

# The Sierran

✦ A Publication of the Sierra County Historical Society ✦

## The Historic Sierra City School

Tom Butt, FAIA

T

he historic Sierra City School located at 418 Main Street in Sierra City was purchased in 2022 by the family of architect Tom Butt of Richmond, CA, and plans are underway to reconstruct the previously removed belfry and move the original bell, now at the Kentucky Mine Museum, back to its original location. The bell is the property of Sierra County Historical Society; it was given to the museum by Sierra/Plumas School District, and it and will be on loan while back at the schoolhouse.



Figure 1 - The Old Sierra City Schoolhouse

The previous owners, Nora Prince and Don Hemphill did an excellent job of protecting and preserving the old schoolhouse, making critical structural repairs, including a new concrete foundation, replacing damaged decks, siding and other exterior envelope components, and exterior painting. Although a previous owner created a two-bedroom apartment in the rear addition, the original classroom remains remarkably intact, with the original finishes, blackboards (black painted wood) and many early 20th Century textbooks still in bookshelves.



Figure 2 - The Sierra City School bell is currently displayed at the Kentucky Mine Museum.

At its meeting of November 3, 2023, the California State Historic Resources Commission (SHRC) voted unanimously to approve the nomination of the Sierra City School to the National Register of Historic Places, the first and only Sierra City property to be so designated. The formal entry by the Keeper of the National Register should occur in the next few months.

The SHRC staff report described the Sierra City School:

*Sierra City School is a vernacular wooden schoolhouse located in Sierra City, an unincorporated community of Sierra County, adjacent to Highway 49. Built in 1883, it was the principal education facility of this mountain community until it closed in 1952. In addition to being the center of education, the school also served as a local community center.*

1. [https://ohp.parks.ca.gov/pages/1067/files/CA\\_Sierra\\_Sierra%20City%20School\\_DRAFT.pdf](https://ohp.parks.ca.gov/pages/1067/files/CA_Sierra_Sierra%20City%20School_DRAFT.pdf)

# ➤ 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](mailto: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 & INSITUATION .....	\$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 Mahtieson, Membership Chair  
PO Box 260, Sierra City, CA 96125

## President's Message Fall/Winter 2023

The Kentucky Mine and Museum closed for the season on September 4, 2023. This year beat all the records for income and visitors. We had 2572 visitors and 1210 people took tours! This year was unique because there were many large groups of visitors that required reservations. Volunteers Don McKechnie and Bill Copren were of great assistance in conducting these tours as well as filling spots on our regular tour schedules. Melissa, Joanie and other volunteers worked diligently this season on the displays in the museum, adding to the fine quality of our museum.

Tremendous strides are being made with our Oral History Program, especially with organizing and transcribing our existing media. We purchased a laptop computer for volunteer use with the Descript program, and submitted a backlog of interviews to Organic Media for digitization. Once we receive those files, we will begin to transcribe those interviews.

The Historical Society sponsored the Music at the Mine concert series, produced by Chris Stockdale, and it was once again a great success. After many years of bringing musical talent to the Kentucky Mine, Chris is stepping down from production. Thank you, Chris, for years of enjoyable evenings at the amphitheater. We

are currently negotiating with a potential manager to continue the concert series.

There were five Board of Director members up for election for the term of 2024-2026. The following members were elected: Tom Butt, Suzi Schoensee, Mary Nourse, Scott Mathieson and Jan Hamilton.

Doors Open California, organized by the California Preservation Foundation, occurred at the Kentucky Mine Museum and Park on September 9 and 10, 2023. It was the largest statewide celebration of historic places. It allowed behind-the-scenes and special access to unique, threatened or preserved buildings, landscapes or features in a variety of communities. The KY Mine was the only site that participated in Sierra County. The volunteers for the tours and the museum were Corri Jimenez, Joanie Engel, Don McKechnie and Bill Copren.

