

# THE SIERRAN

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*Sierra County skiers Amelia Lewis, an unknown man, Matie Christenson, an unidentified girl, "Babe" Chiaffino and Hazel Thompson. Photo early 1900's. Note the sparse trees—most of the forest had been logged.*

## NOTES ON SKI RACING

*By Betsy Cammack*

As usual, California was first. Not just California, but our favorite part of it.....Sierra County. We were the first in the world to have ski clubs, and first to stage an organized ski tournament.

James Sinnott, in Volume V of his *History of Sierra County* which is devoted to the area called "Over North", modestly states that we may have been the first to have them, not only in this country, but in the world. In a book called *Lost Sierra - Gold, Ghosts and Skis*, author William B. Berry illustrates that James Sinnott was right.

In 1866, some half-dozen individual ski clubs joined forces to host a tournament scheduled for February 11, 1867 at La Porte, which originally fell in Sierra County although at about this time annexed itself to Plumas County.

The new group was called the Alturas Ski Club, and was comprised of clubs from Saw Pit, Onion Valley, Port Wine, Gibsonville, St. Louis and Whiskey Diggings and of course, La Porte. Mr. Berry says, "it was the first club organized for the

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**11:30AM—1:00PM Self-guided  
museum tours**  
**1:00 PM Potluck (please bring your  
own silverware)**  
**2:00 PM Business Meeting**  
**2:30 PM Ray Hartwell: Historic  
Sierra Valley Storms**



## CURATOR'S REPORT

by Karen Donaldson

Once again, we're nearing the end of a busy summer season at the Kentucky Mine Museum. As of September 30 we have had almost 4,000 visitors with 1,500 taking the guided tour of the stamp mill.

The following volunteers are greatly appreciated for their time and dedication over the summer months: Joyce Bagley, Mary Bettencourt, Rita Bradley, Francie Brett, Bob & Carol Canby, Don & Arline Castleberry, Bev Copren, Lisa Elliott, Grace Griffin, Arnold & Kevel Gutman, Jennifer Harnach, Jack Hawkins, Lois Keeler, Linc & Billie Madsen, Barbara Martinetti, Brad Mead, LaVerne Monico, Ruth Neubert, Denise Parodi, Gary & Lauren Ranz, and Maren Scholberg.

Special thanks to LaVerne for coordinating the above volunteers to keep the museum staffed during the summer months.

### SUMMER CONCERT SERIES

The Concert Series was well received this year. Box office sales were up from 1992. A slow start in July was no doubt due to the cool weather. As usual, proceeds are used to support the museum.

The local businesses who advertise on our poster and the 45 season tickets purchased got us off to a great start. Several local businesses helped by posting flyers each week and generally promoting the programs: Bassett's Station, Yuba River Inn, Sardine Lake Lodge, Sierra Country Store, Herrington's Sierra Pines, SCTV, Sierra County Arts Council, the *Mountain Messenger*, Tahoe Instant Press, the Miners Foundry and KVMR Radio in Nevada City. The Downieville Grocery made it possible for us to have tickets available in Downieville this year.

The following individuals have helped with a vast array of production details: Carroll & Renetta Hayes, Dave Bloch & Speranza Avram, Brenda Mitchell, JoAn Cochran, C.K. Smith, Laurel Boggs, Gary Barnhart, Tiffin Kutch, Chuck Hardesty, Mike Heuer, Pat Hill, Marlene Cartwright, Kevel & Arnie Gutman, Charity Clover, Kevin Long of 49er Stage and Feather's Flowers.

Special thanks to Dennis Messa for providing the sound system and technical and moral support. The show could not go on without him.

Finally, thanks to each person who attended the performances--truly making it possible to continue! Plans are being made now for a 1994 season of summer entertainment.

### MUSEUM DONATIONS

The museum received as donations the following artifacts:

From Robin Prince, a **wooden school desk** used at the Sierra City School. From the estate of Captain Roy and Margie Merison Hutchison, in their memory, **gears for a pan or disc feeder**. Dorothy and Chandler Hunt of Sardine Lake have loaned many items for the **fishing exhibit** put together by Mary Nourse's Downieville Schools class. Dave Price and Kevel Gutman also loaned items for this exhibit.

We have been enjoying the company of **five historic figure "dummy boards"** also made by Mary Nourse's students for History Day in May. They are conversation pieces and add a touch of whimsy to the park grounds.

