

Who we are

The North Lake Tahoe Historical Society (NLTHS) was founded in 1969 by a group of concerned citizens who were passionate about preserving Tahoe's history, and telling its stories. The NLTHS mission is to preserve, present and interpret Lake Tahoe history, and the NLTHS does this through its three museums located in Tahoe City

- ❖ Gatekeeper's Museum
- ❖ Marion Steinbach Native American Basket Museum
- ❖ Watson Cabin

Contact Us

Gatekeeper's Museum &
Marion Steinbach Native American Basket Museum
130 West Lake Blvd.
PO Box 6141
Tahoe City, CA 96145
P: 530-583-1762
F: 530-583-8992
E: info@northtahoemuseums.org
W: <http://northtahoemuseums.org/>

Watson Cabin
560 North Lake Blvd.
Tahoe City, CA 96145
P: 530-583-8717

Stories of the Gatekeeper's Museum



NORTH LAKE TAHOE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The Gathering, July 10, 2016, William B. Layton Park
35th Anniversary of the Gatekeeper's Museum

Stories of the Gatekeeper's Museum



North Lake Tahoe Historical Society

2016

Table of Contents

Credits.....	1
Introduction	3
Historical Background.....	3
Memories about the Gatekeeper's Cabin.....	8
Judge C. W. Vernon.....	8
Miriam Biro.....	9
Al Sperry	11
Bill and Fritzi Briner.....	13
Don and Jeanne Davis and Diana Larson.....	18
Don Williams.....	24
Honor Roll of Major Contributors.....	27

Credits

Interviewers

Karen Wagner, Ann Tiller, Carol Shaw,
Trudy Lessem, Susan Devoe, Marnie Carr

Transcriber

Mary Ann Dunlap

Editor

David C. Antonucci

Introduction

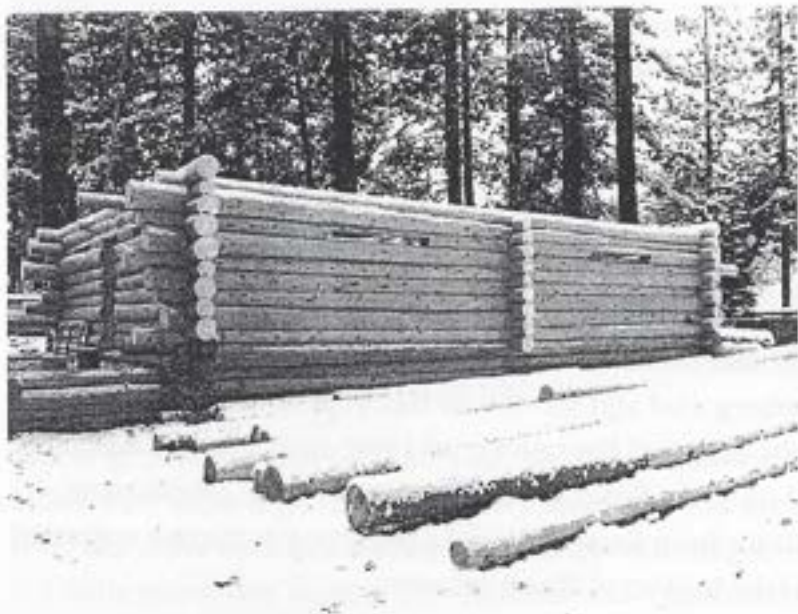
Dedicated in 1981, the Gatekeeper's Cabin Museum stands as a tribute of the era of "Old Tahoe" and a guardian of the cultural history of North Lake Tahoe. Its place within the community cannot be overstated. The museum housed in the reconstructed log cabin is more than a simple repository for artifacts, images and writings that document our collective life experiences at Lake Tahoe. It connects us intimately to our past, honors those who came before us, and explains how we became who we are today. By helping us understand our past; the Gatekeeper's Cabin Museum unifies us socially and makes us more proficient in anticipating our future.

