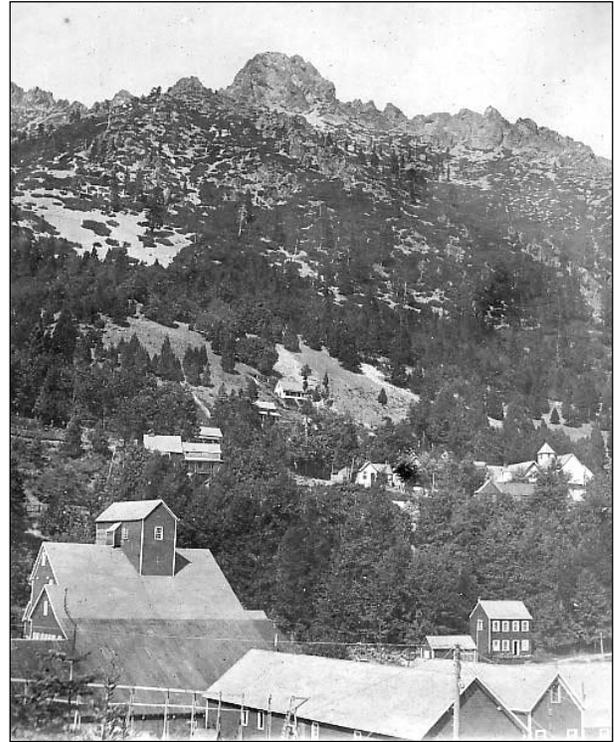
We Go Above - Part 2 - (Cont. from Page 1) —

My “big rock” is not the highest of the many “buttes”, but, although the northern aspect is quite different, it does from the southern slope appear to dominate all the others, and in Sierra City was always known as “the Buttes rock.” It was first climbed by the Indians who were so numerous in this region before the white men arrived, and what they called it we do not know. Downieville miners scaled the mountain in the early fifties, naming it Downieville Buttes, and carved their names on the rocks, which they likened to the teeth of a gigantic saw. Geologists of the State Mining Bureau, coming later, identified the “buttes” in scientific terms, as a group of volcanic remnants” in the form of “a columnerly jointed lava cap.” But we children had our private name, given us by Mother.



Ladies on Buttes Rock, note the carved signatures. Women not identified

“Don’t you see?” she cried as she studied them that morning, “that rock is a man’s head! There he lies looking straight up into the sky, and those small rocks at the side are his arms and legs and feet!” We, who learned from her to see pictures in changing cloud forms, were now quick to perceive her “old man of the mountain” eternally watching the sky.



“You will be nearer the Old Man in our new home up the mountain,” promised Father as he led us into breakfast, “and while we are waiting for the furniture to come, you will be able to do some exploring in Sierra City.”

We did walk that day all up and down Main Street, a narrow shelf cut into the foot of the mountain’s southern slope in the deepest canyon of the North Yuba, and but a little way above that hurrying, swirling stream, which had carved the gorge through which it flows and whose golden bed had lured the first white men to the region. Just across the river, the canyon’s opposite wall rises just as steeply but to a lesser height, forming the dividing ridge between the North and Middle Forks of the Yuba. Oddly enough, the settlement had never crossed the narrow river, but remained confined to the buttes side of the North Yuba.

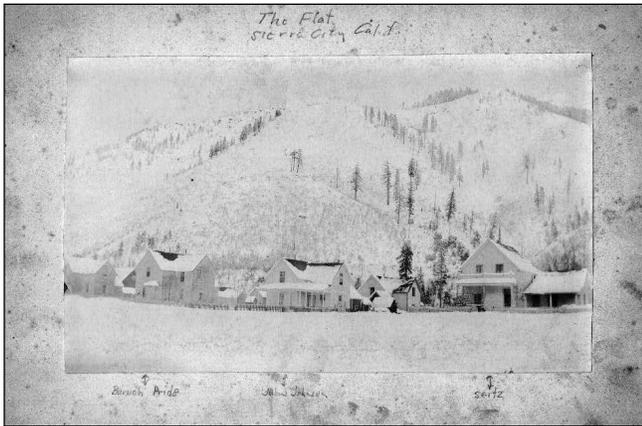
Main Street was a continuation of the stage road to Downieville on the west end to Sierra Valley over the Yuba Gap on the east. To this highway it may indeed be said to owe its existence, for prior to 1870 there was no road either in or out of Sierra City, and no stage-line either east or west from the town. All transportation moved by way of trails up or down the steep mountain grades. Those, Father said, were the days of pack mules and oxen, when the legendary driver Blewberry Jones,

