

The Sierran

— A Publication of the Sierra County Historical Society —

HOLIDAY MEMORIES OF SIERRA COUNTY

By Bill Copren, Virginia Lutes, and Mary Nourse

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ajor William Downie and his party moved into their newly constructed cabin at the Forks on December 10, 1849 - just in time to celebrate Christmas. The men were pleased with the dwelling, but their enthusiasm was somewhat dampened by being so far from home. Making matters worse was the fact that there was but one bottle of brandy in camp, and the homesick miners had trouble deciding whether to drink it on Christmas or New Year's Day. After vigorous argument, they ultimately pulled the cork on Christmas morning, concocting a punch with hot water and nutmeg that lasted well into the day. They toasted absent friends, wives, and sweethearts; then Downie climbed up on the roof with a flag and a pistol. He made a short speech, fired a few shots, led three cheers for the Constitution, and planted the American flag on the gable of the cabin.

Major Downie undoubtedly would have been impressed that within 5 years, correspondence with loved ones in the East had improved significantly. In 1854 Wells Fargo and Co.'s messengers expressed the letters and Atlantic newspapers by steamer from San Francisco to Downieville in the unprecedented time of 22 ½ hours, including a delay of 1 ½ hours at Sacramento. At Sacramento the messenger, Mr. Hedge, took the express items and delivered them to Mr. DeCay at the F. Rumrill and Co. office in Marysville, who delivered them to Downieville at 2:30 p.m. He made that distance in six hours and 15 minutes, and from Foster's Bar in one hour and 55 minutes. This was one hour and a half quicker than the time made by Adams and Co. and Langton & Bro. with the arrival of the previous mail. It is noteworthy that the actual traveling time between San Francisco and Downieville was but 21 hours.



Sierraville School Christmas Celebration, 1964

Photo Courtesy of Arlene Amodio

An unhurried lifestyle was depicted by renowned stagecoach driver Bill Meek who lived in Indian Valley as a lad in the 1860s and had fond memories of his childhood there. He described the population at the time as consisting of "19 white families, three who had tied up with Indian women; 150 single miners; 150 Chinese; and 300 Indians." The white children were fascinated by the Indians' lifestyle, particularly the way they harvested grasshoppers for winter sustenance, but the real highlight for the kids was Chinese New Year. The holiday was celebrated New Year's week, and began with the explosion of Chinese bombs and firecrackers on the last full moon of January. Punks and painted candles were burned to chase away evil spirits, and everyone hosted open-houses.

Whites and Chinese alike enjoyed the delicacies offered: nuts, dried dates, and sugared citron. Bill and his pals enjoyed gobbling the bountiful snacks and scavenging firecrackers that had failed to detonate. They would hold their own noisy celebrations by exploding the "duds" in a sealed barrel, until on one occasion they met with disaster. Due to a large buildup of gas, the barrel exploded and blew its top through the barn wall, hitting a mule and breaking its hind leg. The mule, which belonged to Bill's father had to be destroyed, so a ban on explosives was instituted after the remaining firecrackers were fired at the mule's burial.

A calmer lifestyle was experienced by eight-year-old Mabel Thomas who found herself at the Sierra Buttes Mine in 1885. Her family cabin was bolted to the mountain to withstand fierce winter winds. While her father worked at the mine, Mabel and her younger brother helped their mother at home. They especially enjoyed paring apples, stoning currants, seeding raisins, and chopping all the ingredients for Christmas mincemeat. They worried needlessly that Santa Claus wouldn't find them on the mountain, but Old Saint Nick came through nicely despite their remote location.

Holiday Memories of Sierra County - (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!

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If you have any suggestions or comments, feel free to contact any board member or email at info@sierracountyhistory.org

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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 payable each January for the calendar year.

Membership categories are as follows:

INDIVIDUAL	\$20.00
FAMILY & INSTITUTION	\$25.00
BUSINESS & SUPPORTING	\$35.00
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In addition, donations are gratefully accepted.