On this 35th anniversary, we recognize a few of the many who founded the North Lake Tahoe Historical Society and worked so hard to restore, protect and improve the Gatekeeper's Cabin historical site.

The content in this commemorative booklet has been edited for clarity, brevity and accuracy.

Historical Background

The original Gatekeeper's Cabin began as government built on-site housing for the employee who operated and maintained the outlet gates for the Tahoe Dam. In 1913, the US Bureau of Reclamation finished the dam that impounds water for



it was completed in 1981. A few years later, a library room was added as a memorial to long-time Tahoe City librarian and *Tahoe World* society columnist Ellen Attardi. The acquisition of the Marion Steinbach Native American Basket Collection created the need to add a new wing, entrance and patio, circa 1992-95.

Today, the cabin showcases Tahoe history, from the Washoe people through the logging era and the establishment of the tourism industry at Lake Tahoe. Exhibits include Native American baskets, early resort era memorabilia, historical photographs, clothing, oral histories, maps, archival documents, newspapers and artifacts. The museum grounds annually host outdoor social gatherings and weddings.



LAKE TAHOE OUTLET WORKS AND GATEKEEPERS CABIN

THE FIRST OUTLET WORKS WERE CONSTRUCTED IN 1870 BY COLONEL A. W. VON SCHMIDT. THE STONE AND TIMBER CRIB STRUCTURE SOON PASSED TO THE DONNER LUMBER & COOK CO. WHO CONTINUED TO REGULATE, FOR A FEE, THE WATER FLOW FOR FLOATATION OF LOGS AND, LATER, POWER GENERATION. THE TIMBER AND POWER HELPED TO SHORE UP THE WEALTH OF THE COMSTOCK LODE. BY 1913, THE U.S. RECLAMATION SERVICE COMPLETED THE PRESENT STRUCTURE TO SERVE THE NEWLANDS IRRIGATION PROJECT. CONTRACTUAL FLOW REGULATIONS DEMANDED TENDING OF THE GATES, FOR WHICH A CABIN WAS BUILT IN 1916 TO HOUSE THE GATEKEEPER. THE CABIN SERVED UNTIL 1968, WAS DESTROYED BY FIRE IN 1978 AND THE PRESENT CABIN WAS COMPLETED IN 1981.

DEDICATED JULY 19, 1981

NORTH LAKE TAHOE HISTORICAL SOCIETY
JULIA C. BULLITT CHAIR, NO. 1115
SNOWAROCK TROUSERS CHAIR, NO. 1117
GRIFF THURBERG CHAIR, NO. 3631
I. CLAMPCS VICE

Memories about the Gatekeeper's Cabin

Judge C. W. Vernon (deceased) interviewed by Ann Tiller (deceased), 1980

Tiller: Do you have any other plans for Tahoe City?

Vernon: Well yes, I'm interested in the museum. I'm a member of the North Lake Tahoe Historical Society, and I've been a member for years – a charter member. Ever since the Gatekeeper at the dam moved from the Gatekeeper's Cabin, the historical society has had its eye on that cabin for a museum.

It has been declared a landmark by the State of California and requested a national landmark status from Washington D.C. The society finally got the State Parks and Recreation Department to buy the property for use as a museum. Then a youth of this community tried to burn it down. Now the thing is complicated. They are still hoping the State will repair the burned-out cabin.

First they said it had to be torn down and new logs. Well, I went down and examined it; and I found there are ten-inch logs, and they are laid out so well the fire didn't destroy them. The Gatekeeper's Cabin, as it has always been called, was built for a home.

I wrote a resolution on the matter ending with, "That the State Parks give use of the cabin and grounds, as long as the museum

was maintained there." I hesitated putting any of my history records, mementoes and keepsakes there unless we owned it.

