



Quarterly Bulletin of the Calaveras County Historical Society
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SHOVELS, WET SACKS PROTECTED RANCHES AGAINST WILDFIRE

There is not a town or community in Calaveras County that some time in its early history did not experience at least once, the ravages of a major fire.

In 1854 fire virtually leveled the clapboard shack and tent city of Mokelumne Hill, sparing only its few stone or masonry buildings, while in 1856 and again in 1858, fire also swept major portions of San Andreas. The town of Vallecito burned in 1859 and in 1875 fire left only three buildings standing in Milton.

As a result of their periodic fires each town, in turn, formed its own volunteer fire fighting unit. Some, like San Andreas, equipped themselves with hand pumpers such as its now famous "Blue Boy" which still graces local parades. Others simply depended

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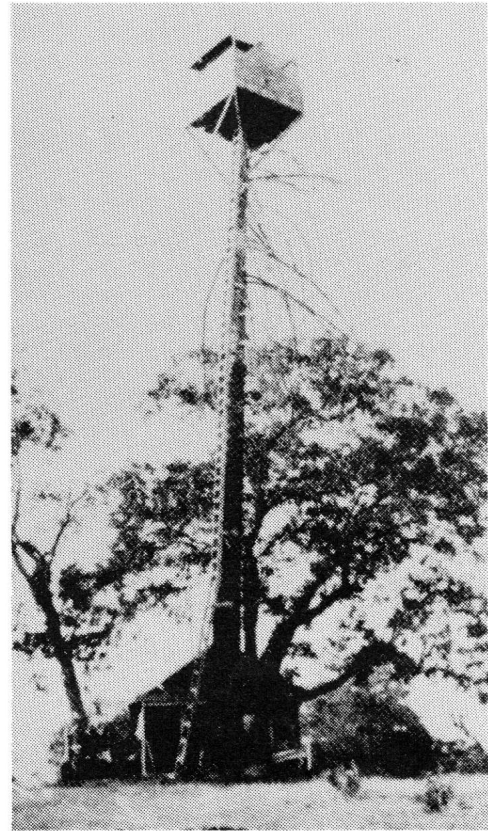
ARCHITECTURAL AWARD WINNERS SELECTED

A restored Gold Rush era ranch home; the replica of an original Murphys residence and a restored Angels Camp commercial building are recipients of the Calaveras County Historical Society's 1986 architectural awards.

The Joses home in Mountain Ranch, built about 1852; the home of Lund and Laura Johnson in Murphys, completed this year as an exact replica of the 1863 Austin Kaler home and the Brosemer Building on Historic Main Street, in Angels Camp, are the award winning structures.

The winners were announced and awards presented by Roberta Kenyon, chairperson of the Architectural Awards Committee, during the Historical

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Sierra Vista Lookout 1931

1927 BROUGHT STATE FIRE PROTECTION TO CALAVERAS

State organized wild lands fire protection came to Calaveras County shortly after April 1927, when Governor Young signed into law a bill creating the State Department of Natural Resources.

The Governor appointed Fred Stevenot, Calaveras businessman, former state legislator and member of a pioneer Calaveras County family, as the department's first director. That summer Al Herbert became the county's first state ranger.

Herbert, employed only on a summer basis, devoted his efforts largely to fire suppression, helping coordinate fire fighting efforts and rounding up fire fighters when rangeland or woodland fires broke out.

Herbert remained until 1929 when Ray Greve became the county's first year-round ranger, with an office in his Mokelumne Hill home. His wife served as dispatcher, and one of Greve's first acts was to establish summer fire stations at Angels Camp, Lilly

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SAN ANDREAS FIRE COMPANY with hand pumper “Old Betsy” and hose cart, prior to 1900. Company members (Front Row, L to R) James Donovan, C.M. Whitlock, G. Tiscornia, John Early, George C. Graves, William Wallace, William Toon, Dr. Simmons, W.S. Coulter, C.F. Waller, Lorenzo Oneto. (Back Row) S.E. Redmond, G.A. Stewart, Gilbert Phortner, Frank Cavanaugh.

(Photograph courtesy of Calaveras County Museum and Archives.)

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upon bucket brigades to provide at least a measure of formal fire protection.

But in the rural areas, in the sparsely settled foothills and grasslands of Central and Western Calaveras, early ranchers lived from mid-May until November under the daily threat of wildfire.

