

The Sierran

— A Publication of the Sierra County Historical Society —

“CALPINE WAS BORN AS A LUMBER COMPANY TOWN”

By Virginia Lutes, with help from JoAnn Chesney, Cheri Sposito, Christine Sullenger Linberg, George Vargas, and Bill Nunes, thank you to Dindy Cavallero for some of these photos



he town of Calpine was “born” with the Davies-Johnson Lumber Mill. James J. Sinnott, in his history published as “Sierra Valley, Jewel of the Sierras” shows the year of 1919 for the beginning of Calpine, thus Calpine celebrates the 100 year anniversary of this Sierra County town located in the western end of Sierra Valley, about 4 miles north of Sattley. Pre Davies-Johnson there was a school district and a school there, it was called Clare, founded in 1881. (Schools of Sierra Valley, SCHS, Bill Long)

Arthur E. Davies was not new to Sierra and Plumas Counties, he appears on the Sierra County 1910 census at age 32 along with his wife, Maggie Ann and a child George Burns. He owned a successful sawmill in Stampede Valley for a decade, as well as a mill in Delleker. By 1916 he had located in Blairsden where he acquired a timber parcel of 3,000 acres owned by Sierra Iron Company. The cost was substantial, \$250,000. He

made a down payment of \$26,000, with the balance to be paid in payments, but only during the active months from June through December at six % interest. With the agreement signed he moved his mill in June of 1916 behind the current Graeagle grocery store. The timber cut was mostly pine; the mill produced approximately 50,000 board feet a day. A box factory made fruit boxes which would be transported as box shook (knocked-down boxes, usually packed in bundles that were sent to fruit packing houses). As Davies had done in Stampede Valley, steam-traction engines and horse teams were used to bring logs to the pond, but needed rail service to move the boxes produced. He negotiated with

Western Pacific to lay a spur, but WP required Davies to furnish necessary cross ties and money to complete the spur. Davies chose to look elsewhere and turned to the NCO railway who built a short extension from



Mr. & Mrs. Davies, founders of the Davies-Johnson Lumber Company and mill, standing beside a California pine, the tree for which the town of Calpine is named.

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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!

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Presidents Message

Sierra County Historical Society wound down the summer season by hosting our annual picnic in Forest City on September 8. Over sixty members and guests enjoyed the afternoon thanks to the warm welcome by Cheryl Durrett, and Glen and Birdsong Sundstrom. Glorious weather and Cornish pasties contributed to the good time, but the highlight was Glen's walking tour of the historic town. The only official business conducted was the election of two new directors. Scott Mathieson and Jan Hamilton will fill the vacancies created by Judy Lawrence and Joe Madigan, both of whom will be stepping down after years of dedicated service to the SCHS board.

Autumn can be a time of letting things go, and sadly we must say goodbye to Bill Harnach, Sierra County's treasured botanist and historian who passed away recently. His passion for plants and his robust spirit will bloom in our hearts. In Bill's memory, I leave you with this thought by Albert Camus: "Autumn is a second spring when every leaf is a flower."

Mary Nourse

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Clio to the Davies Mill. The box factory contributed several thousand dollars to the cost of the narrow gauge spur. In 1917 a fire destroyed the mill; it was quickly rebuilt. The mill needed housing for employees so Davies had company houses from the Stampede Valley transported by boxcars to Beckwourth on the Boca Loyaltan railroad, then to Beckwourth, where they were transferred to NCO trains to Clio. Some of the red houses that are along main street in Graeagle are these buildings. If you were to look closely you would see signs of joining, since Davies had the buildings cut in half to transport!

Soon after, Arthur Davis sold the Davies Box and Lumber Mills and factory and purchased the McAlpine timber tract, which included 17,000 acres of timber. This was in an area near present day Calpine. Davies also purchased several small tracts of adjacent timber. The plans of Davies include building of a railroad to connect with the WP railroad. Rights of way were secured across ranches in Sierra Valley. A large mill was to be erected and ten carloads of machinery equipment had been purchased in the eastern US.

Calpine is born

There were 400 acres which the Davies' purchased from George and Charles Knuthson in 1919; this is where Calpine would be constructed. Davies formed Davies Lumber Corporation in March of 1920, and talked of building a ten-mile standard gauge branch from Western Pacific at a point two and a half miles east of Hawley to the new model town. It is said that the name Calpine was chosen by Mrs. Davies named for the beautiful California pines in the area. The first year employees and families lived in tents while the new company town was being constructed.