Miriam Biro interview summary by Susan Devoe, June 5, 2016

The North Lake Tahoe Historical Society was spearheaded by Betty and Bill Layton and other active community members who wanted to preserve the history of the area including Lillian and Harold Farr, Miriam and Lou Biro, John Fulton, Bernie Bechdolt, Martha Snyder, Ann and Harold Tiller, Gardner Mien, and Marjorie and Earl Marr.

When the Gatekeeper's Cabin was no longer in use due to more modern methods of monitoring the water that left the Tahoe Basin, the cabin was destroyed by an arson fire in 1978. The North Lake Historical Society and the North Tahoe communities were instrumental in raising money and rebuilding the Gatekeeper's Cabin to display historic artifacts, memorabilia, photos, and oral histories. The cabin was built using freshly cut logs to seal as they dried. Wood cuts were made before the posts were removed as the wood shrank as it dried.

One entered the front door into a gift store that lead into the living room and large fireplace with the bedrooms in the upstairs which is now an open area for displays. The gift store was a means to raise money for the museum was a means to raise money for the museum expenses and Miriam Biro was asked to run the store and museum which turned into 20 years of dedicated service to the museum to the museum as she became the Director. Her husband Lou took care of the grounds and did many signs for the Gatekeeper's and Watson Cabins.

agricultural use in its Newlands Project in the Lahontan Valley of Western Nevada. The dam is the second at this site, preceded by an 1870 timber buttress dam owned by the Donner Lumber and Boom Co.

Building of the log cabin appears to have been concurrent with the dam construction in 1913. The new cabin was built by Robert M. Watson and may have replaced an earlier structure occupied by the gate tender for DL&B Co. Photos dated July 1913 show the cabin construction underway.

The original Gatekeeper's Cabin floor plans documented by Lillian Farr show a plumbed two-story structure. The ground-level first floor enclosed a living room, kitchen, dining area, two full bathrooms, two laundry rooms, office and a massive stone fireplace. A stairway in the entry porch led to a tiny basement. The second-floor sleeping area featured four little bedrooms with individual washbasins, but no full bathroom.

Lillian Farr's *The Ladies of the Cabin* chronicles the succession of gatekeepers and the in-family succession that marked the final three gatekeepers. Art and Emma Smith were the first to occupy the cabin. Art may have been the gatekeeper for the DL&B Co. dam and stayed on for the new dam. Emma died in 1918, perhaps a victim to the flu epidemic. Engineer Leroy Paul and his spouse Elvie moved into the cabin in about 1923-24. When the Pauls moved to Texas where Leroy pursued a ministry career, W.A and Ida Simmonds replaced them in 1926. With W. A. Simmonds ailing, the couple passed the gatekeeper duties to Ida's son, Art Frodenberg in 1948 but continued to reside in Tahoe City. Art married Sara Lavina Roop, and the two

remodeled the cabin and operated it as a boardinghouse while Art carried out his official duties. As Sara lay dying from cancer, they sent the couple's daughter Linda to live with family in Ohio. Sara died in 1952, and Linda returned to Tahoe City shortly thereafter.

In 1955, Linda resumed the relationship with her Ohio boyfriend, Darryl de Walt; the two were married, and moved into a trailer on the gatekeeper property. In 1960, Art Frodenberg died and son-in-law Darryl assumed his duties. The de Walts occupied the cabin until 1968, raising four sons there. In that year, the Federal watermaster assumed gatekeeping operations from Reno and used a part-time employee stationed at the lake to control the outlet gates.

Following the departure of the de Walts, the Gatekeeper's Cabin lay vacant but surrounded by a trailer park and a small commercial building, both owned by concessionaires of the Sierra Pacific Power Company.

The North Lake Tahoe Historical Society had sought the use of the cabin as a museum during its vacant period, but was unable to raise the funds needed to accomplish the project.

In 1978, the dilapidated cabin was irreparably damaged by fire. The loss of one of the surviving historic structures stimulated action to acquire the property. At the behest of the community, Bill Briner guided California State Parks into acquiring the parcel and the gutted building.

