

The Sierran

— A Publication of the Sierra County Historical Society —

ELIA ROBERTI MILES

A Life Well Lived

By Virginia Lutes and Mary Nourse



Elia Roberti Miles
Sierra Booster Photo



Island School, 1931. Photo from Elia Miles in *History of Schools in Sierra Valley*.

She was but a tiny child of five years when her mother lifted her onto the horse and handed her the lunch tin, a shiny lard bucket. Then the little girl was sent to the Island School. Elia Roberti began school in May of 1925, technically too young for school. But without another student, the school would not have enough children to stay open. So, off she rode the three miles to school, along the way telling all of her secrets to Chub, the horse. On some days, the child's feet got so cold that she thought her toes would fall off. When she finally reached the school, her cousin Oscar would lift her off Chub and take care of him. She would go inside where the teacher would remove Elia's boots and warm the little girl's feet with a heated towel.

The Island School was a typical one-room schoolhouse for 1st-8th grade students that operated for a summer term,

then closed during the heaviest part of winter due to bad roads and extreme weather. The structure stood at Heriot and Dyson Lanes, not far from the Island Ranch. The location was actually in Plumas County during Elia's school days, but the building was later moved to Sierra County. Fittingly, it still stands in Loyalton, near the elementary school. It was made of wood and featured side windows, a small front porch, and flagpole in the yard. At one time, netting was added to the schoolyard fencing to protect the children from rabid coyotes that roamed Sierra Valley. There was no telephone in the building, so in case of an emergency, the teacher would have to go to a neighboring ranch or send an older child for help. Creature comforts included a woodstove for heat, a well for water, and two privies. Elia remembered the outhouses were "two holers," with one for the boys and one for the girls. For refreshment, an older student fetched a pail of well water each morning and everyone often drank from the bucket with a dipper. At other times, children had cups that hung on pegs in the hall next to their coats. During the 5 years Mrs. Maryian Carman was the teacher, the children took turns bringing a gallon of milk each winter day so she could make hot chocolate for lunch.

— THE SIERRA COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY —



The Sierra County Historical Society is an organization of people interested in preserving and promoting an appreciation of Sierra County's rich history. The Society operates a museum at the Kentucky Mine in Sierra City, holds an annual meeting, publishes a newsletter and conducts historical research. Members are sent notices of Society activities, receive THE SIERRAN, and are admitted free-of-charge to the museum and stamp mill tour. If you would like to become involved in these activities or would just like to give your support, please join us!

Officers and Executive Board of the Sierra County Historical Society

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

Become a Member!

Membership in the Sierra County Historical Society is open to any interested person, business or organization. Members need not be residents of Sierra County. Dues are payable each January for the calendar year.

Membership categories are as follows:

INDIVIDUAL	\$20.00
FAMILY & INSTITUTION	\$25.00
BUSINESS & SUPPORTING	\$35.00
SUSTAINING	\$50.00
LIFE (per person/couple)	\$400.00

In addition, donations are gratefully accepted.

Please send dues and donations to:

S.C.H.S.

c/o Scott Mathieson, Membership Chair
PO Box 260, Sierra City, CA 96125

President's Message, Winter 2021

We held our annual election of board members this summer, resulting in the re-election of Mary Nourse, James Connolly, Scott Mathieson, Suzi Schoensee, Jan Hamilton and Michelle Anderson. Michelle was elected to a permanent seat after having served in the alternate position, and we welcome her energy and enthusiasm to the board. Because we received a limited number of nominations, the alternate position will remain vacant until it is placed on the ballot for our next election.

Hopefully, the constraints of Covid-19 that we have endured for the past 21 months will be resolving soon. Our historical society is excited to strategize the opening of the Kentucky Mine Museum and Park for the upcoming 2022 season. Even though we have been shuttered, a lot has been going on behind the scenes. During the museum's closure, curator Melissa Brewer has continued to accession and catalog our extensive collection of photographs. She is able to work offsite using the museum database PastPerfect. On April 1, 2022, she will return to start restoring and preserving a collection of historic Sierra County maps that are currently stored at Sierraville School. The county generously funded the equipment and supplies necessary for this joint project, and county and historical society volunteers made it happen. Thanks go to Laura Marshall, Tim Beals, Corri Jimenez, Bill Copren, and Joseph Jocks, Melissa's father-in-law who designed and manufactured the specialized plexiglass tanks needed for the map humidification process.

