



THE BULL AND BEAR FIGHTS

California's Grizzly Past

By Bonnie Miller

Before the European explorer and the Spanish (Mission) period, California wildlife was abundant and different to what we know today. The Native Americans knew plentiful salmon and condors, copious mosquitoes and abundant grizzly bear unlike what we can imagine. Yes, the grizzly bear once roamed the coastlines, valleys and foothills of California as plentifully as gray squirrels can be spotted in any locale today.

The Grizzly in Native American Culture

The grizzly bear is generally regarded as the greatest carnivore in the world, should it ever be put to the test. In fact the grizzly is an omnivore, and it will eat just about anything that it fancies. The grizzly actually is a poor predator and prefers easy meals to come his way. This is why most people summon images of the mighty grizzly standing in a stream effortlessly grabbing spawning salmon out of the water. The rest of the year the bear has to work a little harder for food, so it usually picks off unsuspecting wildlife or forages for roots and tubers. The high fat diet, compounded with the strength required for den building and root digging have allowed the grizzly to evolve into a brute with incredibly

powerful shoulders and a dense skeletal structure. This is why one swat from this animal is usually deadly for its foe.

In California the Native Americans revered the grizzly for its might and strength. Anyone who lived through an encounter was believed to possess the special powers of the bear. The grizzly was rarely hunted, but the bear's fat, innards and especially its warm fur were highly coveted. Grizzly parts were used ceremoniously.

Locally the Miwok people were the Native Americans that inhabited the region that has



Original Bear Flag raised in Sonoma in 1846. The Native Americans said the grizzly bear looked like a pig

become Calaveras County. *O-se-mai-ti*, (pronounced u-zoo-mi-tey) is the Miwok word for grizzly. It is similar to some other western Native American words for grizzly. Some believe this is also the root word of Yosemite, although others dispute this definition.

The Grizzly in California History

On June 14, 1846, near Sonoma, a group of American settlers took exception to Mexican rule in California and staged a revolt. Every California school child knows this as the Bear Flag Revolt. The details of the actual flag raised at the revolt may be obscured by history. What is known is that the rebels chose as their symbol of strength in their newly adopted land the mighty California grizzly. The original bear flag was crudely painted by William Todd on a piece of new unbleached cotton. The bear, representing the abundant bears roaming California, stalked a white field facing a red star inspired by the red star of Texas. The words "California Republic" were placed beneath the bear to indicate the autonomy of the land being claimed by the feisty Americans. Unfortunately Todd's artwork was rough, and the original bear was mistaken by the Native Americans for a pig. Later versions of the flag enhanced the shoulder hump for which the grizzly is known. The original flag perished in the fire from the 1906 San Francisco Earthquake.

The "Bear Flaggers", as they came to be known, were a little ahead of themselves. Although Congress had declared war on Mexico on May 13, one month earlier, it was still another thirty days before word reached Sonoma. But their spirits were in the right place, as ultimately the United States did fight with Mexico in the Mexican War between 1846 and 1848. Eventually California and what was to become a good portion of the southwest was annexed to the United States in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo on February 2, 1848. And just

a few days earlier, on January 24th, gold had been discovered, which really changed things in California. But what has all that got to do with bears? The bears were still around to greet the forty-niners, and had imprinted themselves into the landscape to the point that the bear was engraved on the Great Seal when it was designed the following year for the Constitutional Convention. The first version of the Great Seal was adopted in 1850 when California became the thirty-first state of the United States on September 9th.

