



Volume LXI

Quarterly Bulletin of the Calaveras County Historical Society
April 2013

Number 3

“Putting People to Work” The Civilian Conservation Corps in Calaveras County

by Bonnie Miller

The Civilian Conservation Corps was a work program born of the Great Depression. It was highly criticized at the time as a handout yet proved to be one of the greatest accomplishments of this country. The CCC crews built roads, constructed power lines and fire fighting facilities, and launched our National Park System. Numerous crews were located in California with several right here in Calaveras County.

By 1932 the country was fed up with the economic chaos of the depression. They voted Herbert Hoover out of office and voted for a man who promised a better life, Franklin D Roosevelt. Roosevelt quickly got down to business with proposals to put people back to work and revitalize the nation’s economy. The purpose of the act was “to provide healthy employment and practical education to unemployed young men.” In his New Deal proposal he outlined several programs:

The **Public Works Administration** was a program created to provide economic stimulus and jobs during the Great Depression. The program was designed to create public works projects by issuing contracts to private construction firms



The Diablo camp stove, made of stone native to the sight, became a signature CCC improvement found in state campgrounds. Photo courtesy California State Parks.



CCC crew at Big Trees, circa 1934. Photo courtesy California State Parks.

that did the actual work. It created an infrastructure that generated national and local pride in the 1930s and remains vital eight decades later. The PWA was much less controversial than its rival agency with a confusingly similar name, the Works Progress Administration.

The **Works Progress Administration** or WPA was created in 1935 and focused on smaller projects and hired unemployed unskilled workers. As it provided jobs across the nation the WPA impacted millions of Americans. It was renamed the Works Projects Administration in 1939.

Of all the New Deal programs, the most colorful and successful was the Civilian Conservation Corps, or CCC. In March of 1933 Roosevelt outlined his proposal for this agency during his New Deal speech:

"I propose to create [the CCC] to be used in simple work, not interfering with normal employment, and confining itself to forestry, the prevention of soil erosion, flood control and similar projects. I call your attention to the fact that this type of work is of definite, practical value, not only through the prevention of great present financial loss, but also as a means of creating future national wealth.

That year the Civilian Conservation Corps was established. The corps was structured after the military model, following the same rules of discipline and command. Most of the unemployed men who entered the CCC workforce were located in the east. Most of the projects requiring their labor were located in the west. The crews had to be mobilized and the National Defense System was employed to move them to their new camps.

Unemployed workers from all over the financially weakened country streamed into California. In the beginning the program didn't have adequate funds, so men worked four to six hours a day but they received food, tobacco and clothing. Still the unemployed came. Eventually the workers were paid between \$19 and \$94 per month depending on their assignments and skill level.

This work relief program had the desired effect and provided jobs for many Americans during the Great Depression. The primary objective of the CCC was conservation projects, from erosion control, tree planting, and pest management to fire prevention and suppression. Quickly their talents were expanded to include other major public works projects such as the construction of trails and facilities in parks across the nation.

Eligibility requirements for the CCC entailed only a few simple stipulations. Congress required U.S. citizenship only. Sound physical fitness was mandatory because of the hard physical labor required. Men had to be unemployed, unmarried, and between the ages of 18 and 26, although the rules were eventually relaxed for war veterans.

Veterans' programs did not exist during the Great Depression. Veterans of WWI and the Spanish American War had been promised a bonus but it was not to be paid until 1945. In frustration the financially strapped veterans who could not find employment during the Depression marched on Washington in May of 1933. Roosevelt then decided to add veteran companies to the CCC by authorizing the immediate enrollment of veterans with no age restrictions. The early bonus was finally approved but the CCC companies of veterans continued. The protesting veterans came to be known as the Bonus Army.

The massive conservation program enjoyed great public support. Once the first camps were established and the CCC became better known, they became accepted and even sought after.

In 1934, Calaveras County's newspaper the *Californian* noted the record of the crews' first twelve months of work as "amazing." The paper noted the "corps program has been of tremendous economic benefit."

The CCC camps stimulated regional economies and provided communities with improvements in forest activity, flood control, fire protection, and overall community safety. Many politicians believed that the CCC was largely responsible for a 55 percent reduction in crimes committed by the young men of that day.

