

COLFAX COBBLESTONES

May/June 2023

Issue 35.2

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June 3rd Meeting and Presentation: Placer County – Past and Present

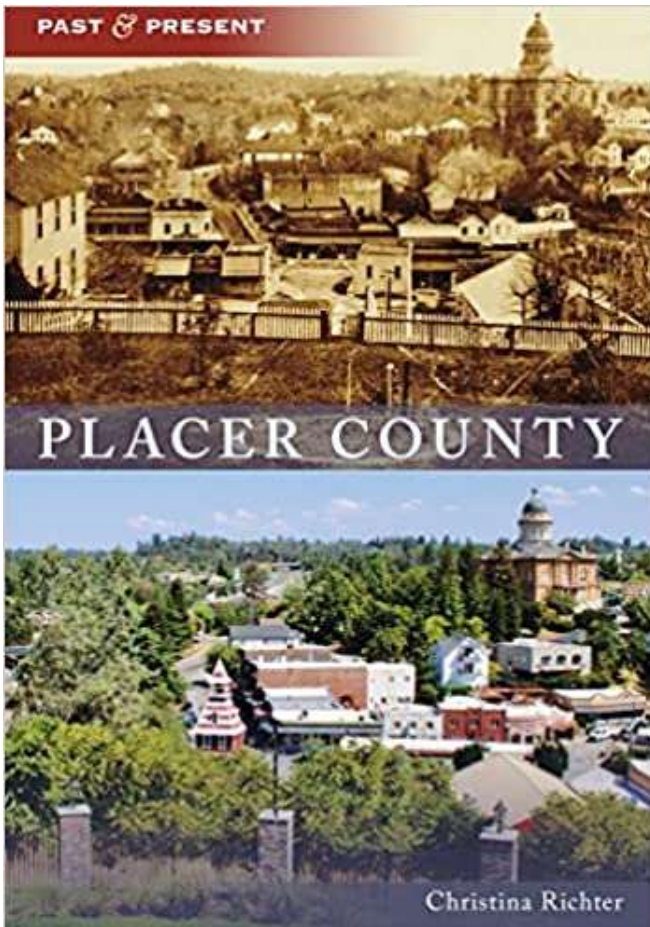
Join us Saturday night, June 3, for a presentation comparing Placer County's past and present, with Christina Richter, the author of the new book, *Placer County (Past and Present)*. Richter is an Assistant with the Placer County Museums and a member of Placer County's Historical Advisory Board.

Saturday, June 3, 2023, 7 p.m.

Colfax Passenger Depot
99 Railroad Street, Colfax, California

There is no charge to attend

Everyone is welcome



Richter's new book places photos from Placer County's past next to current photos of the same locations and scenes.

Copies of *Placer County (Past and Present)* are available to purchase at the Colfax Heritage Museum for \$24 (the same price that Amazon charges). There will also be copies for sale at the presentation.

In addition to writing *Placer County (Past and Present)*, Richter is the co-author of *Walk with me, I want to tell you something – The Story of the Roseville Fiddymint Family* (2013).

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From the CAHS Archives

The Mole People of the Southern Pacific Railroad (1975)

The following article is taken from a *Sacramento Bee* newspaper clipping found in the CAHS Archives collection. The text and captions are printed here as written in the original newspaper account. Originally titled “The Mole People,” it was published on March 2, 1975, page S1.

By Kenneth G. Payton, *Sacramento Bee* staff writer

Norden, Nevada Co. – They don’t mind being called mole people. In fact, they’re kind of proud of it.

“We were called tunnel people once,” said Southern Pacific railroad agent Harry L. Hanns. “We’re mole people though. We live like moles.”

The mole people are railroad workers – and their families – who are responsible for keeping signals and tracks free of ice in 50 snow sheds and tunnels from Truckee to Emigrant Gap.

In a world where snow piles 22 feet deep in the winter, their town consists of one store and a post office beside old Highway 40, connected by wooden tunnels with two-and three-bedroom homes and a 22-man dormitory wistfully called the Woolworth Building.

During the heavy snow period they move from building to building through the tunnels, deep beneath the snow pack. Only one entrance leads from the outside.

Beyond and also connected with wooden tunnels, are the long wooden snow sheds, erected by Chinese workers more than 100 years ago as they helped lay railroad tracks over Donner Summit.

