

Former Sierra Ski Ranch owner dies at age 92

Former Sierra Ski Ranch owner Vernon Dewayne Sprock has died. He was 92.

Mr. Sprock, who was living in Bozeman, Mont., died Feb. 10.

Mr. Sprock along with his wife, Bobbie, owned and operated Sierra Ski Ranch for 40 years. In 1953, the couple took over the financially troubled ski area that is now known as Sierra-at-Tahoe.



Vern Sprock

It was here that Mr. Sprock gained his reputation as a hard worker, dreamer and innovator. Sierra Ski Ranch was located one mile down Highway 50 from its current location. Sierra was relocated in 1968 due to a proposed highway alignment that never happened.

The first year in that location was one of many challenges due to a very heavy snowfall damaging the new lodge and lifts. However, perseverance and prayer prevailed, and the obstacles were overcome to lay the groundwork for many expansions at this new location. He was an instrumental member of the B77 Code of National Ski Safety Committee for aerial tramways. The couple shared a lifetime of pioneering hardship and hard work, always working together to solve each challenge. The resort was sold in 1993 to Fibreboard Corporation. Three years later

Booth Creek acquired it and changed the name to Sierra-at-Tahoe.

Mr. Sprock was born Sept. 3, 1921, in Elk Grove to Hiejo Henry and Bertha (Stubel) Sprock. Following his graduation from Elk Grove High School, he continued to work on the family farm. While doing this he furthered his education in the engineering and surveying field. Mr. Sprock was a World War II veteran, serving in the Army in the culinary department in Texas from 1942-46.

After the war Mr. Sprock spent time with his dog as his only companion near the Tioga Pass as a trapper of marten and bear. He sold the meat and furs from the trappings to make his living. He later relocated to Tamarack Pines on Highway 50.

For a couple of winters he worked for the California Division of Highways, now known as Caltrans. In the summer months he built log cabins, doing all the work from scratch by cutting the trees, skinning the logs, and cementing them together, along with all aspects needed for a completed cabin.

Mr. Sprock met the love of his life, Barbara "Bobbie" Sprock, at Strawberry Lodge on the dance floor in 1950. They were married Oct. 28 that same year in San Francisco. Together they built a log cabin for their first home and raised rabbits to supplement their income. They were married until Bobbie passed 56 years later.

After the ski area was sold, Mr. Sprock took an interest in an innovative and cutting edge pedestrian transport system called the Yantrac People Mover, where he spent much time using his background knowledge in engineering and survey.

Then the couple moved to Montana where they purchased and operated the V & B Ranch located near Wilsall. On their 5,500-acre cattle ranch there were several other businesses operated from this property, such as guided fishing on the property, horseshoeing, and more.

After the loss of Mr. Sprock's vision due to a stroke, they sold the ranch and moved to Bozeman, Mont. He then took great interest in the activities and accomplishments of his grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Mr. Sprock enjoyed skiing, fishing, hunting and family activities. He enjoyed and attended Kirkwood Baptist Church in Bozeman.

Survivors include children, Kathy (Robert) Pavich, and Peter (Juli) Sprock; grandchildren, Christopher Pavich, and Ty Sprock, all of Zephyr Cove, Richard Pettay and three great-grandchildren (Tyler, Jacob, Sara) of Carson City; sister Nadine Tomlinson of Sioux Falls, S.D.

Funeral Services will be at 11am Feb. 20 at Dahl Funeral Chapel, with interment to follow at Sunset Hills Cemetery.

In lieu of flowers, the Vernon Sprock Athletic Scholarship Fund has been created for the benefit of alpine skiing athletes through Far West Ski Foundation, a 501(c) 3. Checks may be made payable to Far West Ski Foundation, P.O. Box 861, Fallbrook, CA 92088.

Obama pledges millions to help drought-stricken Calif.

By Norimitsu Onishi and Coral Davenport, New York Times

FRESNO — President Obama arrived in the heart of California's parched farmland on Friday afternoon to offer tens of millions of dollars in federal assistance to the state, where the lack of rain and snow this winter has led to the severest drought in its modern history.