“When those early day ranchers awakened in the morning they stood on the porch or paused on the way to the outhouse to scan the sky in all directions for any trace of smoke,” said the late Clifford Lombardi. “Fire didn’t mean just the threat of losing the house or barn. In a single morning it could wipe out the whole coming winter’s feed supply and leave a rancher with a bunch of starving cattle on his hands.”

When a grass fire did break out, the rancher, his wife, children and their neighbors fought side-by-side to stop it with the equipment they had at hand — shovels, hoes and wet sacks with which they beat out the flames.

“If the wind was right and there was a road or trail to use as a fire line, we back fired,” said Milton Rancher Willard Tower.

“Wet sacks were a pretty important fire fighting

tool in those days,” he said. “Today its hard to find a burlap sack.”

One local rancher, Earl Hatler, rigged up a drag pulled by two horses, said Tower. Hooked onto the drag were wet sacks and pieces of old rug.

“I never saw it used, but they said it worked pretty good at putting out a grass fire,” said Tower.

“Sometimes if it was handy and there were no wet sacks, we’d just lop off the top of a little digger pine and use it to beat out the flames,” said Calaveritas native Fred Cuneo.

“Not many of the ranchers in the early days scraped firelines around their homes and ranch buildings, but each spring they’d bring livestock in and graze off the grass real close around their buildings so that an approaching fire would have little fuel to burn,” recalls Charles Stone, of Copperopolis.

“Fire fighting when we were kids was a community effort,” said Stone.

“If you looked out there and saw smoke rising you just jumped into a car or buggy and went to help. Anyone who didn’t respond to a fire wasn’t very well thought of,” he said.

Please see **SHOVELS, WET SACKS**, pg. 28

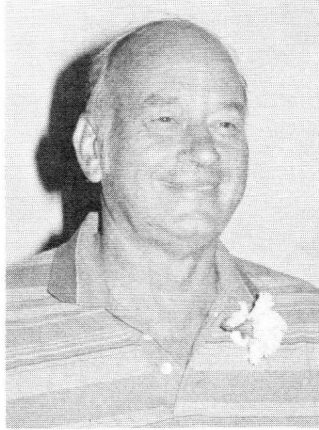
1986-87 OFFICERS INSTALLED

New officers who will head the Calaveras County Historical Society during 1986-87 were installed at a July 24 dinner meeting in the Metropolitan Dinner Theater, in San Andreas.

Installed to serve second terms as President and Vice-President were Lorraine Kennedy and Don Cuneo, of San Andreas.



President
Lorraine Kennedy



Vice-President
Don Cuneo

Others who took office included Ruth Matson, Treasurer; Carmenne Poore, Recording Secretary; Lillian Fillippini, Membership and Financial Secretary and George Beeman, who joins the Society's Board of Directors.

Jack Burns, chairman of the Calaveras County Board of Supervisors, served as installing officer.

Burns, a member of a pioneer Calaveras County family, spoke briefly, outlining the history of his family in Calaveras County and the Mother Lode.

OATH OF OFFICE—
From left to right the new officers include Directors Richard Barger, Fred Cuneo, Rosemary Faulkner, George Beaman, Lillian Filippini, Carmenne Poore, Ruth Matson, Don Cuneo, Lorraine Kennedy, and installing officer Jack Burns.



1867 COPPEROPOLIS FIRE

South Copperopolis, then known as the Plaza area, burned in 1867, leaving only the Honisberger Store, Hensel's storeroom and portions of the Masonic Hall.

The blaze claimed the life of George McAllister, who had arrived that day from San Francisco to work in the Union Mine.

The structures which did not burn were spared only because they were of stone, brick or adobe. The Armory, in which troops trained during the Civil War, today serves as a community center.

The fire broke out on the night of Aug. 28, 1867, in the luxurious Copperopolis Hotel, owned by Luke Kelly.

Flames spread through the hotel, other buildings in the plaza and jumped the street, to destroy a tin shop, Cutler & Emery's Store, telegraph and express offices, Person's Stables, the Wedge Saloon and several other buildings.

The fire crossed Union Street and burned buildings there, including the office of the Copperopolis Courier, the Braids' dwelling and a blacksmith shop.

But, fires which have endangered Copperopolis have not all been confined to the 19th century.