Davies obtained a partner for this new enterprise, C. R. Johnson of Alameda. The company name became Davies-Johnson Lumber Company and was incorporated in June 21, 1921. C.D. Johnson was president, Arthur Davies, secretary and general manager, and M. A. Davies, treasurer. Mr. Johnson was a well-known timber man and held interest in other timber operations in the west. He and Davies had been working previously together perfecting and working out the problems of a high class sugar and white pine proposition.



Ross carriers and drivers from the Davies-Johnson Lumber Company in Calpine -- the first in California.

The Davies-Johnson Lumber Company consisted of a sawmill, a planing mill and a box factory. The sawmill was 42 by 170 feet with a capacity of 100,000 feet a working day of ten hours. In addition there was a store, a handsome office building, a recreation and community building and a train depot. The company town was well thought out, there was a hotel of 40 rooms, 20 cottages of from two to six rooms each, 17 cabins for bachelors and a handsome residence for Arthur Davies. Davies in laying out the town planned for permanency, the buildings were lighted with electricity supplied from the mill's engines, water supplied from a system originating at Fletcher Creek, the water had a fall of 220 feet giving pressure of 32 pounds to the inch. The sawmill was operated with a 500 horsepower steam engine, and was located near the currently named Calpine and Farrar Avenues. (The remains of the mill pond are adjacent to this area.) The box factory was located east of present State Highway 89, and was powered by a steam engine of 350 horsepower. The depot was located at the end of the railroad spur track across from the box factory. The spur was built from the Western Pacific line near Beckwourth to Calpine and most of the lumber of the mill was shipped on the railroad. Logs for the mill came mainly from the cuts in the mountains ringing Sierra Valley.

By the fall of 1920, the big mill and box factory were nearing completion, employing hundreds of workers. Maggie A. Davies was appointed postmaster in November of 1921. Mail was delivered to the community by rail. February 1922 dumped a heavy accumulation of snow that isolated Calpine for nine

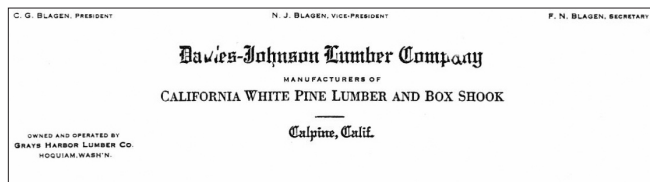
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days. A WP snowplow worked through sixteen feet of snow on the summit to open the town, the people held a party to celebrate. During that summer three camps fed logs to the sawmill but in November winter arrived with enough force to obliterate view of the rail track, and the local locomotive derailed when the engineer could not see that a falling rock had pushed the rails out of position. Portola sent another engine to help it back on track. The next season saw the purchase of a used Shay locomotive, #4. Better track extensions were laid and the Shay started delivering logs to the mill pond in the spring of 1923, and another used locomotive was acquired.

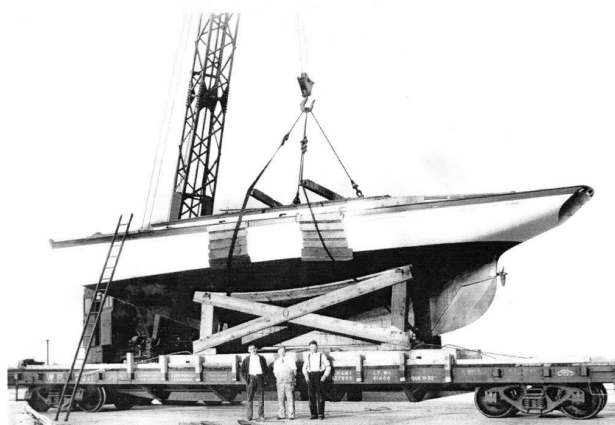
Arthur Davies suffered through a hospitalization for surgery in San Francisco, in 1923, and Davies-Johnson looked for a buyer of the lumber company. It is not known if Arthur Davies health was a contributing factor for the sale, or if there were financial problems.

In 1923 C. G. Blagen family of Gray's Harbor, Washington, purchased the mill, town and timber holdings of the Davies-Johnson Lumber Company. The name "Davies-Johnson" was retained, even though Arthur and Margaret Davies and C.D. Johnson were no longer involved with the operation. The new owners improved the mill and expanded the sale of pine. Ponderosa Pine from Calpine had a national reputation for very soft texture; one specialized account was an organ factory in Quebec, Canada.