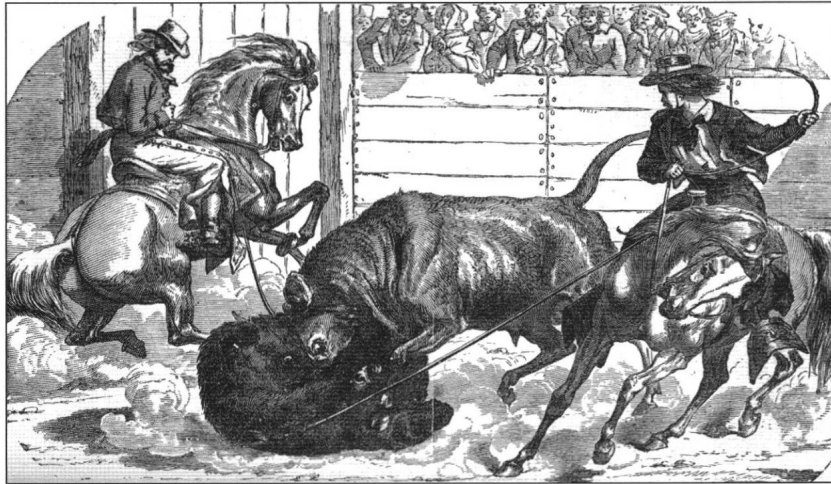
"Bear Creek, near the Calaveras County line... took its name from the large number of grizzlies that made it a feeding ground in acorn time. It is related that in 1851 John Stryker and other on a hunt had killed some deer and hung them in a tree. On going the next morning to bring them to camp the venison had disappeared, evidently having been taken by grizzlies, whose tracks were abundant. They concluded they would have their revenge, so hanging a quarter of beef in a tree, just at nightfall, they got into another with their rifles and awaited the sport. But the bears came in such numbers, like a drove of cattle, that our Nimrods did not dare to fire, and were obliged to remain on their perch all night. Bears were also numerous on the Mokelumne bottoms, the thick undergrowth of willow and brambles affording a fine shelter. It was not unfrequent for our early ranchers to erect platforms in the larger oaks, and sleep there, to be out of reach of the grizzlies."

—Frank T. Gilbert,
*History of San Joaquin
County, 1879*



The original Great Seal designed for the state's first Constitutional Convention in 1850. The grizzly must have been a cub.

If the great grizzly bear was so abundant, and so endeared to the early settlers and the gold miners, then where is it now? Once abundant, the mightiest of all carnivores became extinct almost overnight. The animal presented a paradox to the immigrants. On the one hand, and in the opinion of the Native Americans, the animal was admired and revered. Yet on the other hand, this lumbering beast was killing



their livestock which presented easy prey to this lazy carnivore. This ferocious beast was becoming a nuisance. Bear hunting, and bear *baiting*, were two ways to eliminate this problem.

The idea of staging a fight between animals for sport was not new. The sport of Elizabethan Bull & Bear Baiting is well documented, and traces its origins back to the 1200's. Most towns in England had an arena for Bull & Bear Baiting, as they called the sport. One could argue that this concept of fighting with animals went as far back as the gladiators of ancient Rome. Regardless of the origins of the sport, it had reached California, and the effect was devastating on the mighty grizzly.

The Bear and Bull Fights, as they were played out in California, were based on the traditions of Spain. The Spanish routinely fought a variety of animals for entertainment: cocks, dogs, bulls, etc. Prior to the Gold Rush, California was under primarily Spanish occupation when the sport was introduced during the Mission period prior to Mexican Independence. The earliest known staged fight between a Spanish bull and a California grizzly bear took place in Monterey in 1816 to honor the newly appointed governor. Suddenly this brute of a beast that was usually left alone by the Native Americans was being dragged out of his environment and taunted and enraged into action against unnatural enemies. The bear was pitted against a Spanish bull, an animal introduced to California around 1769. The Bear and Bull Fights became the highlight of the Spanish and Mexican Ranchero rodeos. Although the mighty bruin usually won, the effect on his species was ruinous.

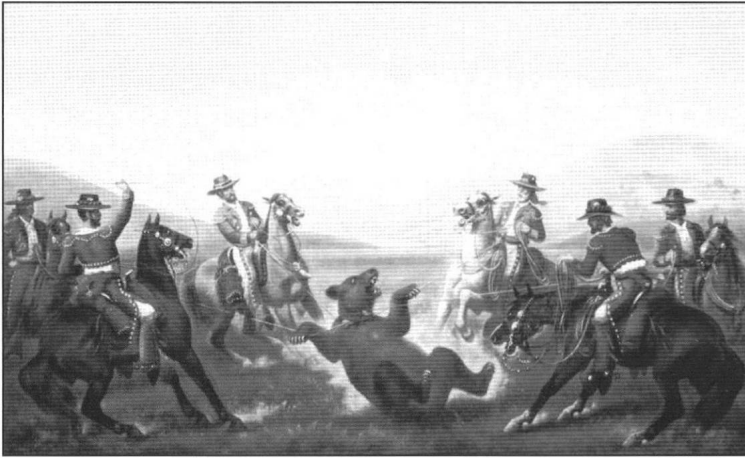
The miners wanted entertainment and a diversion from the drudgery of their daily mining activities.