We Go Above - Part 2 - (Cont. on Page 4) —

**We Go Above - Part 2 - (Cont. from Page 3) —**

became famous along Hennes Pass and Yuba Gap as “the champeen curser of Syeera County.” They were also days of ruinously high freight rates, which lasted until roads were built in 1870.

Except for two “Flats” on the lower side near the river, Main Street affords the only nearly level walk in the vicinity. A brief descent not far from our hotel brought us to the larger of the two, “Busch’s Flat,” a mountain meadow, watered by rivulets on their way to the Yuba, surrounded by trees, and bordered by a number of dwellings, together with the Catholic church. On this pleasant spot, picnics were held, ball games were played, and here the circus would be set up when it came to town.



*“The Flat” Sierra City, Calif*

“This is where Sierra City began back in 1850,” said Father. “The diggings must have been good so close to the river, but it was not a good beginning.” He went on with the story as he had read it in the new county history, from which the following paragraph quoted: “Twelve miles above Downieville, on the south fork of the North Yuba, at the base of the Sierra Buttes mountain, Sierra City is very prettily located. The town owes its origin and present existence, in a large measure, to the proximity of the Great Sierra Buttes quartz mine, where a large number of men are employed. In the spring of 1850 P.A. Haven and Joseph Zunwalt came over the divide where the great mine is situated, and were about the first white men in this locality. Signs of Indians were plenty along the river, but there were no indications that any crevicing or prospecting for gold had been done prior to this time. Later in the year a settlement was made where the town now stands, and the Sierra Buttes quartz-ledge had been located upon by a man named Murphy and another party whose name is unknown. In 1851, John



*Construction of Arrastra - #9 Level*

Lavezzolo settled on Charcoal flat, but removed to his present place in the fall of 1852, his ranch below having been jumped during the years. Locations were made on the Independence lode in 1851, and considerable quartz was soon worked by arrastras. Sierra City then consisted of two large buildings (one on the site of the Catholic church), a baker shop, and several gambling houses and saloons. During the succeeding winter the town was entirely demolished by the heavy snow, so much of this element accumulating on the roofs of the frail buildings as to crush them to the ground. Food being exceedingly scarce, everybody went away, and not a soul was left in the embryo village. At this time a snow-slide on an adjacent hill covered up and killed two men who were trying to get away. A third miner named Dillon escaped the fate of his companions, and lives a half mile below the town. For some years matters did not look very promising for a revival of the settlement. Each of the mines had its own little settlement, with its store-house and saloon; and it was not until 1858 that a permanent town got a foothold on the soil now covered by so many pleasant homes and sightly business houses. The discovery of rich diggings on the flat caused a large number to rush to the spot; shanties were erected, and the real inauguration of the village commenced. In 1855 Doyle & Co. put up a sawmill at Sierra City . . . At

**We Go Above - Part 2 - (Continued on Page 5) —**

### We Go Above - Part 2 - (Continued from Page 4) —

the time of its erection there was one solitary log cabin standing back of Peter Goff's present residence."

"We don't build such weak roofs here nowadays," Father said reassuringly, "and now they are made with steep slopes to shed the snow." (We were to remember this story when, only five years later, the Catholic church at which we were now looking would be destroyed by a similar avalanche.)

"What is this Charcoal Flat where Mr. Lavezzolo went?" Mother inquired.

