

of the
Tuolumne County
Historical Society
Sonora, California

Hours:

Museum:

Tues. & Thurs. (10-4)

Wed. (1-4)

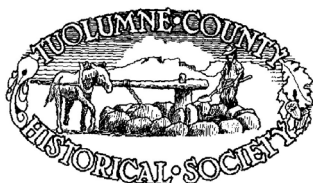
Fri. & Sat. (10-3:30)

History Research
Center (HRC):

Tues.-Fri. (9:00-4:00)

Welcome New Members:

William Fenstermacher
Ann Segerstrom



Letter from the President

Sonora Fire Alarm System Addendum

The article Pat Perry wrote in the Nov-Dec *Historian* about Sonora's old fire alarm system and the picture of the old alarm card brought back childhood memories of hearing that alarm sound. Thinking about that old alarm system made me realize what a big difference in communication systems there is between now and nearly a hundred years ago. Today we live in the "Telecommunications Age," with almost instant access to news via the Internet, and with cell phones providing voice, text, and video. Within minutes these days, anyone with a cell phone can receive a fire alert that includes the exact location of the fire, the response in progress, and, in many cases, a video.

Given our current level of information access, it is understandable that most people would not grasp the need and usefulness of a horn-based fire alarm system. Back in the 1920s, when this system was installed, on through the 1950s, '60s, and '70s, there was not only no Internet or wireless telecommunication, there were also fewer wired telephones. Although televisions became more common in the 60s, there was no cable TV. Not all homes had telephones, and the ones that did usually had only one. The phone line infrastructure was not that built out, and many of the phone lines were "party lines," meaning that you shared the same line with several other people. For many folks, telephone access was the nearest pay telephone booth. The use of telephones to alert the Volunteer Fire Department was just not an effective option in those days.

I remember that back in the 1950s, pretty much every household in Sonora had one of those fire alarm cards somewhere handy. Ours was thumbtacked on the inside of a kitchen cabinet door. In addition to directing the volunteer firefighters to the location of the fire, the coded alarm also alerted the rest of townspeople. My family lived up on Elks Hill at that time and we had a great view of the town of Sonora. When the fire horn started blaring, we would check the alarm card to find what street the fire was on and then go out in the front yard to look in that direction to try to see where the smoke was coming from. Soon after the alarm started, we would hear the sirens on the Fire Department's two trucks as they sped through town. Ideally, the rest of the volunteer firemen would converge on the scene as the trucks arrived and put out the fire as best they could. It seemed like many of the fires happened at night or in the early morning, which added to the sense of emergency. I remember a few evening house fires since we could see the flames burning on the other side of town. That blaring horn fire alarm not only alerted everyone to the fire, it added to our sense of community and shared fire danger.

An additional use of the fire horn was as the noon alert. Every day at noon the horn would sound one long blast, which let the people of Sonora and the surrounding area know exactly what time it was. Another childhood memory was when I was five years old and walking up Washington Street with my mother. We just happened to be directly across the street from the Fire Department when that horn went off. It was the loudest sound I can remember ever hearing. My knees buckled, I almost fell over, and it just about scared the you-know-what out of me. I never forgot that moment, and throughout the rest of my youth in Sonora, I was always careful to be aware of where I was around noon, so I wouldn't get that startled again.

Those fire horns were still in use in the early morning hours of January 27, 1970, when the last big downtown Sonora fire occurred in the area now occupied by Coffill Park. At that time, my wife and I lived on Fir Drive, with no view of Sonora. The fire horns started blaring around 4:00 or 5:00 a.m. That early in the morning, we just wanted to turn over and go back to sleep, but the horns just kept going on and on, along with lots of sirens, indicating that some-

Cont. on page 4

Mississippi House

By Sherrin Grout

At the “Y” intersection of Mountain Brow and Shaws Flat Road, on the north-west side, the remains of a concrete water trough mark the spot of what was once one of the most iconic buildings in Tuolumne County. Located across from the Shaws Flat Bell and the Mark Twain-Bret Harte monuments, the Mississippi House was a hotel, stage stop, store, courtroom, and post office.

Shortly after Shaws Flat was founded in 1850 by Mandeville Shaw, Albert Bulderdeick built the large wooden structure. He was the first postmaster at Shaws Flat. In a 1986 article in the *Union Democrat*, Russell Frank writes about an 1858 store ledger listing purchases, such as oysters, codfish, mackerel, brooms, pencils, twine, blasting powder, fuses, shovels, gold pans, socks, boots, overalls, drawers, and shirts, by the name of the purchaser, the date, and the amount owed.

- ♦ Isaac Williams bought pork, beans, crackers on April 5, 1858, and paid cash.
- ♦ On April 15, 16, and 17, J. Newton bought sugar, butter, bread, coffee, candles, matches, and soap for \$3.26.

Frank Cardinelli sold the building, stock of merchandise, and liquor to John Ratto in February 1904. In 1907, Ratto made improvements to the building, including adding a warehouse on the north side. In celebration, he sponsored a dance, the first in Shaws Flat in fifteen years, since the Ar-



Tuolumne County Museum TP18823

A “NRA” sign can be seen on the building. Note the visible bowl gas pumps in front and the yoke hanging from the sign—past and present signs of transportation.