Please send dues and donations to:

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c/o Don Yegge, Membership Chair
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President's Message Winter 2020

Votes were cast and counted for Board Members, and have resulted in a re-election of Bill Copren, Susan Hopkins and Corri Jimenez for another term. Also elected, to the alternate position, was Michelle Anderson, who will fill the vacancy created by Ernie Teague's term running. Thank you, Ernie, for your years of service on the Board!

As a reminder, the time to renew your membership to SCHS has arrived and we would appreciate your contribution in the envelope provided with this publication. Have a happy holiday season, and, more importantly, a healthy New Year.

Jan Hamilton, President
Sierra County Historical Society

Holiday Memories of Sierra County - (Cont. from Page 1) —

On Christmas Day the family attended a sumptuous feast hosted by their neighbors Captain and Mrs. James. Captain James traditionally greeted his guests with this quote: "At Christmas play and make good cheere, for Christmas comes but once a year." Besides the wonderful feasts, Mabel and her family must have joined in on the charades, tableaux, and dialogues that were customary holiday amusements.

Throughout the long winter, Mabel's mother worked hard to entertain the children indoors. They made ice cream by mixing milk and sugar with a scoop of snow from the stoop, and had a taffy pull to celebrate her brother's graduation to his first long trousers. Even on ordinary days, her mother took the time from her endless household chores to lead them in games of "Hunt the Thimble" or "Pussy Wants a Corner". She told the children stories and they passed the long winter lost in books borrowed from Mrs. James' extensive library. It is not surprising that as an adult Mabel spent 40 years as a librarian in Oakland Public Library.

Margaret Elaine Lambert, longtime Sierra County Treasurer/Tax Collector, also had poignant childhood memories of winters in the Sierras. She was born in 1892 and spent her childhood in Sierraville. Christmas 1904 was a particularly memorable holiday for her, and she recounted her story for the Sierra County Historical Society: "In my youth we always had public Christmas trees. The tree would be placed in the main Hall in Sierraville. It would stand 30 feet high and reach from the floor clear up to the ceiling. On Christmas Eve everyone from the town and surrounding ranches would come to town and celebrate together. The merchants would get together and make up brown paper bags for the children filled with apples and oranges and nuts and candy and cookies and popcorn. They had big laundry baskets filled with paper bags around the tree. The tree would be filled with gifts. That Christmas I wanted a doll so badly and mother would never tell me what she was going to give me. We all knew that whatever our gift was it was hanging on that tree and the tree had lots of dolls on it. The way it worked was the dolls or other gifts would be taken off the tree and handed to Santa Claus and he would deliver it to the child. Well, I kept sitting and waiting for my doll but it didn't come. Finally, there was only one doll left on the tree and it was hanging on the very top. I was crying by this time, figuring that I just wasn't going to get a doll this Christmas. Well, they took that doll off the top of the tree and it was my doll! I was so happy that I cried harder. It was beautiful. It had a light green dress. After the presents were opened, the bags were given to the children. The only time we got oranges was at Christmastime, so you can imagine what a treat they were. After the bags were opened, the children got to play for one hour on the dance floor. We would run and skate and just have the best time. After the hour was up, the orchestra would set up and the dance would begin. It was a real community Christmas on Christmas Eve."

A gold strike at the Chipps Mine in Sierra City was an early Christmas gift for locals and investors in 1912. According to the Morning Union on December 8,

ore valued at \$200 per pound was extracted and over \$400,000 worth was said to be in sight. One chunk of ore exhibited at Sierra City was reported to be valued at \$10,000. This was considered the richest gold strike in many years at the Chipps which was being developed by the Swastika Mining Company, and managed by Lawrence Holley. A macaroni box full of show specimens of the "jewelry shop" quartz from this bonanza was sent to Boston for distribution to the New England Swastika stockholders as Christmas gift dividends and souvenirs of the strike. The principal stockholder was Holley's wealthy brother, a manufacturer.