"It is six miles down the river, but he later took up ranching on Sierra City's other flat, the one which the Buttes Company has bought for its new office," Father told us. Sierra City's real beginning was in 1850 after all, for it was then that the Sierra Buttes quartz ledge was discovered. The outcroppings were so rich that it almost emptied Downieville when the news arrived there. Everybody rushed up to the Buttes, and the mountain was staked off to the very top. The "excitement", as they called it, didn't last very long, and everyone went home again except the miners working on the Buttes and Independence Mines."

"Who was the lucky man who found the mine? Did he become very rich?" asked Mother.

"He was a Mexican named Manuel Gutierrez and a good prospector, for he also discovered the Independence and the Plumas Eureka. He did well enough at first, but he made the mistake of selling his claims too early. 1850 was also the year of the famous "Gold Lake excitement." Hundreds of miners from as far away as Marysville and Nevada City swarmed up into Sierra and Plumas counties hunting for a wonderful lake whose shores were said to be lined with gold nuggets for anyone to pick up."

"Oh! And did they find it?" I cried. "No, although they climbed all over the country behind the Buttes, where there are scores of lakes, they didn't find the one lined with nuggets. They gave the name 'Gold Lake' to one of the biggest of our lakes in mockery, but the hunt did open up this part of the country, and there was gold here in plenty for those who had the sense to dig for it in likely places. This Buttes district is noted for the number of nuggets which have been found here since then, and the biggest of them all came out of the Monumental Mine, which is part of the Buttes Mine property now. Only one larger nugget has been found in California and only two larger in all the rest of the world.

"One of the men in the party which named our Gold Lake was Phil Haven. He had struck rich diggings in other spots, but he finally took up land around the lake and built a house, where he lives now. He has found some good mines, too, both quartz and gravel, so you see the name they gave the lake is not so funny, after all."

By this time we were walking back up the hill to Main Street, where we were soon again in front of our hotel. "Here," Father said, "you can see what has grown out of the old ranch house where the pack trains used to stop. Scott's Hotel stands where the Yuba Gap Hotel used to stand, built in 1863. August Busch owned it in 1871, when he built the Busch Building across the street." He was, Father thought, the wealthiest man in Sierra City, being one of the principle owners of this new and very rich Young America Mine. He might also be called the Pooh Bah of Sierra City, since his building housed not only his general store, but the post office, where he officiated as postmaster, the Wells Fargo express office, of which he was agent, and the telegraph office. There was also one of those new telephone lines connecting with the Sierra Buttes Mine on the hill, where we were going to live. The building's second story was occupied by Mr. Busch's residence, and an outside stairway led up to "Busch's Hall" on the third. Last, but perhaps not least, it served as headquarters for the "ancient order of E Clampus Vitus," which Sierra City knows as "the Clampers."



## Sierra County Historical Society 2015 Events

The **Kentucky Mine and Museum** is open 10 AM to 4 PM, Wednesday through Sunday, from Memorial Day weekend through Labor Day weekend. Museum admission is just \$1 per person. Guided gold mine and stamp mill tours start at 11 am and 2 pm daily with \$7.00 admission for adults, \$3.50 for children ages 7-17, and free admission for children 6 and under.

A **Cornish Pasty Lunch with Black Bart** history re-enactor Lee Dummel will be held at the Sierra City Community Hall on Saturday, May 30. Lunch will be served at noon, with the presentation to follow at 1:30. For reservations, go to [sierracountyhistory.org](http://sierracountyhistory.org) and purchase through PayPal or mail a check to SCHS "Black Bart and James Hume Luncheon", P.O. Box 260, Sierra City, CA 96125.