Meeting with farmers and ranchers around Fresno – where electronic signs along highways flash entreatingly to drivers, “Serious drought. Help save water” – Obama pledged \$183 million from existing federal funds for drought relief programs in California. Though the announcement won cautious support in this region, Obama also pressed ahead with the more difficult task of enlisting rural America in his campaign on climate change by linking it to the drought.

Obama also spoke of climate change, drawing links to the drought as well as hurricanes in the Atlantic Ocean. Mr. Obama announced that he would ask Congress for \$1 billion in new funding for a “climate resiliency” program to help communities invest in research, development and new infrastructure to prepare for climate disasters.

Read the whole story

Judge dismisses Nevada patient dumping civil lawsuit

By Phillip Reese and Cynthia Hubert, Sacramento Bee

A federal judge on Thursday dismissed a civil lawsuit brought on behalf of a patient who was bused to Sacramento from a Nevada state psychiatric hospital in Las Vegas.

Rawson-Neal Psychiatric Hospital discharged James Flavy Coy Brown via Greyhound bus last February to Sacramento, where he had no connections and no arrangements for treatment or housing waiting for him. Brown’s story was the impetus for a series of investigative reports in the *Sacramento Bee* that found the hospital had shipped about 1,500 psychiatric

patients to states across the nation in a five-year period.

In the wake of the *Bee's* reports, Rawson-Neal lost its accreditation and its treatment protocols have been the focus of ongoing reviews by state and federal agencies. The hospital, Nevada's primary facility for mentally ill people, remains in danger of losing its federal Medicare funding, pending demands for improvements.

Read the whole story

Calif. court overturns restrictions on concealed guns

By Maura Dolan and Tony Perry, Los Angeles Times

SAN FRANCISCO – In a significant victory for gun owners, a divided federal appeals court Thursday struck down California rules that permit counties to restrict as they see fit the right to carry a concealed weapon in public.

The 2-1 ruling by a U.S. 9th Circuit Court of Appeals panel would overturn restrictions on carrying concealed handguns, primarily affecting California's most populated regions, including Los Angeles, Orange County, San Diego and San Francisco.

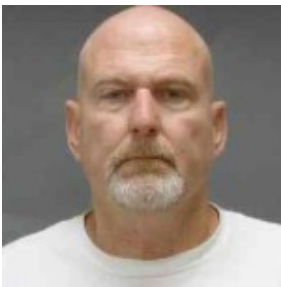
The majority said the restrictions violate the 2nd Amendment's guarantee of the right to bear arms because they deny law-abiding citizens the ability to carry weapons in public unless they show they need the protection for specific reasons.

Read the whole story

Navy SEAL imposter wanted in Nev. arrested in Ark.

By Paige Preusse, 40/29-TV

GARFIELD, Ark. – A former Lake Tahoe bartender who has been impersonating a Navy SEAL was arrested Friday in Arkansas on charges stemming from firearm violations.



A.J. Dicken

A.J. Dicken was wanted in Nevada for possession of a firearm by a person convicted of a felony.

Dicken boasted about being the most decorated former Navy SEAL claiming he served in combat missions all over the world including Vietnam and Afghanistan. According to information from the U.S. Marshals service, he often wore Navy SEAL trident insignia and showed off his numerous awards including two Congressional Medal of Honor awards. It was later confirmed that he never served in the military.

The charges stemmed from when Dicken operated a military style self-defense school in Carson City.. The training he provided included firearms and self-defense tactics. He was exposed

after he was profiled on both ABC's 20/20 and Inside Edition as the result of alleged criminal acts. More allegations include embezzlement and fraud where Dicken bilked investors, including two Lake Tahoe doctors, out of more than \$850,000 for a proposed new international security firm.

Read the whole story

U.S. doctors switching to salaried jobs

By Elisabeth Rosenthal, New York Times

American physicians, worried about changes in the health care market, are streaming into salaried jobs with hospitals. Though the shift from private practice has been most pronounced in primary care, specialists are following.

