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**The Douglas Flat School House, oldest surviving pioneer schoolhouse in Calaveras County.**

*Photo circa 1900, courtesy of the Calaveras County Historical Society.*

## THE DOUGLAS FLAT SCHOOL HOUSE

*by Bonnie Miller*

In the community of Douglas Flat north of present day Highway 4 stands one of the finest gold rush-era school houses in Calaveras County and all of the Mother Lode. This building is believed to have

been the first school built in the county. It is still standing today in fair condition and is still used by the community just as it was intended by the pioneers who built it almost one hundred fifty years ago.

## ***A Brief History of Douglas Flat and Calaveras County Schools***

Douglas Flat is named for pioneer Tom Douglas of Tennessee who in 1852 settled along the springs in the flat below the Murphys diggings. Prior to the arrival of Douglas, the flat had long been inhabited by the Native Americans. Evidence of their occupancy is still clear today with the rich midden soils and bedrock mortars. After being settled by Douglas and other immigrants, the community of Douglas Flat immediately became a stronghold in early Calaveras County. Its diggings were rich, it had one of the first flour mills in the county, and nearby Coyote Creek provided reliable water for mining and agriculture (see *Las Calaveras*, January 1959). The farms also took water from the abundant springs which continue to saturate the community today. As mines played out and mining companies moved on to newer diggings, Douglas Flat did not lose prosperity as so many boom towns did but rather remained viable due to its steady agricultural production which often fed neighboring communities. Remnants of those early vineyards and orchards are still evident today. Douglas Flat enjoys the distinction as California State Historical Landmark No. 272.

The community of Douglas Flat was always in competition with its neighbor Vallecito. Both communities were rich in local industry including their active placer mining, stores, churches and small scale farming and ranching. The history of both communities' schools is very similar. It is a testament to the settlement of these communities that they were among the first to build school houses. It is common history that a boom town starts first with saloons and whore houses, then develops its stores and services such as smiths and public works. The last aspect of settlement is when the churches and schools have taken root.

In 1851 there were 110 children in the county but no schools according to the county's report to the State Superintendent of Schools. By 1852 there were 430 children of school age but still no schools. In 1853 there were public schools operating in Angels Camp, Campo Seco, Mokelumne Hill, and San Andreas. There was a private school, the Franklin School, operating in Murphys which precipitated the Murphys Elementary School. By 1855, the same year that the Calaveras County Board of Supervisors was established, the Murphys School District encompassed mining camps in the following locations: Murphys, French Gulch, Peppermint, Murphys New Diggings, Spring Garden Camp, Douglas Flat, Vallecito,

Macaroni Flat and Owlsburg. The new County Board of Supervisors approved a petition establishing the first school under their watch in Vallecito on November 15, 1855. (*Kenneth M. Castro*, in a letter to the Vallecito School District, June 6, 1972) A few months later the Douglas Flat District was established on February 12, 1856. The first actual class was apparently held on February 11, the day before the formalization of the district. It remains a question as to whether or not Vallecito had actually held classes prior to Douglas Flat. It is believed that although the community of Vallecito established a school district in 1855, it was Douglas Flat that held its classes first in early 1856.

### ***When Was It Built?***

When a viable public building was built, it tended to become *the* public meeting place for all community events. This is true for Douglas Flat as well. The building was originally built as a meeting house and church. The building first served the community for meetings and other functions such as dances. Only later did it serve as the school. In all the building served as the community hall, school, church, and polling place for elections throughout its life. Some believe that at one time it housed the post office but it is more likely that the post office was located next door in a store.

In the early gold rush communities, one could never lose sight of the significance of the gold. Amusingly, this building was first constructed upon what later proved to be a rich deposit of ore. The building was just an inconvenience to the mining, yet it was too important to be torn down. Originally located along Coyote Creek, it was later dragged one quarter of a mile up the hill to its present location on to what was then a three acre site. The community dedicated the site for public use only for a school, church, community center and cemetery and designated it as specifically excluded from mining other than one small exception.

