

# The Sierran

— A Publication of the Sierra County Historical Society —

## Romano Ranch

By: Cory Peterman

**R**omano Ranch, located 3½ miles west of Sierra City at an elevation of 3,766 feet, is considered by many to be one of the most beautiful properties in the river canyon in Sierra County. Most people driving along Highway 49 do not even catch a glimpse of the old wagon road leading down to the place that was once a hustling and bustling ranch, settled by a few of the old pioneer families of Sierra County.

The earliest information about Romano Ranch appears in *An Illustrated History of Plumas, Lassen, and Sierra Counties*, by Farriss and Smith, published in 1882. The ranch is first mentioned on page 470:

“In 1851 John Lavezzolo settled on Charcoal flat, but removed to his present place in the fall of 1852, his ranch below having been jumped during the year.”

The book continues shortly after:

“Lavezzolo had resumed mining on Charcoal ranch, and also had a potato ranch east of Scott’s hotel, where he raised fine tuberous specimens.”

This means that the future Romano Ranch was one

of the first settlements in Sierra City. John Lavezzola (note the spelling) was an immigrant from Northern Italy, coming to Sierra County early in its history. In 1863, Lavezzola is living on the ranch, containing four acres and a house. John’s brother Michael appears as another resident the following year. The ranch was in

John Lavezzola’s hands up until about 1869. This is when another well-known name comes in.

In 1871, John Sorracco (an immigrant from Genoa, Italy) was maintaining the ranch, including 160 acres, a house, barn, and fencing; one wagon, two Spanish mules, one Spanish horse, two mixed cows, and four hogs. Shortly

later, a few other men, including Charles Quirollo, joined Sorracco at his mining claim at the ranch. Most of John Sorracco’s children were born on the ranch, the family staying there until the early 1880s, shortly before they moved to Sierra City to open up a hotel.

The Romanos are shown living on the ranch in 1883, but earlier had a quartz claim at the ranch. Written



*Present day Romano Ranch house.*

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— 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**

**President:** Bud Buczkowske, Alleghany

**Vice President:** Joleen Torri, Sattley

**Secretary:** Vacant

**Treasurer:** Bill Copren, Sattley

Board members in addition to those previously mentioned are Maren Scholberg, Sierraville; Elda Faye Ball, Loyalton; Suzi Schoensee, Sattley; James Connolly, Sierra City; Mary Nourse, Sierra City; Eli Scholberg, Loyalton.

Museum Curator - Virginia Lutes

Assistant - Judy Lawrence

If you have any suggestions or comments, feel free to contact any board member.

**Looking for Historic Photos**

- Brandy City
- Kentucky Mine, Sierra City
- Judge James Galloway, wife Rachael Daughtery, (1850 - 1882 Downieville and Sierra Valley)
- Daughter Agnes and Son-in-law Hartwell F. Turner
- Roderick McKenzie or James Kane (early Downieville/Sierra City Miners and Businessmen)

If you have any photos of history to share on the above, please contact: Virginia Lutes, PO Box 145, Sierraville, CA 96126 or email [historicalsociety@kentuckymine.org](mailto:historicalsociety@kentuckymine.org)

**Also:**

Elda Ball is requesting names and information about Sierra County Loggers and Sawmill workers killed on the job. She has received a request for names for The Sierra Nevada Logging Museum Memorial.

Please contact Elda Ball, PO Box 654, Loyalton, CA 96118 or by telephone at (530) 993-4373 as soon as possible. Thank you!

**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 individual)</b> .....	\$300.00

(The board increased membership fees commencing in June of 2008)

Please send dues to: S.C.H.S. Membership Chairperson, PO Box 54, Sattley, CA 96124

**Romano Ranch (Continued from Page 1) —**

in *Like a Leaf upon the Current Cast*, by Katie Willmarth Greene, starting on page 237:

“We first find a record of the Romanos along the Yuba in February of 1874, when Joe Lagomarsino of Loganville sold what the deed calls the Martini quartz claim (this quartz claim was sold to Joe Lagomarsino by Martin Guiterez only days before Joe passed it on to Louis Romano, as if he were just a go-between).”