Last year, 64 percent of job offers filled through Merritt Hawkins, one of the nation's leading physician placement firms, involved hospital employment, compared with only 11 percent in 2004. The firm anticipates a rise to 75 percent in the next two years.

Today, about 60 percent of family doctors and pediatricians, 50 percent of surgeons and 25 percent of surgical subspecialists – such as ophthalmologists and ear, nose and throat surgeons – are employees rather than independent, according to the American Medical Association. “We’re seeing it changing fast,” said Mark E. Smith, president of Merritt Hawkins.

Health economists are nearly unanimous that the United States

should move away from fee-for-service payments to doctors, the traditional system where private physicians are paid for each procedure and test, because it drives up the nation's \$2.7 trillion health care bill by rewarding overuse. But experts caution that the change from private practice to salaried jobs may not yield better or cheaper care for patients.

Read the whole story

3 defendants sentenced in Mo's Place beating

By Kathryn Reed

PLACERVILLE – One life ended while countless others were shattered all because a South Lake Tahoe bar fight culminated in a homicide. The three men charged with crimes related to the death of Derek “Zippy” Penaranda were sentenced Friday.

Penaranda, who was from Ripon, was in South Lake Tahoe in May 2012 to celebrate his 30th birthday. He never recovered from the injuries he sustained from a fight at Mo's Place. He died in October 2012.

His father, Wayne, told the court through a cracked voice how devastating the loss of his middle son has been. He spoke of the pain that lingers from having watched his son wither away.



Derek "Zippy" Penaranda and Katie Musselwhite had hoped to one day marry.
Photo/Provided

"I will close with a vision that did not have to be witnessed; that no one should ever see. A vision of my beautiful son, Zippy, battered, broke, wasting away having lost 100 pounds, in constant excruciating pain, his muscles hard as stone, contorted and gnarled, retreating into whatever place he had taken refuge," Penaranda said.

As he stood before the judge reading his statement the defendants had no expression. Rodolfo Hernandez looked at Penaranda, while Sean Canilao and Ruben Lizzaragga had their heads down, looking at the defense table

A plea deal was reached last week, with formal sentencing on Feb. 14 for the one-time bouncers of the bar on Lake Tahoe Boulevard. El Dorado County Superior Court Judge James Wagoner did not change the sentence from what had been agreed to by all parties.

Hernandez, 44, pleaded no contest to involuntary manslaughter. He was sentenced to 364 in jail with credit for time served. He has been in custody since he turned himself in after being indicted. He will also be on four years formal probation.

Hernandez will be turned over to federal custody and deported because he is in the United States illegally. His parents brought him to the United States. The 364-day sentence allows

him to seek re-entry. If the sentence had been a day longer, that would not have been possible. The maximum penalty was four years in county jail.

He sat with the public defender and a court appointed interpreter in the area normally reserved for the jury. Hernandez chose not to address the court.

Canilao, 49, and Lizzaragga, 41, pleaded no contest to assault with force that is likely to cause great bodily injury. Both have been out on their own recognizance since being indicted. They faced a maximum four-year prison sentence.

Canilao was sentenced to 60 days in custody starting Feb. 24, to be followed by 120 days house arrest. He will only have to be behind bars 30 days. He will be on probation for four years. He will not be allowed to own firearms or ammunition for the rest of his life.

"I feel very regretful and sorry," Canilao told the court.

Lizzaragga was sentenced to 240 days in jail. However, the time will be split with 60 days behind bars starting Feb. 28 and 180 days of an alternative sentence that has yet to be determined. He is also on probation for four years and will never be allowed to legally own a gun or ammunition.

Lizzaragga did not have anything to say to the court.

Penaranda, the victim's father, had plenty to say. He had been at every court hearing for the past year and a half. On Friday he read a letter from his wife, Debbie, and one he wrote. He spoke of how his wife has been unable to work, and finally he couldn't either and was let go. They are cashing out 401(k) accounts to live on. Penaranda has suffered a series of mini strokes he says is from the stress. The entire family has nightmares to this day. One of Zippy's brothers was at the bar that night. He was beaten up, too.