Gambling, of any sort, was their favorite pastime. Before organized traveling shows reached the gold country, the innovative miners used what was at hand. The vaqueros of the early rancheros had been staging the bear and bull fights for decades, so the miners joined in the fun. Soon bear and bull fights were happening all around the gold region. Many of the miners were from England, and could freshly recall that the Bull & Bear Baiting had only been outlawed

by parliament in their home country in 1835. Hungry to revisit a familiar form of entertainment, they were probably quick to encourage the fights among their fellow miners.

The Spanish miners were ever-ready to stage a cock fight or a bull fight if beef could be had from a valley connection. But the bear and bull fight was a particularly exciting and satisfying spectacle. Satisfying? Yes, it satisfied the miners' lusts on many levels. It satisfied their unvoiced bloodlust, their need for entertainment, and their addictive need for gambling. Whatever else took place that day, the bull and bear fight was the main event. Spectators gladly paid one dollar or more to see the fight, to say nothing of the cost of their side bets. On the day of the event, enthusiasm for the big fight was built up with other forms of entertainment. There were often displays of horsemanship, trick riders, rodeo feats, rooster grabbing, etc. The whole event was a grand affair attended by both men and women wearing their finest Sunday attire.





“The puny efforts of cocks, dogs, and men are tame and insipid compared to the fierce struggle of the bull-pit as seen in California.”

—R. Guy McClellan, 1874

Descriptions of the actual bear and bull fights are particularly gruesome, and will not stain these pages for those light of heart. But a brief description is in order in the interest of historic preservation.

The art of the American cowboy had still not been refined, and livestock work fell to the Mexican vaquero. The strongest and bravest, or perhaps most gullible vaqueros, were enlisted to rope a wild grizzly. They often went out at night to bait the bears with fresh carrion. They were encouraged to find the largest specimen possible. They carefully dragged the beast to the place appointed for the battle. The enraged bear was chained to a tree or a post driven securely into the ground. The angry bear was taunted but kept fresh, as wild bears refused food or water when captive, which only fed their rage. At the time appointed for the fight, an equally angry long-horned Spanish bull was brought forth. By now the fight promoters had whipped up enthusiasm and gambling on the bear and bull was intense.

Details vary from one location to another. Some fights chained the bear and the bull to the same post or tree, and some chained them to each other. Sometimes the front leg of one animal was chained to the rear leg of the other. Regardless, a nasty battle ensued. It is at this point that bloodier details of the battle will be omitted from this narrative. Our delicate readers will be spared the gory points and grizzly mess. The basic outcome was always the same, however. The bull always charged

the bear, as bulls are wont to do. The bull always charged and attempted to gore the bear, and sometimes succeeded. And the bear always got off a few good swats with his mighty forepaws. If he was lucky, the fight was over in one swing. Usually the bear used his massive paw like a huge club, and could shatter the skull or shoulder of the bull, and the fight was over quickly and the betting was poor. If not, the fight raged on much to the thrill of the spectators and the gambling increased. In the end, no matter which beast won, much blood was shed and at least one animal died.

Rooster Grabbing

A live rooster was buried in the arena up to his neck. All that was exposed was his head. The unlucky fowl would look around without the slightest idea why he was in the middle of open field surrounded by so many people. Then he would feel the earth he was buried in begin to tremble, and upon craning his neck around (as birds are good at doing) he would see a horse with a rider thundering down upon him. Except the rider was not astride the horse, but rather hanging on the side of the horse. When the horse and rider were only a few feet from the trapped bird, suddenly it would dawn on the rooster that his unlucky day just got worse. The horse would suddenly veer away from a collision course with the bird, the rooster would try to bury what was left of his exposed self further into the dirt, and the trick horseman would try to pluck the rooster from the ground. The idea was to come back home with an intact rooster. The horseman who successfully grabbed a whole rooster was the winner of the Rooster Grabbing.

Eventually the fights represented more than just a good opportunity to gamble. It came to represent a culture clash before the uncivilized miners even knew what a culture clash was. Remember that California was “taken” from the Mexicans, who had in turn taken it from the Spanish. The bull came to represent the Spanish and Mexican heritage. The bear came to symbolize the later Americans, the Bear Flaggers, the miners who so



rudely took over the countryside. The elements were there for everyone to pick a side to bet on. It is said that the Native Americans, who love to play games, were particularly enthusiastic spectators at the bear and bull fights. Although they did not like seeing their countryside ripped up by mining activity, this author suspects that they sided with the bear in the contest.