C.G. Blagen was President of the company, N.J. Blagen, Vice President and F.N. Blagen was Secretary of the Davies-Johnson Lumber Company of Calpine, California. Frank N. Blagen served as General Manager of the Company for most of the remaining years of operation. He moved into the owner's house, across from the current Calpine Lodge, and soon constructed a new second-story addition, a 10 by 12 foot room with 6 inch walls. The roof was on tracks and it rolled off to one side. It was rumored that Mrs. Blagen enjoyed sunbathing. The Blagen's had three children who grew up in Calpine, attended school, and were very involved in the family business, Howard, Marilyn and Frank Jr.

During their time in Calpine the family was involved with local activities but found time in 1932-33, to build a 46 foot ketch in the backyard of their home. When finished Blagen transported it to the Delta by the WP spur. Three bulldozers were used to drag the ship through town to the WP spur where it was loaded on a flatcar. A special crane was used to load the ketch, named "Minerva", Blagen sailed her to Hawaii. Blagen only kept the ketch for a few years before selling her, she is said to still be sailing.



The Minerva, loaded and ready to leave Calpine, circa 1932, built by Frank Blagen in Calpine

The town was threatened in 1924 by a Forest Fire that destroyed some Sattley buildings. In 1929 the original lodge burned down and was replaced by the current structure on Main Street.

In the early 1930's Sierra County Fire Protection District #1 was established. It covered Sierraville, Sattley and Calpine. Frank Blagen was one of the original fire commissioners; he remained active in the fire department throughout his years in Calpine. Also on that first Fire Commission Board were W. A. Adams and H.A. Turner residing in Sattley, and Charles Dubourdieu and L. L. Blatchley residing in Sierraville. Part of the impetus for the formation of the district may have been the loss of the Albert Church home in Sattley in 1930. Also, the expanding need for securing adequate fire insurance for the Davies-Johnson Lumber Co. in Calpine and the company homes was a force that helped promote formation of a fire district. Immediately following the formation of the district, an American LaFrance pumper fire truck was purchased; around 1948 it was moved from Sattley to Calpine where it remained in service for many years before moving to Sierraville and was retired. The original fire house was built in Sattley as that was

center of the service area. The three fire departments, Calpine, Sattley and Sierraville were established in the 1940's, each having its own chief and crew, with each department having one pumper truck.

During the 1930's the Calpine Lodge (or Calpine Club) was the center of the town, even having poker in the bar, a restaurant and a banquet hall that doubled as a movie hall and stage. Slot machines (illegal) were in the bar, and were quickly moved to the large company safe across the street when warning that the sheriff was going to visit; or the slots were rolled into the banquet hall and covered. It is believed the sheriff would call ahead to let everyone know he was coming over from Downieville. Some kids were given nickels to play slots!

Again fire struck in 1933, the Mountain Messenger of October 28th reported "Fire of unknown origin destroyed a two-story rooming house at Calpine early Thursday morning, resulting in at least one fatality and the complete destruction of the building and its entire contents. Occupants of the building barely escaped with their lives, while several were injured by leaping from windows and by receiving burns. Those in the building mostly workers for the Davies-Johnson Lumber Company at Calpine, were awakened by fire all around them and many escaped in their night clothes. The remains of one victim of the flames area said to have been found in the embers later, and one man was taken to a hospital so badly burned that he was not expected to live. He was also injured by leaping from a second-story window. Mr. and Mrs. V. C. Shattuck, who conducted the picture show at Calpine as well as at Downieville and other places, together with Mr. Shattuck's father were awakened to find flames in the room. Arousing her husband, the couple barely escaped with their clothing, Mrs. Shattuck leaving her spectacles behind in the confusion. It is said that the volunteer fire department, although it did valiant work, having as many as eleven streams of water going at the same time, was able only to keep the fire from spreading to nearby buildings."

In 1934 an incident at the Davies-Johnson Lumber Co. box factory took the life of Thomas C. McFarland, an employee in the engine room. He was smothered in the sawdust bin. It was thought he had climbed over the rail of the sawdust bin and hung to the cleats across the door in order to reach out into the bin and start sawdust moving, and in doing so, lost his hold and fell into the bin. Tons of sawdust clinging to the

sides of the bin broke loose as McFarland fell; he was immediately covered by the sawdust and smothered to death before he was discovered by other workers.