A different type of gold was anticipated by Sierra County residents the following Christmas. J. H. Pearce of the Campbell Hot Springs near Sierraville made deliveries of a couple of wagonloads of butter from Sierra Valley Dairies to the mining camps of the Alleghany District. Pearce also took orders for the delivery before Christmas of several hundred head of dressed hogs to families and the mine boarding houses of Forest City and Alleghany. The hogs were sold at \$15 per hundredweight or "cwt" which equals 100 pounds, and the butter went for 36 cents per pound delivered. Sierra City was also supplied with dressed pork in the carcass and butter from Sierra Valley. The valley also furnished Sierra City with beef during the winter.



Skating on Sardine Lake, 1945

Sierra County Historical Society Photo

A society column of the Grass Valley Morning Union

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Holiday Memories of Sierra County - (Cont. from Page 3) —

gave a snapshot of local happenings during the 1916 holidays: "The Sierra City Mothers' Club has purchased a fine Knabe Angelus player piano, with which they expect to furnish music for the Christmas dance. Mrs. Guy Mooers was hostess for the Elite Card Club last Thursday evening. A bouncing Native Daughter made her appearance at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Sam Veale on Wednesday, December 13th. Mrs. John Champion has returned from Auburn. Mrs. L. Holley and children have returned from Oakland. Mr. and Mrs. Marion Westall have been here visiting relatives and friends during the past week. They expect to spend the winter in Palo Alto. Carl McLane has left his home in Corning, going out via Blairsden. Miss Tillie Castagna has arrived from Oakland. She will spend the winter with her sister, Mrs. Holley. L.H. Morrison, A. Nelson, and P.H. Spellenberg have finished shingling the schoolhouse. Herman Veale, who has been visiting relatives in Grass Valley, has returned. Messrs. Ed and Marion Westall spent Monday in Downieville. Mrs. Carrie Cook has returned from Los Angeles and Downieville." Although there was a lot of coming and going early in the winter, things must have slowed down dramatically, because as of March 15 Downieville residents were still receiving Christmas packages held up by a record snowstorm.



A different form of precipitation dramatically affected Downieville residents in 1937. Early in December, as they prepared for Christmas, rain began to fall. A stormfront was moving in from the Pacific, pummeling Northern California with vicious winds and torrential rains. Sierra County was hit particularly hard. The storm raged for two days and nights, washing trees and boulders into the Yuba and Downie Rivers. At Downieville, debris clogged the river, forming a dam at the bridge where Hwy. 49 crossed the river. The resultant flood damage was extensive: fifteen buildings collapsed, four bridges were wiped out, and scores of community members were rendered homeless. The town was isolated and all telephone and power lines were down. The citizens were at a survival level, and hardly able to think about Christmas which was two weeks away. Thankfully, the kindness of strangers kicked in and neighboring communities took on the Santa role. A number of civic groups,

including the Clampers, collected cash, food, toys and candy. December 21 was chosen for Santa's arrival in Downieville. A caravan starting from Marysville and Auburn was escorted by the California Highway Patrol, and by the time it reached its destination, 600 people in 200 cars arrived bearing gaily wrapped gifts. Marian Lavezzola Kinzler was a child at the time, and she spoke fondly about this benevolent event, noting that her gift was pajamas. She said they were too small, but nevertheless they warmed her heart. Additional toys, food, and homemade presents from the Junior Red Cross of the Pacific area were distributed on Christmas Day.

