

A Tahoe history lesson from locals who lived it



Bill Kingman, from left, Dave Wakeman, Betty Mitchell, Patty Olson, Tom Celio and Margie Daum
Photo/Denise Haerr

By Kathryn Reed

CAMP RICHARDSON – For an area that judges its residents based on the number of years they’ve lived here, the six panelists who retold stories Tuesday night of days gone by more than passed the test of being a local.

Bill Kingman, Dave Wakeman, Betty Mitchell, Patty Olson, Tom Celio and Margie Daum regaled more than 70 people who crammed together at the Camp Richardson Lodge. The six spoke of the infamous winter of 1951-52, how the Lake Valley schoolhouse was where T.J. Maxx is now, two-lane dirt roads, cattle drives

through the middle of town and more.

South Lake Tahoe in some ways was about 100 years behind some parts of the country when it came to infrastructure in the 1950s. The city wasn't incorporated until 1965. Before then people said they were from one of five areas like Bijou or Lake Valley or Al Tahoe. Dirt roads were not unusual. And few people lived year-round in the Lake Tahoe Basin.

Many in the audience had their own stories to tell. After all, from a show of hands about two dozen of them have lived here for more than 40 years.

Kingman started his journey to Tahoe in the 1940s with his parents, and then moved to the South Shore permanently in 1961. He has been a disc jockey and chief engineer at every Lake Tahoe radio station. Today he writes the "Then and Now" feature for *Lake Tahoe News* each Sunday and broadcasts the fireworks show for KRLT.

He brought old black and white photos to share with the crowd – including cows on Highway 50 in front of the old Harrahs Club.

Kingman spoke of Highway 50 not becoming four lanes until 1957. The Y really was a Y until 1961-62 when Lake Tahoe Boulevard was extended.

Wakeman, a 1959 graduate of South Tahoe High School, grew up in what is now Alpina Café on Emerald Bay Road.

He said the Camp Rich area used to be a busy community. There was a fish hatchery near Taylor Creek. From there people would walk to the lodge to play cards and drink.

A house used to sit down the road from the lodge. It's now a vacant lot used for parking. But Wakeman remembers it being where the telephone operator lived and worked. There were 20 party lines. If someone wasn't home, the operator took a

message.

No building department existed at the time – well, one did in Placerville, but no one bothered to come to the lake to see what was being built.

Wakeman remembers buildings collapsing after the snow melted from the record-setting winter of 1951-52. The snow held them up during the winter, but with the thaw they came down. He said the $149\frac{3}{4}$ inches that fell in 72 hours on Donner Summit still holds the record for snowfall in the United States. And that was just one of many storms that winter.

The one snowplow broke that winter. Tahoe was cut off from the rest of the world when it came to traveling by vehicle.

Daum was about 13 in that monster winter. She remembers people going to the Olsons' store to get red Kool-Aid and Jell-O that they used to make an X in the meadow so the plow part could be air dropped.

“Just like the Angora Fire, the community pulled together. Everyone helped everyone,” Daum said.

Olson said with the winter being not long after the end of World War II, people knew how to deal with rationing and hard times.

The house she lives in today is 165 years old. It used to be Young's Market.

She and her husband were instrumental in getting Barton Memorial Hospital built. To do so, the community had to raise \$400,000. The Barton's gave the land, Harrah's gave \$24,000 and others donated what they could.

While Mitchell didn't move here until 1958, she remembers plenty of trying times – like the summer of 1960. A fire on the North Shore cut power to this end of the lake. It meant no showers. And the weather was cold, so dipping into Lake Tahoe

was not happening.

She was a substitute teacher at the Lake Valley school, which went up to grade four. There was only one teacher, which Mitchell said was awkward at times.

Mitchell is credited with starting the Lake Tahoe Historical Society.

While Celio's family's roots run the deepest of the six (150 years ago they created what is now Meyers), he is the newest permanent resident of the basin. He took over the old family ranch three years ago. But he spent the better part of each summer at the ranch, spending much of his time on cattle drives.

The Lake Tahoe Historical Society, which coordinated the event, hopes to have a similar gathering in the spring with different speakers. The Nov. 12 event was videotaped, with copies of the DVDs available for purchase at the Lake Tahoe Museum starting Dec. 5.