On Sept. 19, 1958, a fire started when camping equipment on a deer hunter's pickup truck ignited and burned 7,000 acres.

Local residents and forestry firefighters saved the town by backfiring.

ARCHITECTURAL AWARDS, cont. from pg. 21

Society's July dinner meeting in the Metropolitan, in San Andreas. Other members of the committee included O.L. Kenyon, George and Lucy Schwoerer, of Valley Springs; Shirley Huberty, of San Andreas; Jack and Lorraine Kennedy, of San Andreas and Burton and Winnie Alexander, of Mountain Ranch.

The Joses family home on Whisky Slide Road, a mile west of Mountain Ranch, was built and used as a store and dwelling by D. Sullivan during the early 1850's



Joses Home at Mountain Ranch



Lund Johnson Home in Murphys

when that area and community was known as El Dorado.

The Joses family acquired the old ranch home in 1924, and added improvements. However, it was not until 1979 that Doug and Loree Joses undertook their major restoration project.

In addition to refurbishing the exterior of the rambling, stone and wood structure, Doug and Loree totally rebuilt and restored the upstairs of the old home, making it into separate living quarters.

Each board was numbered, removed, refinished and then replaced before the project was completed.

The Johnson home in Murphys, at 713 Sheep Ranch Road, is built on the exact spot and has the exact same exposure as the Kaler home, of which it is a replica.

The Johnsons built the replica only after it was determined by architects and builders that the original dwelling which Kaler built for his bride in 1863, was beyond restoration.

The new building, which is essentially a twin of the original utilizes most of the doors and hardware from the original Kaler home.

George Haight, who once lived in the original Kaler house, served as architect for the Johnsons in designing the replica.

The Brosemer Building, at 1265 South Main Street, in Angels Camp is a two-story wood and brick

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Brosemer Building, Main Street, Angels Camp

CALAVERAS FIRE PROTECTION, cont. from pg. 21

Gap, east of West Point and at Creighton Station, near the old Mayflower School. Each station was manned by an assistant ranger.

Later, Greves was responsible for setting up fire suppression camps in San Andreas, Murphys and Rail Road Flat. Camp foremen received \$50 per month and firefighters \$25 per month and board.

These camps were phased out in 1933 with the formation of the Civilian Conservation Corps (the CCC) which provided the needed manpower for fire fighting purposes.

Three CCC camps were located at Chee Chee Flat, near Mountain Ranch, at Murphys and at Rich Gulch.

The first State Forestry office in Calaveras outside of a private home was opened in 1930 at 48 North Main Street, in San Andreas.

Rent for this office, then called the "Early Building," was \$10 per month.

Also in 1930, Greve and Dave Serra, who had been hired as an assistant ranger in 1929, began scouting lookout sites and settled on Quigg's Mountain, later named Sierra Vista.

The first Sierra Vista lookout was a 125-foot sugar pine, which on a windy March day in 1931, they topped at a height of about 75 feet, and built a crow's nest on it.

The crow's nest was reached by climbing a ladder

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structure which has been in the ownership of that family since it was acquired in 1889 by Andrew Brosemer, a foreman at the Utica Mine.

Over the years its ground floor served at various times as a dry goods store, butcher shop, men's clothing store and most recently, a video shop. Its upstairs provided offices for doctors and lawyers, and in recent years, as local office of Pacific Gas and Electric.

Will Brosemer and his sister, Betty Weider, spared no pains to retain authenticity in the restoration of the old building. After refinishing the floors and installing authentic iron railing around its balcony, they refaced the front of the building with bricks of the 1860's which they obtained in Sonora.

Presently, the Brosemer Building houses an antique store.

Each of this year's award winners has been presented with an engraved brass plaque.

TRIBUTE TO OUR RETIRING EDITOR

No individual has demonstrated greater dedication or devoted more time and energy to the success of Las Calaveras than has Willard P. Fuller, Jr. who retired June 30 after 21 years as editor of this publication.

Geologist, mining engineer, writer and Mother Lode historian, "Bill" Fuller not only has chronicled the events of Calaveras County's past, but has encouraged others to do the same.

Thus, the pages of Las Calaveras under Fuller's stewardship have provided this and future generations a window through which they may observe with undistorted view, the history of events and ways of life of early Calaveras County settlers.

