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Community unites to patch up historic barn



DON'T FORGET THE SIGN — Straight Line Construction crew Gary Burrows and Noe Guavara, left and center, patch the roof of Clarksville's historic Tong Barn, which spent most of the last century and a half as the Clarksville Union School. Straight Line's president and owner Jack Borba, right, donated the labor. He stopped by to check progress and drop off one of the familiar Straight Line signs. Photo by Mike Roberts

El Dorado County is a place defined by its history. We embrace the past and nearly anything that reflects it.

Don't believe it? Take a drive. Our backroads are altars to the past. We revere old stone buildings. Rusty farm implements are proudly displayed for passersby. Sepia-toned hay barns topped with corrugated steel roofs glow in the afternoon light.

Visitors pull over and take pictures. The past also fuels a lively tourism economy.

Despite a general sense that preservation of historic artifacts is important, protecting them can be difficult and expensive. Restoration costs are prohibitive for low-budget history groups, especially in recessionary times.

A pioneer cemetery and an old barn in El Dorado Hills, both visible from Highway 50, stand as examples of what a persistent local history group can accomplish with hard work and the help of civic-minded land owners, supportive local agencies and, importantly, local business people willing to make a personal investment in local history and heritage, people like Kevin Nagle and Jack Borba.

The cemetery and barn lie at opposite ends of the old Clarksville town site, located just east of Town Center in El Dorado Hills, predating it by a century. Clarksville is now a ghost town on private property with very limited public access.

The Clarksville Region Historical Society won a county "Tom Sawyer" grant which kick-started the project to put a fence around the Clarksville Cemetery, where many Clarksville pioneers are buried.

Realtors Jim and Erlinda Vindler raised awareness and hosted a fundraiser. MJM Properties President Mike McDougal also contributed. Parker Development remains a sustaining sponsor of the Clarksville Region Historical Society, which still came up \$5,000 short of a full fence.

Enter Nagle. The serial entrepreneur and El Dorado Hills resident sold his most recent firm last year, a pharmaceutical benefit company that employs 200-plus people in El Dorado Hills. He's also the managing partner of Tony Mansour's Town Center and a limited partner in the Sacramento Kings.

"I love history and I love this place," said Nagle, who picked up the outstanding balance on the cemetery fence and jumped at a chance to meet the society's co-founder, Betty January, and hear about her successful 2002 campaign for an El Dorado Hills Library.

Nagle also wanted to know about the Tong Barn, located on private property at the east end of the old Clarksville town site.

The fading red barn is best viewed from Highway 50 westbound between Bass Lake Road and the Silva Valley interchange project. It sits majestically beneath the freeway to the south, anchoring a postcard viewscape that's emblematic of the county's rural heritage.

For most of its life, the barn was the one-room Clarksville Union School, organized in 1869 and operated continuously until 1947. Clarksville alumni Madeleine Mosely bristles at the mention of the barn.

"Everyone calls it a barn but that's my school," she snorts playfully. "It was over there by the flag pole, turned around the other way."

At some point after the school closed the Tong Family moved it several hundred feet east, onto their ranch, spun it around and converted it to a barn, bumping out the structure on three sides to create livestock stalls.

After more than a century on their ranch, the Tong family left Clarksville about 10 years ago. Wind and rain have since breached the former school's corrugated steel roof. The storms of January 2012 dislodged several steel roof panels into the surrounding fields and corrals.

Massive structural timbers that stood dry and protected for a century and a half were exposed to the elements in each of the following winters, a potentially fatal formula for dry rot and infestation. The former school's age, size and condition made it unsafe for a volunteer roof repair crew. A civic-minded local contractor — one with knowhow, tools and insurance was needed.

Enter Jack Borba and Straight Line Construction.

The El Dorado County native expanded his Shingle Springs roofing business into the fasted growing residential home improvement firm in the region during the worst recession in recent history, providing good paying construction jobs and fueling the local economy.

He credits his success to targeting existing homeowners, expanding services and above all, satisfying his customers. All employees are safety trained and drug tested. Straightline makes very little use of subcontractors. An innovative compensation system rewards efficiency and quality workmanship.

Borba believes in giving back. He helped bring back the Shingle Springs Community Center after the 2012 snow storm collapsed the roof and put a new roof on the Upper Room Dining Hall in Placerville.

He dispatched an experienced crew to Clarksville. Gary Burrows and Noe Guavara spent July 1 and part of July 2 carefully installing corrugated steel "patch panels" on the roof with as little impact as possible to the remaining structure.

Folsom Home Depot Manager Brian Flair helped out, covering half the cost of the patch panels. Straight Line provided all the required fasteners and related hardware.

Each patch panel was marked, top and bottom, to ensure that any future preservation effort could return the structure to its prior condition.

Ownership changes and a still moribund commercial real estate market have left the ghost town and its prominent barn decomposing in the elements, but have also created an opportunity to patch the barn roof.

The patch job should buy another five-plus years, by which time the final disposition of the former ranch and town site will likely be decided. Local history buffs are hoping that the eventual owner will see the value in preserving the school/barn, the original stretch of Lincoln Highway that runs in front of it, and perhaps other artifacts from the town site.

Society members say that because the old school house was moved and substantially modified, achieving any type of official historical designation would be difficult, and that saving the school/barn may require moving it again.

With the roof patched and the new fence in place, the society is on to the next project, which is back at the cemetery. They are seeking a sponsor for a gate to match the new fence.

Oak Ridge High School Manufacturing Engineering instructor Bob Wilson is considering a student project to create a traditional arched steel "Clarksville Cemetery" sign to go above the new gate.

To learn more about Clarksville or explore sponsorship opportunities visit edhistory.org or contact Betty January at (916) 933-3173.