

The Sierran

◆ A Publication of the Sierra County Historical Society ◆

LEGENDARY ARTISTS OF SIERRA COUNTY

By Mary Nourse

It is no secret that the timeless splendor of Sierra County is a draw for artsy types, and has been for decades. In particular, three historic artists with ties to the area stand out as having achieved regional and nationwide fame: caricaturist Frank Willmarth, folk singer Kate Wolf, and sketch artist George Mathis. Additionally, contemporary artist Jacqueline Rickard is internationally recognized for her beaded baskets.

FRANK WILLMARTH, AKA “PANCHO” came from a show business family. His mother Kathleen had been an actress and singer on the New York stage, later taking roles in silent movies and repertory theater in Los Angeles. Her children all went into the entertainment field. Kenneth was a singer and dancer, Doris was one of the original Rockettes, and Frank started out as a cartoonist and humorist.

At the age of eighteen, he traveled throughout the country for Curtis Candy Company painting signs featuring Butterfingers and Baby Ruths on barns and store windows. Wanting to advance his education, he sought a degree in advertising and journalism at the University of Missouri at Columbia, but couldn't afford to complete his studies. Years later, at his wife's urging, he took classes at the Los Angeles Art Center, a highly regarded commercial art school. During this time, Frank was successful in doing caricatures on weekends along Southern California beaches to pay for the classes, and he wondered if it was possible to make a living that way. In time, his irresistible charm and exceptional talent proved it was indeed possible. Dubbed “Pancho” by the Mexican artisans working near his studio on Olvera Street, he had a truly storied career. He drew caricatures of some of the biggest names in show business, sports and politics. He worked in nightclubs, at fairs, and at an art colony on Catalina Island. During the 1930s and '40s he sketched dozens of celebrities at Hollywood's famous Brown Derby restaurant.

In 1945, Pancho was already well-known when he moved his family from smoggy Los Angeles to a cabin at Shady Flat, four miles “upriver” from Downieville. There he immersed himself in small town life where he drew caricatures in bars and restaurants in Downieville, Sierra City,



Pancho, Self Portrait – SCHS Archives

Johnsville, Quincy, and Calpine. He also worked dinner clubs in Reno, sketched at local fundraisers, and helped with the county's exhibit at the state fair. I was lucky to meet him a couple of times when the Sierra County Arts Council brought him to Downieville High School, where I was teaching at the time. I'll never forget how he'd show up with a contraption he called his “skisel”, an easel he had fashioned out of old wooden skis. This gifted man called himself “the artist with the laughing crayon”, and I can't think of a better description of him.

KATE WOLF was a highly respected and influential figure in the American folk music scene. She was called Katie Lou as a child, but in our house - or more specifically in our Oldsmobile station wagon with the fake woodgrain

Legendary Artists (Cont. on Page 3) ◆

➤ The Sierra County Historical Society ➤

The Sierra County Historical Society is an organization of people interested in perserving 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

- | | |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Jan Hamilton, President | Christie Brzyszc,
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| Corri Jimenez, Vice-President | Gerald Gates, Webmaster |
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| Tom Butt, Director | Erin Wallace, Music at the
Mine Producer |
| Bill Copren, Director | |
| Susie Schoensee, Director | |

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 & INSITUTION	\$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

The Kentucky Mine and Museum closed for winter on September 2 after a very successful season. Gigulette Knochenhauer, manager/curator and Joanie Engel, assistant curator, led the operation of the park with our dedicated volunteers, Bill Copren and Don McKechnie aiding them by leading tours. During our 7-day per week hosting of the park and museum, we had 1937 visitors, and our profit margin was ahead of that for last year.

Our annual picnic on September 7, 2025 was at the Kentucky Mine. It allowed our 60 guests the opportunity to use the beautifully repaired trestle and have an excellent picnic lunch. Bill Copren led a tour of the mine operation for many attendees. After the picnic, Tom and Shirley Butt hosted visitors at the Sierra City Schoolhouse to view the newly built belfry housing the old school bell which is on loan by the Historical Society.



