

WALKING THE ANTELOPE TRAIL

by Bonnie Miller

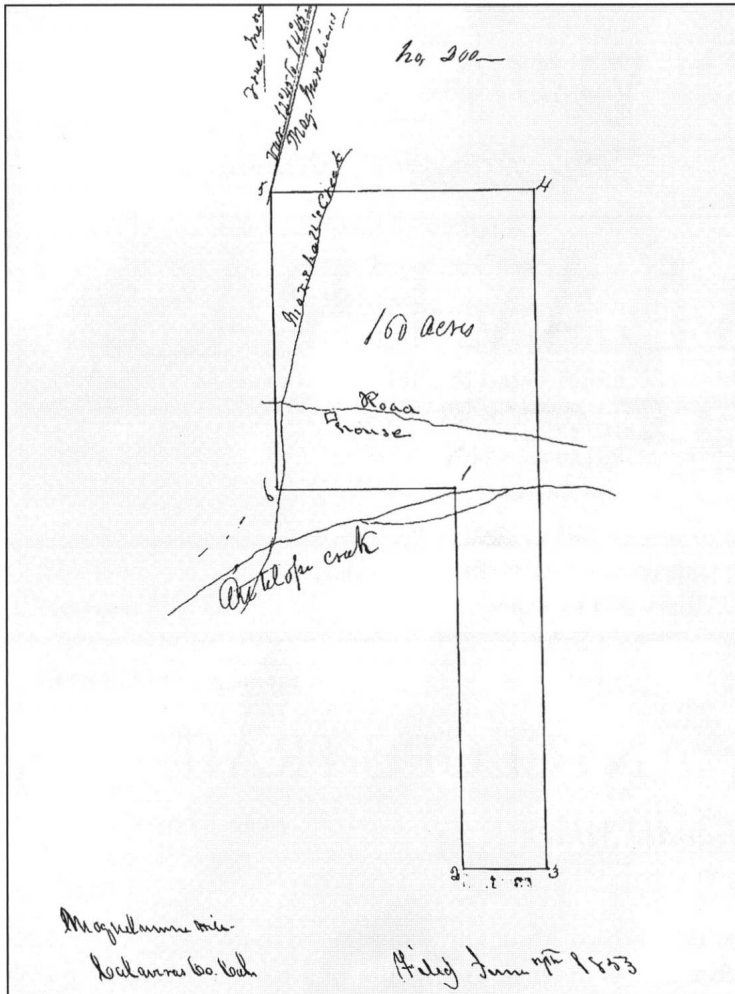
Directly north of present day Copperopolis lays a hidden, peaceful valley. Long before planes flew over it, before cars rapidly traversed it, or horses' hooves had trod upon its soil, Native Americans crossed this valley in their journeys between California's central valley and the mountains. The valley even geologically predates the Sierra Nevada mountain range to the east. Today the valley is partially inundated with a reservoir. Before the water was impounded, numerous creeks and springs fed natural tule lakes across the almost flat valley floor. Some of these springs leach minerals from beneath and make the water salty in nature. This is the Salt Spring Valley.

This valley exists because of the unique geologic formation we call the Bear Mountain Range. This odd small range of hills lies almost one hundred and eighty degrees opposed to the strike, or direction of the flow from the Sierra mountains. This is because the Bear Mountain Range is almost solid ferrous (iron) rock, harder, stronger and even older than the Sierra. (Geologically this formation is known as a monadnock; there is possibly only one other such formation in California, the Sutter Buttes.) When the Sierra range was formed, the

Bear Mountain Range stood in its way like a granite boulder in the middle of a stream. Everything else had to move around it. What it left or carved out on the "downstream" or western side was this quiet little valley.

Changes in climate and geology have ranged considerably over the millennia and western Calaveras County has seen its share of diversity from ice ages to droughts. This area has known swampland, conifer forests, and dry summers with plentiful oaks as we know it today. Regardless of what climate existed in what previous decade, this protected valley has always been attractive to someone. Life in this valley has been dated back to nine thousand years before present time.

Approximately seven thousand years ago, it has been determined that those who inhabited this valley engaged in trade with people from the other side of the mountains. This cross-cultural exchange is significant in that it proves people were on the move. They had to have a route, like ancient trade routes that existed with other cultures across the globe, such as the Silk Road or the Amber Trail. The Native Americans of California also had their preferred route to travel.



This 1853 survey commissioned by Ben Marshall of his 160 acres shows the Antelope Trail passing through his ranch and by his house. Courtesy Calaveras County Archives.