The Art + Ag Trail event of September 23, 2023, was a great success with the Historical Society's participation at the Sierraville School. We sold books, had a hand-quilting demonstration, and displayed a timeline of the history of the Sierraville School. We provided settings and vintage costumes for old-fashioned photos where the participants were able to leave with their printed photos.



**Mary Nourse Photos**

On September 24, 2023, there were 45 members and guests at our annual picnic at Lemon Canyon Ranch in Sierraville. We enjoyed barn tours with Bill Copren and Lucy Blake and the delicious lunch was served by Paul and Sheri Roen at the beautiful ranch house grounds.



**Barn tour at Lemon Canyon Ranch.**

**Mary Nourse Photo**



**Lee Adams and Jan Hamilton bringing back the dead at the Halloween History Tour.**

**Photo by Corri Jiminez**

For a second year, members participated in the Downieville Halloween History Tour which took place on October 28, 2023, and included 60 participants. At the direction of the Sierra County Visitors Bureau, we took part in storytelling at the Yuba Theatre and concluded the tour at the Downieville Cemetery with a glimpse of bygone times and the interesting lives, and deaths, of local residents.

Jan Hamilton, President  
Sierra County Historical Society

The Sierra City School qualifies for the National Register under Criterion A, "The quality of significance in American history, architecture, archaeology, engineering, and culture is present in districts, sites, buildings, structures, and objects that possess integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association, and that are associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history."

*The Sierra City School is significant for its association with the development of early educational facilities in Sierra County during the mining boom of the late 19th century. The Sierra City School illustrates its association with the rapid growth of the mining community from a makeshift camp to an established townsite with families, children and a need for education. The building was built during the period of rapid growth for the Sierra City community and sustained wealth from the mining industry. Constructed with public funds, the school represented the acknowledgment of the state of the growth of the area. The building stands as a good representation of the American schoolhouse typology...*

*In addition to serving the children of miners and others in mining industry-supporting businesses, the building was used as a community meeting space.*

Tom Butt, who is an experienced historic preservation architect, prepared the National Register nomination with assistance from his daughter-in-law, Kimberly Butt, also a preservation architect. Tom Butt recently submitted plans for the replacement to Sierra County for a building permit. The Sierra City School, was built as a one room school serving grades 1-12 in 1883., An addition to accommodate primary grades was added in 1888. Unfortunately, an avalanche in January of 1952 heavily damaged the front wall, which ended the structure's life as a school. Classes moved to the Sierra City Masonic Hall and, in 1954, to Downieville, because by 1953 there were only six elementary school children left in school. Sierra City high school students had been attending school in Downieville since 1943. A gripping first person account of the avalanche was written by Lydia Cartwright Rosen, who was ten years old at the time of the avalanche. It was published in the Fall 1991 edition of "The Sierran." Following the avalanche, the school was sold to Dan S. Wallace and subsequently to Don Nelson.

Either Wallace or Nelson replaced avalanche damaged windows in the front wall with a sliding barn-type door, and Nelson opened a building supply business while he and his wife lived in the back apartment. The couple divorced in 1972 and, shortly thereafter, Raymond and Lucy Prince, parents of Nora Prince, purchased the building. Nora Prince grew up there and inherited it from her parents.

Since ceasing to be a school in 1952, the property has been a store, art gallery and a venue for public meetings, as well as a private home. Nora Prince relates that in 2020 the Sierra County Search and Rescue volunteers would meet at the Schoolhouse during COVID because with the front sliding barn door open, the meeting venue was technically "outside."



Figure 3 - The original schoolroom

One of the interesting features of the school is that it has separate entrances for boys and girls, although they ended up in the same classroom. This arcane configuration was apparently a common feature of 19th Century schools. A former student who attended the school told me that the purpose was to "keep boys and girls from messing with each other" while they were lining up to enter.

For the time being, the Butt family, who spent much of the summer of 2023 in Sierra City, plans to use the Old Schoolhouse as a vacation home.



