

Lake Tahoe's history can never be history

By Susan Wood

"Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both," wrote C. Wright Mills, an American sociologist and intellectual.

Mills, who taught at Columbia University right up to his death in 1962, was concerned with the citizens' responsibilities in post-World War II society – a milestone in the modern world. Knowledge and power: He believed that knowledge was the crucial element to social change, and critical thinking was the means of obtaining this crucial knowledge.

In other words, introspection can help us learn from our mistakes, advocate for what worked and know more about ourselves in the given time period.

It's the reason preserving our history is critical.

And in our little microcosm of a world in the Sierra Nevada, it's the reason to support the Lake Tahoe Historical Society in its quest to hold onto the artifacts and writings of the region.

This year, the society celebrates a half century of peering through that looking glass. For the monumental occasion, a major fundraiser called Chautauqua at Lake Tahoe featuring Duane L. Bliss, George Whittell and Lillian Virgin Finnegan is slated for 7pm Aug. 18 at Lake Tahoe Community College.

"We all want to know where we came from, and why we're here," said South Lake Tahoe resident Carol Olivas, who's lived here for about five decades.



Diane Johnson is key to preserving South Shore's history through the Lake Tahoe Historical Society. Photo/Susan Wood

Truckee historian Chaun Mortier agreed.

"As a people, we are curious about our roots. A vast majority of Americans are American because they were born here, but their ancestors are from many other countries. We can understand our bloodlines because of preservation," she said.

Mortier believes preserving history is "preserving a timeline of our own selves and those that came before us."

The evidence can be good and bad.

Our history is everywhere

Still standing are murals dotting the landscape, tables and shelves holding hundreds of books about Tahoe and walking tours provided by curators of oral history. At the museum off

Highway 50, there's the Osgood Toll House marking the oldest commercial building in South Lake Tahoe.

And still around is a founding board member, 96-year-old Betty Mitchell.

Mitchell believes wholeheartedly in the mission to preserve the history of her town, her region and her country.

"The simple way to put it is: If you don't know where you've been, how will you know where you're going?" she asked *Lake Tahoe News* while relaxing on the deck of her home with a million-dollar view of Heavenly Mountain Resort.

"I don't know if we do, as I look back. We seem to make the same mistakes as we go to war. Taking up arms I guess is the easy way out," she said. "Those things are important, but I'm reminded, the nonsensical things are important.

"I'm proud of the Lake Tahoe Historical Society. There was probably a lot more we could have done, and they had a lot they wanted to do," Mitchell said, declaring she got involved because she was "a history buff."

"I just stuck my nose in there," she said with a giggle. She sat back in the lounge chair, gazing over the landscape with a pensive glance.

What was the memorable time relative to the preservation of Lake Tahoe's history – redevelopment, political climate, tourism?

"Those early years," Mitchell said, not missing a beat.

The South Shore has endured and conquered its share of challenges during its evolution. The city, for one, celebrated its own 50th anniversary a few years ago. So did Barton Health. Lake Tahoe Community College (not quite 50) started in a hotel room – appropriate for a tourism-based place. The winter of 1951-52, in which residents were snowed in up to

their second-story windows, became the testament to a community banding together.

There was something about the 1950s leading into the civil uprising of the 1960s. The nation tried to regenerate after a civilization-defining war that preserved our way of life, only to enter into another that divided us and challenged our trust in government.

To the society's Executive Director Diane Johnson, our history is the best learning tool. It grounds us and forces us to evaluate the vehicle that delivers our chronology.

A reference for the ages

What's important is more than a reference. It's a reference we can believe in.

"Everybody has a voice now. Some have a megaphone, but does that make it right?" she asked.

When someone brings in a piece to donate to the museum, Johnson finds she studies it with a more discriminating eye. She's part historian, part administrator, part fact checker.

"I don't know who would use it in the future. I don't make that assumption. Still, to actually have it as a source (is necessary) because you never know when possibly we need it again," she said.

The museum is filled from floor to ceiling with valuable artifacts and writings that define us as a people.

Johnson recoiled as she was reminded one man came into the museum and questioned whether James Beckwourth (who happens to be black) should be taking his place alongside the likes of Jedidiah Smith in the display commemorating notable mountain explorers. The notion of singling out a minority stuck with her.

What does this say about us?

“I’m concerned we’re leaving people out and creating a one-sided history,” she said, referring to the disenfranchised.

Truth in diversity is not always shared.

She applauds activists preserving the online pages taken down by the federal government because it doesn’t suit the current agenda.

“Our history is in danger. For example, will we ever return to common decency and compassion?” she questioned.