Jedediah Smith, that great trapper, bear fighter and mountain man, is credited with being the first non-Native American to cross the Sierra range. Scholars have analyzed his notes and debated this issue for years. Most likely he crossed over the point we know as Ebbetts Pass. How exactly he got from the central valley to the mountains is unknown, but likely he followed the path of least resistance. Following a river canyon upstream seems logical, but canyons can be prohibitive. They may be precipitously steep or inadvertently change directions, adding danger and delay to one's travel. Smith was clearly looking for a manageable route through the mountains. He was attempting to transport 1500 pounds of beaver pelts to a fur rendezvous by the Great Salt Lake. Well worn Indian trails would have clearly marked a way for Smith to follow.

When the foothills of California became inundated with Argonauts, they too wished to take the

fastest, easiest route and followed the established Indian trails. It is certainly the goal of any trail to minimize climbs and work with the terrain in the walker's favor. One such trail climbed from the hot, central valley and allowed for a respite in the cool Salt Spring Valley before proceeding into the steeper mountains to the east. Like the Argonauts after him, Smith probably took this trail. This trail was the Antelope Trail.

Early Inhabitants

The Miwok and Yokut from the central valley of California annually trekked over the mountains. They traded and intermarried with the people of the Great Basin area, the Mono and the Paiute. Some of these were the people who inhabited the area around Mono Lake, and they had a valuable resource. Until cross-mountain exchanges were established, the Miwok of California fashioned their elegant tools from native greenstones. There were several sources of greenstone, actual quarry sites, located within the Salt Spring Valley. When trade with the Great Basin people was established, there was the introduction of a new material for their tools: obsidian.

Western tribes traded their valuable acorns, while eastern tribes traded pine nuts from the high elevation pinyon trees. (The natives of the Salt Spring Valley captured salt from the salty springs, so they did not need to trade for salt with either their western or eastern neighbors.) The mountain's high elevations were not inhabitable year round, so the natives only visited during the dryer, warmer months. Each spring or summer, depending on the weather, the Miwok embarked on an annual trek to the top or over the mountains. They followed the deer herds to obtain meat for their own subsistence as well as for trading.

It is probable that early French and American fur trappers traversed the Salt Spring Valley after Smith and before the gold rush. And likely the Spanish visited the area during the Spanish period. The first non-native inhabitants of the Salt Spring Valley were the gold seekers who came with the gold rush. They reached the area by following the well established Indian trails. The Antelope Trail

was the most significant route between Tahoe to the north and Yosemite to the south.

One of the area's earliest settlers was a man who would later become the county's second sheriff, Ben Marshall. He established a ranch on 160 acres west of Milton and named it the Antelope Ranch for the plentiful game available on the valley plains. The Indian trail leading from the delta area and up into the mountains passed by his ranch. He wanted to promote traffic by his ranch and on in to Calaveras County by this route, so he named it the Antelope Trail after his ranch. Despite its cachet, the name is not native in origin but was introduced by this early settler.

The Trail's Route

When the early traveler left the delta area, between the Stanislaus River to the south and the Calaveras to the north, there was a well-traveled trail bearing east toward the mountains. As the foothills began to rise out of the eastern edge of the valley plains, an abrupt ridge with a small dip in its horizon made for a visual target. This ridge was later named Gopher Ridge. The trail aimed directly for this swale through this lower ridge of hills. It was along this trail, west of this ridge, that Marshall built his ranch, just west of where Milton lays today.