There are many conflicting histories as to when the schoolhouse was actually built. It is unlikely that it could have been built before 1853 since Douglas only arrived and settled in the area in 1852. It appears that the building was built in 1853 or 1854 at its first location by the creek. Given the quality of the original structure, it clearly had some thorough planning and craftsmanship in its construction. Such an effort would have taken a while to procure craftsmen and materials, so it probably was constructed

later, in 1854, rather than earlier, in 1853, when the community was still developing itself. Classes were not formally held in the building until 1856. So it is fair to say that the building is probably the first building built that later served exclusively as a school, therefore making it the oldest schoolhouse in the county. It was not however the first place that school classes were held in the county.

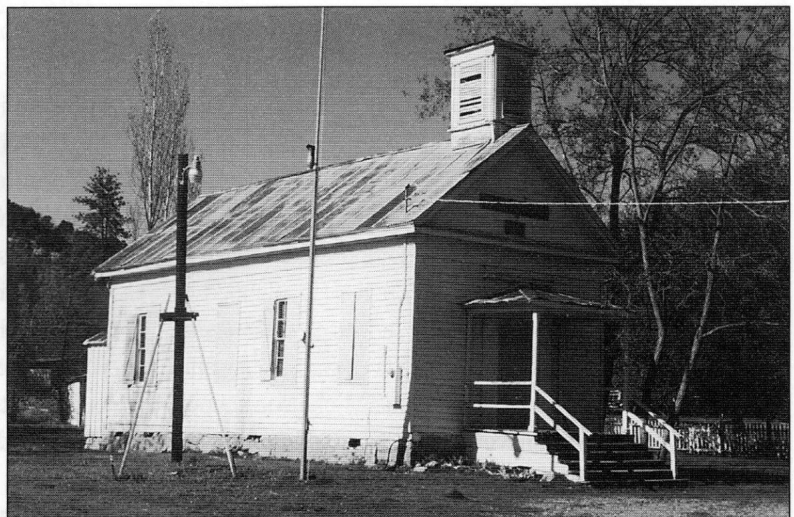
### *The Building's Architecture*

The original structure was believed to have been built for only a few hundred dollars funded by donations from the community. The building is a lovely example of neo-classic architecture. The 20' wide by 24' long building is a simple wood frame structure dressed with lapped siding. The wood framing is cedar, similar to European construction. The classic rectangular shaped building has a pitched roof forming a triangle over the rectangular shape of the body of the building. The front of the roof gable is accented with a picturesque bell tower. Windows run down both sides of the building. The interior walls are tongue and groove pine finished with a cloth similar to cheese cloth which served the purpose as wall paper. The interior finished wood and original windows are classic European construction. The floor is soft pine which bears the dark color of years of oiling (PH0047279).