The unfortunate flood at the Kentucky Mine Museum (See "We Were Absolutely Floored" elsewhere in this issue) had us scrambling to protect our collection during the subsequent floor restoration. The county stepped up, renting a huge storage container into which intrepid volunteers moved all the display cases and their contents. The floor refinishing has been completed, and once the museum has been repainted Melissa will be tasked with redesigning the exhibits. A lot has been going on outside as well. The trestle that leads to the stamp mill is being evaluated by an engineer to determine the extent of repairs necessary prior to allowing visitors to walk on it. Chris Stockdale is laying the groundwork for the "Music at the Mine," and Bill Davey is working on a beautiful handmade sign to greet visitors when they return.

In other SCHS news, Scott Mathieson and Mary Nourse filmed the first oral history interview with our new audio/video equipment. Cy Rollins, long-time resident of Goodyear's Bar, gave great eyewitness accounts of local happenings resulting in 3½ hours of footage. Once the interview is transcribed, it will be added to the oral history collection and stored in the museum office. Highlights of Cy's interview will be featured in an upcoming issue of the Sierran. Several oral history committee members were trained earlier this year in interview techniques and will be offered training on the new equipment in the next year. The plan is to pick up momentum and record several interviews in the near future.

We look forward to a productive and enjoyable 2022 season thanks to our active and involved supporters. The time to renew your SCHS membership has arrived, and we would appreciate your contribution in the envelope provided with this publication.

Merry Christmas,
Jan Hamilton, President
Sierra County Historical Society

Elia's classmate, Adella Dotta Lombardi, also had fond memories of attending the Island School. "Going to school then was like (being in) an extended family. We never showed preference to each other, and all played together. The big children would always teach the smaller ones. I never remember any fighting as is evident today. The games we played were ante-ante-over, work-up with ball and bat, redline, tag etc." Adella also remarked that her family spoke English since her mother was Irish, but she said, "The Ramelli kids could not speak English and talked Italian. By Christmas they could talk English as well as the rest of us. I guess they had no choice and it amazes me how we never thought anything of this and how fast they learned."

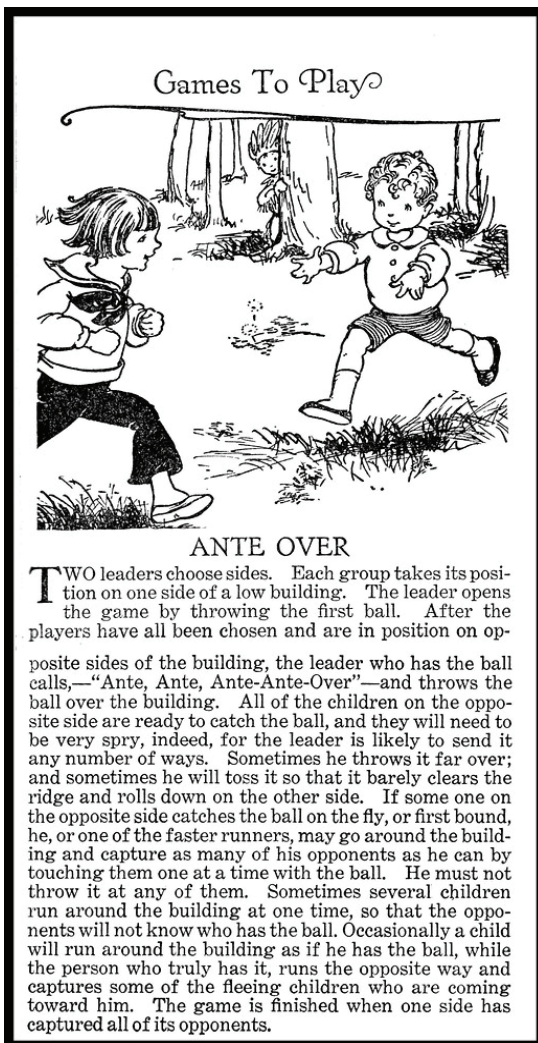
Often older children assisted younger ones while the teacher worked with small groups. Sometimes there were only one or two students per grade. During the early years of the school, some teachers themselves only had eighth-grade educations. After passing a test given by the superintendent of schools, students who excelled were offered the opportunity to teach. In later years, candidates