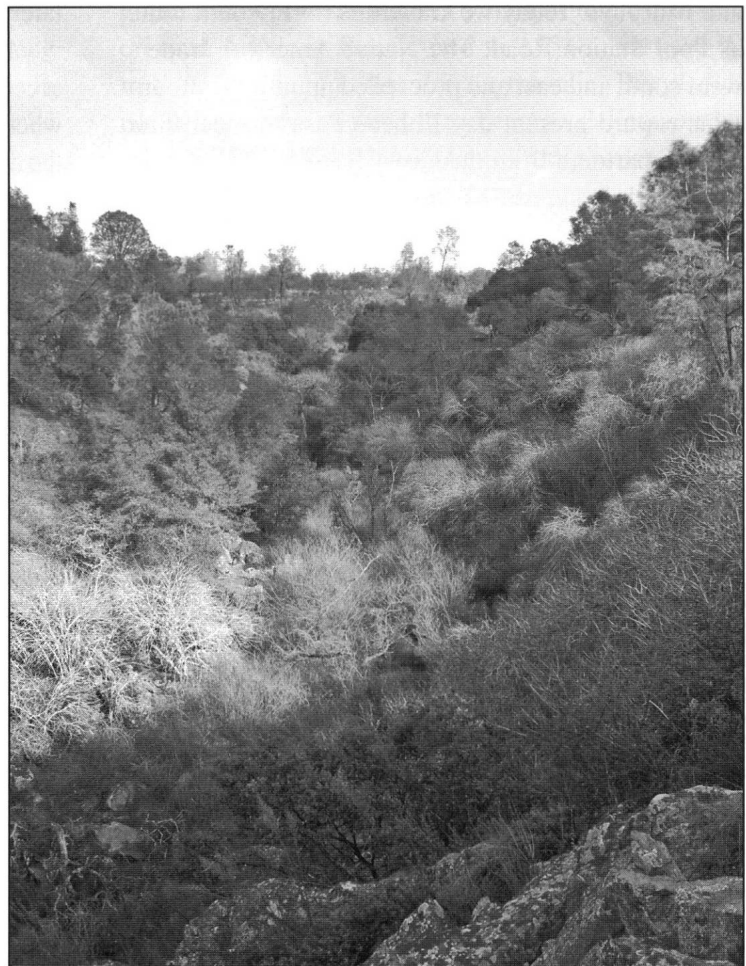
Proceeding east toward Gopher Ridge, the trail continued ascending toward the gap in the ridge, tracing the course of Rock Creek. After passing through the gap in the ridge, one has entered the Salt Spring Valley. Looking northeast, the next ridge comes into view, the Bear Mountain Range. Again a saddle in the horizon presented an apparent low spot for crossing this next obstacle. The old tule lakes required the trail to veer slightly south in order to cross the valley's brief expanse.

Along the horizon of the Bear Mountain Range there are two taller peaks. It was between these two peaks that the trail ascended and scaled this range with relative ease of climbing. Today we know these peaks as Carmen Peak to the south, and Mt Ararat is the pointed one to the north. The Antelope Trail left the valley floor and began

following a natural, gentle draw that originated between the two peaks.

When the traveler reached the top, he found himself standing in a relatively flat saddle between the two peaks. This low spot where one crosses the mountain range came to be named the Bear Trap Gap. From this vantage point, the traveler could look back behind himself and see the Salt Spring Valley that he just left, and beyond the Gopher Ridge all of California's central valley. On a clear day if no fog settled in the big valley, he could see all the way to the coastal range, with Mt Diablo jutting up on the horizon slightly to the north. Turning back to the east, the mountains of the mighty Sierra Nevada range would now be in view. On a bright winter day the snow topped mountains would appear within reach.

The Antelope Trail descended the Bear Mountain Range on the east side rapidly, into another small valley called the Nassau Valley. At this point the



The Antelope Trail followed the rugged Rock Creek canyon up from the valley plains, east of Milton toward this low point in Gopher Ridge.



Today when one enters the Salt Spring Valley from the west, much of the valley floor appears inundated with the reservoir over the old tule lake beds. The Bear Mountain Range is only three miles away.

trail split and either went north toward San Andreas or south and east on to the mining camps of Angels and Murphys. Today we know this north-south route as Pool Station Road. The Native American traders went south and east and proceeded up into the mountains toward present day Ebbetts Pass to meet their trading partners from the Great Basin.

Marshall simplified the description of the route in 1849:

“Old Antelope Trail from Stockton to Murphy’s New Diggings and vicinity. Take Antelope Trail to Antelope Ranch and Rock Creek and Salt Spring Valley, connecting with Bear Trap Trail over Bear Mountain to Valley east of Bear Mountain... to Murphys New Diggings...”

At first travel to the diggings was by foot or horse. However the gold seekers got there, the Salt Spring Valley provided a pleasant respite to the otherwise uncomfortable travel. The Antelope Trail became the foremost route from Stockton and Milton and on to Angels Camp and Murphys. It was also the most direct route from the central valley to the Stanislaus diggings.

As the gold seekers rushed in, travel routes became more established. The Salt Spring Valley lay between two major rivers in the southern mines, the Mokelumne and the Stanislaus. The formidable Bear Mountain Range lay right at the gentle foothills of the mountains, obstructing easy east-west

travel. One of the earliest roads established in the new county of Calaveras was a north-south route that bisected the valley. It connected the travelers from the northern mines coming from Stockton and the Calaveras River, to the routes further south over the ferries to the southern mines.