Life in the CCC

CCC camps were modeled after and operated similar to a military camp. Workers received a uniform of blue Army fatigues. In the winter they wore wool olive drab clothing that was suitable for California winters but too hot for our summers. The day began at 6:00 am with reveille. After calisthenics, breakfast and bunkhouse chores, the crews were trucked to their worksites in the back of slat-sided trucks. They typically worked an eight hour day, forty hours a week unless weather or fires interfered.



Camp Calaveras, SP-22 was stationed at the Big Trees between 1934–1941. Photo courtesy California State Parks.

Enlistment was for a duration of six months, although many re-enlisted after their allotted time was up. Corpsmen could serve up to two years. Of their pay of \$30 a month, \$25 was sent home to their parents. Schooling was provided at most camps. In all, more than 90% of CCC enrollees took advantage of educational opportunities. The CCC is credited with teaching at least 40,000 illiterate men how to read and write, and providing the education for many men to complete their high school requirements.

Camps were set up in all states, as well as in Hawaii, Alaska, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. Enrollment peaked at the end of 1935, when there were 500,000 men located in 2,600 camps in operation in all states. California alone had more than 150 camps which saw more than 30,000 enlistees pass through. Each camp averaged about 50 workers overseen by an officer from the army.

The condition and quality of the camps and amenities available to the corpsmen was

carefully monitored. CCC records indicate that camps were routinely inspected for sanitation, safety, nutrition, and recreational and educational facilities available to the crews. The inspectors also logged the number and race of crew members and the names of military personnel. Complaints or allegations of mistreatment or fraud were quickly investigated. Rarely were problems found as crew members were grateful for the work and sustenance.

In Calaveras County

The Forest Service planned the projects, and the federal government provided the tools, supplies and funding. Crews used native stone and materials whenever possible.

Numerous camps were built throughout the foothills and forested lands of California. The primary camp serving Amador and Calaveras Counties was located at Pine Grove where the present California Youth Authority resides. From



The beautiful Jack Knight Hall at Big Trees was built by the CCC in 1937. Photo by Bonnie Miller, April 2013.

this central point, five satellite or “spike” camps were operated in Calaveras County. They were located at Big Trees, Lily Gap, Mokelumne Hill, Chee Chee Flat, and Murphys. Possibly there was an additional camp at Camp Connell, where CCC records indicate another camp separate from the Big Trees site. Each spike camp had wooden barracks or tents for housing, a mess hall, office and storage facilities and maintenance and repair shops.

The CCC camp located at the Big Trees was the very first camp in a California State Park. It opened in June of 1933, just two months after Roosevelt created the CCC. The camp was called Camp Calaveras SP-22, and it was staffed by 210 corpsmen of Company 590 from Kentucky. The following year a company of veterans, the CCC 1921-V joined the camp.

The camp was located approximately where the present park headquarters lies today. The crew worked on the construction of several improvements to the Big Trees State Park. Improvements credited to the corps include construction of the Big Trees Hall, a CCC Dispensary (now a residence), the Administration Building, the steps to the Big Stump, a weather station shelter, and a comfort station. Campground improvements included the construction of twenty-five camp stoves, two group BBQs, four wood picnic tables, and several utility buildings and shops. In the winter this crew moved to Mt Diablo to work on projects in that area. In the summer they returned to the Big Trees for park construction and fire fighting duties.

The most beautiful accomplishment of the Big Trees CCC crew was construction of the Big Trees Hall which was completed in 1937. Today it is called the Jack Knight Hall. The grand hall boasts a massive stone fireplace and rough hand-hewn beams and boards and a covered porch. The windows perfectly capture the beauty of the big trees by bringing the outside view in to the hall. All of the rustic hardware and ironwork in the hall was crafted at the crew’s blacksmith shop.