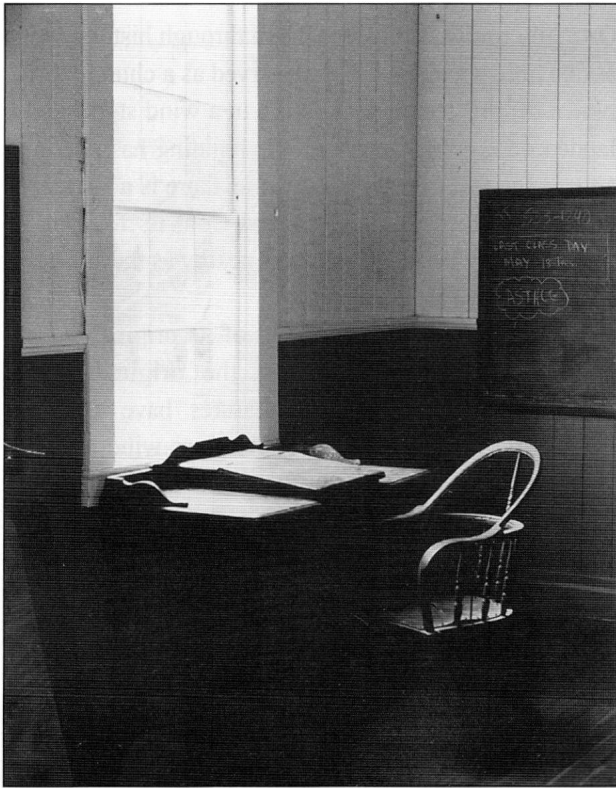
Today one can clearly discern two unmatched additions to the back side of the original 24' long building. The first addition was added almost immediately after classes began in 1856 when it was determined that the building needed to be larger to serve as a school. One can discern the difference in the building's siding between the third and fourth windows. The second addition at the rear of the building houses restrooms which were added much later with the advent of indoor plumbing. Until that time everyone had used an outhouse out back, which still stands in the back yard. The building was heated by a potbelly stove. As was true with most small schools, responsibility fell to the community to provide the wood to feed the stove. The stove heated the schoolhouse until the early 1950's, yet the stove pipe was not removed and can still be clearly seen inside and on top of the building. The stemwall foundation is made of stacked rhyolite stone blocks from the nearby hills.

One silly rumor that passes down through history is that at one time when the building served as a church, it was blown off this sturdy foundation in a wind storm and it landed on a grave. Although the building has undoubtedly experienced settling over time, there is no evidence that it was ever totally dislodged from its foundation. Furthermore, there are no graves nearby as the site never was developed as a cemetery.

The building still has many of its original leaded-glass windows and much of the original school furnishings. Many of these features have a unique history of their own. Some of the glass windows were shot out in an enthusiastic New Years celebration by Roland Sutton around 1975 and are now replaced with contemporary glass. The teacher's desk and chair are the original School Master's desk and chair. The slate which dominates the front of the school room is the original one placed by the community in the 1800's. Many of the slates along the walls are original as well, but are fortunate to be there. When the school was taken over by a county school district in later years, some of these original features were removed from the building. The community was outraged and demanded that the original blackboards be returned to their proper place. Due to the efforts of Louise Johnson, many of the original school furnishings have been retrieved and returned to the school. When the flag flies from the school's large flagpole on the west side of the building, one should be aware of the fact that this flag has flown over the California State Capital. Inside the school room there is



**West side of the schoolhouse where one can easily discern the outline of the original 24' long building plus the first 16' addition in 1856. Note the change in the siding to the left of the light pole. The small addition to the far left houses the restrooms which were added much later. Photo by Bonnie Miller, February 2002.**



**The original Master's desk and chair still occupy the schoolhouse. Photo by Bonnie Miller, May 1999.**

a certificate on display to that effect signed by Eugene A. Chappie of California's 6th Assembly.

The bell tower that adorns the front of the building houses the original school bell which was purchased from the "best" bell manufacturer back East. The bell was the result of a spirited competition between Douglas Flat and its neighbor Vallecito. Douglas Flat raised enough money to purchase their bell before Vallecito could raise enough money for their own bell. According to Louise Johnson, as a reward to itself the community of Douglas Flat bought the finest bell available at the time, "thumbed their nose to Vallecito, and never looked back". Ironically years later the bell became the player in another conflict of less humor. In 1971 when the Vallecito Union School District assumed custodianship of the building, they planned to take the bell and place it in a display in Murphys alongside the rival Vallecito bell. The idea was to have the "Avenue of the Bells" decorating the road to the Michelson school. Fortunately this idea never came to fruition, as the community of Douglas Flat was sure to have been offended and would not have wanted their bell removed.