The historical society raised the funds to rebuild the cabin, and

Both are wonderful artists and Miriam's watercolor cards are very popular sellers at the museum store.

Later, a library was added to the back along with a wheel chair access ramp to the downstairs living area. Donations were made to add the library to honor the deceased Ellen Attardi.



Another important addition to the Gatekeeper's is the Marion Steinbach Basket Collection which was offered to a museum that would build an addition to house her entire collection. Again, the North Lake Tahoe Historical Society board and the community raised money for this wonderful addition contracted by Syd Barlett. There is a plaque in the museum with the names of the many donors.

All are grateful and thankful for the many volunteers that supported and continue to support this wonderful museum and 3½-acre grounds along with the historic Watson Cabin.

A tribute to Al Sperry (deceased) by Karen Wagner, circa 2012

Al was a gracious contributor to the North Lake Tahoe Historical Society for many years and had a generous personality.

Miriam Biro, former executive director, said that he was a two-term president of the board and served for decades on the board as well as many committees. She described him as a peacemaker.

Diana Larson remembered how much help that he offered when she was president and added that he was always a gentleman.

As construction supervisor, Ray Jones said that Al was there when the addition to the building was added. He continued to say that he and Al had a close relationship and that Al contributed to the completion of the entire project.

Jeanne and Don Davis had known Al since 1991, when and that Al contributed to the completion of the entire project.

Jeanne and Don Davis had known Al since 1991, when they both became board members at NLTHS. Al was truly "one-of-a-kind". He was dedicated to the success of the Gatekeepers Museum, Gatekeepers Museum, volunteering to help on any project or problem, to which he could contribute. He always did this with a smile on his face, or with a story to tell or with a joke to tell to make us all laugh. He was, without question, one of the nicest, caring persons that we have ever known. We will miss him.

Nileta and Dick Morton said that we knew him as a tireless supporter of NLTHS. He was already to volunteer, whenever he

F. Briner: I thought it was a thousand dollars. But Bill and I had that conversation. He said, "No." A hundred dollars was a lot in 1970."

W. Briner: Betty Layton was in the Chamber of Commerce. She was running it at the time.

Shaw: So, you were a member of the historical society when the cabin burned. Do you have any stories about that?

W. Briner: If you go back to when I first became acquainted with the Gatekeepers. Frodenberg was a good friend of mine. There was a trailer park here, right where we're sitting now. There was a trailer park here and one across the street. Two trailer parks. And this one was run by the Gatekeeper. They made a little money off of it, I'm sure. And we had a lot of people living in the trailer park across the street. A lot of them were poor people, they didn't have a lot of money and it was inexpensive to stay there. So that was something we talked about a lot. And then we talked early on about not having a trailer park here, especially here, on this side of the road. We were putting in sewers at the time and didn't want to hook up a bunch of trailers. So that's what happened on this side. A little after that, the one across the street was taken over by the Nevada... no the one that works on the Truckee River, the Truckee River something or other, out of Nevada. They controlled the water and eventually came up with the Truckee River Agreement, which is the management of the water that the dam master now controlled and why they have to open the gates instead of keeping the water in the Lake. Anyway that was worked out over about 40 years. The first agreement took about 35 years and then it was redone again. It was Truckee Carson Irrigation District, TCID.

F. Briner: There was a building here around that time, in the late 60s, and it was a restaurant and a gift shop. A friend of ours, Vicky Johnson, who lived in Squaw Valley, was an artist, and had the gift shop for several years. I don't recall what type of restaurant it was, but it was small and it faded out and it became just a gift shop. Then, whoever owned that property got rid of the whole thing, including the gift shop, so the building disappeared. It was kind of a strange looking thing, kind of a haphazard clapboard.