Another beloved Sierra County woman shared fond memories of Sierra winters. When Barbara Davey arrived to teach elementary school in Alleghany in 1940, the only available lodging was a room above the Golden Eagle Saloon. As a twenty-three-year-old schoolmarm she wasn't much of a drinker, but that didn't stop seven individuals from buying her welcoming cocktails on her first night in town. She didn't want to offend the locals by refusing their drinks, so she sipped from each one and dumped the rest into a spittoon at her feet. After that incident, Barbara struck a deal with the bartender. If someone wanted to buy her an unwanted drink, she would order a gin fizz, but he would pour her a ginger ale. The daytime entertainment in the community was generally a little tamer and more to her liking than the bar atmosphere. Music was a big part of her life. Along with teaching grades 1-4, Barbara was also the band teacher. In that capacity she acquired secondhand instruments for her 25 band members and helped sponsor a card party to raise funds for a Sousaphone. The band performed at the community Christmas party, as well as at a spring concert and the Downieville/Alleghany joint high school graduation. Barbara spoke fondly of the Alleghany winters which usually brought 2-3 feet of snow. Students wore their Sears catalog snow suits to school, so they were properly dressed for jumping off the school porch or reading stories in the igloo they had made. Weekends were a joyous time in winter. Every Sunday, the entire community of 125 would go to Bald Mountain for a full day of skiing and sledding. They were towed uphill by a tractor, then kids skied back home and adults sledged down the hill at the end of the day. While on the mountain, everyone ate roasted weenies and drank hot coffee from a large copper pot. They skied and slid all day using a rope tow to haul them up the slopes. The heavy rope for the tow was purchased using funds by, you guessed it, a card party.

Recent history also provides a number of fun wintertime memories. Ice skating was very popular in the Lakes Basin as well as in Sierra Valley. Bill Copren reminisces about being a kid in Sierraville in the 1950s: "In the 1950s Sierraville did not have television. It had radio and had just gotten dial telephones. The first television available came in 1959, when men from Sierraville placed a repeater on the hillside above Harding Point. The repeater picked up Channel 3 from Sacramento. Because there was no entertainment during long winters, the town created its own. There were a number of volleyball teams, pinochle nights at the school, and potluck dinners. People kept busy with community organizations such as the Masons, the Rebeccas, a sewing club, and the Native Daughters of the Golden West. The locals also spent many a nice

winter evening ice-skating on Strangs' Pond which is now a gravel pit located between Sierraville and Sattley. At night half the town would go to the pond to skate. Wooden walkways and benches were constructed alongside the pond, and a place for a large fire was developed. Large truck tires from Wright's Garage were hauled to the pond and burned each night for warmth and to light up some of the ice. Often a game of hockey was played using "smudge pots", the flat-bottomed, round-topped pots that burned kerosene or oil. (The pots were highway markers that were eventually replaced by battery-operated flashing lights.) The hockey goals were constructed of lumber and frozen into the ice. The point was to get the smudge pot into the goal by sliding it along the ice in any way possible."

Sierraville School was the community hub for decades. Numerous activities including exercise classes, and adult volleyball and basketball games were held in the school gymnasium; and the school also functioned as a public library to the surrounding towns. But the crowning event was the town Christmas party which, until the school's closure in 2005, was the longest running holiday program in California.

Virginia Maddalena Lutes recounted her childhood memories of Christmases at Sierraville Elementary School decades after Mrs. Lambert's time: "There was a stage in the gymnasium where performances were put on for the whole community. When I was a youngster, there were three classrooms of excited children who prepared plays for the community. The excitement and tension were extreme by the time school play evening arrived. Our parents had spent long hours making costumes; a huge Christmas tree was decorated by Mr. Kitchen, our custodian/bus driver; the piano was tuned up; and finally, on the last day of school before Christmas break, the dress rehearsal was completed. The performance was always held on a Friday night, and it did not matter whether or not your child attended the school, the entire community always packed the gym where standing room was at a premium.



Mary Zerga and her son, Buddy.