A-1 John's Locksmith of Auburn donated substantial labor to service the **Sierra County Diebold safe** and also open and make keys for a **strongbox** originally donated by the Withycombe family.

Carleton Hanson donated a pair of **12-foot-long skis** last used in the winter of 1952. They were made in the basement of the Loeffler house in Sierra City, using the ski bending press on display in the museum.

Paul and Mary Bettencourt donated a pair of old **Levi Strauss blue jeans** that were found with a telegram in the pocket dated 1908. They have been confirmed as the oldest reported to Levi Strauss & Co., and may win a contest held by said company.

George Baker donated a **leather bound trunk** which was made to hold another leather hatbox containing an ostrich-plumed hat used in Masonic ceremonies. This is from the Doris Jesser Baker family and was used by Hiram Deaner who tuned pianos throughout the Gold Country.

John Atwell donated a **spinning wheel** and **wool carder** dating to 1828 and 1862 respectively, and were used by the William Kirkpatrick family in Van Buren, Indiana.

From Mike Hertzberg, the Museum received two **wooden core sample trays**, five feet long, originally from the foundry in Downieville.

Carl "Chick" Cigogni donated an authentically old-looking Stetson hat for the gold miner in the miner's cabin. Lowell Robinson donated the **mail sleigh** originally used on the route from Camptonville to Goodyears Bar and also on Mountain House Road. Kate Gibson and William Haley donated a **collection of books** in memory of their late father, Marlin W. Haley.

Terry Shaeffer donated some ultraviolet filters for the fluorescent bulbs in the museum. These will inhibit deterioration of fabrics and papers.

On loan from Sierra County this summer has been the Replica Gold Collection of nuggets from the Ruby Mine. This has been an exceptionally popular exhibit. The replicas will be returning to the Courthouse in Downieville when remodeling is completed.

### MEMORIAL FUND

The Museum Memorial Fund has received the following donations:

From Beverly B. White and Andra B. Carter in memory of Thelma Berger Sullivan.

From John R. Berger, Beverly B. White and Andra B. Carter toward the Berger family trust.

From Anthony F. Noga and Sophie Tschopp in memory of Henry Tschopp.

A bronze plaque has been installed in honor of Henry this year.

A plaque has also been installed for Amy Westall Bowman of Loganville.

From Arch and LaVerne Monico in memory of Jack Allen Ring.

Charles K. Smith has been very helpful in this endeavor.

**THANKS EVERYONE!**



# "Notes on Ski Racing"

*continued from page 1*

specific purpose of sponsoring competition and promotional work incidental to such an enterprise."

It wasn't until ten years later that Norway organized its first races. In 1882, there were races in New Hampshire; Red Wing, Minnesota followed in 1886, followed by Ishpeming, Michigan in 1887.

But California was first; and the Alturas tournaments continued to be an annual event until 1911.

Skiing was certainly no novelty in 1867—there is evidence that there was a ski-maker in Downieville as early as 1852. Contests were advertised in the *Mountain Messenger* during the late fifties. The point is that by 1867, the towns sponsoring stake races had become so numerous and the betting so heavy that organization became necessary.

Delivery of mail and supplies - not to mention kids getting to school - had made skiing as a means of transportation a necessity. What made it into a sport was the isolation and boredom of the miners and their families during the winters—so that skiing became a pastime for men, women and children alike. Current observers noted that kids were not only adept at jumping, but turned somersaults while doing so.

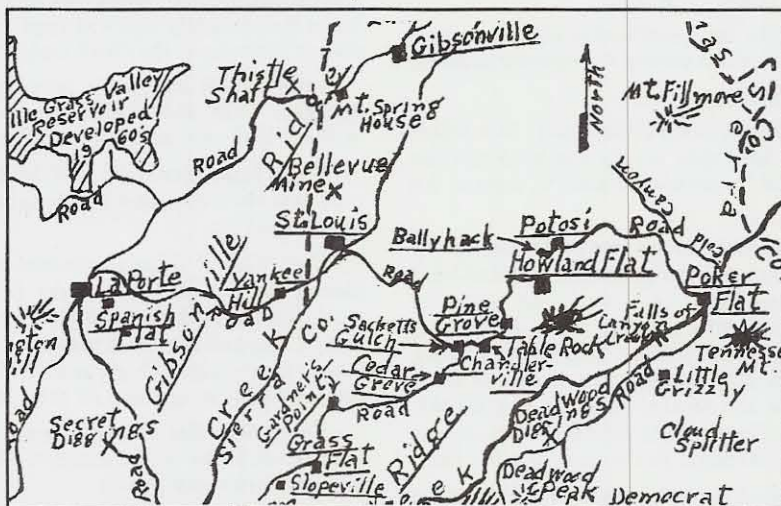
Mr. Berry's book, published in 1991, quotes liberally from material given to him by James Sinnott and by old-timer skiers he interviewed during a long career as a journalist with a particular love for skiing, commencing in 1928.