Board members Suzie Schoensee, Bill Copren, Corri Jimenez, Jan Hamilton, and Susan Hopkins – SCHS Photo

The small, but dynamic Sierra County Historical Society board is quite active. At the Art+Ag Trail event in September, they maintained an information booth in the Sierraville School gymnasium. Five board members staffed

the event, selling books and mementos, and providing old-fashioned costumes for participants to use in posing for pictures.

Recently, the board began exploring a grant opportunity with the Sierra Nevada Conservancy that could help accomplish two key goals at the Kentucky Mine: to add a wing to the museum for more display space and to clear the landslide in the mine portal. The new wing would allow the addition of interactive exhibits about the resident Townsend big-eared bats, and the portal excavation will create a sense for visitors of being underground without actually entering the tunnel. It will also improve air circulation, thus providing better quality of the bat habitat. Board member and architect Tom Butt very generously volunteered his time to design the museum addition. Tim Beals, former director of public works, planning, building and transportation for Sierra County, is working with our museum addition committee to pursue this grant. We have enlisted Marilyn Tierney, retired USFS biologist and expert on Townsend’s big-eared bats, as well as Tom Hogan, retired mine superintendent and construction inspector, to help us prepare our grant application. Our devoted secretary, Susan Hopkins, serves on the committee along with Sierra County’s Bryan Davey and Kaylon Hall. Mary Nourse and I took a fact-finding field trip to the Sierra Valley Preserve and Nature Center where we met with Jenna Holland, public programs manager, to learn from their interactive exhibits, cultural history displays and concepts they used in setting up the nature center. Jenna provided us with contacts from the planning and production of their excellent Feather River Land Trust preserve. On that trip, we also met with our new printers of The Sierran, Reno Type, to brainstorm ideas for promot-

President’s Message (Continues on next page) ➤

President's Message *(Continued...)*

ing SCHS, to tour their plant and to discuss our newsletter, which is now in its 56th year of publication. We are grateful for the folks that help keep our publication going. Thank you to Corri Jimenez for her frequent submission of articles and to Joanie Engel for her stellar copy editing.

Speaking of promotion, a huge thank you goes to Rick Solinsky, head administrator of our Facebook page. Thanks to Rick's abundant postings of Sierra County photos, news articles and maps, our page has over 15,000 followers, making it one of the most popular pages in the country. Check it out on www.facebook.com



Mary Nourse & Kurt Hoge at RenoType – Jan Hamilton Photo

Suzie Schoensee and Mary Nourse attended a Nevada County Historical Society workshop about NCHS's recently launched online photo archive which includes our entire SCHS collection. Besides very old photos, you can access the Downieville High School yearbooks which were painstakingly scanned by Don Costa. To search for photos, just go to nevadacountyhistory.org and click on "Search the Archive."

In October, SCHS entered into a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with Carl Butz, owner and publisher of The Mountain Messenger. This opportunity was presented to us for the gift of The Mountain Messenger extant editions for the express purpose of preserving and digitizing them in order to build an electronic, searchable dataset available to the public via the internet. Simultaneously, two professors at California State University, Berkeley volunteered to assist SCHS in writing a digitization grant. The MOU covering the gift of newspapers from 1853 forward also provided for curation space in the Messenger office until suitable climate-controlled facilities are completed in another building. This gift of ownership strongly demonstrates collaboration for the grant application. Costs of digitization and preparing the papers for archival storage comprise a large part of the grant budget. We submitted the digitization grant application in October, and we expect it will be a few months until we hear of the awards.

The SCHS Oral History Program is alive and well. In fact, you may have seen us recently wandering the streets of Sierraville, as Scott Mathieson filmed Part Two of Bill Copren's walking tour. That footage, along with other material from our archives, is in the process of transcription. Board member and treasurer, Michelle Anderson will be helping transcribe Bill's first interview.