Today the building sports a small porch and overhang at the front door. These features were added after the original construction. The original shutters were

hinged and lowered from top to bottom, but they weathered over time and have been replaced with a simpler design. At one point the school yard was fenced with low maintenance barbed wire. Conservators Cliff and Louise Johnson had the unattractive fence replaced with classic pickets which were constructed by the California Conservation Corps as a special project. On the east side of the property outside of the pretty pickets are the remnants of a stone wall erected along the property line by the neighbor Stephen Perry in the late 1850's. Mr. Perry operated a store, served as the postmaster, taught in the school, and served as the pastor in the building when it served as a church (see *Las Calaveras*, January 1959).

Today the school lies on a 1.25 acre piece of property which has changed very little since the construction of the school building. The site lies in what was the central business area of the community of Douglas Flat. For several generations the school was bounded on the east side by the Perry store and their family's lush orchards, and on the west side by the Gagliardo store which also served as the Wells Fargo stage stop. Despite all of this surrounding commerce, one should never forget that the reason for settling the flat was for the rich gold deposits. This gold was important to the school in unimaginable ways. The Douglas Flat schoolhouse has earned a mention in *Ripley's Believe It Or Not* because part of the teacher's contract was the exclusive right to mine the site to supplement their salary. This was the one exception for the only mining allowed on the site.

### ***The Community vs The School District***

This history of the school building's place in the community is as lively as the furnishing's place within the building. The building was built by donations from the community and remained under the community's custodianship thereafter. School districts existed in Calaveras County since 1855, so over time the county school district "assumed" ownership of the schoolhouse although they had not actually built it. By 1940 it was determined that the building no longer met the current state regulations for a school. The community and the district had shared the building side by side until that time. In 1945 the residents of Douglas Flat had formed the Douglas Flat Community Center, a non-profit corporation. The organization was specifically formed to prevent the old building from being torn down after the school district had determined that

it no longer met the current codes. In 1948 the Community Center attempted to regain control of the school house by purchasing it from the school district. Despite extensive title research, the ownership could not be clearly defined. The school district stopped using the building for classes in 1956 and it was formally "turned back" to the community although the school district "retained" the title. As a consolation, the school district leased the school back to the Community Center in 1956 for one dollar per year, and the Community Center assumed responsibility for maintenance and restoration. This arrangement remained in effect until 1971.

In 1971 the Vallecito Union School District was formed. Elementary school enrollment in the area had exploded to over 400 students crowding all of the existing facilities so the new district decided to take advantage of the Douglas Flat building. Classes were once again conducted in the building. The new superintendent Ben Staffon used a trailer on the property for his office. With the opening of the new Michelson Elementary School in 1973, all classes were moved to Murphys. The last public class taught in the building was the Kindergarten class taught by teacher Mary Denault.

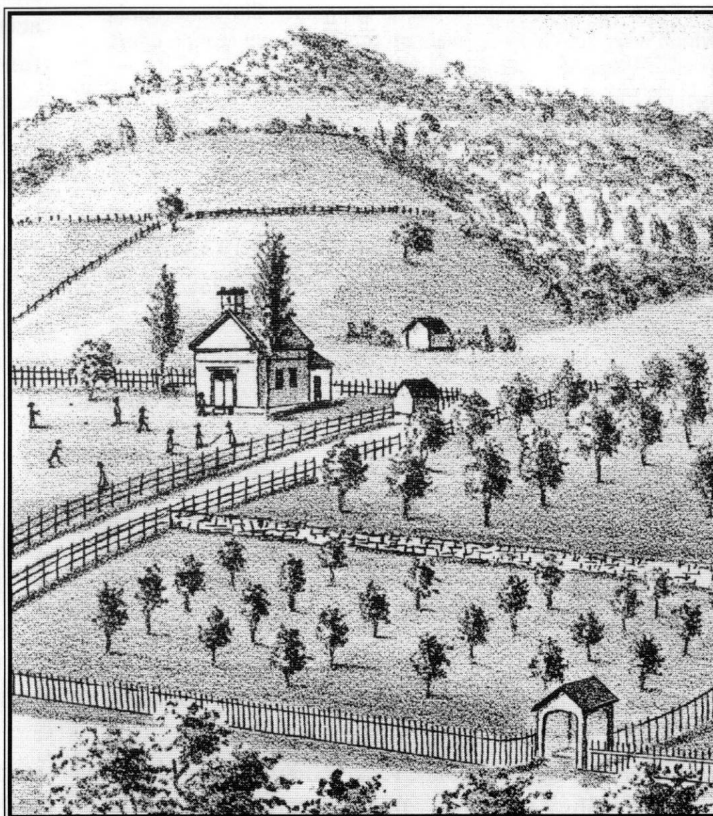
In 1972 the Community Center had again feared that the VUSD could demolish the building and they renewed their efforts to reclaim the building. They stepped up their efforts by appealing to the State of California. Then governor Ronald Reagan indicated in a letter on May 3, 1972 that he had forwarded their request on to the Director of the Department of Parks and Recreation for his consideration. Reagan noted that he did not want to see the beautiful building lost, but also pointed out that there was no state funding available for maintenance.