W. Briner: One of my accomplishments was to get the California State Parks Department to purchase both sides of the dam property. The restaurant which is on the other side and then the one on this side, which was called the Fanny Bridge Inn for a number of years. This land that we're on right here belonged to - well, Truckee Carson Irrigation District claimed it, but eventually the US Forest Service beat them out of it one way or another through court orders and what not. That included the 64 Acres. All of that was TCID at one time and its now Federal Government. But this piece right out here [Gatekeeper's parcel] and the one across the street were privately owned and they all went up for sale at the same time. They were owned at that time by the guy that had the restaurant. Anyway, the state said, "No, we don't want to buy that because there's a lease on there." The power company, the one before the electric one, had a lease for 25 years.

Shaw: Back to the Gatekeepers Cabin. Was it lived in at that time?

W. Briner: They moved the manager to Truckee or Reno. He ran the dam and they did the forecasting. He took care of all of that - the rains, the snow, and how much water was going to come into the Lake, what the runoff was going to be. The original doctor - Church - the one who devised the system of

determining how much water was in the snow -. He was the one who invented that method of finding out how much water was in the snow. Wayne Poulson worked for him for a while learning how to do that. They still use the same method today.

So the building (Gatekeeper's Cabin) was empty and the building was being run by whoever the manager was at that time. I don't remember the year.

Lessem: I read that the Gatekeeper left in 1971 and it burned down in 1978.

W. Briner: I was here, but I didn't see it burn down.

Shaw: So the cabin burned down and at that point there were people, Betty Layton and you and some other people who had formed the Historical Society. Somebody must have had the idea to rebuild the cabin and make it into a museum. Were you involved in that at all?

W. Briner: Not in that decision, no. I was talked to at the time, I wasn't on the board or anything like that at the time.

F. Briner: Don't you think the original idea for the museum at the time came through the Chamber of Commerce, which was a very small organization at the time? Betty Layton was in charge of the Chamber of Commerce and that led to doing different types of projects. This was just one of many.

W. Briner: And the way they built it was with original tools that was used to build a log cabin, all done by hand. My job was getting the land into public ownership. It was state money. I knew they had it.

F. Briner: It was very good timing.

Shaw: So, how involved were you with the museum?

F. Briner: I was on a special Board. It had to do when Miriam Biro was here. The *Degikup*. And they had a special committee, so I was on that. I was never on the Board.

Shaw: Did you have a particular interest in the baskets?

F. Briner: Oh yes. I'm an artist and am very interested in early American, Indian history. So, yeah, very definitely interested. And the family had collected Indian baskets from time to time.

Shaw: Did you know Marion Steinbach?

W. Briner: No, never did know her. Knew about her reputation and her baskets. Thought it was delightful that they ended up here. Fantastic.

Shaw: What do you see as the most important thing about the museum?

F. Briner: I think the connection between the NLTHS and the Museum and the way they dovetail together is very important. Through the years there have been a number of meetings where education was talked about as being very important and not quite met. Culturally, it was something we needed in the area, still do, and more so, and I think we could probably promote it quite a bit more than now.

Shaw: If you could credit one or two people with having been one of the prime movers with having been responsible for creating what we have now, what would you say?

F. Briner: It was a community endeavor.

was that it went off well. I can't remember if we had the live auction before that.

Shaw & Carr: In the beginning of the museum, where did you get most of your funding?

D. Davis: There was a small admission charge, memberships, gift shop, donations.

Larson: Whenever we needed a little extra, people would just chip in.

D. Davis: On several occasions Miriam just wouldn't take her salary. So it was occasionally nip and tuck on costs.

Shaw & Carr: Where did you get the first collections for the museum?

Larson: I don't know, but it got so that we didn't have enough space for the stuff we were getting. We solicited donations of things that pertain to Tahoe and got things that way.