In Tunnel 6, buried on the shoulder of the summit and across the road from Donner Ski Ranch, Danny Carrillo bosses a dozen men who might never see the light of day during an eight-hour

shift of shoveling snow and shooting down icicles with 12-gauge shotguns.



Railroad workers leave their tunnel world in the Sierra.
Photo by Owen Brewer for The Sacramento Bee.

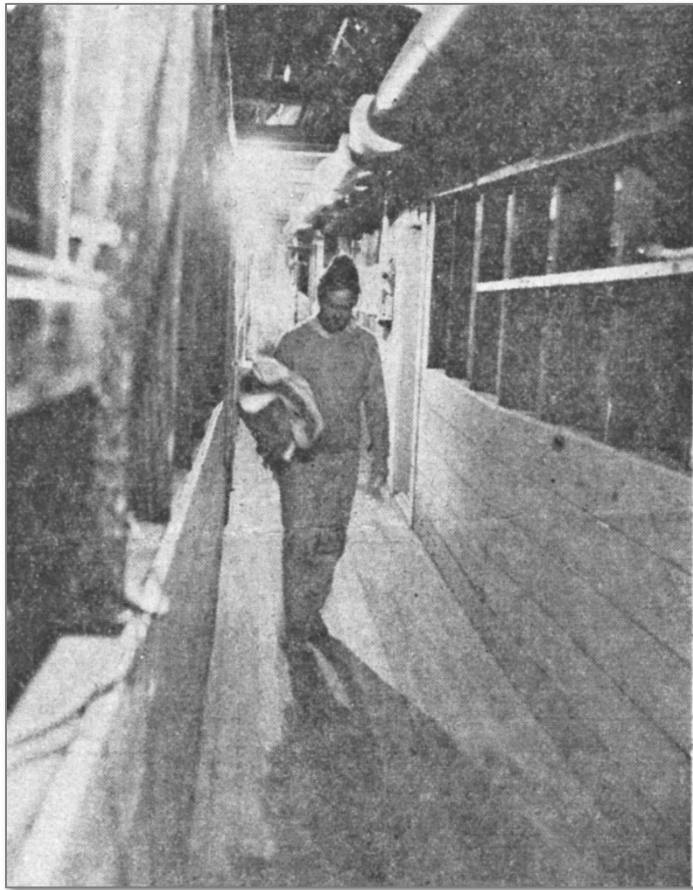
They earn \$36.56 a day and pay SP \$30 a week for food. Their housing is free. Accommodations are in the most isolated place on the SP line. Because of the railroad’s seniority system, only those with the fewest number of years in service work there.

The Gangs have the youngest foreman in the district.

A section hand once chalked “The Mole” above the only entrance to the summit complex.

Today’s 10 feet of snow is about average, according to Hanns. He, his wife and four children have lived here eight years.

“I spent 3-1/2 months here without ever getting out during the 1968-69 season,” Hanns said. “What people overlook is that others pay \$600 to \$700 a month to vacation here, when I, as a working man, can live here.”



Beneath the snow, a railroad employe (sic) walks through a wooden tunnel which connects homes with a dormitory. Photo by Owen Brewer for The Sacramento Bee.

Hanns' housing complex, called the Hilton by another worker comparing it to Tunnel 6 accommodations, consists of 11 houses connected by tunnels. They house three telegraphers, a janitor and maintenance men for water service, bridges and buildings, and signals. And their families.

Only eight children live here now, but that may increase many times as the railroad's seniority system allows men to bump men from job to job.