The State of California was not the only entity to note the importance of the old building. Locally the Calaveras County Historical Society had honored it as well. In 1972 the building received the Historical Society's Architectural Award.

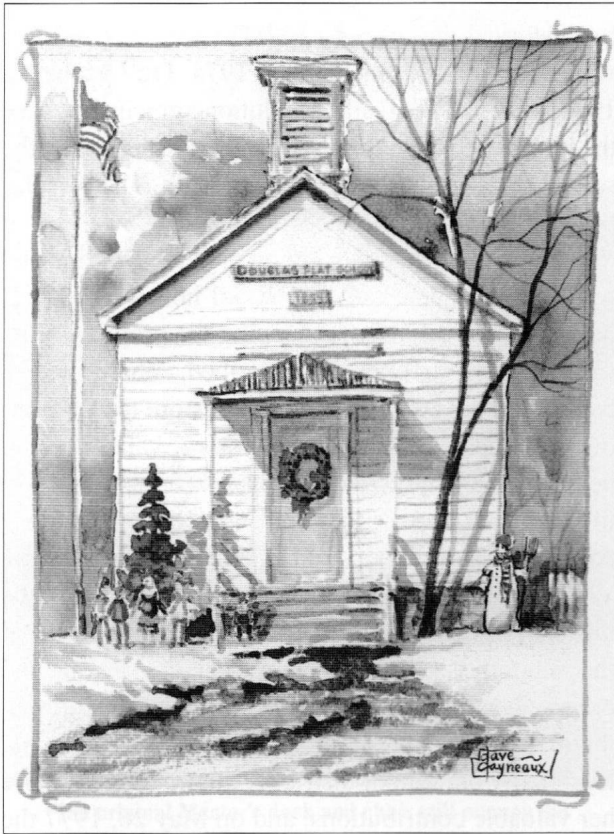
The Community Center kept up its pressure on the school district to return the building to Douglas Flat. Finally guidelines were developed for conducting a transfer of the building

for historical purposes by VUSD Order No. 34104B which was passed on July 29, 1974. On October 8, 1974 the VSUD passed a resolution agreeing to lease the building back to the Community Center, while the school district still retained ownership. The transfer became effective November 14, 1974.

When the Vallecito Union School District had resumed occupancy of the school house in 1971 it nearly amounted to their stripping the property of its valuables, as previously described. There was a backlash from the community to restore the furnishings. Louise Johnson proved to a valuable link between the community and the school district in this delicate time. Louise not only lived next door and looked after the building, she worked for the VUSD as well. Due to her diligence many of the missing furnishings were retrieved and replaced in the schoolhouse. She spent years researching and preserving old school records and carefully turning them over to the school district for safe keeping. Eventually the school district could no longer ignore her valuable contributions, and on May 26, 1977 the VUSD passed a resolution commending her efforts.