**Night at the Museum**, a festive reception celebrating the Kentucky Mine Museum's renovation will be held on Friday, June 26 at 5:00 PM. Join us for appetizers, drinks, music, and a dose of history. For more information, see [sierracountyhistory.org](http://sierracountyhistory.org)

The popular band, **Mumbo Gumbo** will perform at the Kentucky Mine Amphitheater on Saturday, July 11 at 7:30 PM. For ticket information, go to [sierracountyhistory.org](http://sierracountyhistory.org)

An evening featuring local band, "The Stringalongs" and the presentation "Big Jack Davis and the Verdi Train Robbery" - by history re-enactor Lee Dummel will take place at the Kentucky Mine Amphitheater on Saturday, August 29 at 7:00 PM. For ticket information go to [sierracountyhistory.org](http://sierracountyhistory.org)

Sierra County Historical Society's **Annual Picnic** will take place at Tin Cup Diggin's Park in Downieville on Sunday, September 13 at 1:00 PM. Join us in touring historic sites in our county seat. The public is welcome to attend. Lunch is free to members. For reservations information go to [sierracountyhistory.org](http://sierracountyhistory.org)

Sierra County Historical Society presents a

**CORNISH PASTY LUNCHEON**

Followed by

**"THE LIFE AND TIMES OF BLACK BART"**

With History Reenactor Lee Dummel



Black Bart was the infamous road agent who held up 29 stagecoaches. Detective James Hume was the Wells Fargo Detective who spent 8 1/2 years tracking down and arresting the elusive outlaw.

Both Black Bart and James Hume will be portrayed by Lee Drummel, Old West historian and re-enactor of outlaws, lawmen and other personages of the 1800's.

SATURDAY, MAY 30

SIERRA CITY COMMUNITY HALL  
13 CASTAGNA ALLEY, SIERRA CITY, CA

LUNCH AT NOON: \$15 FOR LUNCH AND PRESENTATION

Reservations can be made online through [PayPal](#)  
Or you may send a check to  
SCHS, Black Bart and James Hume Luncheon  
P O Box 260, Sierra City, CA 96125

Historical presentation at 1:30 p.m. - Donations gratefully accepted.

For more information contact Mary Nourse at 530-862-1123

## Truckee Donner Land Trust takes steps to restore the historic Webber Lake Hotel

**T** In 2012, Cliff and Barbara Johnson sold their Webber Lake Ranch, which included sheep grazing, timber management, camping, fishing, boating, and various family cabins and structures to the Truckee Donner Land Trust. Although the Johnson's had received more lucrative offers on these lands they had owned for nearly a century, they chose to sell to the Land Trust so their love for the land and appreciation of its natural beauty and resources would be preserved for the public to enjoy forever.

Naturally, The Land Trust was thrilled to acquire Webber Lake and Lacey Meadows; 3,000 acres of enormous biological importance and opportunities for public recreation. But, something else of real importance came with the purchase. Something really important; one of northern California's oldest standing buildings and one of great significance in California's early history, the Webber Lake Hotel.

Dr. David Gould Webber built the Webber Lake Hotel in 1860. The hotel, just steps from the north side of Webber Lake itself, sits on Henness Pass Road, a popular stage route that in its heyday could see 100 wagons a day.

The hotel became celebrated and entertained guests such as Old Block Delano, an early comic writer, Charles Nahl, an early California artist, and Thomas Hill, a renowned painter. The three-story hotel provided respite for emigrants and miners while drawing hunters, fishermen, botanizers, boaters, and businessmen who enjoyed the lake.



*The Webber Lake Hotel as it looks today.  
Photo courtesy of the TDLT.*

The hotel's true glory days arrived with the discovery of the Comstock Lode in Virginia City, Nevada, as a stage stop on the Henness Pass Road, which was a major supply line for the mines in Nevada. It is not unusual for a land trust to acquire an historic structure but land trusts

emphasize acquisition and management of lands and open space. An historic restoration can be a colossal undertaking for any land trust.

Says K.V. Van Lom, who is heading the Land Trust's restoration efforts, "The Webber Lake Hotel is unique to California, the region, and deserves to be here for history buffs and visitors to explore forever. I just can't overstate how important it is for this building to be saved," she adds.

Tim Beals, Sierra County Director of Transportation and Planning says, "Webber Lake is one of Sierra County's most precious assets, and I will be looking forward to keeping the County Board of Supervisors updated and directly involved in any recreation planning so that the uses proposed at Webber Lake are consistent with the County General Plan.