In August of 1934 the national director of the CCC visited the park to review the corps’



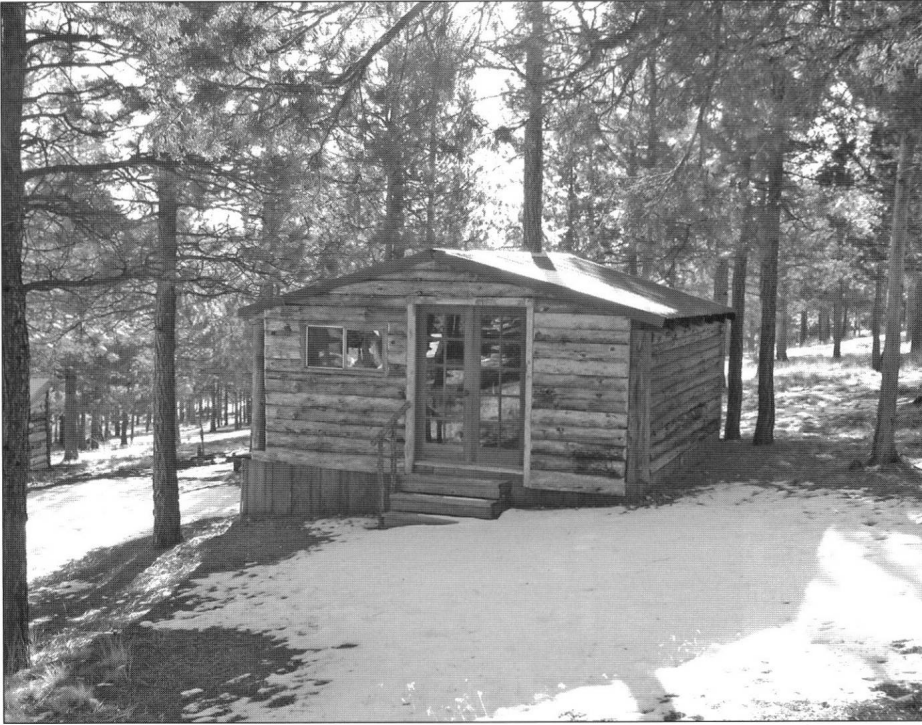
The fire lookout built by the CCC on Quiggs Mountain still stands alongside the more modern equipment in the foreground.

Photo by Bonnie Miller, April 2013.

progress. He said he was “awed by the beauty and natural splendor” of the park, and impressed by the corps’ accomplishments.

Lily Gap is located three miles east of West Point. The Lily Gap crew was in the heart of the forest and its fire prevention activities. There are three fire lookouts in the area, at Blue Mountain, Devil’s Nose and Garnet Hill. Likely these lookouts and the supporting road systems were built by the Lily Gap CCC crew.

During the same timeframe, a PWA contract had been issued for construction of public improvements in Mokelumne Hill. Specifically, the PWA awarded \$3500 for construction of major improvements to the community’s town hall. A twelve man crew dug out the basement and constructed



This log cabin built by the CCC was typical of the housing constructed for workers stationed at the fire lookouts. Photo by Bonnie Miller, January 2013.

the kitchen, banquet hall, window, door, façade and restrooms. The crew had to excavate an area thirty-five by sixty feet. Then they constructed a stone wall mortared with Portland cement to enhance the earlier, more fragile foundation. They never did construct downstairs restrooms, but the improvements they did make endure today.

A CCC crew is documented as having been located in Mokelumne Hill. They were camped at Rich Gulch, east of town. This CCC crew should not be confused with the PWA work at the town hall. Rather, it is more likely that the CCC crew worked on construction of the bridges and the northern end of the Ponderosa Way.

The crew located at Chee Chee Flat in Mountain Ranch constructed the fire lookout on Quiggs Mountain, known as the Sierra Vista Lookout. Additionally the crew worked on the construction of Ponderosa Way by improving the existing roads and cutting new ground where necessary. They also built the West Murray Creek Road that runs from the Sierra Vista Lookout all the way to San Andreas as a secondary line of fire defense paralleling Mountain Ranch Road.

The Murphys camp was located near the intersection of present-day Highway 4 and Pennsylvania Gulch Road. All signs of this occupation have been

obliterated although this was a fairly robust camp. The camp had all the requisite recreational and education opportunities for corpsmen and even produced their own camp newspaper called "*The Skull*."

The Murphys crew likely built the Oxendine Trail and Ponderosa Way. The Oxendine Trail is a former stock trail near Candy Rock in the Stanislaus canyon, below present day Hunter Dam. The CCC improved the trail with a footbridge, good grades and reinforced switchbacks. The trail is no longer maintained but clearly visible today although the footbridge has

been lost to time. The trail is named for the Oxendine Camp on the south side of the river, named for the families near Copperopolis who maintained the camp.