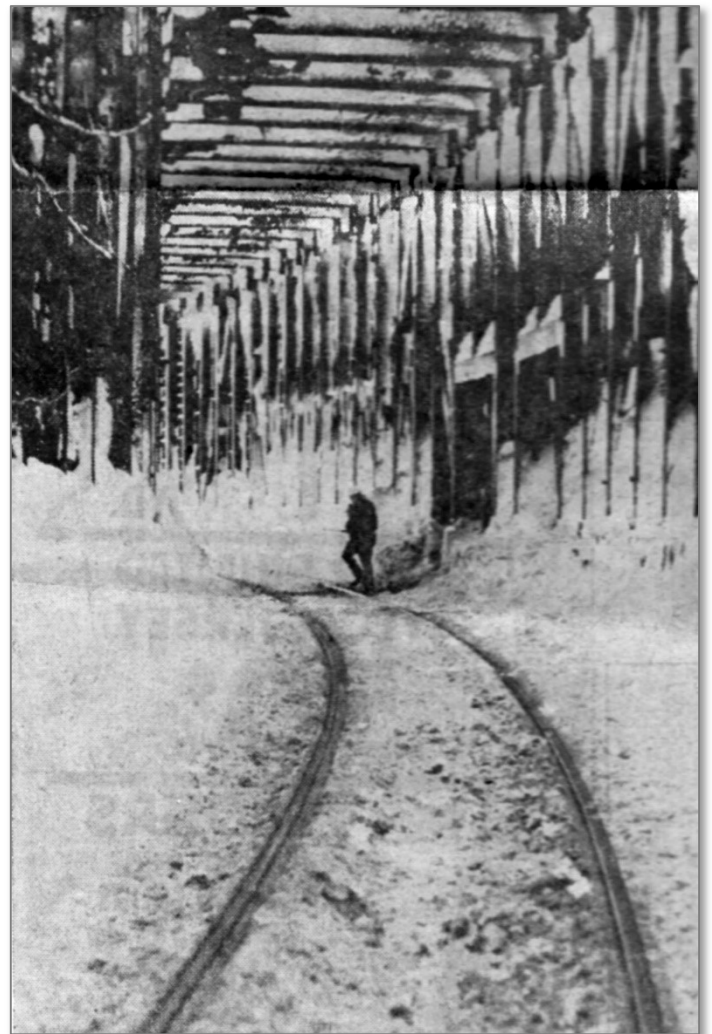
“It takes a special breed of woman to live here,” said Hanns, who requested the job in 1967. “We stock up on groceries for 30 days – just in case –

and have to pack them three blocks when we bring them home. My wife knits, cooks, does a lot of baking.

“We really like it,” Hanns' wife, Mary Louise, said.

“We've had chances to leave but couldn't get the kids away from here. They all ski,” she added as she clicked knitting needles on a half-done wool ski sock.

We just couldn't find a better place to raise kids,” she said. “I don't see where we miss anything. We're just like one big family. In two-room school houses the kids get more attention. They're healthier, and we don't have to look for them because we always know where they are.”



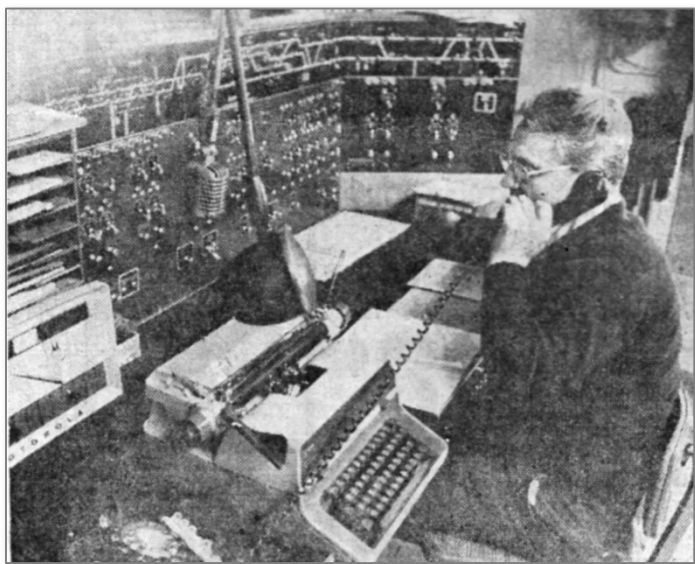
Carrying a shotgun used to shoot down icicles in rock tunnels, a worker plods through an underground winter scene. Photo by Owen Brewer for The Sacramento Bee.

All elementary school children in the Donner Summit area attend a two-room school – at Kingvale – of the Tahoe-Truckee Unified School District.

The SP spent \$16,000 fixing up the inside of the Hanns home but does not paint or maintain the exterior. Hanns has a workshop, four bedrooms, a place for his wife to weave rugs and plenty of room for the children to play chess or run their model trains.

The busiest times are during snowstorms. “Last week we had 10 or 20 avalanches, some 100 to 200 feet long,” Hanns said. “Then we’ve got to get the plows up here from Roseville to keep the tracks open.”