We welcome your help with any of our projects. Contact me at jhamilton21@att.net or Mary Nourse, events coordinator at mnourse46@gmail.com to get involved.

Wishing you a warm winter,
Jan Hamilton, President
Sierra County Historical Society



Kate Wolf, Public Domain Photo

Legendary Artists *(Continued...)*

siding - she was known as that folksinger who could soothe a cranky toddler. The famed singer/songwriter Tom Paxton once said of her, "There was a humanity in her singing, a generosity of spirit that never failed to move me. With Kate, the message was always — always — love. I never met a warmer-hearted person than Kate Wolf — ever."

Kate was born in San Francisco in 1942. Her family moved around a lot, but settled in Berkeley where she attended school from sixth grade through high school. She started musical training at the age of four when she was taught piano by her grandmother, but pulled back from playing when she became shy and self-conscious in her teen years. During that time however, she never stopped listening to music. She later acknowledged being influenced by the Weavers, Rosemary Clooney, Bob Dylan, the Beatles, the Carter family, Merle Haggard, Lefty Frizzell, and Hank Williams.

At the age of 27, Kate began playing in living rooms with musicians in Big Sur on the California coast. Influenced by friends George Schroder and "Jellyroll" Turner, she decided to pursue a career in music. She and her husband who admittedly didn't want to be married to a musician, parted amicably and she became a weekend mother to

Legendary Artists *(Continues on Page 4)* ➔

Legendary Artists (Continued...)

their two small children. She moved to Sonoma County in 1971 where she lived in her '57 Chevy for the first 6 months, writing songs and performing at a local bar. Before long, she brought her kids to live with her, and after a few years she started her first band, the Wildwood Flower, with Don Coffin whom she later married. The band played community events and on local radio stations; with rising popularity and financial backing Kate formed her own record company, Owl Records. She honored her community with her first record, *Backroads* that featured 8 of her songs and 4 by other artists. Her fan base increased with the release of the album, and she began touring nationally in 1977. Her friend "Utah" Phillips helped her book concerts on the East Coast. Kate's love of Canadian folk music drew her to performances at festivals in in Calgary, Winnipeg, and Vancouver.

In 1979 the Wildwood Flower disbanded when Kate and her husband Don separated. Kate then took on Nina Gerber, a talented accompanist who would be with her for the duration of her career. Through the eighties, Kate continued to tour the United States and produce records. In 1982, she married her third husband Terry Fowler and continued to perform at benefits and concerts, but she was growing road weary. In her words, "The road is wearing me down. I feel my health slipping... For twelve years I had been moving fast and furious with my career, so I thought it was time to take a sabbatical." During her time off from touring, she limited performances and studied massage, but before long the lure of her music pulled her back onto the road with a heavy travel schedule, taping the TV show *Austin City Limits*, and doing some radio work on *A Prairie Home Companion*.

In April 1986 Kate was diagnosed with acute leukemia. She underwent chemotherapy, and during a period of remission compiled a retrospective of her songs, but the disease took her life from complications following a bone marrow transplant. Her retrospective album *Gold in California* came out in 1987, and soon after that Kate Wolf was the first musician inducted in the NAIRD Hall of Fame, a tribute by the National Association of Independent Record Distributors and Manufacturers.

Kate Wolf had a strong lifelong connection to Sierra County, spending her summers here when she was in her teens and 20s, and calling it her "spiritual home". She was a friend of renowned organic farming pioneer, "Amigo Bob" and recorded a song called "The Lilac and the Apple Tree" in the late 1970s, inspired by an old, abandoned homestead in Goodyears Bar. Cuttings from the heirloom "Kate Wolf" lilac at the site were sold to benefit Camp Winnarainbow, a performing circus camp for children and adults.

Kate is buried in the Goodyears cemetery.