Did such bloody gambling ever stain the pristine soils of our beloved Calaveras County? You bet it did!

One of the most famous, and lurid, first hand accounts of bull and bear fighting memorialized from the gold rush period was by the author and artist John David Borthwick. J. D. Borthwick wrote and drew elaborate pictures of his adventures in the west in his book *Three years in California*, published later in 1857. In it he describes a famous battle which took place in Moquelumne Hill in 1852. The bull and bear fight was well publicized in flyers plastered about town:

WAR! WAR!! WAR!!!

The celebrated Bull-killing Bear, GENERAL SCOTT

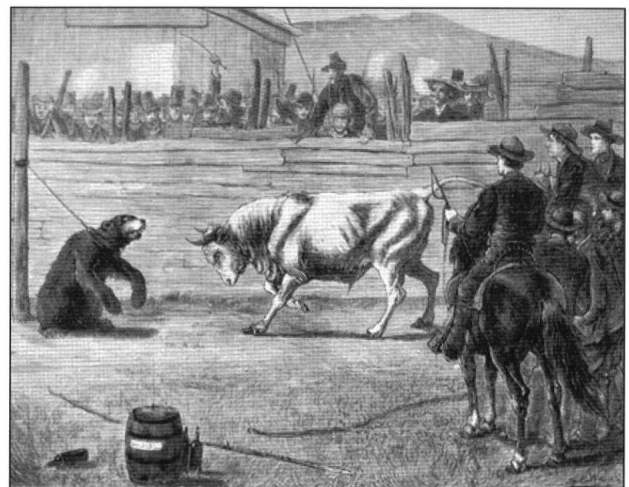
Will fight a Bull on Sunday the 15th inst., at 2 p. m.
At Moquelumne Hill

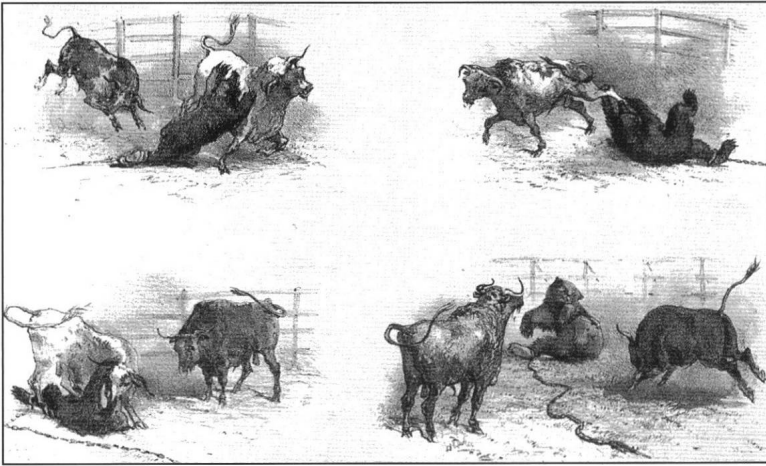
“The bull will be chained with a twenty-foot chain in the middle of the arena. The Bull will be perfectly wild, young, of the Spanish breed, and the best that can be found in the country. The Bull’s horns will be of their natural length, and ‘not sawed off to prevent accidents.’ The Bull will be quite free in the area. And not hampered in any way whatever.”

Present-day Mokelumne Hill resident Sally Tuttle has researched the area to locate where these fights took place, as it was common for each community to have an arena area set aside for such entertainment. She believes she has located a natural flat spot on the northeast side of Sport Hill that was ideally suited for an arena.

When a promoter could not afford a bull and a bear (of which he was sure to lose at least one contestant), he sought less expensive fodder. A donkey was easier to come by. One entrepreneurial entertainer who travelled the Mother Lode had a feisty donkey who put on a good show when he kicked his opponents. He was known as the “Champion Jackass of California” and he gained notoriety when he began to win his fights against bulls. After beating a bull in Sonora, he came to San Andreas where he killed his opponent. His career took him north to Hangtown where he knocked out a mountain lion. His owner was thrilled and ready to fight this nasty kicker against the real thing, so the donkey was pitted against a grizzly. The “grizzly” turned out to be a medium-sized black bear in its brown phase. Naturally docile, the bear took one kick and high-tailed it out of the arena never to be seen again. The fight proved that you couldn’t mess with nature, just like the promoter shouldn’t have pushed his luck and tried to swindle the crowds. Often fights did end poorly as one or both of the animals would escape or worse turn on the crowd.