1930-1935 Island School Teacher,
Maryian Carman. E. Miles' Photo.

attended a two-year institute prior to becoming certified. Teaching at the Island School was certainly no walk in the park. The salary was around sixty to eighty dollars per month, and sometimes the teacher also served as custodian for an additional five dollars per month. Educators had to conduct small group instruction while supervising the entire student-body, and they sometimes faced rigorous commutes that included picking up students along the way. During the Depression, one teacher was issued a promissory note in lieu of cash. On top of these hardships, they even had to deal with naughty children. Elia's dad, who had attended the Island School, told her that in his day a "lady teacher" was reportedly "run off" by the big boys. A heavy-handed man was hired in her place, and he literally whipped the boys into shape on his first day. Elia told of a much gentler response to a student prank: "I remember one day the kids wanted to get out of school early. I was the smallest, and someone lifted me up high to move the hand on the wall clock ahead. Mr. Ede was outside and I pushed the hand back instead of ahead. It was too late to change it forward, as he had come in. We were in trouble, but he really never disciplined us." The students liked this kindly man, who gave them all straight E's for excellence. Teachers who did discipline the pupils used a ruler on kids' knuckles or bottoms, or kept them in at recess. They never were made to stay after school because they all had chores to do when they got home.

Upon her arrival at the Island School, Mrs. Carman wasn't impressed with the students' test scores, so she held them all back a year. Elia reported that, "In a couple of years we were all back to where we were supposed to be." School started at 9 AM and ended at 4 PM. There was a 20-minute recess in the morning for play, and another in the afternoon. The kids also played during the lunch hour. Daily lessons included a lot of repetitive skills such as learning to print on lined paper and tracing the characters over many times. While the older children were having a lesson, the younger children worked on reading, writing, or arithmetic practice. Most lessons were presented orally,



From *The Surprise Book of Stunts and Stories*

thus the younger children could listen in on older students' lessons. This at times gave them an advantage when they moved onto the next higher grade.

Elia spoke fondly of her school days, particularly of holiday pageants when Island School sometimes collaborated with Marble Hot Springs School in order to have enough people. She also enjoyed field-trips to Donner Lake and to the penitentiary in Carson City. And she never forgot the kindness and personal attention of her teachers. Mrs. Cartmell, Mrs. Gottardi, and others drove Elia to school. Mr. Ede carved whistles from willow sticks for each child, and Mrs. Carman gave her a gift for eighth-grade graduation. "I believe I was alone in my grade or class except for two years. I graduated alone, I believe, in 1935. Mrs. Carman gave me a vanity set including a pretty brush, comb, and mirror, and a pretty case. I think it was the only gift I received. Then I graduated to the milk bucket. I never went to high school, but one doesn't quit learning just because one did not continue on with school." Elia lived that philosophy, dedicating her life to education both at home and abroad. She even served on the Sierra/Plumas Board of Education for years. But, according to her dad, "Education would ruin us. He gave us a milk bucket! He thought I would marry a box-factory stiff, and he wanted me to marry a Maddalena, or a Bonta, or a Folchi! But they were related...so he hired Bruce." This was after he had fired one potential suitor - Art Morrell who was breaking horses on the ranch. "I was kind of sweet on Art, and he didn't know it. But daddy did, so he let Art Morrell go. I was 17. So, Bruce came into the valley haying with tractors. I wouldn't say it was love at first sight. My folks would not let me date unless somebody was with us. (My little brother) Elmer was with us. Grandma Iva Ede was with us. She cooked for my mother that summer during haying, and she knew that I wanted to go to the firemen's dance. The firemen had dances every two



Elia and Bruce Miles, 1941
Photo Reproduction Courtesy of Virginia Lutes

weeks in the summertime, and she would chaperone Bruce and I. And yep, that summer it sparked a love between Bruce and I, and we got married January 4, 1941 in Reno. Buster Adams was a noted marrying man and I got married in front of his fireplace and his dog was laying there. I had a small, small wedding."