For Fuller, like every student of history, knows that only the written word endures — that events not recorded in writing too quickly become lost, distorted or relegated to the realm of myth.

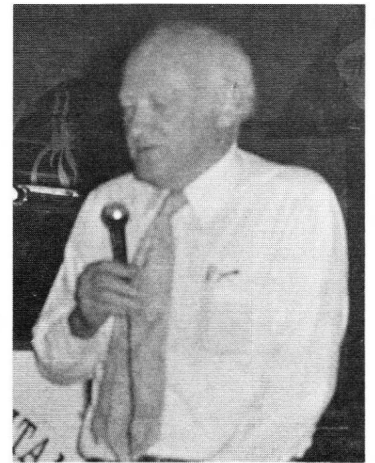
He has captured on the printed page and with photography, memories of the Gold Rush era and the succeeding years that otherwise would have been lost forever.

Mining and the history of mining in the Mother Lode have been Bill Fuller's first loves, but his history gathering has covered a broad range and every facet of Calaveras County pioneer life.

In recent years he also has assumed the responsibilities of Executive Office Director for the Historical Society and although he has given up the Las Calaveras editorship, he will remain as office director.

The members of the Calaveras County Historical Society and the people of Calaveras County owe Willard Fuller and those who worked with him in publication of the Las Calaveras, a debt of gratitude.

Under his leadership Las Calaveras has become recognized as one of the Mother Lode's leading historical publications.



Willard P. Fuller, Jr.

CALAVERAS BIG TREES THREATENED BY FIRES

*(From information and first hand accounts provided
by Frances Bishop and Charles Valente)*

Twice early in this century, the famed Calaveras Big Trees North Grove felt the devastation of man-made fires.

In 1908 and again in 1921, major fires swept into the North Grove but were suppressed before wreaking irreparable damage.

Fire which ignited the top of the Mother of the Forest in September, 1908, started from sparks from a donkey engine at Manuals Mill in the lower end of Moran Meadow, a half-mile south of the present park boundary.

The summer had been hot and dry and when sparks landed in the dry grass, fire exploded along the road leading toward the North Grove.

The mill crew managed for a time to contain the blaze at the Park's south boundary, but a prevailing afternoon westerly wind fanned a smouldering snag into flames that swept into the North Grove.

The fire ignited the Mother of the Forest and the wind took the flames up the hill beyond the two trees known as "The Orphans," before they were brought under control the next day.

An entry in the Big Trees Hotel register of Sept. 1, 1908, records, "Mother of the Forest on Fire at 7 p.m.," and on Sept. 2, it contained another entry, "Mother of the Forest still burning at 10 a.m."

The huge old tree burned for another two weeks until an early fall rain quenched the fire.

It has been noted that the tree might not have burned at all, had not its fire retardant bark earlier been removed.

Mrs. Bishop notes that the path of the fire still is clearly visible from Fly-In Acres Dam, as the timber that grew back still is much smaller along the route of the fire.

The 1921 fire which endangered the North Grove broke out at mid-day at the Avery Dump on the San Domingo side of Fullen Road.

By nightfall, despite efforts of local fire fighters, it had burned southwest, all the way to Hunters Dam.

The following morning the wind switched and swept the blaze up Love Creek, even though the U.S. Forest Service (still in its infancy) had conscripted

firefighters from Murphys, Angels Camp and surrounding areas to try and stop it.

Charley Valente, of San Andreas, now 86, was working at the Sheep Ranch Mine when Forest Rangers on the third morning of the fire, arrived to pull every man out of the mine and send them to the fire line.

"The only ones left at the mine," he recalls, "was the pump man and the engineer."

"They took 50 or 60 of us and I made several trips hauling men from the mine to the fire in my 1917 Model-T Ford. Some men walked and others rode to the fire in wagons."

"When we arrived, the fire was burning through what is now Blue Lake Springs and we began cutting a line across McGill Ridge. We worked all day and into the next morning clearing a fire line, falling snags, cutting brush and establishing a line we hoped would stop the fire.

"No bulldozers in those days, it was all axe and shovel work," said Charley. "If we came to a downed tree too big to cut, we'd blast it with dynamite."

"On its fourth day the fire seemed to lose some of its intensity and we thought we had it stopped," he said.

"But about 2 p.m. the wind came up again, pushed it right toward us.

