

Magic of Vikingsholm comes alive through stories from woman who lived there



Beverages were served throughout the day in the morning room; a room not on the regular tour. Photos/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

EMERALD BAY STATE PARK – An iconic gem of Lake Tahoe describes Vikingsholm as well as Helen Smith.

Smith spent her first 14 summers staying at what is now a castle within the California State Parks system. At the time, it was the private summer residence of Lora Knight. Smith's mother was a friend of Knight's so that's how they had the opportunity to summer at Lake Tahoe.

Smith, upon hearing the State Parks in 1953 bought the more than 200-acre parcel that included all the land in Emerald Bay up to the highway, made her way back to Lake Tahoe to see what the estate looked like.

She was taken aback a bit that no one knew much about the property. By this time furniture had been removed from some of the rooms. State Parks thinking at the time of acquisition was to tear down the buildings and return the land to its natural state or make it a campground.

Activists got involved and saved what is now a treasured jewel.



Helen Smith's goal is to ensure Vikingsholm's history keeps being told and that there will be money for its upkeep.

"This is considered one of the top cultural resources in the State Park system behind Hearst Castle," Heidi Doyle, executive director of the Sierra State Parks Foundation, said.

(This wasn't the only time the furniture was removed. In 2007, during the Angora Fire the house was evacuated.)

Smith, who is now in her 80s, was not comfortable letting the rich history of Vikingsholm disappear so she started the docent program. She gave tours for 42 years, retiring in 2009. But it wasn't an easy job to get because the thinking at the time was that this kind of work wasn't meant for women.

This is the fourth summer she has been a part of special fundraising events where guests get to see some of the rooms that are normally off limits as well as have the opportunity to ask Smith questions.

The intimate evening includes wine and light snacks. The emphasis is getting a chance to relive part of this history as well as contribute to the restoration of the site via the price of admission. Sodding the roof so it's like it was in Mrs. Knight's era is the current fundraising project.

The electrical system is next. Mrs. Knight had electricity and running water at Vikingsholm when it was built in the late 1920s.

"I would like to see an endowment so the house is kept up," Smith told *Lake Tahoe News*. "With a building as old as this, there are problems. It's continuous upkeep."

Besides seeing the library, Mrs. Knight's top floor and a room off the kitchen, stories not heard on the regular tour are told, like how some people came to Vikingsholm in the winter of 1951-52 for Thanksgiving but weren't able to leave until Easter because it was an epic snow year.

While stories abound about Mrs. Knight and her guests being rowed to Fannette Island for tea, the truth, Smith said, is this seldom occurred. This is largely because it was not an easy endeavor to take all the cooking devices to the island, plus most of the guests were older and the island is rocky.

This was the era when guests were expected to dress for all three meals. This meant dresses for the women and and coat and

ties for the men.

At what is now the boat-in campground was Emerald Bay Resort. Smith said Frank Lloyd Wright visited the area before Mrs. Knight.

“He was interested in building a bridge from the resort to the island,” Smith said.

Smith stays in the caretakers quarters when she is town. The rest of the year she is in Palo Alto. She and her late husband lived on the Peninsula for years. Smith obtained her doctorate in teaching from Stanford. The special tours are her way of continuing to teach about a bygone era as well as an opportunity to help preserve a slice of Tahoe’s history.

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Notes:

- The next event at Vikingsholm with Helen Smith is Aug. 27 at 5pm.
- Cost is \$60.
- Tickets are available **online**. A limited number are available.