*Tom Butt, FAIA, is an architect and founder of the 50-year-old Richmond architecture-engineering firm, Interactive Resources. He served 28 years on the Richmond City Council, the last eight as elected mayor, terming out in January 2023. He founded and serves on the boards of three historic preservation-related nonprofits: Rosie the Riveter Trust, East Brother Light Station, Inc., and The Winehaven Trust. He was recently elected to the board of the Sierra County Historical Society.*

2. Illustrated History of Plumas, Lassen, and Sierra Counties, with California from 1513 to 1850 (Fariss & Smith, San Francisco, 1882): 471
3. Sinnott, A General History of Sierra County, (Fresno: Mid-Cal Publishers, 1978), 109
4. Sinnott, 107
5. Sinnott, 32
6. "Governing Board of the Sierra-Plumas Joint Unified School District," Sierra Booster, (February 20, 1953) 17.
7. First person account by Lydia Cartwright Rosen of the 1952 Sierra City avalanche published in the Fall 1991 edition of The Sierran. Lydia Rose Cartwright was born March 21, 1942. Her parents were Calvin and Mabel Morrison Cartwright.
8. "Sierra-Plumas Joint Unified School District," Sierra Booster, (August 22, 1952) 11.
9. Sinnott, A General History of Sierra County, (Fresno: Mid-Cal Publishers, 1978), 109.

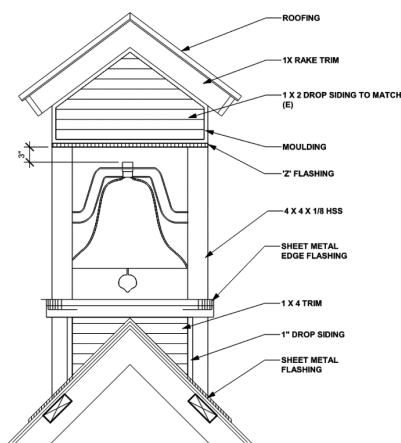


Figure 4 - Proposed new belfry



Figure 5 - Proposed new belfry



Figure 6 - Historical photo

## Noteworthy Acquisitions

The Kentucky Mine recently received some noteworthy acquisitions: a handcrafted quilt, a composition book, and a set of silverware. Each, in its own way, embellishes our understanding of Sierra City in its heyday.

The quilt, which chronicles Sierra City history, features a montage of photos of significant buildings and scenes from the mining era. It was created as a raffle prize for a 2012 fundraiser by Irmke Schoebel, Susan Hopkins, Renetta Hayes, and Margaret Boothby. It will be prominently displayed the museum in memory of Irmke who recently passed away.

The composition book contains over 150 pages of handwritten notes on properties and possessions of Sierra City residents from 1849-1892. This body of research was a labor of love by board member James Connolly, and it is now being put into a Word document to make it searchable for research purposes. Sierra County Historical Society is grateful to James for this marvelous donation and for his years of service on the board.

The silver flatware belonged to Catherine Busch, wife of Augustus C. Busch, partner in the Young America Mine and local entrepreneur. The Busch family resided at the imposing Busch and Heringlake building which also housed Wells Fargo and Western Union offices, a general store, a meat market, and a public meeting space where E Clampus Vitus met. Mrs. Busch's elegant silver service reflects the fact that her husband was one of California's wealthiest men in the 1870s and 80's. The silver was donated by David Bishop in memory of his mother Marion Simmons Bishop. Marion was given the silver by Mrs. Nellie Wade. To learn more about the Busch family and the Busch & Heringlake building, see the article by Fran Burgard in the Fall, 2008 Sierran. [www.sierracountyhistory.org](http://www.sierracountyhistory.org)



*Catherine Busch's lovely monogrammed flatware.* **Photo by David Bishop.**

#### Sources:

"A Look at the Busch-Heringlake Building" by Fran Burgard, *The Sierran*, Fall, 2008.