In addition to legends of races past, feats, rivalries and even shootings, the book contains old photos (including some supplied by our Society member Margaret Burrelle), lithographs, maps and reproductions of circulars and newspapers. Some of the chapters are reprinted from articles he wrote during the course of that career, others contain new material.

Mr. Berry deserves credit for establishing the "Over North" area as the cradle of American skiing. Prior to 1938, Harold A. Grinden, Historian for the U. S. Ski Association, had thought the Aurora Ski Club of Red Wing to have been

the first ski club, and the races in Berlin, New Hampshire to have been the first ski tournament.

However, he found an old issue of the *Marquette, Michigan Mining Journal* dated Jan 15, 1905. In this was an article proclaiming "America's Best Riders Will Participate in the Tournament," scheduled for Washington's birthday, 1905. Several skiers from Norway were named. The article goes on: "James F. Mullen, a California skier, has written the president, stating that he would come to Ishpeming with several riders if expenses are paid.... the expense of bringing the California riders here would be too great...the list will be large enough without them." Mr. Mullen's letter was never answered.



Portion of map of northern Sierra County (from Sinnott's "Over North...")

Intrigued by the implications of all this, Mr. Berry went to La Porte in July of 1938, to contact the writer of the 1905 letter. Affectionately called "Colonel Bull," Mullen snorted, "Why, when I wrote that letter, snow-showing was in its second childhood up here."

The result of interviews with Mullen and several other old-time skiers was an article called "Into the

Ski Cradle", which clearly established just who was first.

And by December of that year, Harold Grinden had written to Mr. Mullen: "Bill Berry's article has started me on a new hunt. It looks very much like a new chapter is to be written, and a chapter which will head up what already is preserved as far as I have been able to go."

What should endear Mr. Berry to the residents of this area, though, is his respect for, pride in and enjoyment of the accomplishments of our Western skiers. (Most of our readers already know they called themselves snow-shoers —not skiers.) He cites the famous 1872 race in which a man named Tommy Todd set a record, going 1,804 feet in 14 seconds flat, from a standing start. That's 87.857 miles per hour! That time is verified, but in 1894 one veteran of many races said he saw two skiers do 1,886 feet in 12 seconds. Furthermore, he points out that the courses were flat at top and bottom, so that the actual speeds in some places would be greater than these averages would indicate.

*Continued on next page*



In fact, modern ski riders—including champions from all over the country—failed to defeat these old-timers in old fashioned race revivals in 1938, 1941, 1951 and 1952. In 1954 they finally managed it — by which time the old timers from Alturas were in their 70's and 80's! What might have happened had the communities "Over North" prospered and produced new generations of snowshoers and dopemakers will never be known.

For the benefit of readers who do not have a copy of Volume V of Mr. Sinnott's history, or may have missed Georgine Copren's excellent article which appeared in the 1970 issue of this publication, we include some high points here.

The Tournaments usually lasted for at least four days, with balls given every night. Purses ran several hundred dollars, and spectators came from miles around. There were divisions for men, women and children.

Racing skis ran from 10-1/2 to 13-1/2 feet in length, varying in weight from 13 to 17 pounds, predicated by the height and weight of the rider. Width ran from 2-3/4 to 4-1/2 inches. Norwegian skis, such as those worn by Snow-shoe Thompson, had flat bottoms. But sometime in the 'fifties, our locals began experimenting with grooved bottoms; finally settling on one of 3/8 inch depth and 1-1/2 inch width.

They used only one pole, much heavier than anything seen today. During runs, it was carried under the right arm, pointing forward, and served the purpose of deflecting the snow thrown up by the ski-tips. At 80 mph with no goggles, this was a consideration.

But what made the real difference was the DOPE. (Today they call it wax.) Mr. Berry asserts that modern-day skiers would be well advised to study these old-time concoctions. Dope was so important that the prize money was divided equally between the snow-shoer and the dope-maker.

