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(Editor’s Note: Courtney Ferguson is EMPA's Outreach Coordinator who kindly agreed to write this column for EMPA President Jim Coe, who is scheduled to return soon.)

123rd MINERS PICNIC –
Old Gold and New Fun
By Courtney Ferguson

While each special event we host at the Park has its own character and purpose, none can compete with Miners Picnic for longevity and history.

Courtney Ferguson
(All photos with this article by Richard Bannister)

The first one was held on June 5, 1895 at Ismert’s Grove and Glenbrook Park. However, I learned lots more when I read the yellow-covered booklet for sale in the Gift Shop. It’s called “The Miners Picnic, A Legacy,” and what a gem it is! Based on information gleaned from The Union and gathered by members of the Research Group, it’s a fascinating account of this annual event – certainly one of the longest-running in Nevada County.

Early picnics raised funds for miners’ widows and orphans, as well as injured and out-of-work miners. It was a big-hearted event – and so important that local businesses shut down for the occasion. Visitors were encouraged to enjoy a picnic lunch on the stately grounds. One popular activity was a waltz contest, where the winning couple won prizes such as a new dress or a box of cigars. More outrageous competitions featured Cornish wrestling – and even fat-baby contests – creating a carnival-like atmosphere.

Let’s fast forward to Miners Picnic 2018. It’s still a big-hearted event, but instead of raising funds for miners’ widows and orphans, now it’s a chance to celebrate both our gold mine past and our Park.

In spite of the fact that our Living History team and all our docents were coming close to the end of a long-and-busy season, they rallied to support this (continued on page 3)
REVISITING THE OWL RESTAURANT

By Caryl Fairfull

In our Cottage Living History stories, we often mention The Owl Tavern in Grass Valley. It has been a part of local history until August of 2017, when it abruptly closed and was subject to some vandalism. In order to revisit The Owl and all its history, I visited the Searls Historical Library and the Doris Foley Library in Nevada City. Pat at Searls, directed me to the University of California, Riverside, Historic Newspaper Project. It was fun to be able to see old articles at my fingertips. The Owl has had a history of several closures, like the one we are now experiencing. We look forward to when the new owners, Nate Overstreet and Ashly Amadore, open The Watershed, and to seeing how they have preserved the history.

Let’s turn back the clock and revisit The Owl. The current building was built of brick in 1857, two years after the Grass Valley fire that burned down the entire business district. The new building was first used as Montgomery’s Bank, and sold to Patrick Murphy, who renamed it “The Bank Exchange Saloon” in 1887. It was apparently named The Owl around 1896 by Billy Tuttle, about the time the Empire Cottage was completed. It was renamed The Owl Tavern because it was open 24 hours a day and miners stopped by after their shifts. Legend has it that the current restaurant side of the space was originally a Levi Strauss store. Men could buy pants and then buy a pastie at the bar to put in their pocket and go to work. The Blight family owned the saloon 1907-1921. First father and son, Sam and Joseph Blight, owned the Saloon. Later, Joseph and his brother, Thomas, owned the Saloon and improved the food and liquor selections.

In those days, only men visited taverns and they would stand at the bar to drink. They had spittoons for the men to spit and had a trough for the men to relieve themselves as they drank whiskey. Therefore, women were not allowed in the bar, and had to use the side entrance to avoid a shocking indiscretion at the bar.

During prohibition the focus was on food sold out the front window. It included popcorn, ice cream and root beer. Liquor was moved to a discreet place downstairs and business continued. During that time The Owl Tavern was purchased by a boxer named Charles Oliver, who owned it for 30 years, which would be until about 1950. Jack Dempsey, the famous boxer, was his friend, and often drank with him and owned a speakeasy down the street. I found the obituary of Lambert J. Oliver dated May 1, 1938; he was noted to be a co-owner of the tavern at the time of his death. Perhaps he was related to Charles. In 1954, William and Ethel Oliver were registered to vote at the address of the Owl, 132-34 Mill St., so it seems it was still in the family.