Portion of an illustration of Douglas Flat from the book, *Calaveras County Illustrated and Described*, 1885.



**Painting of the Douglas Flat School House by VUSD teacher and local historian Dave Gano. This painting was donated to the Douglas Flat Community Center to produce Christmas cards which were sold to raise funds to support the restoration effort.**  
*Courtesy of Dave Gano.*

In 1977 the *Stockton Record* reported that state recreation bond funds had become available and the schoolhouse was to be restored to as original as possible. The VUSD, in partner with the Community Center, would allow the building to be opened to school children from around northern California to experience what school would have been like one hundred years earlier in a one room schoolhouse. Restoration work was reported to have been done by the California Conservation Corps. It is likely that this was when the fence pickets were constructed and added to the yard.

A few years later the building received its highest honor. After a vigorous joint effort between the VUSD and the Douglas Flat Community Center, in 1985 the schoolhouse was placed on the National Register of Historic Places and received Federal Register No. PH0047279, as Historic Building No. 73000397. The Douglas Flat School House received this honor alongside its uphill neighbor, the Murphys Elementary School House, which was also named in the nomination. Such distinguished honors help to reinforce its

historic significance to the community, to the county, and to the gold rush in the Mother Lode and the history of the State of California. Today one can sit in the quiet school yard, block out the offensive electric wire from view and the noise of the state highway, and easily imagine children still attending the school surrounded by the bustle of a gold mining town.

In 1987 the California Education Code was changed which allowed an opportunity for the Community Center to once again pursue full ownership. Education Code Section 39381 allowed that the district could sell property no longer suitable for school purposes to a non-profit organization provided the property had historic value. The code further allowed that the sale could be at less than fair market value if it were to be used for public benefit for at least 25 years following the sale. As the school district had paid nothing for the school and made no substantial capital improvements, they could sell it for as little as one dollar (*Calaveras Enterprise*, June 17, 1987). In 1988 the Calaveras County Board of Supervisors passed Resolution No. 88-508 which allowed for the sale to proceed.

In 1988 the schoolhouse was finally and formally sold back to the community. The terms of new contract, according to the Education Code, require that if at any time in the subsequent 25 years the Community Center is unable or unwilling to keep it up, ownership shall revert to the school district. Upon the termination of 25 years, if the Community Center has held up its end of the arrangement, the school district will absolve any claim to the property and the Community Center will get to keep the schoolhouse and it will revert in perpetuity once again to the community of Douglas Flat.

The schoolhouse is still used today for a variety of non-profit purposes, from painting and exercise classes to Boy Scout meetings. The building remains available to the public for other uses just as it was always intended by the pioneers who built it. The Douglas Flat Community Center is a non-profit organization dedicated to the preservation of the school house. They continue to meet regularly to maintain the building and grounds and conduct restoration projects when funding permits. Participation in restoration projects is gratefully welcomed and cash donations are also accepted. For information regarding use of the building, please contact Juanita Massolo at 209-728-8561. If you are interested in participating in this piece of Mother

Lode history, you can send donations or contact the Douglas Flat Community Center, Post Office Box 73, Douglas Flat, California, 95229.

Information for this article was gained in part from the files of the Vallecito Union School District and primarily from an interview with Louise Johnson on May 24, 1999. *Las Calaveras* is grateful for her extensive knowledge of the property and her dedication to seeing it preserved. Local Mother Lode historian Judith Marvin provided historic architectural insights and extensive title and mining claim history. *Las Calaveras* appreciates the assistance of the Douglas Flat Community Center in the preparation of this article and wishes them well in their continued and noble efforts in keeping the spirit of the Douglas Flat School House alive.



The Douglas Flat School House as it appears today when viewed through the frame of declining pickets in the once-stylish fence that surrounds the site.

Photo by Bonnie Miller, February 2002.