Recipes were guarded treasures, revealed to no one. There were those for damp snow, warm snow, dry snow, new snow, cold snow, morning skiing, afternoon skiing and more. A recipe for cold snow was Johnnie Williams' #21:

#### DOPE #21

1 oz spermaceti  
1/8 oz camphor  
1/2 teaspoon balsam  
21 drops oil of tar

Cook for 45 minutes, then add 1/2 teaspoon oil of tar and cool.

(Other recipes included oil of spruce, hemlock, cedar, pine, fir, Venice turpentine, Barbary tallow, castor oil, Burgundy pitch, Canada pitch, gum, beeswax, rosin and more.)

Snow-shoe Thompson, the well-known mail carrier from Alpine County, traveled two hundred miles to race in the tournament of February, 1869. He didn't just lose, he lost spectacularly, coming in 200 feet behind the last man in his squad.

This was like racing a Percheron against a steeplechaser; like comparing apples and oranges. He wasn't a hot-rodder, like the boys from Alturas. He didn't have grooves on the bottom of his skis which weighed 25 pounds and were only nine feet long. (It should be noted here that the famous "long-boards" were for racing. For general transportation, even our residents used shorter skis.) He didn't use dope at all. He skied upright, not in a crouch, and he used his ski pole horizontally, as a high wire artist does.

The *Mountain Messenger* gleefully reported that this famous man skied "like an ox train after a railroad car."

The *Alpine Chronicle*, Thompson's home town paper, didn't like that much and published a challenge which also appeared in the *Sacramento Daily Union*. The newspaper battle soon included the *La Porte Union* as well; each trading insults, slurs, bragging, and counter challenges with the other papers, all the following spring. Then the La Porte paper burned, while the Alpine paper moved away.

Snow-shoe Thompson died six years later, never having salvaged his hurt Norwegian pride.....although today he is honored by a cross country ski race and several monuments both here and in Norway.

The snow-shoers of Sierra and Plumas Counties didn't deny the talents of Thompson, who could - and did - perform jumps of 80 feet. They had enormous respect for the way he could cover incredible distances under extremely adverse conditions. But — well, when it came to speed, they were the best, and they knew it.

(The *Western America SkiSport Museum* at Boreal Ridge, Donner Pass, is named in honor of William B. Berry. Copies of his book are available at the Kentucky Mine Museum in Sierra City, The Ruffled Goose in Downieville, the Plumas County Museum in Quincy, and The Bookseller in Grass Valley.)



## A SCHOOLTEACHER DISCOVERS SKIING

The Sierra County Historical Society is grateful to have received a copy of "California Correspondence, 1874-1881", a collection of letters written by Electa Louesa DeWolf Butler. They were collected and published by her descendent, Mary Ann Kollenberg in 1986.

In late 1873, 30-year old Electa DeWolf, a teacher living in Burghill, Ohio, secured a position to teach the four children of the Nathan Parsons family of Sardine Valley, near the southern boundary of the Sierra Valley.

Her delight in her new surroundings were expressed in her letters home, which were then published in several Ohio newspapers. Some excerpts follow...

**Feb., 1874:** I am becoming quite an adept in the art of snow-shoing. The shoes are made of wood and are from eight to ten feet long and four or five inches wide, with a strap and a heel piece in the center. A long pole is used to balance with, and to assist in climbing hills. In some places the ladies are quite expert in their use, and have clubs and races to test their skill. To start at the top of a long steep hill, and scoot down it at lightning speed may be very good sport, but judging from the tumbles I have had in sliding down a hill of short grade, it might be dangerous exercise. There is about it the same fascination there is in coasting, and the same "bug-bear of uphill." I advise all to come to Sardine Valley and try it...

Sardine Valley lies on the old Stage Road from Maryville to Virginia City, known as the "Hermit's Pass Road" [or Henness Pass Road — Ed.] which, before the Railroad crossed the State, was a very important thoroughfare...