In 1968, Les Young, an Air Force vet, purchased the tavern and added a broiler to improve the steaks. He decorated the place with tables made of beams from local mineshafts (do you think there were any from Empire?) and paneling from water flumes. When the bar and restaurant was connected by removing a wall, the wall was four bricks thick.

In The Union “Hundred Years Ago Today” feature dated November 20, 2008, there was a statement “the Owl installed a National Cash Register that registers cash, checks, overcharges and cash out. It corrects mistakes and prints out the results.” The wonders of modern machines! It was still there in 2012 when the picture shown on page 8 was published in The Union.

(continued on page 8)
123RD MINERS PICNIC (continued from page 1)

memorable event – held just three weeks after our “Mine, Wine & Dine” fundraiser. I couldn’t help but wonder what triggered this new wave of energy. Perhaps Event Chair Steve Sanchez’ high-octane enthusiasm was the catalyst. Perhaps it was Volunteer Coordinator Lauren Wilson and her Planning Committee’s dedication (more about the Committee on page 4). Whatever the motivation, the 123rd Miners Picnic was one to be proud of! This year, Steve reintroduced a beer garden with craft offerings from the Grass Valley Brewing Company.

We welcomed around 1,000 visitors. Once again, our good friends, the talented Stamp Mill Stompers, kicked off the day with that “new-fangled” Dixieland they play. The Forte Miners barbershop quartet performed impeccable vintage vocals, while our own music docents, Celtic Joy, added to the fun. Another of our docents, Nancy Cunningham, conducted two sing-alongs for children – with resident mountain man, George Steger and banjo-playing blacksmith Bill Heck joining in. Volunteer trail walker Tad Kitada and his wife Diane played engaging old-time music, while one-man band Gary Hinze played country favorites near the mine shaft. Magician Peter Franchino dazzled visitors with magical feats (and shared a few secrets) near the Clubhouse, while colorful Ray Ray the Clown made balloon sculptures for the children. Izzi Tooinsky performed “A Toymaker’s Journey Through the Gold Rush” on the special stage, followed by a first-time appearance at one of our events by local band Midnight Acoustic. The Cottage featured mellow music by Blended Metal Saxophones, followed by another new-to-Empire group, the gals-with-ukes band, the Yubaleles. Costumed BLM donkey, Scarlett entertained visitors, and the mini-donkeys (with their mini-horse friend) were all dressed to go prospecting.

Of course, there was the explosive Mine Rescue Reenactment at high noon – plus the popular Cakewalk and Silent Auction, with a creative choice of items to bid on, including a ride to school in a fire truck. As always, our Blacksmiths drew a crowd with their skills and stories. Jerry and Goldie Levitz kindly donated beautiful jewelry as our top raffle prize again this year. With special children’s activities, exhibits, food (including homemade pasties by Three Gingers Baking Company of Penn Valley), the 123rd Miners Picnic offered something for everyone to enjoy.

I have to give my personal thanks to Sherry Sanchez for sharing her time and talent with us to create our programs and promotional materials.

Heartfelt thanks goes to each and every one of you who put in extra effort to set up, take down – attend the event – and make it outstanding. While Miners Picnic is a treasured tradition, it remains a rare combination of gold history and new ways to show our pride in our Park.
SPECIAL THANKS TO THE 123RD MINERS PICNIC COMMITTEE

By Courtney Ferguson

Headed by Park Volunteer Coordinator Lauren Wilson, these are the people who helped make this event memorable:

    Steve Sanchez
    Kathy Files
    Patty Gizzi
    Marsha Lewis
    Donna Mattson
    Virginia A. Simpkins
    Jan Sweringen
    Courtney Ferguson

Heartfelt appreciation goes to this group – as well as to all the volunteers who helped with parking, in the Mine Yard, Cottage, Clubhouse, Beer Garden, and in the Gift Shop – and throughout the Park. Your efforts made this an exceptional event.
EMPIRE MEN AT THE ARGONAUT MINE DISASTER

By Gage McKinney

Late on a Sunday night in August 1922, deep in the Argonaut Gold Mine in Jackson, California, men caught a whiff of burning timbers – fire! – the most feared word in mining. Three men escaped on a skip hoisted through the flames at the 3,000-foot level, but far below, 47 others were trapped.