“**You have** to be a little touched in the head,” said one man who lives in Truckee.



SP agent Harry L. Hanns at his console which controls switches and train traffic in the mountains. Photo by Owen Brewer for The Sacramento Bee.

That does not bother most of the people here. Steven Ellis is a nine-year veteran with the SP. “It isn’t so bad now with nine years,” he said. He was doing janitorial chores in the Hilton while his friend Domingo Guerra was on a vacation-sick leave in Mexico. “I get outside. They’re laying off a lot of men, but from four years back.”

Ellis ordinarily works with the Tunnel 6 crew but with nine years seniority he became a temporary janitor. Guerra cannot work in the tunnels. He was once hit in the back with a rail.

Hanns’ title is interlocking tower operator, which is a fancy name for controller of 44 miles of switches and train traffic. His railroading in the winter includes one small window of daylight, a bank of lights and switches telling him where his traffic is and a reinforced concrete snowshed covering the entire Norden depot switchyard.

All of the wooden snow sheds and homes at the depot burned down in the winter of 1961. That was still in the days of steam engines and passenger trains. The depot was rebuilt of concrete to include passenger and even freight loading facilities. They were discontinued in a few years.

Today, from 6,992 feet elevation, crews are dispatched only to keep the tracks open over the mountains and through the tunnels – tunnels like no. 41, which, at two miles in length, is the longest the Chinese built.

Editor’s note: The Chinese did not build Tunnel 41. It was added in 1924 using heavy equipment then available. ◆

Upcoming meetings

August 12: Swend Miller will give his presentation about "The Wright Brothers and How They Developed the Model B Aircraft." We had to postpone this presentation in March, because of a late season snowstorm in Colfax.

October 21: Nancy Hagman's presentation will be about the long history of the Bull and Bear statues that were located next to the Colfax Heritage Museum until recently. This will be an entertaining evening illustrated with great stories and photos.

Please support the local businesses and organizations that support the CAHS

The following local businesses and organizations are members of the Colfax Area Historical Society, and we appreciate their support. We ask you to support them.