SCHS Photo

We prepared for our performance by dressing in those costumes and trying to sit quietly in Mrs. Burelle's, or Mr. Roscoe's classroom until it was our turn to enter the stage. It was scary when the curtains were drawn back and it was your turn to say your lines! Looking out at all those people who knew you, was terrifying! If you were lucky, you made it through your part with no major disasters, such as wardrobe failures, or forgotten lines. Your teacher would be off-stage, whispering prompts. At the end of your class play, you exited the stage, and the next class took over for their time. When all the three classrooms were finished, all the children filed out on the stage to sing Christmas Carols with the audience. Then came the grand finale, Santa would arrive with a big "Ho, Ho, Ho!". Each student had drawn a classmate's name and had brought a wrapped gift to place under the tree for Santa to distribute." To top off the evening lunch-size paper bags were given to each person, and just like in Mrs. Lambert's day each held a beautiful orange, some nuts, and a few pieces of hard candy.

Sierra City was not to be outdone in the winter fun department. As a teenager in the 1950s, Pat Hill talked about sledding on the highway from Yuba Pass to Sattley. In the 1960s Mary Nourse was introduced to Sierra City during a holiday storm so heavy the road was closed for 3 days allowing for sledding on the Highway. Jim Lamb towed sledders up the road with his Jeep, and all the restaurants (the Buckhorn, the Sierra Buttes Inn, and the Chattering Chipmunk) provided refreshments for the revelers. Buddy Zerga opened his bar at the Zerloff Hotel, even if sometimes wasn't until 11 p.m. on New Year's Eve. The Sierra City merriment lasted through Doc and Edy's complimentary New Year's Eve buffet and culminated with Bud and Georgia Siebrecht's renowned open house on New Year's Day. During ensuing years the Sierra City Fire Department Auxiliary established the custom of hosting a Christmas party at the community hall complete with a dinner, caroling, and a Nativity pageant. The evening culminates with Santa's arrival by fire truck.



Director of the Pacific Area Junior Red Cross and helpers preparing a shipment of toys and food to families in Downieville and other towns devastated by the floods in 1939. Madera Tribune photo.

Downieville, is a delightful holiday place. Events in "recent history" included a few performances of the Messiah in the 1980s—once even featuring a children's choir—and lots of activities at "Holiday on Main". One must-see feature for many years was Laquita Barnes' home. Every Christmas season Laquita transformed her riverfront home on Pearl Street into a music box with a giant key on top and toy soldiers and ballerinas performing on her 4 balconies. The performers were schoolchildren who were rewarded with silver dollars at the end of their shifts. The event was especially magical for locals and diners at the Forks restaurant who could view the routines from across the Downie River. Holiday pageantry was also popular with the churches. Every Christmas the Catholic kids donned their parents' bathrobes to commemorate the Nativity during Mass, while across town the Methodists created a living tableau in front of their church. Once in the 1980s "Jackass Larry", an itinerant who traveled through the Mother Lode posing for pictures as a gold miner happened to be in town on December 24. To the delight of the Methodists, he agreed to lend his mule to add authenticity to their scene. Later that night, the mule was seen guzzling beer from a bucket at the St. Charles Bar.

This, the Christmas of 2019, brings with it extreme hardship due to the global pandemic. Whether by Zoom or across the room in masks, let's keep the spirit of Major Downie's enthusiastic Christmas celebration alive here in Sierra County despite the challenges of isolation and loneliness. I'm pretty sure he would have said, "When life gives you just one bottle of brandy, make some punch!"