The book continues shortly after:

“He acquired some flat homesteading land close to the mining claim, across on the south side of the Yuba at Charcoal Flat. He planted fruit trees and tended a large commercial vegetable garden, potatoes doing especially well.”



*The Sierra County Historical Society Annual meeting held at the Romano Ranch.*

Louis Romano was also born in Genoa in 1830. He came to Sierra County in the early 1870s with his wife Catherine Lagomarsino, and their son John, born in 1870. First they came to Eureka Diggings, and then went towards Sierra City to live on the land near their quartz claim. The State of California granted Louis Romano a patent for the ranch in 1886 for 160 acres. This was the first time that somebody had actually owned the ranch, the government having leased the land to the previous residents. In 1897, Louis Romano sold 16 acres of the north-west corner of their ranch to Felix Fournier, and a cabin from his ranch was moved onto his new property. The size of Romano Ranch was lowered to 144 acres, and has maintained its acreage to the present time.

In 1902, while picking apples, Louis Romano fell out of a tree at the ranch, fracturing his spine and dying shortly after. Catherine Romano died four years later in 1906. Both are buried at the Sierra City cemetery. Their son Johnny then had to step up as the “man of

the house,” taking care of his sisters Ida, Justina, Mary, and Olive, and his brother Louis.

Louis, Jr. would take an annual trip up to Harris Meadows from a trail behind the ranch, staying up there for many months at a time. On his trip in 1917, Louis never returned home. Johnny ventured up the trail in November, finding his brother’s decomposing remains by a spring. Louis had been kicked in the head by a horse shortly before he made his journey, so that was suspected to be the injury that ended his

life. The remains were carried back down the steep canyon to be brought back for burial. It is not known where Louis is buried; the ranch may hold his remains, or a headstone at the Sierra City cemetery could have rotted away.

Johnny Romano then lived with his sister Justina and her husband

David Carbona until they moved to Gilroy. The other siblings had moved away. For reasons unknown, Johnny stayed a bachelor, living with his dog. He also owned three 1909 Studebakers, of which one still exists on the ranch, used as a flower holder. Johnny worked in the large meadows most of the day in the hot sun. This would later cause him to get skin cancer, which would cause his death. An interesting story has been told by few about the time of Johnny’s death:

The year was 1953, and Johnny had just finished working in the fields when he returned home. It had just so happened shortly later that a few people headed down to the ranch, looking for Johnny Romano. He was nowhere in sight. A man walked up to the old cabin and peeked inside. He saw Johnny sprawled out, not moving. The man attempted to walk in, but then the barks of a dog were heard. Johnny’s dog was trying to “protect his master” and started to attack the man. Another person from the group pulled out a gun and

**Romano Ranch (Continued on Page 4) —**



### Romano Ranch (Continued from Page 3) —

shot the dog between its eyes. Johnny Romano was found to still be alive, and was brought down to the county hospital in Downieville. He died at the hospital shortly later on November 24, 1953, a result of skin cancer.



*Felix Fournier, (on left) and John Romano after killing a bear they had trapped.*

Olive Old, Johnny's sister, inherited the ranch. She passed it on to her daughter, Gloria Anderson. After Johnny's death, the old cabin was remodeled, having a new interior, rear addition, windows and siding, and roof, but the old claw-foot bathtub remained with the house. The cabin was most likely built around 1892, based on records in the courthouse. Gloria Anderson was later moved to a nursing home, so the ranch was sold to Willi and Sandy Behrens. After installing a new bridge to gain access to the ranch, Willi built the present-day home in 1996. He also tore down the old barn and built a new one, similar to the old barn. In 2002, the ranch was sold to Doug and Laurie Peterman, who currently reside year-round on the ranch with their children Joe, Cory, and Rachel. Doug is distantly related to the Italian families who settled the ranch, his great-grandfather Joseph Mottini claiming China Flat.