"Quilt Featuring Historic Mining Photo Collage Could Be Yours!", *The Sierran*, Summer, 2011.

## Sierra County's Painted Ladies

**W**hile San Francisco's "Painted Ladies" flaunt their flashy colors, two historic Sierra County buildings have proudly returned to classic white and the results are stunning. The Webber Lake Hotel covered up red walls, while the Bowman house ditched its green hue in favor of white with black trim. In both cases, the buildings have now reverted to their original states.



*The Bowman House in Loganville.*  
**Mary Nourse Photo**

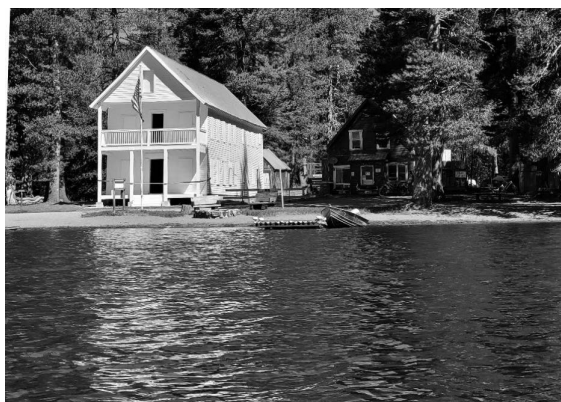
The Bowman house in Loganville was built by August Kaiser in the 1880s as a family residence

that was also run as an inn. The front of the building served as a card room and bar, and the present-day garage was at one time a bowling alley. The thriving community of Loganville included several facilities: a general store, a school, a building for public events (Avignone's Hall), and some ranches. These amenities supported the nearby Keystone and Marguerite lode mines, as well as hydraulic mines operated by the Dutch Company and the Romanos.



*Today's garage was once a bowling alley.*  
**Mary Nourse Photo**

James Edward Westall purchased the Kaiser property in 1902, and the home has been a private residence ever since. Current owners are his great-grandchildren Joey Brown, Cayleb Bowman, and Sara Bowman. Tom Sawyer's Aunt Polly would be impressed to see the clean, crisp "whitewash" applied to the house by the younger generation.



*Webber Lake Hotel*  
**Photo by Greg Barraclough**  
courtesy of Truckee Donner Land Trust.

The other old structure sporting a fresh coat of paint is the Webber Lake Hotel. The historic inn was a key stop on Henness Pass Road, a major supply line for the Comstock Lode in Virginia City, Nevada. It was built in 1860 by Dr. Webber

Painted Ladies (Cont. on Pg 6) ➔



primarily as a means to share the magnificent mountain setting with visitors. The doctor's passion was not innkeeping; he preferred mapping horse trails and building bridle paths to access the high country. His resort rates were said to be "ridiculously low", so he was clearly not interested in getting rich as a hotelier. He welcomed the indigent and the infirm; and he even added a sanitorium for tubercular patients. His varied interests attracted a wide variety of guests including the famous Sierra Valley botanist J.G. Lemmon, Red Cross founder Clara Barton, actress Lola Montez, and painter Thomas Hill.

Truckee Donner Land Trust purchased Webber Lake Hotel in 2012 and recently raised the historic structure to replace its decaying foundation. They chose the new paint color under the guidance of the Sierra County Historical Society, and a team of TDLT volunteers went to work bringing the exterior siding back to its original color. To follow the progress of the hotel renovation or to make a donation, go to the Truckee Donner Land Trust Website.

#### Sources:

##### Webber Lake Hotel

Sierra Booster 5/6/2015

Truckee Donner Land Trust website

The Sierran, Summer 2006, "David Gould Webber", by Virginia Lutes & Maren Scholberg.

##### Bowman House

The Sierran, Fall 1990, "George Fournier and Loganville" by Billie Madsen with information from Sierra City and Goodyears Bar by James Sinnott.