D. Davis: In June of '91, Marion Steinbach told us that she would like to leave her basket collection to the museum if we could provide an adequate facility to display all the baskets. This was valued at that time at something like \$500,000. She and her husband had a summer home here on the North Shore of Lake Tahoe. We (Board members) went over and looked at some of the baskets that they had on display at their home here and everybody was thrilled with this prospect but also concerned that we'd be looking at \$300,000 or \$400,000 for an addition capable of providing the space needed for the display.

That started us on this need to raise funds, so we tried all kinds of things, would send out requests to members to help

contribute funds for this special account, start to build up a building fund to accommodate what Steinbach's were willing to do and that along with other things went on until, I think, 1994. The building construction started in 1995. By '93 we had raised almost \$200,000. I think the total cost was in the neighborhood of \$350,000 to \$400,000. By that time Marion had passed away and Hank was anxious to build it so he could give us the collection and was continually pressing us to raise the money.

We got some donations from various businesses and people who became interested and we applied for a grant from the Cowell Foundation in Reno. We made construction and interfaced with Lou on any items, problems, and application for a grant and we got at least \$100,000 for the building. We already had about \$200,000 set aside so that put us up to the \$300,000 range so we decided to go ahead and build the building.

We started in 1994 and the building was finished in late 1995. The idea was to match the style. We went through several architects and three or four contractors and finally settled on Syd Bartlett, who was a member and a retired home builder. We gave him the contract to build. Another longtime member, Ray Jones, was a retired engineer and he became the spokesman for the museum and the decisions to be made. The whole idea was to keep it looking comparable to what we already had and so I think the construction went rather well. We built it to have a gift shop and to have a new entrance.

D. Davis: There was always a group on the board that was willing to volunteer a lot of time to work in the yard. One of those was Al and Jo Sperry and Al and I used to modify the sprinkler system every year. There was an atmosphere of fun. Everybody enjoyed doing it and liked being together. I'm sure Diana found that when she came on the Board. As time went on,

W. Briner: In those days, there were a lot of people involved. Local people got together. That's how things got done. People willingly joined in to get things done.

Interview with Don and Jeanne Davis, and Diana Larson by Carol Shaw and Marnie Carr, June 9, 2016

Shaw & Carr: What was your connection to North Lake Tahoe Historical Society?

D. Davis: In 1960, we started summering at Meeks Bay. We liked it here, and eventually moved to Reno. In 1991, there was a notice in the paper from Miriam Biro looking for board members so we responded.

Larson: I joined in 1995.

D. Davis: At that time most of the people on the Board were couples. That went on for many years and part of it was just to get enough people to participate because the board essentially did all the work. Especially for all the events that were held then. In those days the personnel here at the museum put on the annual dinner. Miriam would find someone in the area, usually a member, but sometimes not, that would let us use their property, usually a beach front, for the dinner. We would prepare all the food, take it to the site the morning of the event. Miriam's husband, Lou, was the official chef. He would do the barbecuing or whatever we had for the entree.

So, we worked at serving and taking care of everything and cleaning up. I can remember one of the last ones we had down on the Gold Coast. We all gathered here and went down mid-



morning, got everything set up and by nine o'clock that night we had the kitchen cleaned.

Shaw & Carr: How did you decide to hold the event here at the museum?

D. Davis: One of the fellows suggested that we have the event at the museum and cater it. This was a big change and we all wondered how it would work out and it turned out to be just great. We had several different caterers for a number of years before we settled on one - Melanie. She's great. The end result

we changed the by-laws so that individuals could be members of the Board, not just couples.

Shaw & Carr: When you were Board president, what was going on?

Larson: Lots! Finding money. That was always somewhat of a problem, but we had wonderful volunteers.

D. Davis: In 2013, we were still here volunteering on the photographic collection, I was asked by Marguerite (Sprague) to write a history of the endowment fund. It's a fairly good history, I think, of how we raised the money and when we contributed to it, and who gave to it.

February of '95 was when we started the endowment fund. We put \$2,000 in a special bank account for the endowment and Jeanne and I were Board Presidents in '95 - '96. Diana was President in 2004-05.

