

# The Sierran

— A Publication of the Sierra County Historical Society —

*Editor's Note – This issue of the Sierran features recreation and entertainment in the Downieville/Sierra City area during the Gold Rush era, and upcoming musical events at the Kentucky Mine Amphitheater this summer!*

## Recreation in the Northern Mining Towns

**W**hen questioned “What’s there to do around here?”, current residents of western Sierra County are quick to point out the countless outdoor recreational opportunities in our pristine mountain area as well as various cultural events including concerts, festivals, plays, car shows, wine-tastings, brew-fests, and holiday celebrations. As historians, it is fun to wonder, “What WAS there to do around here?”

The list of leisure activities moving forward through the years from the Gold Rush is daunting: horse-racing, ice-skating, baseball, tennis, fishing, hunting, climbing the Buttes Rock, roller skating, snowshoe (longboard) racing, dancing, picnicking, shopping, foot-racing, shopping and dining. There were fraternal organizations, literary societies, band concerts, masquerade balls, and sleigh rides. Special occasions brought circuses, parades, inspiring orations, historic re-enactments, and ice-cream socials.



During its heyday in 1885, Sierra City alone had 28 saloons, 4 hotels, 2 breweries, 3 dance halls and a couple of gambling houses. The Columbo Restaurant offered good food, liquors, wines and cigars at all hours. There was a ginger-ale factory and a lunch stand that served oysters. Although it was mainly “a man’s town”, a woman could shop for fine china, books

and magazines—even a doll or a pair of shoes for her child. Before all these amenities were available in the mining towns there was an emphasis in self-made entertainment which often employed humor at the expense on another.

### Gibsonville

There were few women to be found in the mining camps in 1857, and the young married girls often were mothers by the age of fifteen. Gibsonville was the hub of activity in a 20-mile radius, so despite its lack of resident females,



the town decided to put on a grand Fourth-of-July ball. Extensive advertising lured some fifty ladies who arrived on mule-back from such places as Rabbit Creek, Whiskey Diggings, Brandy City, St. Louis, and Port Wine. Even if the young women were married, they were permitted to dance with the single miners, so they brought their babies to Gibsonville where a makeshift nursery was prepared at the principal hotel in town. Several hundred miners attended the gala celebration, but with the limited number of ladies, many men were left without partners. Cheated out of dancing, a few disappointed miners vowed to get even. While the festivities were in full-swing, they stole into the room where the babes were sleeping swaddled in their blankets. They mixed them up in such a way that it escaped the mothers’ notice when they rushed in to pick up their

Recreation in the Northern Mining Towns - (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**

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Dianne Bruns,  
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:

<b>INDIVIDUAL</b> .....	\$20.00
<b>FAMILY &amp; INSTITUTION</b> .....	\$25.00
<b>BUSINESS &amp; SUPPORTING</b> .....	\$35.00
<b>SUSTAINING</b> .....	\$50.00
<b>LIFE (per person/couple)</b> .....	\$300.00

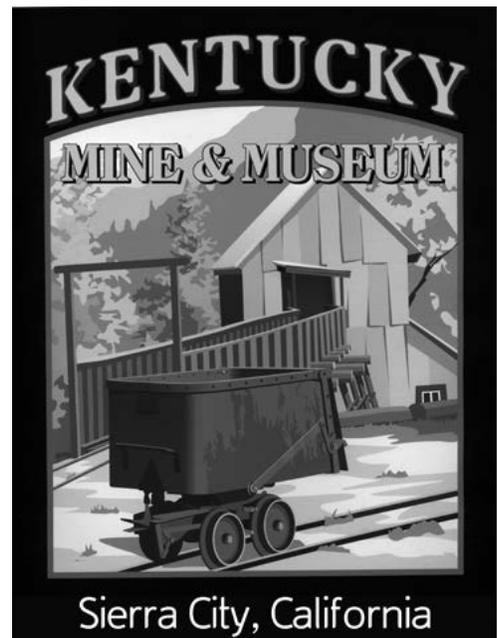
In addition, Museum Renovation Project donations are gratefully accepted.

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

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

**Call for Volunteers at the  
Kentucky Mine and Museum**

As we prepare for another busy season at the Kentucky Mine and Museum, we invite anyone interested in California Gold Rush history to join our wonderful group of volunteers! Whether you would enjoy leading mine tours, creating museum displays, working in the bookshop, accessioning artifacts, or assisting our curator in a variety of other duties; we would appreciate your help. If you are interested in becoming a part of our museum family, please call curator Dianne Bruns at 530-862-1310, or stop by the museum during business hours: 7-day each week, 10:00 AM to 4:00 PM. A summer day at the Kentucky Mine is a great way to enjoy our beautiful area and to share its unique history with visitors.