Find the Sierran articles in their entirety at [sierracountyhistory.org](http://sierracountyhistory.org).

## ECHOS From the PAST

By Mary Nourse

### Part II of the story of the countywide Echo Yearbook



## ANECDOTES OF MY PIONEER GRANDFATHER

**I**n northern Sierra County at Mount Pleasant Ranch, near the old town of Scales, there's a dance hall in a fair state of preservation, considering the many decades that it weathered through the sunshine and storms. This dance hall was built of lumber manufactured by hand as there were no sawmills of any type within many, many miles at that date. It was constructed in 1853, and the opening grand ball was held July 4, 1854. As there were no roads for vehicles of any type, the only mode of travel was by foot or on horse or mule back. The opening ball was really a grand affair since the mining camps in the neighborhood were booming, and all the streams and placers were a scene of great activity. The price of entertainment seemed but a trifle this time. Tickets for this grand ball were sold at \$20 each. The men were very gallant and peppy. For days before this grand affair, they labored with oxen and whatever could be used to cut away the brush and the branches that might tear or injure the fair damsels' dresses by making the adventurous trip by mule or horseback from different parts. Many went from Downieville.

My grandfather started for California in 1851, against the wishes of his father. After his absence for a few days, his father surmised that he had taken his departure for the land of gold. His father saddled a swift horse and started westward, also on the immigrant trail overtaking his adventurous son at Saint Joe, Missouri. His father's word was law, which meant that he must return home until he became the age of 21. In the spring of 1852, he and eight others in his party, turned their faces westward to this wonderful land of gold and adventure. His experiences were many and varied on that long, tedious journey from Golconda, Illinois to what is now known as Hangtown, El Dorado County. They found a plant native to those parts, which resembled a pineapple so closely, that some members of his party mistook it for the real pineapple, and tried to eat it. Their mouths were soon filled with thick lather. Then and there it was

Echos ... (Cont. on Pg 7) ➡

decided that it must be soap roots instead of pineapple.

By Mary Wehrle



*Downieville Student Body 1936-1937*  
Photo courtesy of Gary Adams

**Row 1:** Betty Lavezzola, Wilma Mottini, Patricia Quinn, Mary Jean Rixey, Lewanda Taylor, June Poggi, Frances Cook, Dorothy Jarvis

**Row 2:** Norman Mottini, Anne Costa, Merritt Veck, Miles Schofield, Charles Scott, Bert Elliott

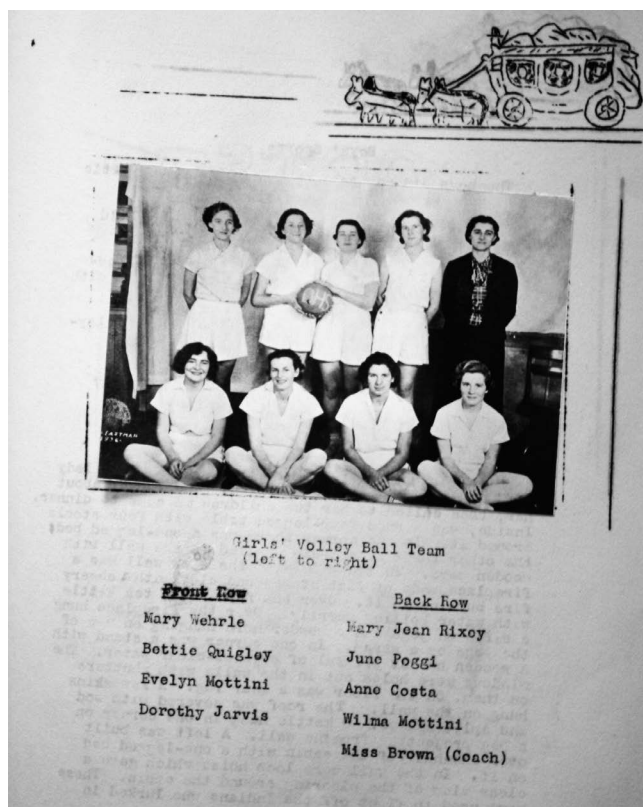
**Row 3:** Bettie Quigley, Marjorie Taylor, Evelyn Mottini, Billy Westcott, Peter Smith, Wallace Tuttle, Robert Jarvis, Reynold Mottini, Mary Wehrle