Ponderosa Way

In 1911 Congress had passed a law which provided funding for fire protection work between the National Forest Service and various states. The 1919 California Legislature appropriated money for this fire prevention and suppression work. Ten years later a forester had the foresight to envision an extensive firebreak, a permanent defensive line, nearly the length of the state. It would protect the valuable timber of California's forests from fire from the lower valley elevations. It was to be called the Ponderosa Way Firebreak, but it would take a tremendous workforce to build such a firebreak. Forestry labor camps were formed in the winter of 1930–31, but then came the Great Depression.

After surveying in the fall of 1933 crews began the clearing and construction for the massive Ponderosa Way firebreak. The roadway measured between fifty and two hundred feet in width. By just May of 1934, only eight months later, 440 miles of the eventual 768 miles had been completed.

The route started in the north from above Redding in the Cascades, and proceeded south along the western slope, for the entire length of the Sierra Nevada mountains and ended at the Kern County line. The road bisects Calaveras County at about the 1500–2000 foot elevation. It starts in the north after crossing the Mokelumne River between Moke Hill and Glencoe, then leaves the county in the south by crossing the Stanislaus River near Camp Nine. In many cases the adopted route used existing roadways. In other areas raw ground had to be cut and cleared for the new road. The road crossed numerous creeks and rivers requiring countless bridges and culverts, almost all of which were constructed by hand labor. Construction of the massive roadway employed 4800 CCC workers, and was completed in 1935, just two years after its commencement.

Since public funds were expended on the road it is a public road. It continued to be maintained by the Department of Forestry although a rumor developed that it was actually built during World War II as part of a national defense system of roads on the west coast. This may be true of I-5, with the Ponderosa Way providing back-up, but Ponderosa Way has always been a firebreak. Rather, during World War II it was again improved as part of our national defense for use as a secondary line of roadway in case the major highways were destroyed.

Today seventy-five years later the Ponderosa Way can still clearly be seen traversing the foothills. Legal access rights cases have been both won and lost over this road, so if hikers or prospectors try to use it they will encounter many a locked gate. Regardless of the legitimacy of those locks, we can be assured that in case of wildland fire, the road will be used again as originally intended.

Legacy

The PWA spent over six billion dollars in contracts that kept companies working throughout the Depression. The PWA continued functioning until the country diverted its energy to wartime production for World War II. The agency was eliminated in 1941.

The WPA was ultimately the largest agency that came of the New Deal. Numerous roads, public buildings such as schools, and other public facilities and projects were completed under its purview. The WPA officially ended in 1943.

Nearly 250,000 veterans served in the CCC. In 1936 they did eventually receive their promised bonuses.

Of all of the New Deal programs, by far the most successful was the one with the acronym of three interlocking Cs, the Civilian Conservation Corps. The CCC met Roosevelt's objective of massive conservation programs coupled with widespread employment and economic growth. They followed their slogan, "*Putting People to Work.*"

Nationally more than three million men served in the CCC. They constructed over 3400 lookout towers and employee housing, joined by hundreds of miles of service roads and firebreaks. They installed about 9,000 miles of telephone lines, almost 1.2 million miles of forest roads and trails, and constructed numerous fire stations and public buildings. Hundreds of campgrounds were either built or improved by the CCC across the country.

One of the corps' primary conservation goals was to plant trees. They planted more than three billion trees throughout the country, reforesting national park lands, and re-securing the lands decimated by the winds of dust bowl.



The CCC built West Murray Creek Road, connecting the fire lookout at Quiggs Mountain with San Andreas. Photo by Bonnie Miller, April 2013.

In the summer months construction activities ceased and the workers turned toward fighting fires. In addition to planting trees they saved untold millions more trees through their fire fighting work. Because CCC corpsmen were also fire fighters, they were considered the largest wildland fire fighting force ever assembled in US history.

The California Conservation Corps

The CCC disbanded in 1942 yet their success lived on. California's monumentally successful relief effort during the Great Depression became the model and showcase for all of the work programs under Roosevelt's presidency. In 1976 Governor Jerry Brown created the California Conservation Corps for youth, modeled after the original CCC. Based on a strong work ethic, young men and women between eighteen and twenty-three years of age enlist for a year. Project work was also similar to the CCC of the 1930s, emphasizing conservation work on public forests, state and federal parks and emergency assistance.

