

NLTHS Oral History Program

Since prehistoric times, the human voice, with its unique inflections and accents, has possessed the power to draw in listeners and involve them in worlds far outside their own experience. Such was the Muse that inspired the gathering, over a period of a quarter century, of nearly 100 taped oral histories on behalf of the North Lake Tahoe Historical Society.

In the spring of 1984, acting to fulfill its mission statement, the fledgling Board of the North Lake Tahoe Historical Society voted to purchase a Dictaphone with which to conduct Oral History interviews. At that time, many local "old timers" were still living (some of them members of the Board), and the practice of conducting taped interviews with those who could remember early history was becoming widespread in the realm of history preservation.

Despite a cost of over \$900, the NLTHS Board voted to purchase a state-of-the-art Sony Dictaphone, and in August 1984 Board member and student of local history Carol Van Etten conducted her first taped interview with C. Don Huff and his wife Bernice, longtime proprietors of Homewood Resort. The Huffs' congenial hospitality, honed by years of meeting the public, put their shy interrogator at ease and resulted in an excellent recorded conversation that reveals much about early Homewood history.

Having survived this initial encounter, Van Etten began to consider additional interviews, and a number of key narrators were close at hand. During this time Van Etten was renting a house in Lake Forest on acreage belonging to Mildred Watson Collins, granddaughter of Tahoe Trail finder Robert Montgomery Watson and only child of Tahoe City pioneers Stella and Robert H. Watson. Mrs. Collins, born in 1910, grew up in Tahoe City, and had spent her childhood summers in the log cabin that still overlooks the Tahoe City shoreline. She agreed to be interviewed, and among her recollections was making the whopping sum of \$5 a day as an extra in the Mack Sennett two-reelers that were being filmed locally.

Retired Tahoe City schoolteacher Lillian Vernon Farr was another of Van Etten's early history contacts. Not only were Farr's comments on several Tahoe City subjects captured on tape, but together the pair made a complete survey of her parents' photo collections. As Farr realized Van Etten's consuming interest in local history, she rewarded it with the gift of these photos, which illustrate much of Tahoe City's activity during the 1930s and '40s. Van Etten has since donated these collections to the NLTHS.

Further valuable insights into Tahoe City's past are supplied by a 1989 recorded conversation with Pat Henry Fox, whose father and brother (Joe Henry and Al Henry) both served as Chief of the local Fire Department. Pat was an avid horsewoman, and her account helps bring to life the active equestrian history of this high Sierra community.

Also among the sizable stack of cassettes is one containing an interview with Pat's classmate Beccy Brodehl Shontz, who arrived in Tahoe City in 1934 when her father, Daniel M. Brodehl, won the contract to carry the mail around the Lake aboard his cruiser MARIAN B, last of Tahoe's mail boats.

Many summer-only residents are among those who shared their Tahoe recollections on tape. Another 1986 interview was with retired Auburn and Meeks Bay Contractor Millard Hollenbeck, the young carpenter hired to dismantle the Hotel Tallac in 1927. Hollenbeck was also proud of pointing out that he was the builder of the popular Auburn eatery Lou LaBonte's, which closed in 2014 after almost seven decades of operation.

Among the earliest of the Tahoe accounts collected by Van Etten is that given by Alice Madeley Matthews, a native Sacramentan who could recall having first come to Homewood to enjoy the summer of 1904. Other notable interviewees include Carl Shannon, son of the long-time Caretaker of Glenbrook Inn and Ranch; Alfred and Eleanor Ross, early residents of Lake Forest's first subdivision; Arden Law Thronsdon, daughter of one of two Law brothers who alternated summers at Emerald Bay; and Ann Milton Wallis, whose father, San Francisco Capitalist Maxwell C. Milton, was an early property owner on the Lake's west shore.

It is planned that these and scores of other Oral History interviews will soon be available on the North Lake Tahoe Historical Society's website, helping modern-day Tahoeophiles gain a better understanding of the Lake's interesting past.