The fire came up McGill Ridge, crowning.

There was fire in the tops of the trees a hundred feet ahead of the fire on the ground. Pines were going up in a blast of flame that sounded like a bomb going off.

Some of the men along the center of the line had to run to get away from the blaze. There was so much fuel and the fire was burning so hotly that there was very little we could do," he said.

"We were exhausted, hungry, dead tired. They brought food out for the firefighters but many on the line didn't have a chance to get it. Men were so tired they'd just pull back to some safe spot and fall asleep on the pine needles."

"The fire kept coming up the ridge, right toward the North Grove, and men began saying we were going to lose the Big Trees."

"'We can't stop it,' they said. 'It's gonna' take the North Grove.'"

"But then the wind dropped, humidity began building and the fire lost its heat. By dark, it was burning slowly," he said.

"We pulled back to Squaw Hollow Road, got a backfire going on the morning of the fifth day and that put an end to the fire."

1950'S MELONES FIRE TERMED COUNTY'S WORST

(From the Stockton Record of August 21, 1950)

Calaveras County today took stock of the most disastrous brush fire in its history, which virtually destroyed the historic gold mining community of Melones late Saturday with a loss of approximately \$300,000 in property.

It was one of 11 blazes covering more than 10,000 acres which were battled for 72 hours by hundreds of fire fighters in temperatures ranging up to 110 degrees.

Twenty-two buildings in Melones, including 10 dwellings and all but one of the buildings owned by the Carson Hill Gold Mining Corporation were laid in ruins. The town of Carson Hill, two miles north of Melones, narrowly escaped a similar fate.

Fires during the weekend burned in various parts of the county and the toll of the Carson Hill and Melones fires was 2,500 acres.

Two persons were injured. Jobe Alexander, 58, of Carson Hill, suffered first and second degree burns when trapped by flames which menaced his community.

Jack Barber, 20, a state firefighter from Murphys, severely injured his hand while fighting the Melones fire.

The fire at Melones leveled 12 dwellings, the historic Robinson Ferry Elementary School, two barns, two garages, five office buildings, the cyanide plant and crusher and 2,000 mine timbers belonging to the Carson Hill Mining Corporation.

Among the homes destroyed were two historic

landmarks, the two-story home of Mrs. Percy Woods and of Mr. and Mrs. Mervin R. Woods. Also destroyed was the home in which Mr. and Mrs. Joe Langford and their three children were living, the former home of



Melones Main Street around turn of the century

resident mining company manager Harry Libby, and the William Falls' barn.

Left intact after the fire were Libby's present home, the home of C.W. Stone, and the homes of Clara Sacconella, Lloyd Hines, John DaCosta, John Chadwell, James Drips, D.A. Weston and the Weston store.

Libby estimated damage to the mining company property to be in excess of \$200,000 and that damage to power and telephone lines will amount to another \$50,000.

SHOVELS, WET SACKS, cont. from pg. 22

Valley Springs rancher John Snyder remembers, when in 1925, fire swept down off Bear Mountain, endangering San Andreas.

"Everyone in town, including my Dad, who was a lawyer, closed their offices and stores and went out to fight fire."

Stone remembers during the 1930's when a hawk flew into a power line and set a fire at the Ralaugh Ranch on Reed's Turnpike (now Highway 4) near the edge of town.

"The school kids all took off on the run, beat the fire out with wet sacks and saved the house and barn.

"I've seen this mountain behind Copperopolis burn off at least five times since 1920, and in all the early fires we saved the town by back firing and using wet sacks," said Charley.

There were times in the early days, however, when a fire just couldn't be stopped, he said.

"Between 1906 and 1909 the Mountain Traction Company, using a huge wood burning, iron wheeled tractor, pulled wagons along its own road between the rail head at Milton and Copperopolis.

"It used its own, separate road because its noise and the smoke belching from its smokestack frightened the horses traveling Hunt Road, between Milton and Copperopolis, causing them to bolt.

"The old wood burning engine was notorious for the fires it set with sparks that blew from its chimney. However, the worst fire, which started on the Milton grade when the old engine blew up, burned from Rock Creek to Knight's Ferry on the Stanislaus River before it was finally stopped."

But, big grass fires were not unusual in the early years of this century and before. Willard Tower recalls more than one during the earlier years of this century which burned from a few miles east of Clements all the way to Rock Creek.