SOURCES

- Hunting for Gold, by Major William Downie
Sierra Citizen: December 23, 1854
- The Life Story of Bill Meek, Stagecoach Driver, David Lawler & Leland Pauly
Sacramento Morning Union: December 8, 1912
Sacramento Union: December 18, 1912
Grass Valley Morning Union: December 3, 1913 and December 24, 1916
- The Sierran: Winter 1978
Madera Tribune: December 27, 1937
- Oral History Interview with Marian Kinzler,
Sierra County Historical Society, 2012
- History of Recreation in Sierra County,
an Oral History Interview with Pat Hill
- Reminiscences contributed in 2020 by Bill Copren, Virginia Lutes and Mary Nourse
Grass Valley Union: December 22, 200

Cemeteries of Sierra County, Part 1

By Corri Jimenez

Cemeteries are and will always be sacred cultural landscapes that tell stories about a broad community, its demographics, and its people. Their topography is shaped for the living to pay respect to their dead. The cemeteries in Sierra County, whether located in communities or rural hinterlands are very unique. Some are built on hillsides, like the Sierra City and Sattley cemeteries. Others are very rural like those in the far northwestern corner of the county known as "Over North, where the dead outnumber the living. The area was a hydraulic mining mecca that shaved the cliffs and the main road in order to access what now is Quincy-LaPorte Road.

St. Louis Cemetery

Saint Louis was settled in the 1853 and is believed to be the earliest mining town in northern Sierra County. In 1855, St. Louis was vital enough to open a post office, but by 1870 the hydraulic mines had petered out. In 1915-16, hydraulic mining returned to the area, though the activity was short-lived. Only a few people lived in St. Louis in 1919. One trivial fact about the town is that it was the "birthplace of Lotta Crabtree," a late 19th century actress who developed her career in Northern California mining camps. As a philanthropist, she erected a bronze water fountain in 1875 on Market Street in San Francisco, which served as a meeting point in the aftermath of the 1906 Earthquake and Fire.

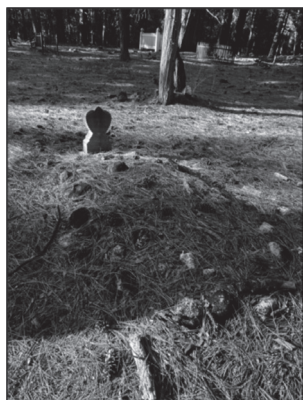


St. Louis Cemetery gravesites have footstones as well as headstones.

Photo by Corri Jimenez.

The St. Louis Cemetery is all that survives of the families who called St. Louis home. From the Port Wine Ridge Road, there is a pathway of round white rocks that was constructed by Boy Scouts of America which winds through the trees to the sacred ground. Approximately 24 people are buried in the St. Louis Cemetery that is an open, fenceless landscape. A few of the gravesites had fieldstones stacked on them like a pyre, a foot aboveground. This isn't typical when

compared to other gravesites. Some of people interred there include members of the Jones, Jenkins, and Carmichael families.



St. Louis Cemetery. Left: Grave of Mrs. Susie McKenzie, born in 1852.

Right: Headstone of Addie Amelia Anderson, daughter of Elias & S.M. Anderson. She died June 6, 1873 at 1 year, 4 months old.

Gibsonville Cemetery

The town of Gibsonville was 8 miles northeast of La Porte and was settled in 1850. The community was prospering in 1859 and even had a school that thrived in the summer months. Thirty-eight students attended the school in 1882. Native of Nova Scotia, David Corbett was a pioneer of Gibsonville and owned a hotel there for 44 years until he passed away in 1916 in Oroville.

The Gibsonville Cemetery is surrounded by a white picket fence and is huge. It is about an acre in size, with a smattering of large 24-inch diameter trees and headstones. Over 50 people are buried in the Gibsonville Cemetery across the vast area. The oldest headstone in the cemetery is of Elmira Cole who died on February 15, 1866.



Gibsonville Cemetery. Photo by Corri Jimenez.



Gibsonville Cemetery

Photo by Corri Jimenez.

Cemeteries are sacred places and tell a rich story. They speak, if you listen. These sacred grounds are pretty much all that remains of these once vibrant mining communities.

For more information, see "Sierra County Pioneer Cemetery Historic Survey," by Lee Adams, III (1997).

The Sierran

Sierra County Historical Society

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ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED

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FALL/WINTER 2020

More Holiday Memory Photos