The California Conservation Corps once had a presence in Calaveras County. Between 1977 and 1981 the corps briefly operated a camp housed in the former hospital facilities at the Bret Harte Center in Murphys. In 1981 the crew moved out to Fricot City when that property became available. The young workers were embraced by the county for their outstanding work such as their vigorous

assistance during the floods in 1986. Regrettably the corps moved the crew out of Calaveras soon thereafter. The Fricot school still displays the mural that boasts their slogan: "Hard work, low pay, miserable conditions... and more!"

Today the California corps is thirty-seven years old and Governor Brown, founder of the CCC, is once again governor. It is the oldest, and largest, conservation corps active in any state. There are twenty-seven permanent camps where members work on thousands of projects throughout the year. Since inception, more than 100,000 young Californians have been a part of this program.

The New Deal was a Good Deal

The New Deal Civilian Conservation Corps crews are credited with constructing our national park system. The dramatic stone walls that adorn Yosemite are examples of the corps' contribution to the national parks. They are also credited with building California's state parks.

The California State Park system was adopted in 1927 yet received no significant funding. With an annual operational budget of \$279,000 and dwindling in the 1930s, the state had not provided funds for construction or maintenance. For eight years the CCC pumped two million dollars annually into California's parks. Between 1933 and 1941 the CCC built more than 1500 buildings, structures and landscape features. These were the first visitor facilities

within the new state park system. The CCC was largely responsible for launching our state parks.

In what was considered the largest public works project in the state, the CCC worked on the reconstruction of the historic La Purisima Mission in Lompoc.

The "lodge style" of architecture, such as the Jack Knight Hall and other improvements at Big Trees, represents the style of architecture adopted for our state park system. The California park system



The CCC crew that worked at the Big Trees in the summer worked at Mt Diablo in the winter. Here the Mt Diablo crew builds a stone camp stove, circa 1939. Photo Courtesy California State Parks.



Footings of the former bridge built by the CCC are still visible on the Oxendine Trail.

Photo courtesy Dave Gano.

calls the distinctive architecture “park rustic” in recognition of the native wood and stone features endemic in our parks today. The “Diablo stove” style of campground cooking fireplace, made of locally available stone, became a signature CCC stamp on a park.

CCC projects in the west included road and trail construction, forest improvements, conservation projects such as flood and erosion control, campground construction, fish habitat enhancement, fire prevention and suppression, and support for disasters such as search and rescue, floods or fires. The CCC planted more than 30 million trees in California and constructed more than 300 fire lookouts. State park improvements included visitor centers, comfort stations, picnic tables and landscape features.

The industrious CCC also led to a greater public awareness and appreciation of the outdoors and the nation’s natural resources. Their success illuminated the continued need for a carefully planned, comprehensive national program for the protection and development of natural resources.

The benefit of having served in the CCC was invaluable. Service in the CCC helped the men economically as well as improving their physical condition and morale. For decades following the depression employers preferred to hire men with CCC experience. Employers believed that anyone who had been in the CCC would know what a full day’s work meant, and how to carry out orders in a disciplined way.

Many corps members who had been brought to California to work during the Great Depression chose to stay. Because of the skills gained through their conservation and construction work, former CCC crewmen obtained positions working for the forestry, utility companies or construction firms throughout the Mother Lode.

By the time the economy had recovered the New Deal programs were winding down. Funding for most programs was discontinued in response to growing tensions in Europe. When the world turned from economic depression to world war, the United

States was ready. The CCC corpsmen proved to be a ready-made army of men who understood diligence and discipline. Many CCC workers left their civil service to join the military service.

The New Deal had been a good deal for California. The CCC had existed for fewer than 10 years, but left a legacy of strong roads, bridges, and beautiful buildings across the country and specifically throughout California and the Mother Lode. This year 2013 marks the eightieth anniversary of the Civilian Conservation Corps. Structures like the Jack Knight Hall stand as testaments to the skills and contributions of this fine organization.