"Old Kentuck". Nevada County Historical Society Archives

GEORGE MATHIS was called the "pictorial historian of the Mother Lode" and to this day his nostalgic works abound in businesses, government buildings, and private homes. He created over 200 drawings of the Mother Lode region primarily using pencil sketches in pursuit of his goal to recreate western history in pictures. Born in Seattle, Washington, George attended Washington State University, majoring in art and studying under well-known western landscape painter, William T. McDermott. After completing his degree, he worked as a commercial artist and art teacher in California. In 1936 he married his wife Jean, also an artist and they later had one daughter, Carol. In 1948 the family moved to Nevada City where George and Jean began a thriving lithography business. The process entailed George creating intricate pencil sketches which were then reproduced as lithographs and prints, making them widely accessible.

Sometime around 1960, the Mathis family bought and restored an old house in Coloma, just a stone's throw from the Marshall Gold Discovery site. They named their home Friday House after Jean's maiden name and there they operated a studio and gallery under one roof. It was very much a family business; upon customer request Jean or Carol would watercolor George's black and white sketches. In 1974, I had the pleasure of visiting Friday House and meeting the artist himself. He was very gracious and whipped up a pencil drawing of a stamp mill for me in about a minute. It is one of my most treasured possessions. I also am lucky to have a collection of his prints from the calendar annually given to customers of Alpha Hardware in Nevada City.

Mathis's style is very distinctive. His prints, known primarily for featuring historic buildings or sites, also portray events and activities such as Chinese miners working the diggings or stagecoaches crossing bridges. He also brought everyday scenes to life by adding touches like a cat in a doorway or smoke coming out of a chimney. This

Legendary Artists (Continues on next page) ➔



Wovoka basket, now on display in Carson City



Basket depicting Great Basin animals, Smithsonian Photo

Legendary Artists (Continued...)

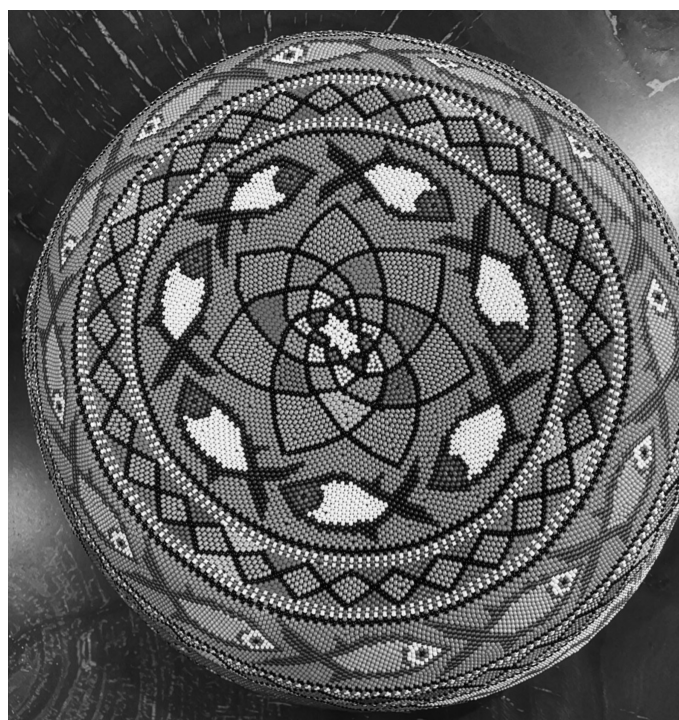
attention to detail was useful in the years 1960-1970 when his career took a surprising turn. He went to work as an illustrator for Aerojet Corporation, America's largest producer of rocket engines, where he created space mission illustrations. His drawings include the famed Gemini and Apollo space missions. He went on to become one of the most recognized space artists of the era, and some of his oil paintings set in deep space were acquired by the Smithsonian Institution. Whether it's a stagecoach traversing a rocky trail or a rocket soaring into space George Mathis's art is absolutely masterful.