The Land Trust has appointed Truckee architect Dennis E. Zirbel, experienced with restoring some of Truckee's older buildings, to produce an Historic Structures Report, the first step needed for a restoration project. The report is currently in process.

Says Doug Gadow, owner of Linchpin Structural Engineering. "The building appears to be holding up very well. However, it has no apparent foundation and has settled significantly into the soil. The structure will need to be lifted, straightened, provided a foundation, and deteriorated framing will need to be repaired or replaced. The foundation work and wood deterioration repair will be costly, but definitely worth it considering the good condition of the rest of the structure."

A Truckee local as well, Gadow too has extensive experience in historic restoration projects, and the Land Trust feels it is in the good hands of experts.

The Land Trust's immediate plan is simple: clean out the building and make it structurally sound. Once this is accomplished, the front parlor will be restored to period, will display exhibits, and two upstairs sleeping rooms will be restored to period. The original external color of the hotel, white, will be applied as well. The building will also be put on the National Historic Register.

The Land Trust is now working with the Sierra County Historical Society, the Truckee Donner Historical Society and other agencies to collect artifacts, create exhibits, restore rooms, and search for funding sources.

**Webber Lake Hotel - (Continued on Page 8)** ➔

# The Sierran

Sierra County Historical Society

P.O. Box 260

Sierra City, California 96125

ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED

## Webber Lake Hotel - (Continued from Page 7) —

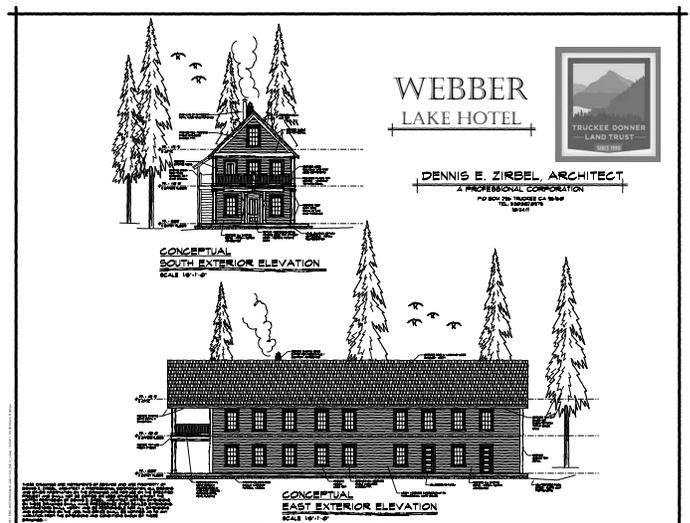
“The Sierra County Historical Society is delighted to play a supportive role in the restoration of the Webber Lake Hotel. Its historic significance is undeniable,” says Mary Nourse, the Historical Society’s president. She adds, “The structure is truly an historic gem and it is the logical repository for artifacts of a bygone era. Our membership will work to help preserve that history in order to provide a link to the past for generations to come.”

Dr. Webber was a well-known and respected leader in Sierra County, rumored to have adopted as many as 50 children. His contribution to Sierra County is notable.

“Dr. Webber figures prominently in the hotel’s restoration”, says Van Lom. “Not only was he a great gentleman, he built the hotel, and he also named nearby Mt. Lola after Lola Montez, the famous and scandalous courtesan who is rumored to have once stayed at the hotel. We absolutely need to obtain some of his personal items to honor him with an exhibit in the parlor.”

The Land Trust is asking for folks to search for Dr. Webber’s ancestors, artifacts, furniture, photos and time period items as well as to volunteer for in-kind

projects such as debris removal, painting, expert services, etc. More importantly, if you would like to make a contribution towards the restoration, you can make a secure online donation at [www.tdlandtrust.org](http://www.tdlandtrust.org), or send a check to the Truckee Donner Land Trust, P.O. Box 8816, Truckee, CA 96162. Be sure to note that your donation is for the Webber Lake Hotel Restoration.



A conceptual drawing of the Webber Lake Hotel courtesy of Dennis E. Zirbel, Architect.