Roads follow necessity, linking communities together. Road names often referred to their destination, depending on one’s direction of travel. Over time the Antelope Trail route was also known as Marshall’s Trail as it passed by Marshall’s ranch, or the Stanislaus Trail as it led to the Stanislaus River ferries accessing

the southern mines. If one was westbound, the route may have been referred to as the Stockton Road, and later the Old Stockton Road.

By 1854 the Antelope Trail had been improved to accommodate wagon traffic. It had also been improved where the road left the east side of the valley and began the ascent up Bear Mountain, called the Carmen Grade. Here the road was referred to as the Angles Road.

A Typical Settler

In the first ten years after the discovery of gold in California, the Salt Spring Valley was settled by approximately twenty different farmers, on mostly 160 acre plots. Most were hopeful single men or young families from back east, or emigrants primarily from France, Switzerland, Germany or England. Few of these early hopefuls stayed beyond those first ten years. One exception was Conrad Hizer and his family.

Conrad Hizer (later spelled Heiser) was born in 1835 in Darmstadt, Germany. He immigrated to the United States where he met his future wife. Aubrett Wilson was born in 1840 in Missouri and married Conrad and they moved west. Aubrett’s name was later altered to “Orbita”, and ever after she was known by her descendents as Grandma Orbita.

The Heisers moved to the Salt Spring Valley and established their farm alongside the north-eastern edge of the valley. Where the Antelope Trail left the eastern side of the valley and began

its ascent up the Bear Mountain Range, the Heisers built their home alongside the drainage course that the trail followed. This draw came to be known as Heiser Canyon. The family lived in a spacious two story house that had six rooms for their large family. The house was located about one mile from the valley floor. They used newspapers to insulate the walls, but had the luxury of many windows. Between 1858 and 1880 Orbita bore ten children. During this timeframe Conrad became a naturalized citizen, at the District Court of Calaveras County in the summer of 1860.

The Heiser's life as early settlers in the valley was probably typical or indicative of the difficult lifestyle that other families endured to live in this remote valley. Most families agreed that the location was beautiful, but the life of subsistence farming was one of long hours and hard work. They carved out a rugged life on their meager ranches. Many families chose to operate way stations or road houses. One of the more famous neighbors in the valley was the endearing Madam Felix.

As life wasn't particularly profitable for the farming families of the valley, they often found themselves in debt. On July 10, 1883, a \$150 judgment was levied against Conrad Heiser. He must have made good on the debt, for two months later on 17 September of that year, he filed for a Declaration of Homestead on their farm, and valued it at \$4000. The Heisers were one of the more well rooted families in the area as shown by their longevity. At least one of their children married locally and remained in the area, and lived to celebrate their own 30th wedding anniversary in the valley. Descendants of this family continued to participate in Salt Spring Valley reunions for several generations.

In July of 1902 Conrad Heiser was helping a neighbor on Carmen Peak. He attempted to stop a runaway team and his leg was crushed, requiring it to be amputated. For a while he appeared to be convalescing well in Stockton, when suddenly

he "took a turn for the worse." On 30 September 1902 the *Calaveras Weekly Prospect* reported that he had passed away as a result of the accident, at the age of 68.

The family maintained the homestead for some-time thereafter, but eventually the property was absorbed into the neighboring Red House Ranch. The Heiser house was abandoned for several years, until an employee of the Red House Ranch moved in in 1931. The employee gained permission to tear down the Heiser's original two story home and rebuild a sturdier one story home. They reused most of the lumber and windows from the original home, and built the new home on almost the same location alongside the creek.

Ben Marshall and his heirs had maintained a sporadic presence in the valley and surrounding area as well. Marshall's primary business, besides his later checkered career in law, was that he ran a butcher business in Murphys. To supply that business he raised beef cattle on his properties in the west county area. He owned several large parcels in the west county. Apparently he lost interest in his original Antelope Ranch, and in 1851 advertised it in the *San Joaquin Republican* for sale. But it did not sell, and he allowed it to become delinquent in taxes by 1857. On 22 August 1859 the ranch house burned down. He ultimately lost the Antelope Ranch in a sheriff's sale of delinquent properties.

Another early settlement in the valley that had a lasting affect was the Peach Orchard Farm. It was established in 1850 by two gentlemen, Harris



When looking back to the west, the low swale through which Rock Creek flows in Gopher Ridge is clearly evident.