Sierra City, California

### Recreation in the Northern Mining Towns - (Cont. from Page 1) —

sleeping children after the ball. Hours later astonishment reigned in several households as, one-by-one, the mothers discovered they had taken home the wrong children.

#### North San Juan

In the heyday of hydraulic mining, the voters of North San Juan were a significant factor in the political scene, and candidates would flock there and “buy the bar” in order to garner votes. During a particularly boisterous campaign event, one candidate decided to top off visits to most of the saloons in town by leading a march of his supporters to French Corral. One of the drunken revelers didn't quite make the destination. He stumbled into a well that he mistook for a barn door, and spent the night alternately drinking well water and shouting for help. In the morning when sober folks were up and about his pleas for assistance were finally heard, and he was hoisted out. He may have been the only one from the North San Juan contingent that survived the night without a hangover.

#### Indian Valley

Bill Meek, the renowned stagecoach driver, was born in 1856 and spent his boyhood in Indian Valley where his father was a business owner. The population at that time consisted of Native Americans, Chinese, white families, and single miners. Bill and the other children engaged in the games and activities of the diverse ethnic groups. Grasshopper drives, while life-sustaining to the Indians, were highly entertaining to the kids. The tasty insects were harvested by being driven into trenches by squaws and with children beating the ground using twig brooms. The hapless creatures were put through a smoking and roasting process, and were later ground up with manzanita berries and acorns to be eaten in the winter.

Young Bill Meek talked about an Indian who was greatly admired by the children. He was aptly named “Split-Toe Bill” because he had a double toe on each foot. He would amuse the youngsters by throwing rocks with his remarkable feet.



Bill also said that whites and Chinese alike celebrated the Chinese New Year which began on the last full moon in January. The festivities began with the explosion of Chinese bombs and firecrackers and the burning of candles and punk

sticks meant to chase away evil spirits. As the week progressed, open houses featuring trays of dried fruit and nuts were held. On one occasion Bill and his friends scavenged firecrackers that had failed to explode throughout the week and detonated them in a barrel. They enjoyed their game until gasses built up in the cask causing it to blow up and send staves flying every which way. The family's mule was the unfortunate victim of the explosion when a piece of shrapnel broke his hind leg. He had to be put down, and though his burial was celebrated by the firing of the remaining firecrackers, the explosives were banned from further use by the children.

#### Camptonville

Camptonville, like many other mining camps, was a hub of gambling, brawling, and debauchery. Playing cards by the thousands were tossed into the street along with all manner of debris. This rubble became the diet of the miners' pack mules, and they seemed to thrive on it. The main street served as the racetrack for the town.



On one occasion an eccentric stranger came to town and fell into the company of rowdy citizens. When good-natured teasing and jostling turned a bit rough, the newcomer pushed for a fight, but was assured by the locals that the only way to settle disputes was by having a duel. The stranger accepted the challenge, and it was arranged that the duel would be by pistol at 20 paces. The seconds were named, and two doctors were charged with the task of loading the weapons. Unbeknownst to the serious-minded visitor, the “duel” was actually an elaborate hoax. The doctors loaded the weapons with just gunpowder which exploded loudly when fired but did no damage. The town representative in the battle, however, provided a dramatic death scene, complete with beet juice that resembled blood. When the fallen man's second, Dr. Webber pronounced him dead, the unfortunate traveler thought it best to high-tail it out of town. The hilarity of the practical jokers was numbed several weeks later when his body was found at the bottom of an 800-foot precipice. In his haste to escape the wrath of the townsfolk, it appears the stranger met with a tragic accidental death. His remains were given a decent burial in an unmarked grave in the cemetery, and practical joking settled down for a while.

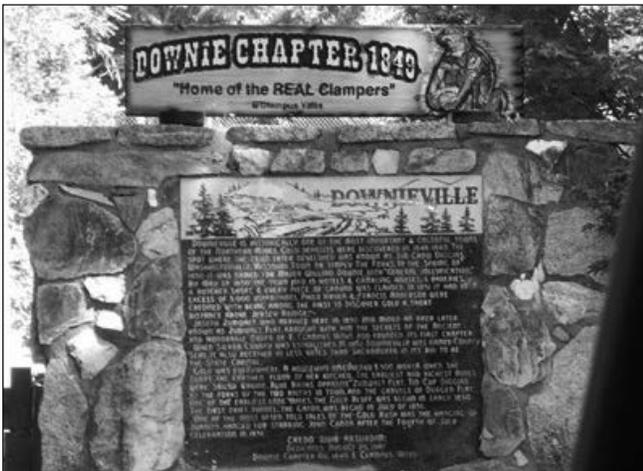
Recreation in the Northern Mining Towns - (Cont. on Page 4) —