After the sentencing hearing, Penaranda sat down with *Lake Tahoe News*.

"It was pretty light," Penaranda said of the sentences. "Somebody's life was taken. That to me should mandate the most serious charge."

While the criminal case is now history, and the sentences much more lenient than Penaranda and his family had hoped for, the next thing to be resolved is the civil case.

"We went after whatever their maximum insurance was," Penaranda told *Lake Tahoe News*. He's expecting a decision to come by the end of the month.

He is finding some solace in writing a short story about the ordeal. Penaranda said he might try to publish it with other short stories he's written.

What he'd really like to see changed is how the health care and health insurance systems work.

"From Day 1 they should start a comatose patient on physical therapy to prevent them from atrophying," Penaranda said. "It was disturbing watching him waste away." Penaranda said it was all about giving his son drugs. They didn't care for the whole body.

Zippy went from Renown Medical Center in Reno to a specialized rehab place in Marin County to a long-term care facility in Walnut Creek.

"If the insurance company sees a patient is not responding, they stop paying," Penaranda said. That, too, he sees as inhumane.

Penaranda is exhausted. He tries to console his wife, but she is having a hard time moving on. And while he said it's been devastating for the entire family, Penaranda is confident they will eventually find a way to move forward without Zippy.

Warm weather makes for slushy Olympics

By John Branch and Sam DolnickFeb, New York Times

KRASNAYA POLYANA, Russia – Warm weather is threatening the outdoor events at the Winter Olympics, forcing organizers to shuffle schedules, tap into reserve stockpiles of snow and scramble workers into action.

Afternoon temperatures at the ski jumping venue on Thursday reached 63 degrees. A practice session for the men's aericals competition scheduled for Thursday night was canceled, and the men's super combined ski race on Friday was moved to 10am local time from 11am to avoid midday temperatures expected to approach the mid-50s. Crews have begun adding snow, some of which was stockpiled from last year, to portions of the course.

For most of the mountain venues, the issue is not the amount of snow, but its condition. Workers at the Laura Biathlon & Ski Complex spread more than a ton of a salt mixture across the cross-country skiing courses on Thursday to help improve the slushy areas, a strategy also employed at the site of Alpine skiing across the valley where all the outdoor events are held.

Read the whole story

Mental health takes its time leaving sr. center

By Kathryn Reed

“Frankly, I feel that by remaining we are subjecting the clients of our wellness center to unjustified and disrespectful mistreatment.”

That is what Terri Daly, chief administrative officer for El Dorado County, wrote in a letter to South Lake Tahoe officials on May 15, 2013. It was in reference to mental health clients being seen at the senior center in the city.



Despite those sentiments, mental health is still seeing clients at the senior center. A deal was signed in 2012 allowing for the joint use. It has been an unsuccessful blending of populations.

“We are working together on a solution so they can leave as soon as possible,” City Manager Nancy Kerry said. But she said the move could still be several months from now.

The problem is the county took over some of the space the seniors had been using. The mental health clients can be disruptive. Seniors don’t feel safe.

Ross Branch, policy analyst with the CAO’s office, said, “The senior center was never intended to be a long-term solution. The reason we moved there was to help defray maintenance costs with the city.”

That’s great in theory. But the county hasn’t paid its share of utility bills that was originally agreed upon. After months

of no payments, the county agreed to a lower amount and has paid that. The fees were based on the percentage of space used.

“The cost sharing for ‘maintenance costs’ was the sharing of the facility expenses. However, as soon as we submitted an invoice, the county disputed the cost sharing,” Kerry told *Lake Tahoe News*.

The county doesn’t have a date for when it will be out of the senior center, but it has found a place it would like to move into. An employee told *Lake Tahoe News* it’s the Tata Lane building the city used to lease.

“We are finalizing details on a new lease agreement,” Branch said. But he didn’t know where the building is and said he could not give a time frame for when the move would occur.