When they were first married, Elia and Bruce lived at home with her parents. She wanted to stay there until her folks got out of debt. She continued to milk cows and Bruce worked at the mill as an electrician for \$.65 an hour. It was Clover Valley Lumber Mill at that time, later known as Feather River. In 1943, when Elia was pregnant with their son Johnny, she and Bruce moved to the Dory house. The former homeowners, Max and May Dory, wanted Elia and Bruce to have some time alone together because Bruce was "headed for the draft." According to Elia, former resident Pete Gottardi made "bootleg booze" under the floor. She said there was "a still and everything." It wasn't uncommon for the ranchers to make wine during Prohibition. "In October or September, the Swiss people had a ton of grapes delivered to their home. They had a big vat and they had a stand grinder/crusher that we turned by hand. Then my dad rigged up his Model T and got the back end up on stakes and a belt/pulley on the grinder and then the model T tire. It made the crushing easier. Elmer and I never liked the wine, but the dairymen from Switzerland liked the wine. We would go out and take grape juice off before it fermented and we liked the grape juice, but not the wine."

Elia and Bruce raised 3 kids in the Dory house: John, born in 1943; Virginia, born in 1946; and Pamela, born in 1959. All have February birthdays, which Elia emphasized were



The Miles House. Photo courtesy of Elia Miles in *Historic Houses of Sierra Valley*.

planned. "Stupid people nowadays. We counted the days, and we planned so Bruce wouldn't have to be in the field and he could help me. Yes, we planned. Nowadays they have so much stuff and they get pregnant. The more educated they are, the more stupider they are!"

In addition to providing a warm family household, Elia and Bruce opened their home to foreign exchange students from all over the world. Through the years they hosted a total of twelve young people from Norway, Sweden, Jordan, Nepal, Brazil, and Venezuela through the Rotary Exchange Program and the International Farm Youth Exchange. The Miles family was also very active in 4-H. Their daughter, Virginia, talked about how the whole family was involved: "Mom became the community leader and she was community leader for years. And 4-H was a going concern. It was a big thing. We had well over 100 kids at one time. That was the only thing going. The boys had basketball at school and in high school football and some baseball. The girls had GAA, Girls' Athletic Association, but that was minimal. The only people the girls competed with were once a year at Downieville, and that was volleyball. But there were not a lot of other activities. So, for fun we read a lot and had 4-H. We had meetings with our leaders, cooking and sewing. Dad was a forestry leader. Mom was a cooking leader as well as community leader. We had Melba Larsen who helped with sewing and Rollo Larsen was the soil conservation man. They were real good friends with Mom and Dad. They were very involved with 4-H. Rollo taught entomology which I took for a few years (and learned) how to stick bugs. I had a bee project which Mom and Dad helped me with."

Besides 4-H, Elia Roberti Miles was active in numerous community organizations, including Native Daughters of the Golden West, Plumas-Sierra Cattlewomen, Sierra County Republican Women, Loyalton Community Church, and Sierra Valley Grange. She was a board trustee for Sierra/Plumas Joint Unified School District, an honorary graduate of Loyalton High School, and one of the Loyalton Grizzlies' greatest fans. This remarkable woman truly lived her life as spelled out in the 4-H Pledge: "I pledge my HEAD to clearer thinking, my HEART to greater loyalty, my HANDS to larger service, and my HEALTH to better living, for my CLUB, my COMMUNITY, my COUNTRY, and my WORLD."



Elia as Grand Marshall of Loyalton July 4th Parade
Sierra Booster Photo

SOURCES:

Historic Houses of Sierra County in Sierra Valley, Sierra County Historical Society, 2000

History of the Schools of the Sierra Valley, Sierra County Historical Society, 2004

Oral History of Elia Roberti Miles and her daughter Virginia, conducted by Virginia Lutes and Elda Ball, July 12, 2012, at Elia's Loyalton home.