Jacquie Rickard family photo

JACQUELINE RICKARD is a living legend making Sierra County burst with pride. Raised in Sattley, she graduated from the University of Nevada, Reno, with a fine arts degree and became an elementary school teacher in Downieville. A member of the Walker River Paiute tribe, Jacque has practiced traditional Paiute basket beading since 2005. She first learned to make pine needle baskets, then advanced to willow basket-making. Her intricate beaded creations all have motifs that tell stories. A recent masterpiece that celebrates the Paiute spiritual leader Wovoka and the Ghost Dance movement is owned by the Nevada State Museum in Carson City, NV where it is currently on display for a year.

Another of Jacque's exquisite baskets, which depicts the animals of the Great Basin, is at the Smithsonian National Museum of Indian Art. Each of its scenes is related to the past and present Paiute culture.



Basket representing the Walker River Paiutes, Nevada Museum of Art Photo

A third basket, on exhibit at the Nevada Museum of Art in Reno, is similar to the Smithsonian basket in that it depicts regional animals from the life of the Paiutes. The bottom of the basket represents Walker River Paiutes. You can view this basket now through December 31, 2027 at the exhibit entitled *Of the Earth: Native American Baskets and Pueblo Pottery*. 🌿

Legendary Artists of Sierra County sources:

- *Like a Leaf Upon the Current Cast*, written and published by Katie Willmarth Green, 2001
- *The Official Kate Wolf website*
- *George Mathis Photo and Art collection, Archives West website*
- *Nevada Museum of Art website*

SIERRAVILLE SCHOOL RESTORATION:

Preserving a Sierra Valley Landmark

By Corri Jimenez

Built in 1931, the Sierraville School has stood as a beloved landmark in the Sierra Valley for more than 90 years. For generations, it served as both a schoolhouse and a community gathering place—hosting everything from potlucks to Christmas pageants. After the elementary school closed in 2005, the building saw little use under the Sierra-Plumas Joint Unified School District (SPJUSD). Recognizing its significance, I nominated the Sierraville School to the National Register of Historic Places, and on August 14, 2017, it was officially listed by the National Park Service. This designation preserves its rich story and importance to the people of Sierra County.

In 2019, while serving as adjunct faculty in the Historic Preservation Program at the University of Nevada, Reno, I led four students in developing a comprehensive historic preservation plan for the school. Their work evaluated original building materials, proposed interpretive exhibits for the hallways, and explored strategies to re-

activate the site as a community center. The plan documented masonry failures in the board-formed concrete, deteriorated steel windows, and non-period alterations such as replacement doors, acoustic drop ceilings, fluorescent lighting, and classroom carpeting. Roof deterioration had allowed water infiltration, leading to spalling acoustic tiles and additional interior damage. Years of deferred maintenance had left the building in need of significant rehabilitation if it was to endure another century.

In 2021, Sierra County purchased the school from SPJUSD using matching funds through California Proposition 68, supplemented by a federal USDA grant designated for rehabilitation work. The project scope included roof replacement, window restoration, concrete repairs, exterior repainting, and an upgraded kitchen. Total grant funding amounted to \$573,274.65, while the estimated scope of work was \$572,329.11. When the project first went out to bid on March 7, 2024, both bids exceeded one million dollars—well beyond the available budget. After strategically rescoping the work, the project was rebid and awarded on June 25, 2024, to McCuen Construction for \$427,503.65, bringing it successfully within budget.

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Architect Bruce Boyd was contracted to oversee the rehabilitation, providing guidance on design and ensuring the project remained both fiscally responsible and historically appropriate. As a historic preservation professional, I collaborated closely with Mr. Boyd and the Sierra County Public Works Department, drawing on the 2019 preservation plan to inform decisions. Because the school is a listed historic property receiving federal funds, all work was required to meet the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation. Approximately 80% of the recommendations from the preservation plan were implemented—an exceptional achievement best illustrated in the before-and-after comparisons.

