Caltrans Meyers' enclave becomes a village of seasonal workers sleeping and eating onsite

By Kathryn Reed

MEYERS – Aromas of freshly made food waft from a nondescript building tucked off Highway 89. Three hot meals a day are served here. Boarders are upstairs sleeping – in the middle of day.

Today starts week four of winter at the Meyers' Caltrans depot.

When it's storming out – and it doesn't have to be white stuff that is falling from the sky – the heavy equipment operators are working 12-hour shifts. There may be no time for breaks.

"Anything dealing with our highways we take care of," Mark Wagener explains during lunch Dec. 5. "There's so much sand on the road we have to clean the catch basins regularly."

Twelve-hour shifts at the

Caltrans kitchen in Meyers are routine for Claire Neville. Photos/Kathryn Reed

Rocks are sliding on the road and storm drains are backed up. Most of the mop up is done by hand.

When it's snowing, Wagener is in a plow truck or grader.

This seasonal facility usually operates from sometime in November through April. Though there was the year it opened in October.

Any city, county, state or federal employee can eat here. Lake Valley personnel and California Highway Patrol officers are dining on Dec. 5. Each meal is $4.

The lunch crew can put sack lunches together so workers stay nourished throughout their shift.

On Wednesday, heavy equipment mechanic Walt Wimsett and Wagener are relishing the meal in front of them as they sit in the dining area that seems a bit like a cafeteria. The difference is the quality of food.

"This is the best meatloaf I've ever had," Wimsett says. "This reminds me of the cooking I grew up with."

Real mashed potatoes and green beans are also on his plate. Pudding is available for dessert.

Wagener enjoys fish Fridays the most. He said the choice of a half dozen items from shrimp to salmon to chowder keeps him filled up.

Keeping workers fed

Dennis Russo has been cooking here since 1996 – having been a cook for nearly 50 years. Caltrans has 15 cooks in the state – mostly in snow country. The closest facilities like this to

Tahoe are the one at Caples Lake and the two on Interstate 80.

Russo has three people helping him make sure there is plenty of food for the crew. And like any restaurant, it’s a bit of a guessing game to know how many mouths there will be to feed on any given day.

Russo said after a while he’s gotten good at knowing the forecast and figuring out how many workers will be on duty.

It’s a full commercial kitchen that is capable of producing meals for the masses.

Beef ribs with an Asian rub are on the counter. That’s what was served for dinner last night.

Soup is always available. So are fresh fruit and a salad bar.

“We do cookies, cakes, pies. They are spoiled,” Claire Neville, one of the cooks, says with a smile.

She said newbies to the Meyers’ family – and a family is what they consider themselves – can gain 20 pounds in a season. Healthy and not so healthy items abound. For instance, on Wednesday homemade cinnamon rolls with frosting were whipped up for breakfast. But fresh fruit and yogurt are also available.

The breakfast sandwiches are one of the more popular items first thing in the morning.

Dinners run the gamut from pork, fish, beef – to steak about every 10 days. Burger bars, fresh chili over a hotdog, chicken Monterey and seven-spice chicken are some of the favorites.

Home away from home

Some of Caltrans’ employees live nearby and go home at the end of their shift. More than a dozen are in town for the next six months.

Russo is one of them. He has a room upstairs. He calls Oakdale home the rest of the year.

Their quarters are sparse. Rooms are on the second and third floors, off hallways that look like a rundown hotel, or maybe an old college dorm. The worn brown carpet has seen better days. Rooms have twin beds, a sink, closet, dresser and old TV. Down the hall are the communal bathroom and laundry facility.

Towels and sheets are cleaned by a service, but clothing must be laundered by the individual.

On the first floor near the entrance is a break room of sorts. It doubles as a family room. A pool table, foosball, television and comfy couches fill the room.

“If it snows, there are no days off until the sun shines,” Russo says.

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