Roberti Ranch website

Sierra Booster, Elia Miles Obituary, 10/28/2019

The Surprise Book of Stunts and Stories, Game Ante Over Illustration, Whitman Publishing, Racine, Wisconsin, Copyright 1927.

Wikipedia

Sattley Fire of 1924

By Corri Jimenez



Last summer, wild fires loomed as a clear and present danger to Sierra County. While the massive Dixie Fire raged in neighboring Butte, Plumas, Lassen, Shasta, and Tehama counties, our residents endured dangerous air quality, economic hardship, and of course, anxiety that the conflagration would spread in our direction. National forests were closed, and restaurants that had adapted to the COVID-19 epidemic by offering outdoor dining now found that option problematic.



Sattley Fire, 1924
Photo courtesy of Bill Copren

residence, and barns on the Martinetti place, were burned." Historian James Sinnott later noted the Sattley Fire had burned over 9,000 acres.



Looking south to Sattley from A- 23 and Westside Road
in 2021

Photo by Corri Jimenez

Sierra County residents are no strangers to adversity. Like the Dixie incident, the Sattley Fire of 1924 earned state-wide attention. It ignited on July 4, following a year-long drought, and California newspapers reported that it was one of the three largest forest fires ever to blacken the state. Driven by stiff winds, flames threatened the fringes of Sattley and Calpine, burning the meadows and hillsides. On July 5th, *The Humboldt Times* reported it was, "...out of control, and racing through stretches of virgin timber; Sattley and Calpine, threatened yesterday, are temporarily safe." By the end of the second day, the fire was reported by the *Merced Sun-Star* to have grown to approximately 1,500-4,000 acres, and a hundred Tahoe national forest rangers had been deployed. On July 7, four-hundred men were fighting the blaze per the *Stockton Independent*, and Sierra County was one of five counties in the state under fire watch. Three million acres of national forests were closed during the conflagration. The *King City Rustler* falsely reported that fires had "destroyed the town of Sattley are now menacing Sierraville despite strenuous fighting."

By July 10, when Tahoe National Forest Supervisor L.P. Bigelow announced the fire was under control, approximately 3,000 acres had been burned. The inferno had moved in a 4-mile swath through Sierra Valley, inflicting significant destruction along the way. According to the *Lompoc Review*, the Stosk Company from Pyramid Lake lost 400 sheep in the Sattley Fire. The shepherd was trapped with them and, sadly, he perished with his flock. The *Feather River Bulletin* reported the loss of a garage and two barns owned by Sam Devine. A large number of residences were also lost. The *Feather River Bulletin* cited, "...a farmhouse occupied by George Knuthson, the old Turner mill, the Toomey place on the Calpine Road, a deserted house, and barn owned by the Davies-Johnson Lumber Company, the Blatchley house and the Copren

In local newspapers, there was no documentation of the origin of the fire, nor much about its path, but oral accounts from Sierra Valley residents filled in some of the blanks. Historian Bill Copren said the fire began behind the Strang Ranch and blew over the back side of the mountain. It proceeded through the Martinetti Ranch and burned Bill's ancestral home that stood in vicinity of today's vista point on Highway 49. He said it then traveled between what is now Highway 89 and Westside Road, burning the Hale House on the north side of Sattley Cemetery. That structure was historian Suzi Schoensee's ancestral home. The fire's damage extended as far north as Mountain Quail Road on the edge of Calpine. In addition to Copren's account, the reminiscences of Rita Faith Martinetti Bradley (1914-2003) added more details to this story. In a 2014 *Sierran*, she was quoted as recalling a bucket brigade of neighbors and family members scooping water from the creek and saving the home. Unfortunately, the fire burned their barn and nine outbuildings. Martinetti recalled that later in the summer, Amos and Joseph Hathaway and their neighbors cut and milled burned trees to build the barn that now stands behind the family house. In the aftermath of the fire, salvage of burned trees continued throughout the year. Charlie Campbell, Schoensee's grandfather, logged burnt cedar trees on the entire ridge south of Sattley.

Sources:

Feather River Bulletin, "Forest Fire Today Seriously Threatens Davies-Johnson Town," July 10, 1924.

Healdsburg Tribune, "Fires Rage out of Control in Mountain," July 11, 1924.

