

**Mono County
Historical Society**
Bridgeport, California
2001 Newsletter

**The
Mono County
Museum**



Curator Lee Symmonds



The Bridgeport Schoolhouse about 1900

This is the first newsletter issued by the Mono County Historical Society since incorporating in 1963.

MCHS was established by Mono County Historian Lee Symmonds, and he became the first curator of the Mono County Museum in Bridgeport.

Lee was a first rate local watercolor artist who painted many local scenes. Some of his original works are on are on display in the Bridgeport Library.

When Symmonds was a child he rode his horse to a one-room schoolhouse in Missouri. Before he was grown, Lee moved to Colorado and lived on a ranch. He had a great appreciation for the past, a much simpler time, and he was responsible for obtaining many of the artifacts now displayed in the museum.

The Mono County Museum is housed in the original 1880 Bridgeport schoolhouse. Until 1964 it was located on Kingsley Street at School Street, the site of the current school. Originally there was only one large classroom and the rooms on each side of the lobby contained an office and a library.

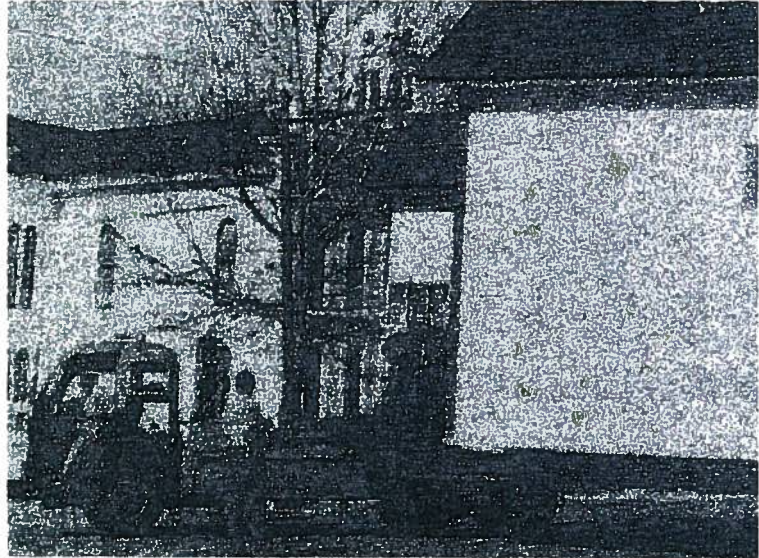
As the population increased, the big room was divided into two classrooms, separated by a series of folding doors. The front room was used for grades six to eight. The back was for grades one to five. As was typical in the good old days, the “restroom” was outside.

By 1964, the community needed a larger school. Due to the efforts of Symmonds and realtor Art Webb, the County Board of Supervisors designated the old building to be used as a museum. It was moved to its present location in Bridgeport Park during March of 1964.

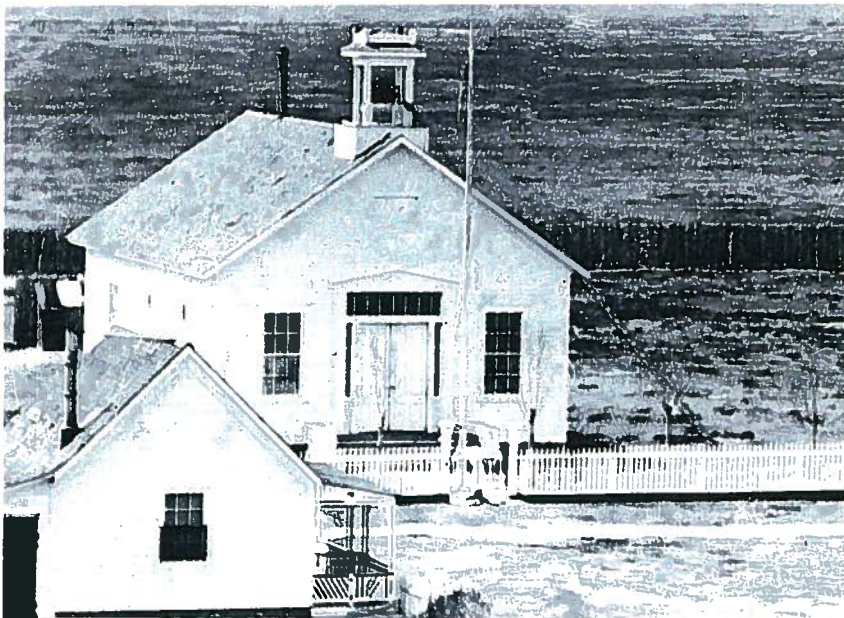
In January of 1965, Symmonds announced that the museum was ready to accept artifacts. On April 20, 1965, enough items were in place and an official preview was held for local residents. By June, the museum was open for business.