I have lately come to appreciate traveling in winter in the mountains. On the 14th of January commenced a snowstorm which lasted until the 19th. At its conclusion the

snow measured six feet three inches on the level, and our road, which had been in prime order, lay buried under five feet of snow. In a country thickly settled and on even ground it would be bad enough, but when you take into consideration that for fifteen miles, between here and Loyaltown, there is but one stopping place, the task of opening the road assumes almost gigantic proportions. Your horses refuse utterly to go ahead, and three or four men make the trail; after them several loose horses are driven; even then, they flounder in the snow, which comes up even with their backs; after these come sleds, each drawn by four horses in single file. It took the force of seven men, and more than a dozen horses, eight days, to open communication with Truckee, about thirty miles distance. In some places in the mountains they have reduced the matter to a science, and put snow-shoes on their horses. These are made of rubber, and are about ten inches by twelve in size, and are fastened to the hoofs...

**May 6, 1874.....**looking out over a valley and hills covered with about two feet of snow. Today, after lessons, my pupils and I went out on snow shoes in search of buttercups, real genuine buttercups and a little white flower resembling candy tuft, and found them growing cheerily not two feet from the snow...

**July 8, 1874** (on the Donner Party) Sutter's fort, now Sacramento, was only a hundred miles distant, and any mountaineer of today could make himself a pair of snow shoes, and in two day's time travel that distance, and still, out of the eighty-four persons who reached here, more than half perished from starvation and exposure. There are still to be seen stumps of trees, ten to twelve feet high, cut by the party and showing the depth of snow at that time.

*Note; Electa DeWolf married John K. Butler on March 9, 1875, and moved to "Halfway House", which was halfway between Placerville and Sacramento. She was plainly an avid sightseer, and her descriptions of Lake Tahoe, Independence Lake, the Sierra Buttes and other landmarks are charming. The book also includes poems, and letters by her mother, who came West to visit.*





## Letters of Griffith Meredith

(In the supplements appended to the second printing of "Over North in Sierra County", James Sinnott included a series of letters from Griffith Meredith to his sister Sarah back in his home state of New York. He operated two sawmills and wrote these letters from Empire Flat, near Poker Flat. These excerpts will show how enamored he became with the sport of "snow-shoing.")

*Jan 22, 1860*...Snow here by our house is full three feet deep and it is snowing now very fast. This winter, thus far, has been very pleasant. We have had very little cold freezing weather, but still our Winters are long and tedious...



*Snowshoe racers lined up for the start of a race at La Porte in the early 1900's (from Sinnott's "Over North in Sierra County")*

You would have lots of fun if you were here traveling over snow-Shoes. Mollie (Mary, Griffith's wife) puts them on once in a while and trots around. I go to the Steam Mill (3 miles) once in a while and wear them, and when I am coming down the hill for a half mile I stand up and ride and go very fast and sometimes fall down, but not very often...

*May 6, 1860*...Molly says that I am quite a Boy yet, but I think I am quite a man. But then if you were only here to ride on these snow-Shoes you would have more fun in one day than on those sleds in a week, for we stand straight up and let them go at rail-Road speed, and then turn them around corners as pretty as you can imagine. And they are not heavy. They are about as thick as a stave of a barrel and about twice as long. Oh! You should see me

go. I don't fall down now. I can run on them a whole day and not fall once, but along at first I used to fall very often. You would laugh outright if you were here to see the little Boys and Girls run on them everywhere...

*Dec 23, 1860*...I have all my work done that I can do before March except drawing about 10 cords of wood on a hand-sleigh. It will take me about 2 or 3 weeks to do it. I have been making several pair of Snow-Shoes. We have had a fine Fall and Winter thus far. We have about one foot of snow and it is snowing now quite fast....I presume that by this time you have plenty of snow up on the heights, and then those sleighs will be brought out and then what a time. I wish I were there to make you a pair of the Norwegian Snow-Shoes — then you would go a perfect streak...

(*Undated letter*)...Sarah, you would be the right sort of woman for California for these long winters would be only fun for you to ride on Snow-Shoes. Sister Sarah (his sister-in-law was also named Sarah) over at St. Louis beat all the women and most of the men riding on Snow-Shoes down hill...

(*Note: His wife Mary, or "Mollie" died while on a trip to Sacramento in December, 1861.*)

*Feb 3rd, 1862*...Well Sarah I must tell you that today I was a boy again. I saw a large number of young men having a good time riding down the hill on Snow-Shoes, and they passed by my window. The temptation was too much for me. Some of them even dared me out to run —

(and you know I won't be dared) — So I went and had a good time for about two hours, but every time I would pass my window I could not help looking to the window, the way I always used to last Winter. Poor Mary always used to sit there when we were riding down and enjoy herself as much as anyone and sometimes hold Minna up and show her Papa as I would pass...