Humboldt Times, "Sierra Forest Fire is Beyond Control," July 8, 1924.

King City Rustler, "When Forest Burn, You Pay-Help Prevent Fires—It Pays, Says the District Forester," July 11, 1924.

Lompoc Review, "Forest Fire Threatens," July 11, 1924.

Merced Sun-Star, "Two Towns Menaced by Forest Fires," July 6, 1924.

Sierran, "Rita Faith Martinetti Bradley, One of our Favorite Sierra Valley Historians", Lutes, Virginia Vol. XXXXIII, No. 3. Summer 2014.

Sierran, "Sattley Pioneers", Vol. XIX, No. 1, Spring 1991, Turner, Freda

Sierra Valley: Jewel of the Sierras, "Histories of Sattley and Calpine," Vol. IV, 1976, Sinnott, James.

Stockton Independent, "Five Counties Act to Remove Fire Menaces-U.S. Closes Three Million Acres of Forest to Campers-Situation Critical-State, Federal Officers are Planning Union of Forces, July 8, 1924.

WE WERE ABSOLUTELY FLOORED....

...last 4th of July weekend while, in the midst of devastating drought conditions, we faced flooding at the Kentucky Mine Museum. A water pipe in a restroom wall failed and leaked into the gallery, submerging the floor under an inch and a half of water. The lovely wood laminate, installed in 2015 and still thought of as the "new" floor, buckled and was destroyed. Compounding the situation was the fact that the original flooring (indoor-outdoor carpet glued to the cement slab foundation) lay beneath the laminate and was saturated, thus vulnerable to mold. Fortunately, intrepid SCHS volunteers arrived on the scene armed with buckets, squeegees, and shop vacs, and within a few hours had the water sopped up. Caretaker Bill Davey monitored high-powered fans provided by Sierra County Public Works Department to dry things out, then a few weeks later local builder Ken Kinneer arrived to remove the ruined flooring. The county rented a large container, and volunteers were called upon again-this time to move the museum cases and contents into storage. After research into several flooring replacement options by

the county and SCHS, the ultimate decision was not to replace it at all, but to clean and polish the existing concrete. This popular finish is durable and fits with the style of the museum. Part-time Downieville resident and contractor, Louis Yannotti of Premiere Concrete Construction, recently completed the work, and the floor is stunning. Some of the aggregate in the cement was exposed during the grinding process, emphasizing its rustic look, and the few cracks in it were retained for character. While the contents are out of the way, the inside of the building will be painted, then the real fun of moving back in will begin. At that time, the exhibits will be reorganized and refreshed.



Sierra County Road Crew moving cases on the old "new" floor in 2015.

This entire process has been a collaboration between SCHS and Sierra County. As you may know, the Kentucky Mine Museum sits on US Forest Service land, but is owned by Sierra County and operated by Sierra County Historical Society. The last floor replacement was paid for by SCHS's rigorous fundraising campaign, which included the Sierra City Sesquicentennial celebration. This time, Sierra County is funding the project. With their help and that of our dedicated volunteers, we hope to dazzle you when we reopen this spring.



A sneak peek at the polished concrete, 2021.
Photos by Mary Nourse

The Sierran

Sierra County Historical Society

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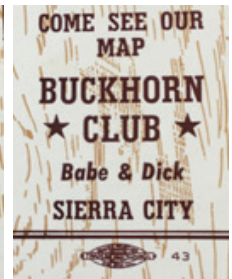
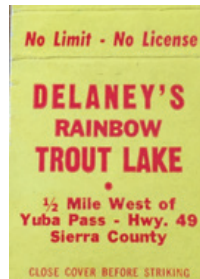
ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED

THE SIERRAN

Fall 2021 - Winter 2022

GOT A MATCH?

Did you know the hobby of collecting matchbooks is called phillumeny? Though not half as popular as stamp or coin collecting, these “walking billboards” document the existence of historic businesses and often include names of the proprietors. Also popular for advertising were calendars and even milk bottle caps. Here’s a glimpse at some 1900s Sierra County establishments provided by SCHS member and phillumenist, Chris Bock.



Milk Bottle Lids from Sierra Valley.