The causes of fire were many, says Tower. They ranged from lightning strikes to fires started by sparks from shod horses striking their hooves against rocks in the dry grassland.

Arson, even in those days was not unknown, and Tower once was instrumental in the arrest of two men suspected to setting a series of fires along Highway 26.

But, as the automobile became more common the fire situation in the Western end of the county began to change.

During the years after World War I the larger ranchers, including the Orvis, Groves and Moran Ranches purchased trucks which they equipped for fire fighting.

Some were equipped with a water tank and small pump while others simply had a tank which supplied water to wet the burlap sacks.

Ranchers also had tractors that allowed them to disc around the edge of their property or around their ranch buildings, thus creating an effective fire line.

Stone recalls that Copperopolis residents in the 1920's purchased \$5 subscriptions to buy a 1918 Dodge truck on which water and fire fighting equipment could be hauled.

The Indian brand back pump also had come into being, and that five-gallon container on a man's back along with hand operated pump was an immeasurable improvement over wet sacks.

By 1936 Copperopolis had formed its own fire district and that year the district purchased a VanPelt fire engine built on a Dodge chassis.

The Sam Levin Salvage Company, which in 1937 was stripping out the then closed copper mines, gave some of its employees, including Charley Stone, several hours off each week to attend fire drill.

The coming of the 1930's also saw the State Division of forestry coming into its own as a fire fighting unit, and Ray Greve, in 1930, became Calaveras County's first year-round ranger.

When major fire broke out Greve would arrive with a crew gathered in nearby towns to set up a fire camp and direct the fire fighting operations.

"I was working in the Copperopolis store then," said Stone, and I can remember many a night when Greve got me out of bed to open the store and get supplies for the fire camp he was setting up."

"Fire camp supplies in those days ran mostly to bread, canned beans and sliced lunch meat, but at least it was something for hungry men to eat."

"Times have changed, and now although we sometimes still have some pretty big fires, we have bulldozers, four-wheel drive tanker trucks, helicopters and fire retardant bombers to fight them," Stone said.

"But I can still remember those days of fighting fire when I was a kid. We put out an awful lot of fires with wet sacks."

CALAVERAS FIRE PROTECTION, cont. from pg. 25

spiked to the trunk of the tree, and it served as a lookout until 1934 when the present steel towered Sierra Vista Lookout was built.

Don Wriggley was the first lookout stationed at Sierra Vista "and he used to go scooting up that ladder like a squirrel," recalls Serra.

Serra and his wife, Mary, now retired and living in San Andreas, served as lookouts at Sierra Vista during the fire seasons of 1932 and 1933.

"There was no fire finder, no binoculars and at first, no telephone," said Serra. "When we spotted a fire we had to jump into the car and drive to a phone to report it."

Later, Serra with a CCC crew, installed a one-wire telephone line from the lookout to San Andreas.

He and Mary lived in a tiny cabin beneath the lookout which they manned seven-days-a-week except for one afternoon each week when they drove to town for groceries and mail. Water was hauled to the lookout from a spring on the Doster Ranch.

During those years, from 1929 to 1934, Earl Barron was in charge of the ranger unit which encompassed Calaveras, Tuolumne and Mariposa Counties.

It was Barron, who with his brother, later invented the Barron fire fighting tool, a combination wide bladed hoe and rake used for the cutting of fire trails.

During those early years there was only a single State Forestry fire truck, stationed in Placerville, for use in El Dorado, Amador, Calaveras and Tuolumne Counties, that was available for wild land fires in Calaveras.