As the smoke crept down the shaft, carried by the ventilation system, the 47 sought refuge in a cross-cut off at the 4,350-foot level. They built a bulkhead against the choking odor, using waste rock, loose wood, discarded dynamite boxes and the clothes they were wearing. They retreated 25 feet and put up a second bulkhead, trying to seal themselves from the carbon monoxide coming towards them.

In the wee hours of Monday, August 28, men were fighting the fire from the surface, pouring water down the shaft. Before dawn, the U. S. Bureau of Mines District Engineer dispatched rescue equipment to the Argonaut and telegraphed for more equipment from Nevada.

At 7:00 p.m., a rescue team from Grass Valley, composed of men from the Empire and North Star Mines, left for Amador County. It was an arduous drive on the roads of that era, but they arrived in time to help fight the still-burning fire. Wearing scuba-like gear with a tank containing a two-hour supply of oxygen, they descended into the mine with hoses. When the fire was out, they stayed to help open a rescue tunnel into the Argonaut from a neighboring mine.

The Grass Valley all-volunteer team included: H. Crouch, Fred Carter, Thomas Evely, Robert Jeffrey, M. Cartonni, Alex Lindsay, Harry Cordell, Phil Moore, Thomas James, William Hooper, Jerry Worthington, Darrel Kitts and J. H. Kendall. “The Grass Valley boys all did splendid work and at no time hesitated to do anything that was asked of them,” said Crouch, safety engineer from the Empire.

The Grass Valley men weren’t the only rescuers. Rescue teams came from mines dotting the Mother Lode and even from Nevada and Arizona. The rescuers who weren’t immediately needed, gathered about the headframe of the mine, mingling with relatives of the men trapped below.

In Grass Valley, people read reports from the Argonaut Mine each morning and many gathered around The Union newspaper office for updates throughout the day. For three weeks the reports alternated between hope and despair. More than once the newspapers gave up the 47 for dead. More than once hope revived based on supposed signals from the miners below and conjecture they had found a seam of air.

At last a rescue team broke through the first bulkhead erected by the trapped men. They tested the air behind the second bulkhead by inserting a caged canary through the wall. When the cage was withdrawn, the bird lay lifeless at the bottom. On the 22nd day the story broke in newspapers across the country: “Bodies are located in the Argonaut Mine.” A subsequent investigation determined the 47 had suffocated within three hours of being trapped.

Grass Valley had its own mine fires, especially at the Idaho in 1894, Brunswick in 1908, W.Y.O.D. in 1912 and North Star in 1936. In those instances, frightened miners escaped through secondary routes to the surface. Miners weren’t so lucky at the Idaho in 1889 where three died. The Argonaut’s 47 died in the worst gold mining disaster in American history. Their story is told by O. Henry Mace in the book 47 Down, available in the Nevada County Library.
NEWS OF OUR FRIENDS

(Editor's note: I recently learned that husband and wife docent team, John and Betty Lucas, would be leaving to volunteer time closer to home. I asked Betty to submit an article about their experiences while volunteering at Empire. The article below is what Betty submitted. We will greatly miss them both, and thank them for their many contributions to the Park.)

We started at Empire Mine State Historic Park in 2013. When we first went to the Park early that year stating that we were interested in being tour guides, the Park Aides at the desk asked if we were interested in doing school tours. Sure, why not. Thus, we became Tour Guides, School Tour Guides, and were involved with Security. The following year we were recruited to join the Clubhouse History program, and our roles expanded to being Co-coordinators with Bob Jennings and, with Bob’s departure, we became the Coordinators.

After experiencing the La Porte Fire in our community of Bangor last October, we have decided to focus our spare time toward needs here in Bangor. I am expanding on the projects offered to the Bangor 4-H Club to include Cooking and the crocheting project is now Yarn and Thread, which will include knitting, embroidery and needlepoint. I have also been elected as the Treasurer for the Butte County 4-H volunteer management unit. Both of us have started helping with the Bangor Community Group that supports the Bangor Hall and Park. John is helping with the maintenance of the building and park and I have been appointed as the organization’s secretary.