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Donations

The Historical Society appreciates the following generous donations:

January thru March 2013:

David Studley—Office equipment for Historical Society Office

Victor and Jewell Wedegartner—1930s loom with warp (assembled and delivered by weavers Steve and Therese May), flax spun and woven from 1828

Barbara Kathan—Photo of Calaveras Union High School Sophomore Class 1923–1924 with student names listed

Donna R. Shannon—Cash donation in memory of Betty Snyder

Anonymous—Cash donation to Downtown Museum for rotating display featuring the history of Calaveras County newspapers

Anonymous—Cash donation to the Red Barn Museum for materials needed for the Guidici display

Roger Withers—Correspondence from the Office of the Phil Sheridan Gold and Silver Mining Company dated October 17, 1878 listing officers of the corporation

San Andreas Lions Club—photos, plaques, banners, paperwork and other items from 1947 until it disbanded

Phil Alberts—clothing, album book, memory box, toy dishes, 1907 Skull (Calaveras Union

High School yearbook) given to Phil by Juanita Worden Newell, purse and pincushion

Coco Shearer, San Andreas Trading Post—loan of 1920–1940 phone for “news desk” in rotating display exhibit featuring Calaveras County newspapers

Wally Motloch—plaque for Calaveras County Historical Society depicting Calaveras skull

Steve Cilenti—binder with history of Carmenne Cilenti Poore including photos, Calaveras Union High School yearbooks 1938, 1940, 1941, photo of Banner School

Gene & Sonny Quarton—San Francisco newspapers 1906–1912

Wally Motloch—used books mostly pertaining to Calaveras County, mining, or other pertinent subjects to be sold in the bookstore as “gently used books”, miscellaneous newspapers, documents, photos

Duane Wight—view master, ceramic angel, thread holder with thread, figurine with hair accessories, flashlight, lighter, beaded purse, sterling silver chain purse, musical powder box

Virginia Spencer—Cash donation to Red Barn Museum in honor of Rosemary Faulkner’s birthday

William Lafranchi—Cash donation

Betty Snyder of Pow Wow fame passes away

Betty Snyder, longtime friend of the Historical Society and resident of Valley Springs passed away on February 1st. Betty is most famously remembered for creating the Snyder's Pow Wow, although many people today refer to it as the Valley Springs Pow Wow.

Betty was born in Oakland in 1925 but came to Valley Springs 70 years ago. Although born a city girl, she quickly countrified when she moved to Calaveras County while she was in high school. Soon thereafter she met her future husband John during WWII volunteer activities. She and her husband John lived on the Snyder Ranch where the couple and their family raised cattle. "There were 50 people in Valley Springs when I came here," Snyder once was quoted as saying. That's quite a difference compared to the 3,500 individuals who currently make up Valley Springs area.

Nearly 40 years ago the Snyders allowed some rockhound friends to comb their property. From that simple beginning was born the famous Snyder's Pow Wow, an annual gathering for rock and gem enthusiasts that draws thousands of visitors each year.

The couple was also extensively involved in other community events, helping to found Calaveras County's 4-H and Future Farmers of America programs. For many years Betty served on the Calaveras County Fair Board. Betty's husband passed away in 2008 yet she carried on with her community activities. In 2010 she was nominated for Senior of the Year.

Betty also served on the Mark Twain Hospital District board, and was an active member of



Betty Snyder, 1925-2013

Mark Twain Hospital's Ladies Auxiliary. She helped to promote Valley Springs through her work with the Valley Springs Boosters and the Valley Springs Area Business Association. She was also a member of the Valley Springs Methodist Church and the Historical Society where she regularly attended the society's dinner meetings. "She was such a pleasure to know," recalled one member. "I never heard her say a bad word about anybody—she was definitely a special lady."

In her 87 years, Betty clearly led an active life and gave much of herself to her community. She certainly left a legacy with her involvement in many organizations plus the creation of the Pow Wow, yet she considered her greatest accomplishment knowing and serving Jesus Christ.

Many people fondly refer to Betty as the First Lady of Valley Springs. She will be missed.

Calaveras County Historical Society

30 No. Main Street P.O. Box 721 San Andreas, CA 95249

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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

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MaryLee Levy—converted to Lifetime membership
Colette and Frank Busi—Jackson (gift membership)
Kelsey and Ty Busi—Jackson (gift membership)
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