The ranch is located deep in the river canyon, surrounded by lofty mountains covered with many species and sizes of trees. The sharp crags of the Sierra Buttes are visible from all of the four meadows located on the ranch. There is an abundance of water sources, the ranch being fed by a creek, and having  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile of the Yuba River running through the property. Dur-

ing certain times of the year, waterfalls cascade down the steep slopes of the mountains. The water supply for the ranch is provided by the creek, a well and a water tank being nearby. There also used to be a saw mill on this creek.

On the river, the footings of a bridge exist. This bridge was built in the 1940s by the United States Army to gain supplies from the mines above the ranch for the war effort. Nearby, there is a Flying Dutchman used to cross the river. A Flying Dutchman is a platform that is suspended by a cable in which a small group of people can stand on. They would pull themselves across by grabbing on to the cable. Another way people used to access the ranch was by driving across the river when the water was low. This crossing was below the present bridge.

Upriver, there are large cement chunks along one side of the river. These were part of the hydroelectric plant of the Gillepsie Dam that supplied power to the Monarch Mine. There is a nice swimming hole upstream that can be accessed by water, or by one of the meadows above.



*Built in 1892 this old cabin still stands on the Romano Ranch.*

On September 19, 2010, the annual Sierra County Historical Society meeting was held at the ranch. Visitors had a good time walking the grounds and eating lunch. Romano Ranch is a great place to step back in time and to learn its history.

## The Sierra County Vault Has Withstood the Test of Time

Excerpts from a Report Compiled by Edwin Tyson

**T**he Sierra County Board of Supervisors met on March 3, 1882, and received bids for a vault to be built in the county building housing the office of the County Clerk. The meeting was adjourned until the following day when the bid of H.K. Turner was accepted.<sup>1</sup>

The Turner bid was for a brick building, sixteen by twenty feet inside with walls a minimum of two feet thick, ten feet from floor to girders, an arched two feet crowning, and a ceiling one and two-thirds feet thick. The interior surface was to be plastered, and doors and windows were furnished by the county.

The accepted bid was for \$1,500, and the vault was to be completed by September 1, 1882.<sup>2</sup>

According to the *Mountain Messenger*, rainstorms in May delayed the building actually getting underway. It reported on May 27, that when the rains began three days earlier, H.K. Turner had about 3,000 bricks drying in his yard but that he did not anticipate much damage as a result.<sup>3</sup>

The paper for July 8, 1882, carried the item that "H.K. Turner lighted his kiln on Thursday," and on July 17, "Mr. Turner finished burning his brick kilns Wednesday morning. It will take a week to cool."

Additional *Mountain Messenger* items indicate that Turner had begun laying the vault foundation by August 5, and by August 12, the walls were about half up. By August 26, the walls were completed, but Turner had to wait for iron girders before putting on the arch.<sup>4</sup>

By September 2, the roof was being installed and on September 9, "the walls of the County vault are all

finished and all that remains to be done is to plaster the insides."<sup>5</sup>

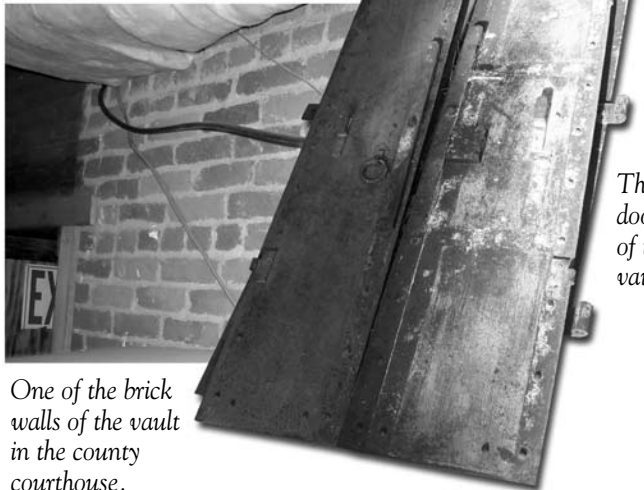
The Supervisors Minutes for August 9, 1882, show that "upon approval and acceptance of the vault by D.J. Cole the auditor is authorized to draw his warrant on the General Fund for \$1,100.<sup>6</sup> Later minutes dated November 10 indicate that the vault was accepted and a warrant ordered drawn for \$1,100 for balance due.<sup>7</sup>