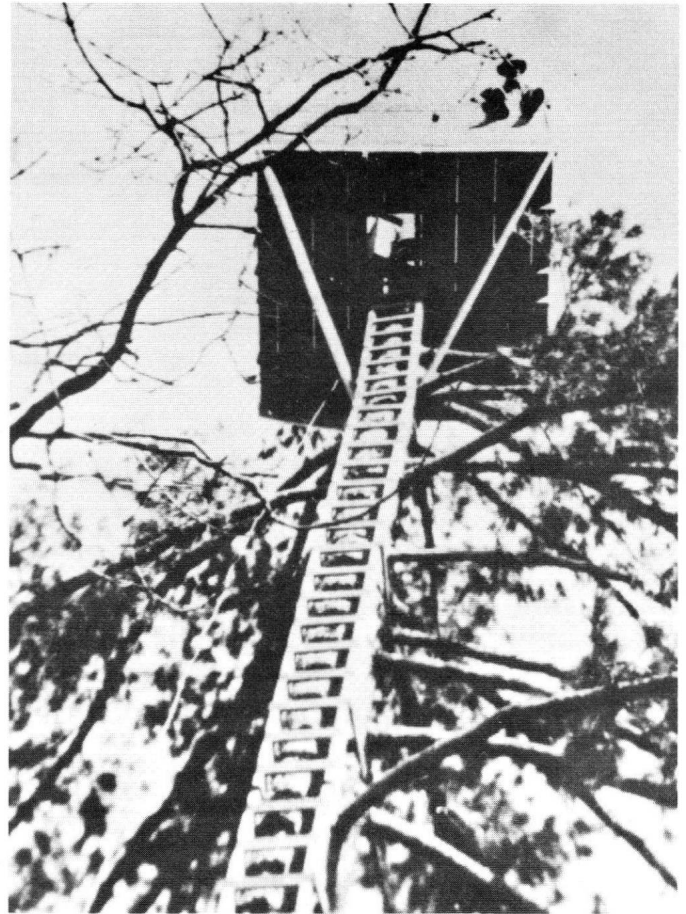
"Because of the demand for it during the summer months, it wasn't very often that it got to a fire in Calaveras County," said Serra.

One of the few times the truck made it to Calaveras was in the summer of 1929 when a fire started at the Steele Ranch, on Pool Station Road, at the same time a fire started at the DeMartini Ranch, on the south side of Hogan Reservoir.

The fire burned for six days and six nights, destroyed the Steele home and burned off most of Bear Mountain, but the truck prevented the fire from burning south and threatening Copperopolis.

One of the principal responsibilities of assistant rangers, when fires broke out, was to recruit fire fighters off the streets who were paid 40 cents per hour to fight fire.

"Fire camps as we know them were virtually non-existent in those days," recalls retired Calaveras



A close-up of Sierra Vista Pine Tree Lookout ladder.

Ranger Walter Mueller. "We ate sandwiches and slept on the ground."

"The fire trucks all were without cabs and I remember one night as we were coming home from a fire it was so cold riding in that open truck we took up the floor boards so we could get heat off the muffler."

The first forestry fire truck to be permanently stationed in Calaveras was a Dodge purchased in 1939 for which Assistant Rangers Serra and Ray Simms collected donations bolstered with \$100 raised at a dance in Mokelumne Hill.

At that time State Forestry's total vehicular fleet in Calaveras County was a sedan, stake-side truck, the Dodge fire truck which had been purchased with the donations from Van Pelt in Oakdale and a pickup truck which carried water filled 55-gallon drums with which to wet burlap sacks.

It was not until the end of World War II that State Forestry began to become the highly mobilized fire

Calaveras County Historical Society

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The Calaveras County Historical Society, a non-profit corporation, meets on the fourth Thursday of each month at the Grange Hall in San Andreas — except for dinner meetings which are held each quarter at different places in the county.

The Society's office is open on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 8:30 to 5:00. The telephone number is (209) 754-1058. Visitors are welcome.

CALAVERAS FIRE PROTECTION, cont.

fighting unit it is today.

In 1938 Greve was replaced as Calaveras Ranger by Mac Dixon and a short time later Jim Mace took over serving as head Ranger until 1941.

Fred Herbert was Ranger through the years of World War II and George Ruth then served until 1947, to be replaced by Bert Harris who served for two years.

Jim Fenlon then became head Ranger until 1952 when John Lockhart took over and served until 1957.

Lockhart's State Forestry sedan burned on High Mountain, near Fricot School, during a brush fire and still sits there today as a landmark and remembrance of the early days of State Forestry.

(From information provided by Dave and Mary Serra and Walter Mueller, all of San Andreas.)

NEW MEMBERS

We welcome these new members to the society:

Mr. & Mrs. Vernon Kuellmer

Mr. & Mrs. Hal Truett

Tom Foley

Dan Marcon

Arthur Doeltz

Raymond & Margaret Turner

Ronald & Elizabeth Airola

Barbara Burris

John H. Lemue

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Jessie Voinich

Ruth Halverson

Harry Tuchsén

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