

# Family letters become Tahoe history book

By Kathryn Reed

For 30 years a treasure trove of Lake Tahoe area history sat in a closet unbeknownst to the owners.

The white wooden chest was in Mary K. Sonntag's home in New Castle, Pa. Her mother, Myrtle McConahy Keefer, had sent it to her in 1962. In 1992, Sonntag's daughter, Mary Jo Sonntag, said it was time to open it.

What they found were photographs and more than a century (1842-1962) worth of letters between family members in Vermont, Illinois, Pennsylvania and California. Those in California had settled in the Sierra.



Mary Jo Sonntag speaks Aug. 13 at South Lake Tahoe Library. Photo/Denise Haerr

Mary Jo Sonntag was in South Lake Tahoe last week talking about "Write If You Live to Get There", the book she and her mom wrote from the letters and subsequent research.

In 1862, Sonntag ancestors bought 160 acres at what is now Phillips Station for \$2,000. An old cabin is still inhabited there by family members. It's on Highway 50 at the

intersection of the road that leads to Sierra-at-Tahoe.

“Phillips burned down multiple times and they kept rebuilding,” Sonntag told the audience gathered at South Lake Tahoe Library.

The resort was rustic. Electricity didn’t exist. Icehouses were on the river. Meat came Placerville, vegetables from Gold Hill. It was a bit of a haul to get eggs and butter from Camp Richardson, which had been delivered there via train.

For \$12 per week people could camp out at Phillips Station. Swimming, tennis and horseback riding filled days. Sitting by the bonfire was a ritual in the evening.

In the winter of 1952 most of the cabins collapsed from the weight of the snow in what turned out to be an epic year.

Throughout her talk, Sonntag read passages of letters that are woven into the book.

The mother-daughter duo first came to California in 1993 to begin their research. Soon they discovered how their family had left quite a mark on the region.

Family is buried in Placerville and Truckee, as well as the private family cemetery at Phillips Station.

Meeks Bay Resort employees helped piece together facts. A curator at the El Dorado County Historical County Museum in Placerville said, “Sally must be thrilled you are here.” They didn’t know who Sally was.

Thus began the introduction to West Coast family. Those out here thought the Sonntag clan had long since perished. Mom Sonntag is now 94.

In addition to Phillips Station the family ran Meeks Bay Resort for the McKinnys and leased property at Rubicon Springs, where they ran another resort.

It was Joseph W. D. Phillips who started Phillips Station. His daughter, Sierra Nevada "Vade" Clark, took over. When she inquired with the Postal Service about what to call their post office because a Phillips already existed, she was told to call it Vade Post Office. At one point it was part of the Pony Express Trail.