NOTE: The difference between the \$1,100 final payment and the original contract for \$1,500 is explained by payments to workers while construction was in progress. An example is to be found in the Supervisors Minutes for August 8, 1882, where a warrant is recorded "to F. Schmidt work on the vault, \$28.33."

The building where the vault is located housed for many years the offices of the Clerk, Auditor and Recorder and the

District Attorney. For that reason, when the Courthouse burned in September of 1947 most of the current valuable records were in the vault and so escaped the flames. Later the safe from the County Treasurer's office was temporarily located there along with the accounts from the Tax Collectors office.

The County vault is an important part of Sierra County history. It is 114 years old: it is made of locally produced brick: it was constructed by a prominent citizen of Sierra County: it has served its purpose well. It presently houses the office of the Planning - Building Director, Tim Beals.



One of the brick walls of the vault in the county courthouse.

The old doors of the vault.

<sup>1</sup> Supervisors Minutes, vol. C, March 4, 1882, p. 188.

<sup>2</sup> *Mountain Messenger*, vol. XXVIII, no. 42, March 11, 1882.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. XXIX, no. 1, May 27, 1882, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. XXIX, no. 14, August 26, 1882.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. XXIX, no. 16, August 26, 1882.

<sup>6</sup> *Op., Cit.*, August 9, 1882, p. 200.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* November 11, 1882, pp. 205-6.

## Hot Rock Cooking in Sierra Valley

(A conclusion from a thesis entitled "Prehistoric Use of Hot Rock Cooking Features: Archaeological Investigations at the Webber Gravel Pit Site, Sierra Valley, California, by Judy Lawrence)



Although there is much more to be learned about Native American hot rock cooking in Sierra Valley, there are some statements we can make about the site with some assurance:

- The three radiocarbon dates obtained from the site indicate it was occupied ~ 1000 BP and ~700 BP, either as separate occupation sequences or perhaps a continuous occupation spanning those dates.
- The artifact set collected at the site fits within the Late Martis/Early Kings Beach Complex as defined by Elston (1977). However, these chronological phases may not be applicable to Sierra Valley and Plumas County sites and a more region-specific chronology should be established.
- X-Ray Fluorescence analysis of obsidian at the site produced north central and northeastern California sources which suggest trade with groups visiting the valley or travel to quarries out of the area
- The site was most probably a seasonal resource collection and processing site, located within the core area of the indigenous Washoe. Tool manufacture of basalt was also taking place during site habitation. The number of discarded projectile points suggests that hunting trips may have been conducted from the site.
- The ground stone collection from the site – mainly portable metates and manos – suggests seed grinding and processing of camas, pine nuts, and other plants.
- The abundance of fire cracked rock on the surface and below surface and the excavation of three rock-lined cooking features indicate that the site was used for hot rock cooking, most likely roasting camas and parching seeds.
- Ethnographic sources confirm that Native American groups visited Sierra Valley to harvest seeds and dig and roast camas bulbs.

### Site Interpretation

The site conclusions listed above are empirical markers of a unique place and time and a group of people who gathered, processed, cooked, and preserved resources in Sierra Valley as part of a year round cycle of subsistence procurement. From the choice of site location, near plants that could be gathered, soil that could be easily dug, and abundant supplies of fuel and rocks, to the very precise way resources were processed and cooked to obtain maximum caloric benefit, the Native American groups who visited Sierra Valley developed a successful strategy for survival.