### Recreation in the Northern Mining Towns - (Cont. from Page 3)

Large-scale pranking was such an integral characteristic of Camptonville's culture that it didn't go dormant for long. In 1893 the town staged a re-enactment of Custer's massacre of Native Americans. Indigenous tribesmen took part in the elaborate production which, along with a pow wow and a bloody battle, included a staged bear vs. Indian brave fight. The "bear" was in reality a man wrapped in a bear hide. Over 3,000 people from far and wide attended the dramatic events and the grand ball that followed. Bill Meek was proud that he even brought together the two rival newspapermen from Marysville. He managed this while they were under the haze of alcohol by tucking them into the same bed. The next morning, they acknowledged that they had been "licked" by Bill Meek and began the day cordially.

#### Downieville

The birthplace of E Clampus Vitus, the mock fraternal organization devoted to caring for "widders" and orphans, is disputed between Downieville and Sierra City, but its colorful antics are agreed upon by all. It is a society dedicated to hard drinking and practical jokes, and its organization was rife with lofty titles and outrageous customs that enhanced its hilarity. Initiation of new candidates proceeded. " ...at the horrendous Sound of the Hewgag, when all Brethren of E Clampus Vitus, casting aside whatsoever other task or onus, would seasonably assemble within the Hall of Comparative Ovations, to be celebrated and auspiciously performed by and before the Brethren at the Imperishable Hall of Comparative Ovations, before or after the Full Moon, whenever the Bray of the Hewgag should announce unto them the opportune appearance in the Diggings of some Poor Sightless Sucker, ripe for immolation on the Order's effulgent Altar of Sacrifice."



The initiation fee for the "poor, blind Candidate" was generally paying for the evening's beer. He was prepared for the initiation by "being divested of most of his clothing, then blindfolded. In this condition he was led around the hall, stopping at different points where he was catechized and lectured in a most fatherly way". A strap with a ring attached was put on him, and he would be suddenly lifted

to the ceiling and dropped back down into a wheelbarrow filled with ice-water saturated sponges. The initiation ceremonies lasted several hours, and sometimes after paying to entertain his friends, a candidate left town in humiliation "to appear again only when he could produce some new candidate or victim for admission to the order."

#### Sierra Buttes

Contemporary aficionados of mountain-biking from the Sierra Buttes to Downieville might be surprised to learn of an extraordinary footrace that was run along that course in October of 1859. According to the Sierra Democrat, George Hersch and Frederick Miller agreed to run the 14-mile rough road in their bare feet. Each runner was accompanied by a man on mule-back with a gallon of beer as a "stimulant". The hearty athletes started out at 9 in the morning, but Hersch dropped out after about 4 miles. Miller finished the race in 2 hours and fifteen minutes, winning \$180, ready to beat his own time in the future.



Through the years, folks just slightly less intrepid than Hersch and Miller made sport of ascending the majestic Sierra Buttes for pleasure. As early as the 1850s organized groups climbed the trail north from Sierra City to the craggy "Buttes Rock" on horseback. They would usually leave town around midnight, make a breakfast stop at Whitney and Shaughnessy's logging camp in the vicinity of the later established Monarch Mine, then continue 2 1/2 miles to the base of the rock. Once on site some men would lead the precipitous climb and lower a rope to aid the ladies in conquering the lofty peak. The hearty group would then revel in watching the sun rise over their sleepy mountain village 4,500 feet below.

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# OPENING DAY CELEBRATION MAY 26!

OPENING DAY 2018 CELEBRATION!

## KENTUCKY MINE

SAT. MAY 26TH, 12-4PM

*To Sierra County & Beyond: Come One and All to Opening Day Celebration 2018 at the Kentucky Mine Park and Museum in Sierra City, California!*

**FREE:**

- \*Docent Led Tours of the Mine @1pm, 2pm, & 3pm
- \*Glitter Tattoos for the Kids
- \*Ice Cream Sundae Bar
- \*Magic Show in the Amphitheater @1:30
- \*Concert in the Amphitheater Featuring Local Musicians, "The String Alongs" @2:30pm



ENJOY AFFORDABLE  
GRILLED BURGERS AND  
HOT DOGS, OR BRING  
YOUR OWN PICNIC AND  
REFRESHMENTS!