Within the next couple of years, Ella Cain loaned her extensive Paiute Indian basket collection for display. In 1982, plans were made by the county to build an addition onto the museum to specifically house the baskets and other Paiute artifacts.

Symmonds and Webb worked closely together to make the entire venture a success. When Symmonds died in 1982, Webb took over the duties of curator and continued until his death in 1987. When the new addition to the museum was finished in 1986, it was dedicated to the memory of Symmonds.



The school being moved past the Courthouse in 1964

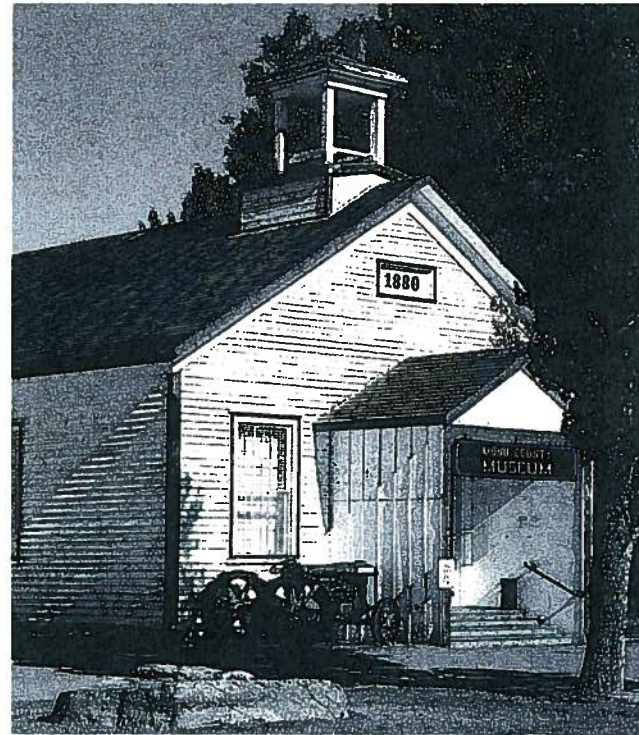


Another photo of the school, about 1900

Upon the passing of Art Webb, Paiute businessman Joe Lent became curator and served until 1999. He contributed many hours to keep the museum open. The task was made more difficult in 1986 when Mono County officials announced they could no longer afford to fund the project and they would have to close the museum. The Mono County Historical Society began funding the museum payroll, while the county agreed to maintain the building and to pay the utilities.

In the fall of 1996, people began to lose interest in the Mono County Historical Society and no one seems to know why. Between 1997 and 1998, Curator Joe Lent and his wife, Mary struggled to keep the museum open, in addition to working their business, the Eastern Sierra Trading Company. Joe administered the bank account, paid the docent, and answered the mail. In January of 1999, a new Board of Trustees was installed and Joe stayed on as curator until September, when he resigned to devote more time to his other career as a minister. Al Annett, the great-grandson of pioneer Bridgeport rancher George Byron "By" Day, served as curator between 1999 and 2000. Bridgeport resident Kent Stoddard has been the curator since 2000.

The Board of Trustees realized some of the museum exhibits required reorganization, but they did not change the up-close familiar feel of the displays, which many visitors had identified with over the years. Photos and documents had been poorly placed and mounted, many became damaged and were easily stolen. All of the items were removed, copied, and in most cases, enlarged. Many other items were found in office files, copied, and added to exhibits. All originals are now stored in a fireproof safe. New photo displays were posted on various blackboards in the main room and covered with Plexiglas. Each photo is now identified and the exhibits are separated into specific towns or areas. More Indian baskets, paintings, and photos were found in storage and were placed in the Lee Symmonds room. Gun displays were securely fastened to the wall and the weapons are identified.



The present Mono County Museum

The upstairs room of the building addition had been used for storage, mostly assessor's record books, old newspapers, and other miscellaneous record books, all of which had been saved from the county dump during the 1980's by Curator Art Webb. The room was clean and carpeted, so it was decided to make it into a resource room. Cabinets mounted to the wall now hold numerous editions of the Bridgeport Chronicle Union, Mono Herald, and Lakes District Review newspapers, 1938 to 1985. Assessor record books from 1862 to 1974 are available, as well as other county records. Tables, chairs, and a desk provide a pleasant and quiet atmosphere in which to review the materials.

The docent is the only paid employee. The curator and the Board of Trustees are all volunteers. The Board of Trustees is comprised of President/Curator Kent Stoddard, Vice-President Ed Oliver, Secretary Al Annett, Treasurer John Reid, and Member-at-Large Lynda Pemberton, who is a member of the pioneer Bryant family.

We are discussing ways to raise funds to continue the operation of the museum. The obvious needed improvements were made and more are planned. A favorable public reaction offers encouragement to carry on. We look forward to your visits and hope that you will approve of the changes.

MONO COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY MEMBERSHIP DRIVE

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