In the gold camps the lovely Lola Montez entertained miners with her pet bear. That is until one day in 1854 when her bear decided to bite her hand severely crushing it. The incident was celebrated in a famous poem. Furious, she allowed her bear to be fought against a mountain lion in a well-publicized battle in Placer County. Later she had it killed, as she felt she could no longer trust it as a pet.





"Bull & Bear Fight" as sketched by J.D. Borthwick, of the famous battle between the bear General Scott and a Spanish bull in Moquelumne Hill in 1852.

In later years, as the sport became more "refined", the bears were pitted against more and more exotic animals. The proud California mountain lion generally proved too elusive to be caught and brought to a public spectacle, so foreign cats were imported at great expense. By the time such extravagant measures were being pursued for entertainment, public outcry had begun to bring disgrace upon the fights. As California became more civilized, such sport was no longer regarded as acceptable entertainment. In 1860 the city of Los Angeles outlawed the bull and bear fights all together.

In 1868 the *St. Louis Dispatch* newspaper in Missouri gave a lengthy description of a bull and bear fight that was staged with circus fervor in their fair city. "The whole affair was a burlesque on civilization and a farce. To see it was to become disgusted."

Just a few short years later, such sentiments had turned in California as well. "Among the relics of barbarism which prevail in some portions of the State" cried the now civil citizens of 1871 San Francisco, "bull and bear fighting, as a pastime, is a favorite... these disgraceful exhibitions—pandering to the lowest and most depraved tastes... If the local authorities will not interfere" provoked the *San Francisco Chronicle* on 8 November 1871, "... the

Grand Juries of the counties in which the bull-fights take place ought to act by indictment."

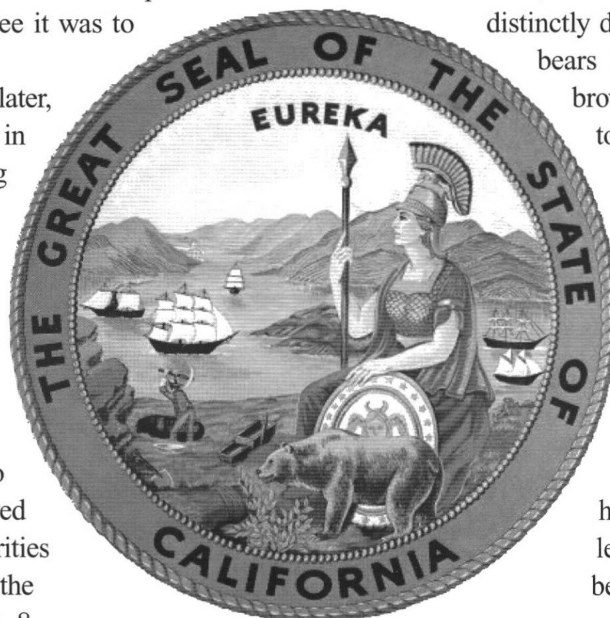
The lazy grizzly continued to help themselves to the easy meals of the cattle ranches. The bears were declared to be a problem. The governor actually appointed expert bear hunters to rid the ranchers of this nuisance. The exploits of these famous men comprise a story in itself. Suffice it to say that by 1880 they were successful in nearly eradicating the bear from the California landscape. By the time that the University of California decided that it would be a good idea to have a specimen of the mighty grizzly, no mighty specimens could be found, but just a few small stragglers that seemed rather inadequate.

Not a Very Trivial Bear

Where is the mighty grizzly today in California? The last grizzly bear recorded in Calaveras County was in 1875. The last native California grizzly was shot and killed by a rancher in Fresno in 1922, but it had endeared itself forever into the state of California none the less. Californians may be relieved to know that the grizzly lives on to the north, in northern states and in Canada. In Alaska the grizzly's cousin is known as a Kodiak bear. The Grizzly and the Kodiak, both identified by their big shoulder hump, are both subspecies of the American Brown Bear. What makes the Grizzly and the Kodiak different from a brown bear is their diet, rich in fat. These large bears are distinctly different than the smaller black

bears (which sometimes appear in brown phases) that are prevalent today and harass picnickers and campers in the Sierra Nevada.