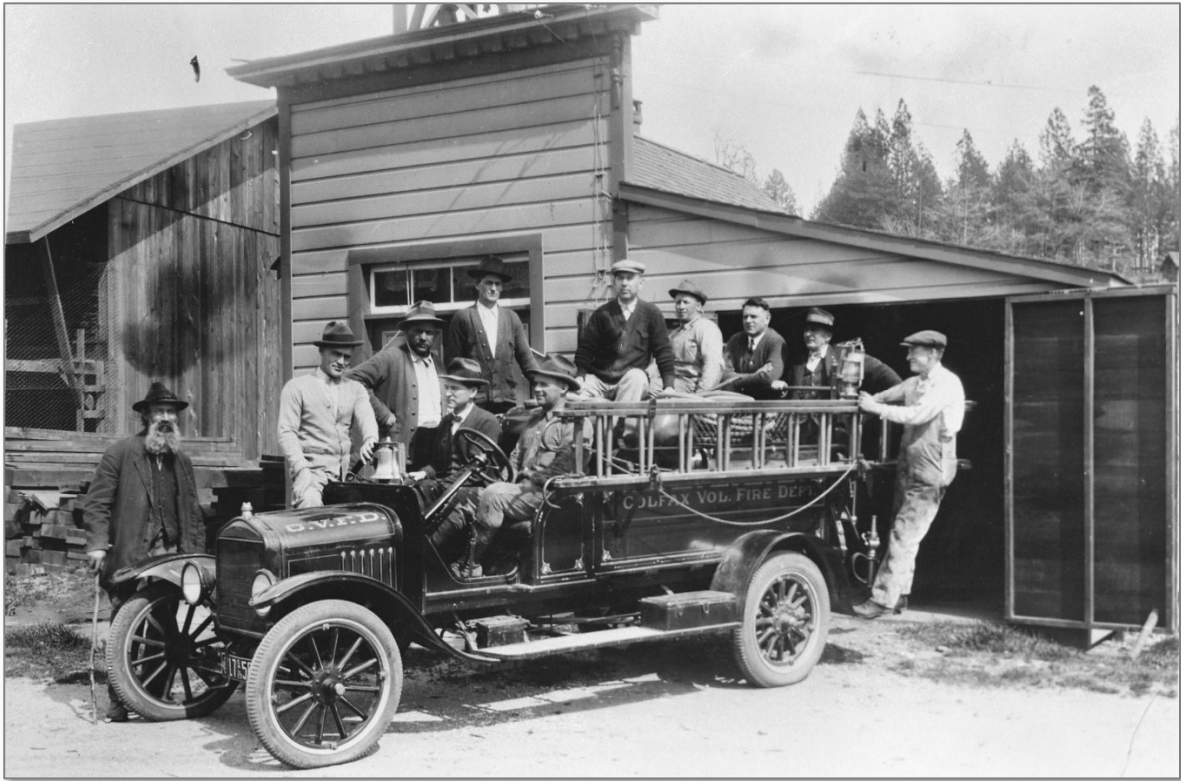
<p>American Legion Colfax Post 192</p> <p>P.O. Box 311 Colfax, CA 95713</p>	<p>Colfax Dental Center</p> <p>120 Whitcomb Avenue Colfax, CA 95713 (530) 346-6244</p>	<p>Colfax Garden Club</p> <p>P.O. Box 1801 Colfax, CA 95713 (530) 346-6215</p>
<p>Colfax General Store</p> <p>6 North Main St. Colfax, CA 95713 rklobner@colfaxnet.com</p>	<p>DACOMM</p> <p>Providing internet service to the Colfax Heritage Museum, Colfax Visitor Center, and businesses and residences throughout the area. DACOMM is “a local company helping the local community and not the corporate giant.”</p> <p>(530) 545-9750 or (530) 210-9918 dacomm.net • support@dacomm.net</p>	
<p>Colfax Lions Club</p> <p>P.O. Box 664 Colfax, CA 95713 facebook.com/ColfaxCALionsClub/</p>	<p>Grace Hubley Foundation</p> <p>24820 Ben Taylor Colfax, CA 95713 gracehubleyfoundation.org</p>	<p>Kurtis H. Fox, M.D., Inc.</p> <p>101 Grass Valley St. Colfax, CA 95713 (530) 346-2281</p>
<p>Sierra Business Services</p> <p>520 South Auburn St, #D Colfax, CA 95713 (530) 346-2455 barbkelly@foothill.net</p>	<p>Sierra Vista Community Center</p> <p>55 School Street Colfax, CA 95713 (530) 346-8726 svcc@colfaxnet.org</p>	<p>VFW Auxiliary Post 2003</p> <p>P.O. Box 1213, Colfax, CA 95713 President: (530) 636-4242</p>

<p>To join the Colfax Area Historical Society, fill out this form and mail it with a check to: CAHS, PO Box 185, Colfax, CA 95713 . Your subscription will begin with the next quarterly issue.</p> <p>Name _____</p> <p>Address _____</p> <p>Address _____</p> <p>City _____ State _____ ZIP _____</p> <p>Email address _____</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> \$20 Individual membership (one person)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> \$25 Family membership (including children)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> \$35 Business or Non-Profit Organization membership (includes an ad in each issue of <i>Colfax Cobblestones</i>)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Go paperless option. We will send a copy of each newsletter to your email instead of mailing you a copy.</p>
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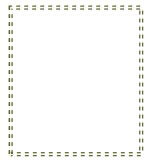
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Membership Chair: Chris Miller

Corresponding Secretary : Not filled at this time
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Museum Director : Irene Allen
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Cobblestones Editor: Dirk Gifford
Webmaster: Dirk Gifford



Colfax Volunteer Fire Dept., 1921, Standing: Ed Atwel; L-R: L.R. Starr, Jack Viscia Sr., N.E. Booth, F.D. Kingsley Sr., Ben Dressen, S.H. Sayre, Walter Viscia, John B McCleary; seated: H.D. Pounds (assistant chief), C.P. Wills (chief). From the Bowers-Keck collection.



The Colfax Area Historical Society

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Colfax CA 95713

Phone: (530) 346-8599

Email: museum.colfax@gmail.com

USPS mail: Mail for both the Colfax Area Heritage Museum and the Colfax Area Historical Society is received at PO Box 185, Colfax, CA 95713.

Museum location: The Colfax Heritage Museum is physically located at 99 Railroad St, Colfax, California, in the restored Colfax Passenger Depot.