Log trucks had come into their own as the means of transporting lumber to the sawmill, and lumber trucks to haul out the finished lumber. Silas "Doc" Linebaugh (who grew up in Sierraville, son of a doctor) returned to the area around 1926 while still horse logging. He converted over to log trucks, when the Blagen's considered moving to the Central Sierra, Linebaugh was chosen to move the mill.



In 1939, the mill was moved from Calpine to White Pine in the Central Sierra. The local owned timber supply was depleted. The Associated Press picked up a story printed by the San Bernadino Sun on 23 August 1940 "Doom Decreed for Once Booming Camp"... "The death knell was sounded today for another formerly booming Sierra Nevada region lumber camp, when the interstate commerce commission granted the Western Pacific railroad permission to abandon and tear up 12.6 miles of track between Calpine and Calpine Junction, California. Calpine was one of the busiest lumber camps in the High Sierras several years ago, and in the 1930's census boasted a population of 600 residents. Last November there were only 20 of the 600 left." A number of employees chose to go with the Blagen's to the new mill at White Pine.

Calpine Is Sold

J.J. Farrar purchased the land from the Blagen family, owner of the Davies-Johnson and began to convert Calpine into a retirement and recreational village. Mr.

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Farrar worked to bring the power line to town from across Sierra Valley from the Beckwourth area, he did this with Plumas-Sierra Rural Electric Co-operative; the installation costs were paid by Mr. Farrar. When Davies-Johnson discontinued its operations the water system water-rights on Fletcher Creek were given to the people of town. Farrar renovated some of the dwellings that had been the homes of the mill workers, street work was done; and Lodge facilities were built, with a dining room. Farrar donated land to the community in 1939 for a future community park. Calpine was no longer a company town.

In 1941, the Mountain Messenger report another fire, this time in the Calpine restaurant - "There was quite a commotion at Calpine around 11 o'clock Sunday morning. A clothes closet adjoining the Calpine restaurant caught fire, presumably from spontaneous combustion, and the blaze threatened the dance hall and bar. Fortunately Jack Farrar happened to be in the vicinity and the heard the crackle of flames. He lost no time in spreading the alarm and in telephoning to Sierraville for the fire truck, which headed for the scene immediately. Many Calpine residents came running to help put out the fire, setting to work at once with a fire hose, and some forming a bucket brigade. By the time the fire truck arrived, the flames were well under control. The restaurant was badly damaged by smoke, and the clothes closet was gutted by fire, but smiling Jim Wong will carry on business as usual."

There were not a sufficient amount of students to keep the Calpine School open. The schoolhouse was a one room covering the first eight grades, 1943 was the last class to attend the school. Children attended Sierraville School, and in later years were bused to Loyalton for school.



The original Calpine Clare school was located directly across from the railroad station.

Mr. Farrar passed away in 1944 but the work continued on the town by his wife who later married Jim Bateman. They lived in the house across from the Lodge where Blagen had added the second story. Lots and homes were sold by Farrar and later Mrs. Bateman. The Farrar-Bateman's retained ownership of the lodge and owner's home, eventually selling the lodge.

One Calpine personality related at a "Calpine Homecoming" that she came to Calpine when her uncle, Jack Farrar had bought Calpine to develop into a resort. Barbara and her husband Ray Fernsten bought their house and lot for \$500. A number of other current Calpine residents also trace their time back to the early days of the development of Calpine as a private town, and have shared some memories: Friends of Jack and his brother Oak Farrar came to visit. Some stayed summers, and some purchased homes that were original structures. Calpine Avenue was called the "Society Row", there were no houses beyond Farrar, but there were employee houses on Coates Avenue and along Main Street that became summer homes for most, residences for others. Fishing and hunting seasons were quite the events, and many came to enjoy these summer and fall sports. Along Coates Ave. the houses had hand pumps to pump the water. There were few phones, one was at the store operated by Gordy Laird; that spot was popular for ice cream after a swim. Gordy had a slat side truck to deliver supplies to the logging camps. In front of the lodge was a hitching rail. Sammy Devine would ride to town, he had a white horse that would be hitched at the post, and at times became an unauthorized ride for youngsters. Horse stables were across from the current fire house and CIA building, and provided many pleasant adventures. Some children were allowed to groom the horses. When telephones did become more available, the lines were "party lines" with two to four families on the same line, you would know by the ring which family the call was for. A house of "ill-repute" was said to have been located in the town. The game warden had a memorable name "Johnnie Walker", he may have been "a dollar a year man" for fish and game. (He basically volunteered to do the job; the state paid \$1.00 a year.) Kids enjoyed the summers without TV, many games of cards; jig saw puzzles, ball games, picnics and hiking, swimming at the old mill pond and ice skating there in the winters. The great outdoors was the entertainment of the day. The Lodge was a place parents would go in the evening, while the kids enjoyed

a bit of freedom. The swim pool at the lodge was built around 1947; all remember the water as being cold, but swimming as great fun!