There would seem to be a discrepancy between the  $^{14}\text{C}$  dates, 1,050 cal BP, 960 cal BP, and 690 cal BP, obtained from the site and the Late Martis, 1,500-2,500 BP, tool typology designation. Waechter and Andolina (2004) suggest that a sequence that is specific to Sierra Valley and Plumas County sites should be developed because tool set designations from other areas in the eastern Sierra front may not apply. Whether the Webber Gravel Pit site was used continuously during the span of the three  $^{14}\text{C}$  dates obtained, could perhaps be determined by comparing the amount of fire cracked rock and charcoal from various levels within the features. However, the depositional disturbance noted above precludes this comparative method. Waechter and Andolina (2004) concluded that the Buttes site represented two distinct occupation areas within the site corresponding to earlier and later  $^{14}\text{C}$  groupings around the separated occupation areas. Future excavations at the Webber Gravel Pit may provide the answer to this question.

What brought about the intensification of rock cooking and the increased use of geophytes in Native American diets around 1,000 BP, coinciding with the 1,050 cal BP date from the Webber Gravel Pit? Thoms (2006a) and others have



## Native Americans (Continued from Page 6) —



*Webber Gravel Pit with Randolf Hill in background.*

hypothesized that a “carbohydrate revolution” came about as the result of population intensification pressures or environmental changes that took place during the Medieval Climatic Anomaly, a time of fluctuating conditions between wetter and drier periods. Waechter and Andolina (2004) advise that population pressure and/or environmental changes, while valid hypotheses, may not be the complete answer to the dietary shift question. They call for more exploration of the accepted chronological sequences assigned to the northeastern California/western Great Basin region. This suggestion seems valid given the extreme environmental variation within this large region and the many different groups of folks encountering these disparate ecotones.

### **Closing Comments**

The features at the Webber Gravel Pit site were carefully planned and constructed. The rocks that had been fitted together to line the basins, angling one against the other for maximum coverage, still retained their symmetry despite hundreds of years of use – or abandonment and reuse – and hundreds of years of burial. The use of fractured

ground stone throughout the feature structures provides evidence of a “waste-not-want-not” mentality. The flat rock platforms at the basin bottoms were arranged to provide an efficient cooking surface, and were placed to assure recovery of resources without waste. As we exposed the layers of circular rock levels, each carefully placed to support the gently sloping concavity of the structure, it became clear that the features were created by people whose mindfulness of purpose was consistent and well-defined through generations of rock cooking events.

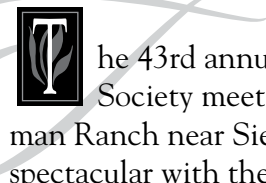
As noted before, hot rock cooking sites are often overlooked in an archaeological setting because they often appear to be part of the natural landscape. Large areas of surface rock midden can obscure feature definition and below-surface midden scatter can prohibit feature recognition within the jumble of midden rock density. Our excavation at the Webber Gravel Pit adds to the cumulative knowledge of Native American hot rock cooking sites, and we hope it will encourage more studies of this informative aspect of prehistoric life ways in Sierra Valley.

# The Sierran

Sierra County Historical Society

P.O. Box 260

Sierra City, California 96125

The 43rd annual Sierra County Historical Society meeting was held at the Peterman Ranch near Sierra City. The setting was spectacular with the Sierra Buttes as a backdrop to a beautiful green valley and ranch. The forty members in attendance were treated to a tour of the grounds and the original ranch house. Cory Peterman gave a detailed report on the history of the ranch. James Connolly gave an update on the Lagomarsino-Keirn cabin in Loganville. James also asked for any late 1870's household items for the cabin. If you have or know someone that

has any items, please contact the Sierran. The project goals and objectives are to enhance visitor's knowledge through interpretive resources at the cabin. This year's luncheon was supplied and catered by two gracious ladies from Sierra Country Store. Be sure to read Cory's research paper on the Peterman Ranch in this issue of The Sierran.

Respectfully,  
Bud Buczkowske  
President