Lake Tahoe Airport master plan taking off



A master plan is being put together to guide Lake Tahoe Airport for the next 20 years. Photo/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

It's not a noise study. It's not a comprehensive economic study. It's not a study to do away with the airport. It's not a study to bring back commercial air service.

The master plan for Lake Tahoe Airport is a vision for the South Lake Tahoe airfield for the next 20 years.

As Councilman Tom Davis said at the start of the Feb. 13 meeting about the master plan, the airport has a “checkered history”.

The 1992 airport agreement that was the result of multiple lawsuits that involved the California Attorney Generals Office, League to Save Lake Tahoe and Tahoe Regional Planning Agency expired in October 2012. Because the environmental, economic and social fabric of the South Shore is not the same as 1992, the city opted to go forward with a comprehensive

master plan for the airport. Plus, the FAA requires a master plan.

The FAA is funding 90 percent of the master plan at a cost of \$315,000, with the city picking up 10 percent or \$35,000. C&S Companies out of San Diego is the consulting firm doing the work.

Safety is the FAA's No. 1 priority for all airports. And because it is footing the bulk of the bill, it has the most say in what is studied.

The Tahoe Regional Planning Agency has rules about noise in the Regional Plan, but they remain much the same as when the 1980 RP was adopted. There was talk when the latest RP was adopted in 2012 that noise would be addressed at a later date. That still hasn't happened. And it won't be looked at in the master plan.

While the economics of the airport will be considered, it is done on a limited basis. It won't delve into who regionally is benefiting or being hurt financially by the airport. Nor will it study the feasibility of having festivals or other events there. It's about the finances of the airport itself.

This was a bone of contention for some of the more than 100 people who attended the Thursday night meeting. Some people want a comprehensive economic study done. The city always has the option to do that at another time, for more money.

Several in the room advocated for closing the airport or keep it just for helicopter service.

To close the airport would require Federal Aviation Approval. It would also mean the city would have to pay back the \$27,462,036 the FAA has provided for improvements to the facility since 1999.

The city obtained the 55-year-old from El Dorado County in

1983 for \$1. The city's general fund has been subsidizing the airport at a cost of about \$400,000 a year. Half of that expense will go away after this fiscal year when the hangar debt is paid off.

Most South Lake Tahoe city offices are at the airport. This is saving the city roughly \$100,000 a year in rent; what it was paying when offices were on Tata Lane.

On the flip side, if commercial air service were to return, those city offices would have to relocate.

City staff and councils have for years said they want commercial service to return. It hasn't happened since 2000. The peak passenger count was in 1978 at 294,000.

While there was a vocal contingent of people against the airport as it is today and adamant against expansion, many in attendance want a viable, thriving airport.

The FAA will have final say over the Forecast of Demand and the Airport Layout Plan. These are two documents that are part of the master plan.

The Forecast of Demand predicts future levels of service (operations) and the type(s) of aircraft providing that service.

Michael Hotaling with the consulting firm was repeatedly asked where the information was coming from to predict those outcomes. He didn't have a concise answer, instead differed to the company doing that report. But no one from that firm was in attendance.

The Airport Layout Plan is the other document the FAA must approve. It will show existing airport facilities and provide a blueprint for future airport development. It also goes into safety issues and land use outside the airport.

Hotaling had mentioned the airport's being an environmental

asset. When pressed to explain in what way, Hotaling said only in regards to providing a tarmac and fuel for planes fighting the 2007 Angora Fire and then as a staging area for planes working on slope stabilization post-fire.

Vehicle miles traveled to get to the airport or to the destination after landing will not be studied.

At least two more community meetings are planned regarding the master plan. Public comment would be taken at the City Council and TRPA meetings when approval for the document is sought, but by that time it's essentially a done deal. The final report is expected to be completed in January 2015, with it going for agency approval the next month.

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Notes:

- *Lake Tahoe News* did a three-part series on Lake Tahoe Airport in July 2012. Here are the articles – story No. 1, story No. 2 , story No. 3.
- Information about the master plan process will be on the city's website.