Betty Long was the manager of the Watson Cabin during the time it was open in the summer. Miriam was somewhat of an artist and her notecards were sold in the gift shop. She was very good at devoting her full energy to things, so I have to give her credit for getting us through those first 10-12 years. She retired in 2001.

After Miriam left, Sara Larson was hired. We had a search committee and interviewed people. We needed someone who understood basketry and museum principles and policy. Hugh Harris was on the committee. Things worked out well for two or three years. The biggest problem every year is where do we get the money.

I was a promoter of having weddings. There was some concern, but it all worked out. We set up a volunteer as a wedding coordinator. It took off just great. That was 1994-95, somewhere in there.

Larson: The Home Tour was always a great project. Trying to get the homes. We had such wonderful people allowing us to use their homes. It was a lot of work!

Shaw & Carr: Did the Home Tour start as a social event, or was it always a fundraiser?

D. Davis: Oh, it was a fund raiser. Miriam had started it, way back even before we came on the Board. It was pretty small, early, but grew.

Shaw & Carr: What stands out in your mind as something that you enjoyed about being active in the NLTHS?

D. Davis: One thing would be Jeanne's love of photography. Early on we got into going through the photo collection that the museum had and cataloging them and making notebooks of all the photos we had by category. We used to come up from Reno once a week and work on the collection. We never finished.

Larson: I loved the history and we had such good people that gave us support. It was fascinating to work with the history.

Shaw & Carr: If there were one person that you would thank for making this happen - the museum that is a valuable community resource, who would it be?

D. Davis: I'd have to say, "Miriam Biro."

Larson: I would too. She worked hard, was tenacious, and she loved it. She made it happen. And another important contributor has been Hugh Harris.

Interview with Don Williams by Carol Shaw, June 30, 2016

Shaw: When people started to talk about forming an Historical Society, did you have anything to do with that?

Williams: In the late sixties, I recall becoming somewhat involved. My role was more of a middleman. My partner, Bob Harmon, and I were Moana Development Company. We did Tahoe Tavern and Tavern Shores. This was in the sixties. In the late sixties, the Power Company, Sierra Pacific Power Company at that time, came to us and asked if we would be interested in developing what is now Tavern Shores. This was about 1968. So we entered into a joint venture with the Sierra Pacific Power Company.

The initial reason that I somewhat got involved was the baseball park. The baseball diamond on this property, where the park is now and I remember dealing with Ralph Bly. Now this is a name that old-timers would remember but he's long been gone. In fact, I think the baseball park was even named after him.

This was on the power company property which is where the Historical Society is now. So we had to relocate the ballpark. Now the Historical Society, I don't think they were directly involved in that activity.

Shaw: At that time, this was not a California State Park? This was owned by the power company?

Williams: Yes. This was all just vacant land, owned by the Power Company, with the Gatekeeper's facility. The ballpark was ultimately relocated. My role was only in helping the different parties get together because I had become acquainted

with the officers and executives of the Power Company in our business dealings. So when the Historical Society really started getting going about wanting this property, I dealt somewhat with Gardner Mein who I knew well, and to a lesser extent, Betty Layton and there were others. Bill Layton, Betty's husband was in the picture as well. They negotiated for a period of a year or so. Again, my main recollection was really introducing the players, the different people at the Power Company and our local people. I was involved, but not directly, and ultimately, we were able to successfully make an arrangement.

The Sierra Pacific Power Company and Neal Platt, the President at that time, was a very public relations conscious company, and they wanted to be thought of well in this community. I think they were very fair, and I believe that Gardner and Betty and others that dealt with them even when I was not directly involved had a good relationship and again ultimately this went together. So my role was really as a facilitator.

Shaw: According to Bill Briner, California State Parks took title to the land. It sounds like that was the result of the negotiations that you're talking about.

Williams: The bottom line was that it did get into the hands of the Historical Society.