Sierraville School Restoration
(Continues on next page) ➔



Sierraville School, post-restoration, Corri Jimenez photo



Restored floor, Amodei Room, Corri Jimenez Photo

Legendary Artists *(Continued...)*

At the school's front entrance, the cheek (side) walls and steps were fully restored. The cheek walls had been spalling (deteriorating) due to moisture migrating through the masonry and expanding during freeze-thaw cycles—damage worsened by the absence of any protective coating. Unlike the cheek walls, the original concrete steps were cast with iron rebar. The finishing layer of concrete, known as the parge coat, on the treads had worn away, and the differing alkalis in the metal and concrete caused separation over time, likely contributing to the deterioration of the cheek walls.

Historic photographs from the school's 50th anniversary celebration in 1981 revealed the appearance of the original exterior doors. These served as reference for matching replacements, especially the center door, which was clearly a later addition.

Because a rescoped project removed the kitchen upgrades, the remaining grant funds were redirected to restoring the school's historic wood floors. All three classroom floors were refinished—and the result is stunning.

In closing, I extend a heartfelt thank you to Sierra County's Public Works Department for their dedication



Example of the building's deterioration, Corri Jimenez Photo

to restoring the Sierraville School—ensuring that this cherished landmark continues to serve the Sierra Valley for generations to come.

For more on the Sierraville School's history and National Register status, visit the National Park Service's database (Asset No. 100001666). For additional information on appropriate concrete preservation methods, see Preservation Bulletin 15: Preservation of Historic Concrete by Paul Gaudette and Deborah Slaton. 🌿

The Sierran

Sierra County Historical Society

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Sierra City, California 96125

ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Meet Orval Coffin

You're not going to believe how this character popped up from my past! I follow a Facebook page about my hometown of Danville, California and the administrator recently posted a slideshow about the seedy side of Contra Costa County in the 1920s and '30s - you know, Prohibition, prostitution - things like that. I was casually viewing the presentation when this headline popped up, "CROCKETT MAN ARRESTED FOR ALCOHOL POSSESSION." The story was about a guy named Orval Coffin being nabbed along with two others during a raid at a San Pablo restaurant in 1925. The other men were Ralph Lagomarsino, and the restaurateur, Max Sheahan. For decades, Sheahan had catered dinners and events at various sites, including the Richmond Elks Club. Some of his rave reviews even mentioned the delicious "punch". After being charged with bootlegging and losing his business, this fraudulent character fled to parts south, specifically Los Angeles and Tijuana, to escape charges of grand larceny. Orval Coffin, near as I can tell, was just a young man having dinner and drinks. He didn't go on to be a hardcore felon, but he did become our neighbor in Sierra City in the early 1970s.

When we were newlyweds, working at Sardine Lake Resort 6 days a week and living at our family house on Butte Street, Orv and Mary Coffin lived right across the stream from us. We were

in our early twenties and they must have been in their mid-seventies. And they invited us for dinner every single day off. I remember midwestern food and a lot of booze. That's where I learned that I don't like gin and it doesn't like me. The Coffins reveled in sharing town gossip during the cocktail hour, and one time Orv had a big scoop for us. Sadly, Mr. Higgens had died at his market of a sudden heart attack, and Orv had witnessed the whole sad incident. He eagerly provided details, "...and there he was lying on the floor on his back!" Mary: "You said he was on his stomach!" Orv: "He was on his back!" Mary: "He was on his stomach!" And so, on and on they went, until Orv shut it down with, "Goddammit, Mary, were you there?" Throughout our long marriage, Rich and I would flash back to that exchange whenever we found ourselves sinking into one of those no-win arguments between couples. One of us would break the deadlock with, "He was on his back!"

Source: Daily Gazette, Martinez, California, Tue, Aug 11, 1925

This is the third installment of this column which features noteworthy locals. If you would like to share an anecdote about your favorite personality in a future issue, submit it to mnourse46@gmail.com. 🌿