Celios keep Tahoe heritage alive on private ranch

Tom Celio outside the home where his grandparents lived, which is part of the 103 acres he owns. Photos/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

MEYERS – Not everyone struck it rich during the Gold Rush. Many of the men who came to California in search of gold ended up returning to work they knew.

Carlo Guiseppi Celio was one of those men.

He came to the United States from Switzerland. When he didn't strike gold, he began a dairy farm in Placerville.

In 1863 he homesteaded on property in what was known as the Upper Lake Valley area of the South Shore. The valley with its towering granite walls reminded him of his home in the Old

World. Celio's first 160 acres on the South Shore were bought for $300, which he paid for in gold.

At one point the Celio stake in Lake Tahoe was about 4,000 acres, making them one of the largest landowners. They ran 500 head of beef cattle from Meyers into Meiss, Big and Freel meadows. During the fall cowboys drove the cattle on horseback to the West Slope of El Dorado County. It was a five-day journey.

Today, the Celios own 103 acres on both sides of South Upper Truckee Road, to the center of the Upper Truckee River, and crossing the Old Meyers Grade twice.

On Aug. 24-25 the property is going to be the site of a 150-year celebration of the ranch. This is one of the largest private property holdings in the Lake Tahoe Basin. Tours of some of the outbuildings will be available, stories of what life was like years ago will be told, and an old-fashioned cowboy barbecue will take place.

Recent history

Cattle no longer roam the property, but a handful of horses do.

Tom and Chris Celio in 2011 were deeded the property from Shirley Taylor. Taylor and Tom Celio are second cousins.

Taylor inherited the property from her mother, Hazel Taylor, who was a Celio. This was in 1985.

Taylor spent years refurbishing much of what had gone into disrepair. She inherited what she calls "13 old buildings and three outhouses." The house had always been a summer home. Taylor winterized it so starting in 1988 she could live there year-round.

Since Tom and Chris Celio moved in full time they have put in a picture window above the sink that looks up to Echo Summit.

Sitting at the kitchen table it’s hard to have eye contact with the people on the other side of the table with that view just above their heads. They have also taken out a wall that divided the kitchen and living room to open up the area more.

In 1986, Taylor was granted Timberland Preservation Zoning from the state Department of Forestry. This zoning restricts development and preserves the timberland. Selling wood was one way she could pay to bring the ranch back to life in at least a habitable manner.

In 1991, Taylor received the Forestland Stewardship Sward. Five years later she was honored with the California Tree Farmer of the Year award.

Through the 1990s many of the old buildings were reroofed, resided, and two foundations were reinforced.

But it was never going to be what it was based on the number of acres and environmental regulations that bind private property owners.

“My goal was to preserve the Celio ranch property as a tribute to the pioneering Celio family and hope that is continued in the future,” Taylor told *Lake Tahoe News*. “The Celio mural on the Meeks building (in Meyers) scheduled for a September completion, is my last effort to recognize the family.”

Various members of the nine generations of Celios who are in the United States have spent time at the ranch. Tom and Chris Celio are continuing that tradition with their children, grandchildren and great-grandchild.

There will even be Celios at the celebration next weekend who haven’t met each other.

What it used to be like

In 1903, the Celios bought the town of Meyers, which consisted of a variety of businesses occupying 22 buildings. They were

the largest employer at the time in this area.

The 125-head of dairy cattle required five people to milk them twice a day. Butter was made on site, which was then sold to locations as far away as San Francisco.

The family incorporated in 1905 and established a lumber company.

Lumber from the first mill built in 1910 provided the lumber for the house where Tom and Chris Celio live today. It was built in 1914.

But Carlo Guiseppi Celio knew better than to clear-cut the forest area, even though others were doing so.

The slaughterhouse was built in 1912. Beef was sold to the various resorts around the lake and at stores in Meyers.

Tom Celio points to how the circular metal contraption in the ceiling would hold the cattle upside down after they were shot and killed. The blood drained into a catch area that flowed into a bathtub on wheels that was under the building. The carcasses stayed there chilled for a couple weeks before being sold for eating.

The room was chilled from ice blocks that had been cut the previous winter from area creeks and lakes, and even from a pond at Tahoe Paradise Golf Course.

A stone’s throw from the main house is the house Norm and Ann Celio lived in when they were first married. They are Tom Celio’s grandparents and Taylor’s uncle and aunt.

Celio recalls the story of when his grandmother found out there was no indoor toilet. She nearly lost it and was ready to leave. Norm Celio had been a bachelor at the lake and he was fine without that modern convenience. Still, he quickly added a bathroom to accommodate his new bride.

Today the house needs some work. Remnants from the past remain – old appliances, dishes and handmade furniture.

But the Celios were a clan of practical workers. Fancy antiques are not to be found here.

The Depression took its toll on the Celio operations. There wasn't as much family to keep things going, so some of the businesses were leased out.

By the 1950s developers were taking an interest in Lake Tahoe. That is when much of the property that became Tahoe Paradise and Christmas Valley was sold off. They were given those names by developers to entice people to buy houses in the area.

A series of gifting-inheritance-gifting transactions have kept the current 103 acres in the Celio family.

"This is one of the last pieces of old Tahoe," Tom Celio said with pride looking at the ranch.

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Notes:

• Tickets for the 150-year celebration are $35 for Lake Tahoe Historical Society members, $40 for non-members. They may be purchased at the museum – 3058 Lake Tahoe Blvd., South Lake Tahoe, or call (530) 541.5458.

• Tours are Aug. 24 from 10:30am-1pm, Aug. 24 1:30-4pm, Aug. 25 10am-1pm, and Aug. 25 1:30-4pm.

• Proceeds benefit the Lake Tahoe Historical Society.

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