Tuolumne County Museum P25064

John Ratto with 1920s truck in front of the Mississippi House.



Tuolumne County Museum TP18559

Mississippi House with water trough.

mory Hall was torn down. Another dance, in 1908, was advertised as a supper for fifty cents, with a dance badge costing an additional fifty cents.

As a saloon owner, Ratto had at least one run-in with the law during Prohibition, when he admitted to owning fifty-five gallons of liquor hidden at the neighboring Frost Ranch. At some point, Ratto added gasoline pumps—in 1924, advertising Red Crown Gasoline, especially useful as the business was on the main road from Angels Camp to Sonora. When Highway 49 was rerouted in the 1930s, the business slowly went downhill. John Ratto died in 1951; the building was torn town in the late 1990s.

"Too Much Chocolate Is Never Enough!"

To complement the recent *Chispa* article "A Sweet Life," Janice Nelson will expand on the details of chocolate and candymaking at the **Wednesday, January 10**, program at the **Tuolumne County Library** on Greenley Road. The program will begin at **3:00 p.m.** This is your chance to ask all those questions about candymaking!

The Columbia Candy Kitchen, operated by five generations of the Nelson family, opened its doors in 1923, when Julius and Pauline Naegele renovated the former bank of D. O. Mills on Main Street in Columbia. When the Naegeles decided to retire, Rex Nelson became the confectioner, as noted in the 1940 article in the *Tuolumne Independent*.

In the 1970s, the business moved a few doors north on Main Street, giving it increased retail space and open-viewing to see the candymaking process. The marble tables, from the quarries of Columbia, were all moved to the refurbished space.

In "A Sweet Life," Janice describes a "normal" day of a confectioner—such as whipping three dozen egg whites to a stiff texture for a frappé. Come hear other fascinating stories Janice has to share.

NAEGELE'S CANDY KITCHEN CHANGES HANDS

Naegele's candy kitchen in Columbia, conducted for a number of years past by Mr. and Mrs. J. C. Naegele changed hands this summer and the new proprietors, Mr. and Mrs. Rex Nelson assumed charge of the business when it reopened recently for the winter season. Mr. and Mrs. Naegele, who have worked hard to supply their many patrons who came from all parts of California, will take a much needed rest. They are building a new home in Columbia. The Nelsons have been associated with Mr. and Mrs. Naegele in the operation of the candy kitchen for several years past.

Tuolumne Independent
Oct. 3, 1940

THE FAMOUS COLUMBIA CANDY KITCHEN

Located in the Historic Gold Rush Town of Columbia, California, this building still stands since 1854, being one of the first fireproof buildings of the town. Gold was discovered here on March 27, 1850 and the population grew to 15,000 by 1851. Now a California State Park, having been restored and preserved for future generations. The home of the first bank, operated by D. O. Mills; the first public utilities office, the Tuolumne County Water Co. and one of California's first Post Offices. These and many other historic points, make this town well worth a visit.

MILLS BUILDING, HOME OF
GOLD RUSH CANDIES PURE AS GOLD
HAND MADE CANDIES OF THE PUREST AND
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RECIPES AS OLD AS THE TOWN
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Mrs. C. Rex Nelson, Proprietor
Phone JEFFERSON 2-7886
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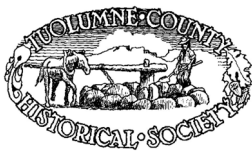
POST CARD

Address



Tuolumne County Museum
2023.29.12

Columbia Candy Kitchen Post Card
Note the phone number.



**TUOLUMNE COUNTY
HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

158 Bradford Street
SONORA, CA 95370-4920

ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

*The Mission of the Tuolumne County
Historical Society shall be to discover, collect,
preserve, and disseminate knowledge about
the history of Tuolumne County and
the State of California.*

Non-Profit Organization
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Sonora, California

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Tuolumne County Museum & History Research Center

158 Bradford Street, Sonora, CA 95370

Museum: 209-532-1317—History Research Center: 209-532-4227

<http://tchistory.org>, info@tchistory.org

New Exhibit at the Museum This Spring!

“Telling Stories of Mexican California: Real Life & Myth Making”

Developed and organized by the California Historical Society and Exhibit Envoy, with institutional support provided by San Francisco Grants for the Arts and Yerba Buena Community Benefit District, this traveling exhibit will be described in more detail in the next issue of the *Historian*. For more information, go to <http://tchistory.org>.

Make plans to visit the Museum—April 7—June 2, 2024.

Cont. from page 1—Letter from the President

thing serious was happening. We finally got up, checked the card, and saw the fire was on Washington Street. So we got in the car and drove downtown, along with many other locals, to watch the center of Sonora, including Central Motors and twelve other businesses, go up in flames. That was the last fire in Sonora that I can remember hearing the alarm sound—except for what seemed like an increasing number of pranksters pulling false alarms. By 1980, according to Pat’s article, the system was obsolete and taken out of use.

Chuck Holland

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