Garcelon and Ossian Kallenbach along the eastern flank of the valley. They grew crops to sell to miners, and built a hotel to serve travelers through the valley. The Peach Orchard employed two young men, Thomas McCarty and Jacob Tower, both of whom would have a lasting presence in the valley.

Many early settlers and later inhabitants noted the abundant duck, geese and quail that lived about the valley. Market hunters heavily hunted the Bear Mountain Range and Salt Spring Valley for quail to sell to Stockton and San Francisco restaurants. Some hunters boasted daily minimum bag limits of 144 quail. At the price of \$3.00 per dozen, the quail hunting business was quite lucrative, as well as devastating to the quail population.

Roads, Gold and Copper

Traffic through and around the Salt Spring Valley in its first ten years had significantly improved the Antelope Trail to a road that could almost be called comfortable, considering the wagon travel standards of the day. On 17 February 1858 the roadway was specifically described as the route across the valley floor between Madam Felix's ranch and the Bear Mountain Range: "following valley and grade of mountains to its base at Carmen's Ranch in Salt Spring Valley." Later that year, the county board of supervisors' minutes reflected a petition from the citizens requesting that the board establish a road,

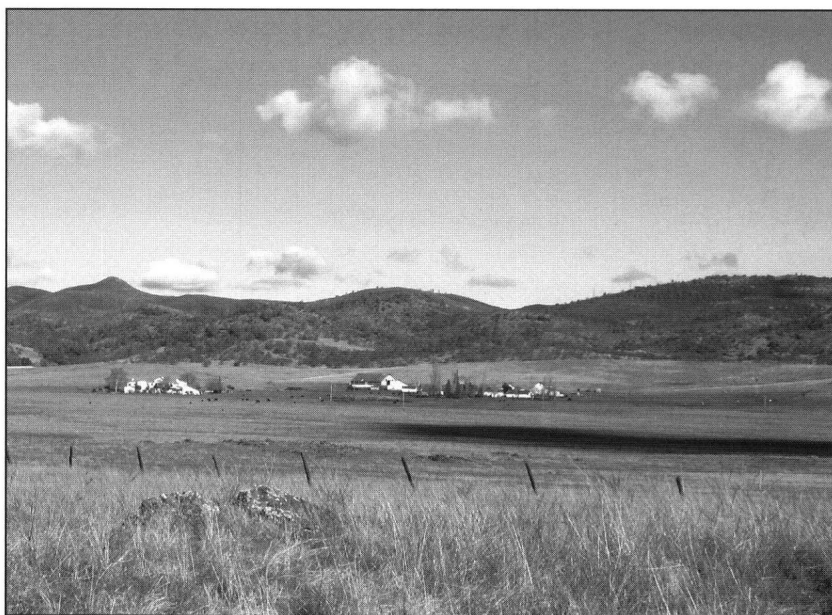
to be declared a public highway, from San Joaquin County to Murphys. The board acted accordingly and appointed a road commissioner and filed a \$1000 bond to fulfill that purpose. The Antelope Road was described as the primary route from Murphys to the San Joaquin County Line (with a short piece through a portion of Stanislaus County) and declared a public highway on 13 May 1858.

The Salt Spring Valley and its surrounding usable land was almost entirely settled with farmers by the end of the 1850s. The farmers grew crops such as peaches, figs, grapes and hay, and raised stock such as cattle and hogs. The first cattle brand issued in Calaveras County originated in the valley. The farmers sold their crops and stock to the mining camps, or operated roadhouses to serve the travelers on their way to the mines. The firmly established road, the roadhouses, and somewhat peaceful life of the meager farms were all to change dramatically in 1860. The valley was no longer just a cross-roads or way-station. Both copper and gold were discovered in the hills south of the valley, changing the nature of the valley ever after.

The community of Copperopolis sprang up in response to the copper industry which vigorously served the Civil War effort back east. A more direct route for transporting the ore was established. The road was rerouted to go directly to Copperopolis rather than detour through the Salt Spring Valley.

Today this newer road is known as State Route 4. Although it has been reengineered to modern standards, it significantly follows that original alignment. With the relocation of the Copper to Stockton route, travel through the Salt Spring Valley diminished rapidly. Likewise, north to south travel was accomplished more easily by roads on the eastern flanks of the Bear Mountain Range. Travelers were choosing to go around the small, hard mountain range rather than scale it.

