

History: Recollections of people on the West Slope

Publisher's note: *This is reprinted with permission from the February 1976 Lake Tahoe Historical Society newsletter.*

On January 29, members had the pleasure of meeting Betty Yohalem who is collecting oral histories from pioneer families to be published as the El Dorado County Bicentennial book entitled *I Remember ...*



Upon their retirement from their motion picture work, Mrs. Yohalem and her late husband, George, settled in Placerville where he established the Pioneer Book Shop and she became a reporter with the Mountain Democrat, writing the "Our Yesterdays" column. Mrs.

Yohalem is now at the El Dorado County Chamber of Commerce where her love affair with Mother Lode history is finding expression in her writing of this book.

Mrs. Yohalem displayed a collection of fascinating pictures obtained along with diaries and other documents from families she has interviewed. She also played excerpts from some of her tapes, including description by Amy Drysdale, 84 year old former editor of the Georgetown Gazette, of the fire and explosion in Georgetown during July 1897; recollection of such escapades as hiding slot machines from the sheriff by Irma Lawyer, also 84, who lives at the Temperance Hotel in Lotus but spends each summer at Uncle Tom's Cabin; and recollections of early days in Placerville by Lloyd Raffetto, founder of the Mother Lode Bank.

One of Mrs. Yohalem's favorite interviews was with Ruth Ward Corker, now in her eighties, a native of Georgetown, who is the granddaughter of Jonathan and Mary Ann Smith, who crossed

the country by wagon. During a brief stop by a stream, Mrs. Smith was shot in the back by an Indian while nursing her baby. The bullet went through her body and landed in the front of her dress. Surviving the incident, she continued on to settle in the Mother Lode area with her husband and children.

Mr. Yohalem also interviewed Rhoads Grimshaw who, until his recent passing at 84, was the oldest living helicopter pilot. He had the distinction of having set his helicopter down in the tracks of the wagon train in which his grandfather, one of the three founders of Placerville, had crossed the plains.

She also displayed pictures of Indian Diggings, now only a few shacks and an old cemetery off the Omo Ranch Road, but once a thriving community of 3000 with four hotels, nine saloons, and three grocery stores. Cone Jenny, the last Indian in the area who refused to go when the other Indians left, was over 100 years old when she was found dead at her little cabin in Indian Diggings.

Another of Mrs. Yohalem's favorite stories was her seeking out of a black man, Mr. Burgess, in Sacramento. Now nearing his 90th birthday, he was readily able to identify his father in a well known photograph of the Sutter Mill in Coloma.

One of Mrs. Yohalem's treasures was a copy of an 1897 issue of the San Francisco Examiner relating an interview with John Mattison (Matt) Harbin, who came to California with Dr. John Marsh in 1844. Calling himself the "King of the Mountain", Harbin related his naming of Donner Lake as Little Truckee Lake and Tahoe as Big Truckee Lake. He also claimed the honor of being the first millionaire in California. After spending some time in Mexico, he finally settled in Shingle Springs. His descendants, the Grays of Gray's Meadows, will be interviewed for the book.

Publication of *I remember...* is projected for this coming summer. Copies may be ordered in advance from the El Dorado

County Chamber of Commerce at a pre-publication price of \$20.00 plus tax for the first edition (\$25.00 when published). Also, a Limited Edition of 750 numbered copies, with special binding and slip case, including inserts of diaries, documents, and map, is available, pre-publication, at \$30.00 plus tax (\$35.00 after publication). Remittance should be enclosed with order to The Chamber at 542 Main Street, Placerville, California 95667.