## RECALLING PIONEER DAYS IN FOREST CITY

The little historic town away up in the Sierra Nevada mountains was first started in 1852 by a number of sailors who had deserted their ship when it entered San Francisco Bay. One of those men was named Brown, and from him, the settlement took the name Brownsville. But in the following spring, a woman came into camp, the wife of W.S. Davies, and an occasion of such importance could not be overlooked. Therefore, Brown was forgotten, and the name was changed to Elizaville after Elizabeth Davies. It was not long before another woman arrived, a Mrs. Moody. This lady was impressed by the dense forest which covered the forks of Oregon Creek with a growth so thick, that even at noon-day there was scarcely a spot where the sun could touch the earth. This cool retreat of perpetual twilight caused Mrs. Moody to refer to the settlement as Forest City. Now there came to be differences which name of the town should have. Finally in 1854, a meeting was held, a vote was taken, and the people formally christened it Forest City.

This little place came to be very prosperous because of its wonderful location. Soon it was a small city instead of small town. In 1855 a telegraph line was built into Forest City so that it was in instant communication with San Juan, Nevada City, Grass Valley, and the Bay district. Evidence of this pioneer line can be seen along the ridge today. There were many mines here at the time, notably the South Fork, North Fork, Young America, Exchange, Yellow Jacket, and the Bald Mountain, which last who is the biggest producer of them all, for years the most extensive drift line in



Girls' Volley Ball Team  
(left to right)

**Front Row**

Mary Wehrle  
Bettie Quigley  
Evelyn Mottini  
Dorothy Jarvis

**Back Row**

Mary Jean Rixey  
June Poggi  
Anne Costa  
Wilma Mottini  
Miss Brown (Coach)

# The Sierran

Sierra County Historical Society

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ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED



the state. The main tunnel of the Bald Mountain was more than 2 miles in length and many side tunnels were built. There were huge dugouts inside the drift, so built that many dances were held there. An engine christened, H.K. Wallis in honor of the superintendent, made hourly trips both day and night, carrying cars to every portion of the mine. The mine then employed over 200 men. It is related that an elderly man employed at the Bald Mountain had the job of emptying the cars on the waste rock pile. One day he noticed the excessive weight of one rock as he was about to throw it down the mountainside. He at once called the superintendent, who, upon examining it, found out that it was a black-crusted, pure gold nugget, a fortune in itself. As a reward for his keenness in saving this fortune for the mine owners, the laborer was given a new suit of clothes

Living costs were said to be \$2000 per person yearly. At this time there were gun battles, gambling and robbing. There were five or six saloons, and you could find nearly every man on Saturday

night, taking them in. The most important event of the day was the arrival of the large stage coach, drawn by six or eight horses as it rolled into Forest City, raising the dust high up into the sky. The stage was held up very often and the drivers were sometimes cruelly murdered if not obedient. In the winter time, the mail was packed on the backs of men, or sometimes, if possible, on a sleigh driven by a number of horses.

When heavy winter came tunnels were made in the streets and sidewalks in order to keep people from starving. There were large storehouses owned by different persons who distributed the food among them. Good times were also had in the dark, gloomy winter. Ski races were held at the back of Bald Mountain in which valuable prizes were given to the winners. People from everywhere came to see them. The tracks used to be icy and as steep as possible. Many old timers now living in Alleghany and Forest remember the exciting rides they had on those ski tracks.

By Bill Hart '39

Echos ... (Cont. Next Issue)

