

History: Ex-TRPA member's memories of Lucky Baldwin

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By Sheryl Morris

Ray Knisley relived some of his personal experiences at Lake Tahoe during the early part of the century and recalled stories about the settlers of some of the big estates on the Southwest Shore of the lake last week when he addressed members of the Lake Tahoe Historical Society.



Knisley, a Nevada business executive and member of the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency, was involved with the Tahoe area in the early 1900's because of his position as general manager of the ranch properties belonging to E.J. "Lucky" Baldwin.

Baldwin not only owned property in the Tallac area of Tahoe, but had holdings throughout the state of California. In fact, Knisley noted, Lucky was the largest individual property holder in all of California's five largest counties, including Los Angeles County by the 1920's.

Knisley traced Baldwin's exploits from his home state of Ohio to California at the age of 19. It was the Gold Rush that beckoned Baldwin west and it was the thousands of people making the trek that helped him get his start in business.

In 1851 Baldwin went to Salt Lake City with six wagon loads of trade goods. He sold the wagon and team, bought a buckboard and four horses, and then traveled down the south fork of the Humboldt River through Lovelock, to Tahoe and on to Placerville and San Francisco.

"When Baldwin went through here, he was determined he'd come back," Knisley said, adding that at that time there were only two small places in Lake Valley.

Operating a brickyard in San Francisco, Baldwin got enough money ahead to invest in the Virginia City mines. Because of his success in the Nevada mining operations, he was given the nickname of "Lucky."

When he moved to Southern California, Baldwin had some \$20 million in cash. He bought Rancho Santa Anita, which is now the Santa Anita Racetrack.

He also became involved in the financial world, making loans at 12 per cent interest and starting the National Bank of the United States in that area.

"Then came the panic of the 1880's. The squeeze was being put on the leading people of the community and Baldwin had developed such a reputation as a scoundrel and thief that they were after him," Knisley said.

Baldwin became interested in the Tahoe Basin in 1914 when the federal government announced plans to drive a tunnel through Incline mountain 12 feet below the normal low level of the lake. They wanted to take the water out and send it on its way over to the Nevada valleys.

"This would have spoiled Lake Tahoe, cut off the Truckee River, and caused numerous problems," Knisley explained.

The few families living in Lake Tahoe at that time banded together and fought the project. Knisley recalled, adding that they included mainly the Baldwin and Bliss families.

"Baldwin was undoubtedly the earliest conservationist in California," Knisley said. Baldwin bought Yank's Station, the first commercial place at Tahoe, when he began acquiring property in the Tallac area. He had a violent dislike for the

cutting of trees. In fact, Knisley continued, Baldwin made a stipulation in his will that the Tallac property was never to be logged.

Knisley first saw Baldwin's Tallac House and other Tahoe properties in 1921 to familiarize himself with all the Baldwin holdings. It was from that time on that he became involved with Tahoe area and came to know the other families who were early landowners here.

The Tevis Family owned what later became known as the Pope Estate. Tevis was an English banker who moved to California and financed his undertakings such as the Moffit Tunnel in Colorado. When the Tevis Family was forced to dispose of its Tahoe property, the estate was sold to George Pope.

The Popes were originally from Maine. They came to California with their friends, the Talbot and Walker families. The three families acquired holdings in San Francisco, Puget Sound and the Sierra. They were steamship people and for many years they ran ships to South America and the Orient.

Descendants of the Pope family are still in the forestry business today, Knisley noted. In fact, he said, Pope-Talbot lumber was used in front of the new Waystation in South Lake Tahoe.

The original owners of the Valhalla Estate, were of the Walter Hellers of San Francisco and the Copelands were the original owners of Camp Richardson.

Knisley pointed out that the historic old estates on the West Shore have been bought up by the United States Forest Service. "This acquisition has not only created a beautiful area, but it has brought the wilderness in touch with Lake Tahoe," Knisley added.

Following his address on the estates, Knisley was asked to comment on the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency on which he

presently serves as the governor's appointee from Nevada.

"I think it is still possible for people to use Lake Tahoe, enjoy it and for it still to be protected so long as the Tahoe compact exists and is accurately administered," he said.

When questioned about his vote on the proposed construction of a Raley's Shopping Center at Tahoe Vista, Knisley explained that the developer had met all the requirements so there was not one legislative reason for denial.