The Calpine Lodge and swimming pool in the mid-1940's.

During this time the town slowly began to grow. The lodge was a sometimes successful dinner house and bar. Dances, BBQ's, Fourth of July parties were all a part of the life. The property had a swim pool, and was enjoyed by locals as well as vacationers. This has been the scene of many community events.

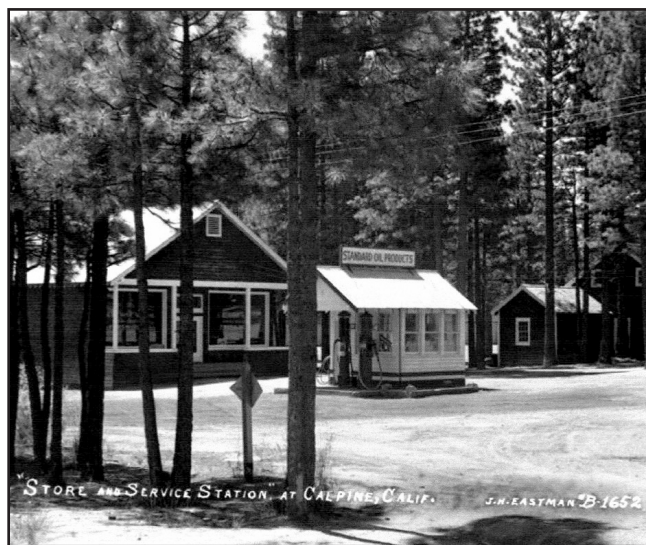
Across the highway 89 intersection the old school was turned into a dinner house on the top story and a bar on the lower portion. The bar was known at different times as Colonel Pines, Sherwood Park, and the "Snake Pit". The building still stands as a residence.

The winter of 1952 was hard; snowfall was excessively heavy and closed the roads to travel. Some people needed to exit from the second story of homes to get out! The town was snowed in for a number of days. When the weather cleared enough to do a quick trip to the Sattley Store, the shelves were quickly emptied.

In 1958 Sierra County Water Works District No. 1 was formed with a Board of Directors, and plans were made for the installation of a new water system. At the time the state approved the installation of the new water system, the people of Calpine extended the boundaries of the town. Since the formation of the water district in 1958, there have been four annexations, adding about 125 acres to the town. A dedicated volunteer board serves the water district. Some remember wooden pipes, wrapped with wire that used to carry the water supply.

The lodge has been known by a number of names of the years, the Calpine Club, Calpine Lodge, Sierra Valley Lodge, Calpine Village Resort are among the business names used. Sierra Hot springs/ New Age Church of Being is the current owner, the motel rooms and lodge are undergoing remodel.

There was a small grocery/general store for a number of years on Main Street; some of the operators were Gordon Laird and later Jan and Bill Barker operated a store; this structure is now a residence. At one time there were gas pumps for fuel, and the store had a soda fountain in the 1940's. There was also an ice house.



The CIA (Calpine Improvement Association) was established in 1968 and since inception has been a force to improve Calpine. They worked with Sierra County to construct the Calpine Community Center and Park. Annually events are held there to celebrate the town, to raise funds to continue those efforts, and to support a scholarship. The ball field and playground are open to residents and visitors for use. The Marketplace, car shows, Christmas Party and many other activities occur. As well as a community center the local post office has space in the CIA building.

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The Sierran

Sierra County Historical Society
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ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED



Many structures in Calpine today date from inception with the Davies-Johnson Lumber Company. Little sign of the mill remains, with the exception of the mill pond, and a slight depression in the ground. As well as houses and cabins still in use, some of the Lumber Company's skid houses used in the lumber camps are located on private property in use for a variety of uses such as chicken houses and storage. Many local homes have lumber milled at D-J mill in their residences. A large building once used as the railroad depot was moved to what is now the Sierra Valley Ranch.

The town of Calpine today has many fine residences, an active population, and people with pride in their community.



The Calpine railroad station in the 1920's. The building is now used as a ranch bunkhouse in the Sierra Valley.