Questions/Information call Chris @530.862.1076

## Music at the Mine Summer 2018

The line-up is set and we are pleased to be bringing a dynamic and diverse program to this summer's Music at the Mine concert series. The revival of the annual series, now in its third season, showcases music that ranges from pre-WWII American "Swing", to music that has its origins in Africa, So. and Central America, the Caribbean and Americana bluegrass. Due to the support of folks throughout Sierra and Plumas Counties, we are able to present elite bands who have cultivated and mastered their respective musical offerings. The bottom line...if you attend a show you can be assured you will have a wonderful time and be treated to a first class musical experience. All shows are \$22adv./\$25 door and students aged 6-17 can attend for \$10. Children under the age of 6 are free. Tickets can be purchased on-line at [sierracountyhistory.org](http://sierracountyhistory.org) and retail outlets throughout Sierra and Plumas Counties. Season tickets are available for \$85 and obtainable by contacting Chris Stockdale at [cstockrock@gmail.com](mailto:cstockrock@gmail.com) or 530 862-1076. Chris is, in fact, the person to contact for any information related to the Music @ the Mine program.

For those who have not attended a show, the Kentucky Mine Amphitheater is a beautiful and acoustically dynamic venue. The amphitheater seats 200 people, has a large dance floor and is in excellent condition. Bands routinely praise the natural acoustics and appreciate the attentiveness and energy extended by the audience. We offer an optional BBQ dinner (\$16) before all of our Saturday night shows and you are also more than welcome to bring your own picnic dinners and refreshments. We do not sell alcoholic beverages and must stress that smoking is not allowed in the facility. Any and all profits that are generated go directly to the Sierra County Historical Society and every show is literally a fundraising event.



### Music @ the Mine, Summer Schedule 2018

Opening Day Celebration, Saturday, May 26, 12-4 PM

\$5.00 BBQ, **FREE** Mine Tours, Magic Show, Sundae Bar, Heifer Belle's concert & more

Saturday, June 23, 7:30 PM-The Earles of Newtown

Saturday, July 14, 7:30 PM-Mumbo Gumbo

Saturday, July 28, 7:30 PM-World Beatnix (plus special guest TBA)

Saturday, August 25, 7:30-Achilles Wheel

Sunday, September 2, 3:00 PM-MerryGold (plus special guest TBA)

We want to encourage everyone to consider carpooling to the shows as it makes the drive home easier and safer. Camping and/or securing lodging is also recommended for those folks who are coming from out of the immediate area.

*We are continuing our visits to the Sierra Valley schools of the past.*

## Chilcoat School

Northwestern Sierra Valley, Plumas County – 1934 – 1955

*By Virginia (Maddalena) Lutes*

**T**he Chilcoat School did not operate for very long. Ted Ramelli remembers hearing the story of how this school came into being. At one point in time, there were quite a number of children in Chilcoat. The parents felt there were enough students to support a school, so the parents petitioned the Superintendent of Schools. Some felt that the Summit School, only a few miles to the west, was sufficient. The Chilcoat parents were persistent; they wanted a school in their community for their young children. The Superintendent researched and found written provisions to fund a school from her office. Therefore, the Chilcoat School was approved. (Other schools received funding from the school districts.) This school was difficult to research, as no official records of the school were located. Thus, the history of this one-room schoolhouse is somewhat vague, and left open to discussion.

The Chilcoat School appears to have first opened in 1934 with Thomas L. Ross as teacher. It closed during World War II due to the gas shortage, combined with the shortage of teachers. The students attended the Summit School for a few years until the Chilcoat School reopened following the end of World War II.

Some families with children who attended this school were the Wright's, six children; Toothacker, Deini and Hood, six children; Donnelly, three children; Boones, Tan, four children; Moss, two children; Hayes, Mackie; Babbit, Fritz; Coggins, three children; the Friends had ten children; Gourdin, Sandalens, French, Landabura, and the Perkins children.

Ray Donnelly remembers learning the three basics – reading, writing and arithmetic. Every Friday they would have art; they would draw, color, whatever they wanted. The students liked this Friday diversion from the regular studies. They learned their multiplication tables by “playing baseball multiplication.”

Real baseball games were also held between the schools. They played the Summit School and Long Valley School.

The Chilcoat Schoolhouse is currently a private residence located on State Highway 70 in Chilcoat.



*Unnamed students and teacher at the Chilcoat School circa mid 1930's. Photo courtesy Elia Miles.*

# The Sierran

Sierra County Historical Society

P.O. Box 260

Sierra City, California 96125

ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED

## “Cultural History of Sierra County” Course Offered at San Francisco State Sierra Field School

If you are reading the Sierran newsletter you will probably be interested in a course being offered this summer at the San Francisco State Sierra Field School campus located near Sierra City on Highway 49.

The course will utilize short lectures and field trips as we explore the human history of Sierra County. We will view Washoe petroglyphs, visit gold mines, follow the B&L railroad bed, compare past and present agricultural and logging practices, and learn numerous anecdotes and folk tales of this intriguing part of the Sierra Nevada.

The class, led by Sierra County historian William Copren, will be held from August 5 - 10. For more information about the class and to enroll, visit <http://sierra.sfsu.edu/>.