# Calaveras County Historical Society

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material presented in *Las Calaveras* is not copyrighted and anyone is invited to use it. Mention of the source would be appreciated. Contributions of articles about Calaveras County is appreciated and may be submitted to the Historical Society for consideration.

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.

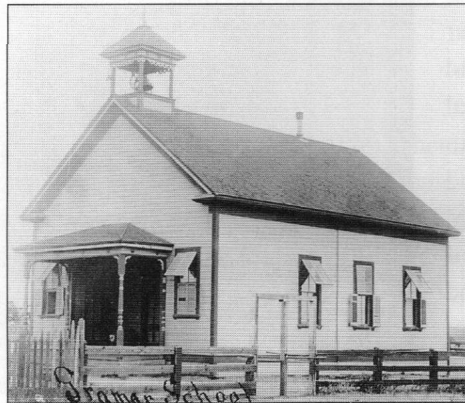
The Society's office is located in historic San Andreas, the Calaveras County seat. Visitors are always welcome to stop by the office for assistance with research, and are encouraged to visit the museum while in the area. The office is open Monday through Friday from 8:30 to 4:00, and the telephone number is (209) 754-1058.

# LANDMARK LOST

The Calaveras County Historical Society is sad to note the loss of one of Calaveras County's most dramatic landmarks, the Milton School House. The schoolhouse, pictured below, sat on a small hill on the east side of town next to the picturesque cemetery. This schoolhouse was in fact the second one built on this spot. The first schoolhouse was built in 1873 and served the community for twenty-two years until it was replaced with the larger, sturdier building in 1895. The builder Charles Barling would have been proud of the longevity of his work. The Milton School House served the community until 1950 after which time it passed in to private ownership. The building has stood vacant other than for use as storage since, and evidence of its decline became more conspicuous over time. A few years ago the Calaveras County Historical Society contacted the owner in an effort to save the structure but was unsuccessful in preventing further deterioration. The old building finally collapsed in upon

itself in a wind storm in December of 2001 after having stood grandly in this location for over 100 years.

One of the stated goals of the Historical Society is to save landmarks such as the Milton School House for future generations. It is a shame that such a beautiful piece of Calaveras County's history has been lost. Won't you please help us to prevent other such losses? Your participation with the Historical Society is always appreciated. Please call the office at 209-754-1058 and volunteer help us continue to meet our goals.



**The Milton School House, built in 1895. It is another example of neo-classical architecture in the Mother Lode, with Victorian embellishments. Photo by Barbara Trew Beaman, courtesy of the Historical Society from the book *An Album of the Pioneer School Houses of Calaveras County*.**



**Milton School House as it appeared in its later years when signs of neglect became more evident. This photo was taken by Bonnie Miller in February of 1986 against the dramatic backdrop of storm clouds.**

## Museum Donations

The Calaveras County Historical Society wishes to thank the following persons who recently made donations to the Calaveras County Museum:

### **December 2001**

- Ray E. McDevitt, San Francisco, CA**  
*Courthouses of California: An Illustrated History Book*
- Frank & Patricia Genochio, Santa Clara, CA**  
Cash donation
- Jordan & Mary Tatter, Watervliet, MI**  
Cash donation
- Herbert A. Good, San Andreas, CA**  
Record of Burial; Ex-Union Soldiers, Sailors, and Marines
- Judi Beard, Jamestown, CA**  
Fruit Press
- Coco Shearer, San Andreas, CA**  
7 x 9 carpet

### **January 2002**

- Douglas & Catherine Mewhinney, San Andreas, CA**  
Cash donation
- Carmel Barry-Schweyer, Auburn, CA**  
Cash donation
- D. Margaret Studley Foundation, Fresno, CA**  
Cash donation
- Mrs. M.B. Smith, Murphys, CA**  
Pictures of Oro Y Plata mine, pictures of Indians, U.S. Geologic Surv. Mother Lode, photo of Carson Hill 1880's