*Note: Mr Meredith was a member of the California legislature during 1865 and 1866. In addition to operating the two saw mills, he became a lawyer while in Sierra County, was a Justice of the Peace, and even operated a school at his home in the evenings. See pages 300-314 of James Sinnott's second printing of "Over North".*



## ANCIENT HISTORY

"I think of the snowshoe as the American Indian's second great contribution to wilderness travel: his cold-season canoe. Like the canoe, the snowshoe evolved subtly different shapes and designs according to the needs and conditions encountered by local tribes across North America. Archeological evidence — such as it is — suggests that the snowshoe (and the ski) existed in central Asia some 5,000 years ago, so its origins doubtless date back much further. The ski became the favored mode of winter travel in northern Asia and Europe, while the snowshoe seems to have been preferred in eastern Asia. Some believe snowshoes made their way to America with nomads crossing the Aleutian land bridge, but it is difficult to locate their point of origin; evidence of one form or another of snowshoes can be found all across the snowbelt of the Northern Hemisphere." —from an article by Carl Heilman II which appeared in Harrowsmith's Country Life January-February issue. He is an Adirondack guide; he crafts and sells hand-split wooden snowshoes —and when he uses the word snowshoes, he refers to those shaped like tennis racquets. However, it is interesting to learn that what our old-timers called "snowshoes" or "Norwegian Skis" and what Mr. Heilman calls snowshoes had a common origin.

### NEW BOOK HIGHLIGHTS HISTORIC AREA TRAILS

*Yuba Trails* is a brand-new guide to over forty trails in the North, Middle and South Yuba River watersheds. Written by Historical Society members Hank Meals and Susan Lamela, the book provides a substantial historical overview of the region, geography, directions to each trailhead and maps of the trails. Hank and Susan also provide their own personal commentaries and insights, bringing to the hiker their great depth and breadth of knowledge of the archaeology, anthropology, geology and biology of the area. *Yuba Trails* should be available in bookstores now.

## FOREST CITY SCHOOL BELL RETURNED

by Glenn Sundstrom

In the early 1870's, the Mike Redding Company opened the Bald Mountain Mine in Forest City. The richness of the gravels brought a second population boom to the town, which was established in 1852, resulting in the need for a new schoolhouse. The present structure, built in 1874 went two years without its' bell. A theatrical performance was held in November of 1876 and a bell, purchased from W.T. Garratt Foundry of San Francisco, was installed in a small tower atop the structure. The school served the community until the late 1930's, when a dwindling population forced the school's closure. Removed by the Sierra-Plumas Joint Unified School District for a Constitution Day celebration at Pliocene Ridge School in 1987, the bell remained in storage at Pliocene.

In November of 1992, Joe Simmons donated the Forest City School building to the newly formed Forest City Historical Association and an inquiry was made as to the possibility of the bell's return. At the school board meeting on September 7, 1993 the Historical Association made the request that the school bell be returned to its original home at the Forest City School. The school board members agreed to loan the bell to the Association for the annual Homecoming on September 11, where it was placed on display, to the enjoyment of many old-timers and newcomers alike in the Forest City Dance Hall.

At the October 5 meeting, the SPJUSD board voted to sign a permanent loan agreement with the Association, so that the school bell could be replaced in the school. At press time, the Association had recruited volunteer labor to restore the bell tower and hoist the bell back in place on the weekend of October 16 and 17, with a full weekend of festivities planned.

For more information on the activities of the Forest City Historical Association, call Glenn Sundstrom at (916) 287-3413.

### YUBA-DONNER SCENIC BYWAY UPDATE

The U.S. Forest Service is continuing to work on projects to improve the Scenic Byway, which traverses Sierra County on Highways 49 and 89. USFS is presently working with the Sierra County Arts Council on a brochure and signage for the Kyburz Flat Interpretive Area, on Henness Pass Road off Hwy. 89. These materials will explain the fascinating things to be found in the area, from 3,000-year-old petroglyphs, through a stage stop used by gold miners in the 1860's, to a Basque sheep Camp with a restored brick bread oven.

USFS has also published an informative brochure entitled "49 Miles Along Highway 49." The brochure is keyed to new signs along the highway from the Middle Yuba River to Yuba Pass, and explains the historic significance of each location. Pick one up at any Tahoe National Forest Ranger Station, or call them at (916) 265-5820.