We do seem to keep busy around our house and the surrounding five acres with this summer’s project being replacement of our back deck. Since we retired, we have also enjoyed traveling. So far, we’ve managed one major trip per year, and we keep thinking that someday we’ll have time to do more short trips per year. We can always hope anyway.

We truly have enjoyed our time at the Park as volunteers and having the opportunity to share the story of Empire Mine State Historic Park. We have also enjoyed working with other volunteers. We will miss all of you.

John & Betty Lucas

Retirement: so much to do and so little time

HELP WANTED!

This issue of The Empire Star marks the beginning of my fourth year as Editor/Publisher. While I have thoroughly enjoyed this assignment, it is now time to “turn over the reins” to someone else who can bring fresh ideas and perspective. I am hoping/planning to relinquish my direct involvement with producing the newsletter as of January 1, 2019.

I would be very happy to discuss what is involved, and to act as a mentor for an issue or two until the new person feels comfortable with the assignment. It can also be shared by two people, with one serving as editor and the other as publisher. If you are interested in learning more, please contact me via email (la_buenz@hotmail.com), or via telephone at 470-0595. Many thanks for giving this your careful consideration.
Tales from the Tapes
by Jack Laird

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We built a 30 x 90 foot warehouse near the end of the Empire office building about 1950. Before that, we used the lower floor of the office building. The greater part of our supplies was in the warehouse. We had an inventory that was worth $481,000 plus or minus at any one time. We had certain machinery that had high cost to it that raised it that high.

In the warehouse we had to keep parts for all of the drills that were used underground that were constantly being improved.

They told me that if the electricity was off for four hours they would be in water trouble. We had extra motors for the pumps and extra pumps so that if there was a failure they could be replaced immediately so we had to have quite a high inventory just on that account.

We had two different fellows working in the warehouse. I was often working on Newmont explorations, so they had to take care of all of the stores. Sometimes when I was away on short notice one of the engineers would come over and take care of the warehouse.

When I returned, I would have to go through all of the mail and weed out the bills and get them processed. I received all of the bills for what we had purchased. I had to service them first before I took them over to the accounting department.

From an interview of Nancy Nilon Levensaler, George & Libby Starr’s granddaughter. Interview date 6/85.

My grandfather, George Starr, would take me up to his house on Osborn Hill and teach me how to shoot a 22 rifle and a 22 pistol. He would set up targets and taught me how to shoot.

In the early part of summer he would open up the Osborn Hill house which had been closed up for the winter. There would be rattlesnakes there that had made their nests inside the house during the winter. He would take a forked stick to hold them down behind their heads and he would shoot them.

He would go to the house on Osborn Hill every single day to get away from all the women. He would have a long telescope and look over the mountains and hills and read and look and contemplate. He loved the peace and quiet.

The preceding recollections are believed to be true; however, we are relying on the memory of the individual who had such a recollection.
THE OWL RESTAURANT (continued from page 2)

Above photo from The Union, April 1887
(Used with permission.)

Above—left — a picture of the Bar at The Owl from The Union April 11, 1887. It is said to be the bar that came around Cape Horn in 1880 and is still there today. Doesn't look the same to me, but maybe the three mirrors were built into the bar at a later date. It must be only the lower part that was shipped around the Horn. Several articles verified that it arrived in 1880.

At right is the National Cash Register that was noted to be at The Owl since 1908. It is a beauty and still works!

In an email, Nate and Ashley from the Watershed say both will be in place when the restaurant reopens soon.

(Photos from The Union, August 3, 2012. Used with permission.)
Empire Mine State Park
Volunteer Coordinators

Interpretive Coordinators

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Empire Mine Park Association
Thanks to these folks for taking the lead in making the Empire Mine State Historic Park such a unique and enjoyable experience!

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*Not a voting member of the Board.

Special Note: The Board presently has four open Director positions.

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Return Service Requested

THE EMPIRE STAR
This Newsletter is a Cooperative venture between the California Department of Parks and Recreation and the Empire Mine Park Association.

On the web at www.empiremine.org