In 1866 a small town east of Carlsbad was harassed by a huge grizzly. The bear was finally shot, and weighed between 1950 and 2200 pounds on the local cattle scale (accounts vary). Its skull was found to have more than a pound of lead in it. It is believed to have been the largest grizzly ever in California, and responsible for the community changing its



Current version of the Great Seal as adopted in 1937

name from Valley Center to Bear Valley and back again over the subsequent years.

Bret Harte published *The Overland Monthly*, a periodical “devoted to the Development of the Country” beginning in 1868. For its cover he chose a picture of the grizzly and explained that all the fine characters of the bear made for a fine masthead for his publication as well. He prophetically cautioned in his first issue “...Look at him well, for he is passing away. Fifty years and he will be as extinct as the dodo or dinornis.”

In 1872 the University of California commissioned a logo employing a golden grizzly bear and blue and gold colors, thus establishing their mascot and college colors, and what is believed to be the first use of the image of a “golden bear” in California history.

The current flag of California was standardized and adopted in 1911. In 1937 minor changes were made to the Great Seal, bringing the grizzly forward to a more prominent position at the feet of Minerva. But it wasn’t until long after the state adopted the poppy as its state flower (1903) that the mighty grizzly, *ursus californicus*, an animal extinct in California, became the official state animal in 1953.

Early fur or hide traders got into the act unknowingly. A bearskin middleman would sell skins he had not yet received, hoping or speculating that the price would drop by the time trappers had delivered them. These middlemen became known as “bears”, short for “bearskin jobbers”, for the men who hoped for a downturn in the market between price speculation and actual product delivery. The term came to be associated with a falling market. The terms “Bear” and “Bull” market or strategies in the stock market are believed to be based on the bloody Bear and Bull fights, first coined by journalist Horace Greeley after he witnessed a fight in Columbia in Tuolumne County. When one considers the personalities of the animals and the manner in which each attacks the other, it is easy to see the connection. The bear is generally mild and sluggish, and will swipe down with its paw. The bull is feisty and will charge on, and thrusts his horns up. A downward market is bearish, a bullish market is on the upswing.

Cattle are not native to North America, so our grizzly would not have naturally encountered a cow or bull. The Spanish forced the confrontations through



Current California State Flag adopted in 1911

the organized bull and bear fights. The great author Larry McMurtry surmised what a natural confrontation would have looked like had one occurred if the two animals had happened upon each other. For his version of an unstaged bull and bear fight, readers are encouraged to revisit the Pulitzer Prize winning novel *Lonesome Dove*.

The mighty grizzly had foraged unchecked side by side with the Native Americans for centuries before the advent of the European explorers. As with most of nature, the Native Americans had respected their neighbor and lived amicably in balance with the great carnivore with little interaction or conflict. The first European settlers in the state estimated more than 10,000 grizzlies roamed California peacefully. Yet less than 75 years after the discovery of gold, every grizzly in California had been tracked down and killed.



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Calaveras County Historical Society

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The Calaveras County Historical Society is a non-profit corporation. It meets on the fourth Thursday of each month in various communities throughout the County. Locations and scheduled programs are announced in advance. Some meetings include a dinner program, and visitors are always welcome.

The Society operates the Calaveras County Museum which is open daily from 10:00 to 4:00 in the historic County courthouse located at 30 Main Street in San Andreas; and the historic Red Barn Museum at 891 Mountain Ranch Road, also in San Andreas, which is open Thursday to Sunday, 10:00 to 4:00.

The Society's office is located in historic San Andreas, the Calaveras County seat. Visitors are always welcome to stop by the office for assistance with research, and are encouraged to visit the museums while in the area. The office is open Monday through Friday from 8:30 to 4:00, and the telephone number is (209) 754-1058, or contact us at: CCHS@goldrush.com; Red Barn Museum (209) 754-0800.

New Members

The Historical Society welcomes the following new members:

March, April and May 2008

Allen & Kathy Biggs, San Rafael
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Donations

The Historical Society is grateful for the following donations:

March 2008

Copy of new book *East Belt Mines and Others—Moke Hill to West Point 1861–1881*
—Lloyd Ames, Glencoe

Old wooden kitchen chair—Frances Bonebrake, San Andreas

Two photographs: one of grammar school children including eight Pitto children; the other of John Alfred Kirby—Beverly Burton

May 2008

Diary of his great-grandfather "Samuel Linus Prindle"—Robert Prindle, Moraga

American flag for jail yard, and new pole and flag for Main Street entrance—Bill & Beverly Burton, San Andreas