So what happened to the Antelope Trail? Portions of it evolved into the roads that traversed the valley, roads that served the Felix mining district and later a reservoir. Some segments are called Salt Spring Valley Road



The Bear Trap Gap is the low point seen directly over the roofs of the Red House Ranch, as viewed from the west side of the valley. Mt Ararat is the high point to the left, and Carmen Peak is the low rise on the far right.

today. The portion that descended Gopher Ridge alongside Rock Creek toward the community of Milton is called Rock Creek Road today.

The section of the trail that ascended the Bear Mountain Range on the northeast side was abandoned for public travel in favor of alternate routes, but the ranching families continued to use it for their own ranching purposes. They used the trail to drive cattle between the Salt Spring Valley and the Nassau Valley when moving cattle on up to the higher country. Many of the ranchers grazed their cattle and hogs along the slopes of the Bear Mountain Range. Many of those pigs got loose and went wild, wreaking havoc on Bear Mountain for generations to come.

The Bear Trap Gap, sometimes referred to as Antelope Pass, is that unique low spot in the Bear Mountain Range. It is one of the few vantage points where one can view all the way across the central valley to the coastal mountains in one direction, and all the way to the Sierra summit in the other direction. It can easily be distinguished from either the Salt Spring Valley or the Nassau Valley, should one look up at the crest line of the Bear Mountain Range. Today the Bear Trap Gap is traversed by power lines, and is no longer accessible to the public. The iron core of the Bear Mountain Range will not allow radio waves to pass through it, so radio towers now sprout from its higher peaks. A trail that once carried the annual footfalls of travelers for thousands of years, now only occasionally sees service personnel checking on modern technology.

Wild game was readily available in early California. The presence of such game was behind the grizzly bear on our state flag as well as the name of Grizzly Peak, northeast of the Bear Trap Gap. Grizzly Peak, also shown on maps as Joaquin Peak, gained its name because it is believed to be the last location where a grizzly bear was trapped in Calaveras County. The Salt Spring Valley was named for the salty springs that emanated in the valley. The rugged Bear Mountain Range was named for the numerous bears, both brown and grizzly, that roamed its slopes.

Despite its importance in the county's early



Today the Bear Trap Gap can be seen from Pool Station Road as the low spot in the Bear Mountain Range where power lines cross, in the center of the photo. All photos by Bonnie Miller, December, 2010.

transportation and history, no portion of the old Antelope Trail still bares that name today.

Notes

Las Calaveras is grateful for the extensive notes of Frances Bishop on file at the Calaveras County Archives, and the book *Madam Felix's Gold*. Readers who wish to learn more about the fascinating history of the Salt Spring Valley are encouraged to read the book *Madam Felix's Gold, The Story of Madam Felix Mining District*. The book was produced as a joint effort between the Calaveras County Historical Society and and Foothill Resources, Ltd and can be viewed at the Historical Society or Calaveras County libraries.

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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 Calaveras County Historical Society welcomes the following new members:

October–December 2010

Linda Dougherty—Des Moines, Washington
Dave & Eden Sanders—San Andreas
Mr. Lynn Thompson—Valley Springs
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The Historical Society appreciates the following generous donations:

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Sheriff badge belonging to Harry James, Deputy Sheriff badge, pistol belonging to Sheriff Joseph Zwinge and sawed off shotgun from early 1900s, and original jail cell key—on loan from the Family Trust of Charles and Denise Allured

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David and Hallie Studley—cash donation in honor of Bill & Beverly Burton, cash donation for Red Barn Museum Annex

Donna R. Shannon—donation of new printer for office
Otter stole, fur collar, assortment of leather and silk gloves, antique girl's shift—on loan from Pru Starr, West Point

Roxi Berlin, West Point—donation of dress from 1949

Rosemary Faulkner—antique striking clock originally belonging to Elsie Tiscornia, and then given to Juanita Worden Newell. This clock dates back to the mid to late 1800s and is exquisite in detail.

Anonymous donor—Cash donation in honor of Rosemary Faulkner for completion of Red Barn Museum Annex projects

F. Ted Laskin—Copy of book, *Wild Edges*, Manzanita Book Volume 6, and *The Tools Are On The Bar*

Susan and Randy Metzger—Books from the library of Grant and Betsey Metzger from 1907–2000

Wally Motloch—Reward postcard issued by Sheriff Joshua Jones, October 3, 1909

Wally Motloch—Copies of the *County Atlas of California*, July 1904