

# Fresno Historical Society

IN MARCH 1919, the Fresno Historical Society was founded by the members of the Fresno County War History Committee tasked with preserving all material of historical value related to local World War I soldiers that could be gleaned from “commonplace material, or may be had through conversation and correspondence.” A War History Committee was established in every California county by the California State Council of Defense in October 1918. The Fresno County Committee was led by Charles McLane, president of Fresno State Normal School. He was joined by future Fresno mayor Frank A. Homan, professor and football coach Emory Ratcliffe, librarian Sarah McCardle, and *Fresno Morning Republican* newspaper editor Ben R. Walker. After the war, this group and the information they had gathered formed the basis of the Fresno City and County Historical Society. Founded under the leadership of Ben R. Walker, the purpose of the Historical Society was to collect and preserve all written or other records of historical value to Fresno County and the San Joaquin Valley.

For a century, the Historical Society has gathered collections that document the early history of Fresno County from its founding in 1856. Its archival collections outline the settlement of this sprawling and diverse region, as well as the landscape modifications, particularly irrigation, that made the San Joaquin Valley the most fertile farmland in the world. Records dating from before 1970 make up the bulk of the collections that show the development of Fresno through government, business, and organizational records and family collections.

The Historical Society’s earliest manuscript is the 1848 Edward Smith Diary, which describes a six-month journey on the California Overland Trail from Independence, Missouri, and is one of only eight complete California Trail diaries from before the California gold rush. The archives contain early Fresno County records and business ledgers. These records, along with pioneer family collections, help document life in Fresno County’s first seat of Millerton, on the San Joaquin River. Early California racial tensions are highlighted by legal documents such as an 1862 “indenture of apprenticeship” binding a twelve-year-old Native American boy to a local hotel owner, and the minutes of a town meeting in December 1867 in which the “Citizens of Millerton” decided to relocate the Chinese community outside the town limits after a flood required them to rebuild.

The county seat was moved to Fresno Station on the Central Pacific Railroad in 1874. The Historical Society's archives contain records that document the rapid development of the city of Fresno, incorporated in 1885, and surrounding communities. The archives house several sets of mayoral papers, the papers of congressmen and civic leaders, and various urban and agricultural business records. These records include the ledgers of real estate developer J. C. Forkner, whose grand vision of large home lots, each with a profitable fig orchard, gave rise to the Forkner-Giffen Fig Gardens, which survive today as the Old Fig Garden neighborhood in the center of Fresno. Organizational records from women's clubs such as the Leisure Hour Club and the Query Club, and an extensive collection from the Parlor Lecture Club and the local YWCA, complement those from men's groups such as the Independent Order of Odd Fellows, the Grand Army of the Republic, and smaller organizations like the Raisin City Gun Club.

Individual and family collections such as the Marion Bigelow Papers, the Henry Mattei Andersen Papers, the Ruth McKenzie Collection, the Prescott Family Papers, and the Harvey Family Papers offer a personal look at the evolving history of Fresno County. Family collections offer a well-rounded perspective on a historical moment, as they can contain anything from photographs and printed material to financial and legal records to personal diaries and correspondence. The Historical Society's oral history collections offer another personal perspective on local history; the nearly three hundred oral histories cover a wide range of topics, including agriculture, ethnicity, aviation, World War II, and local history.

One of our favorite manuscripts is hidden in the small Robinson Family Collection. The Carrie Sage Diary, written in the spring of 1882, documents a honeymoon trip through the southern San Joaquin Valley and along the Southern California coast. The diary covers a six-week trip by wagon from Parlier, California, south to the Mission San Juan Capistrano and back along the coast via Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo. It was a rare overland pleasure trip, when the railroad was well established, to see the ocean for the first time.

Twenty-three-year-old Carrie Sage traveled with her new husband, John Sage, her parents, and an aunt and uncle. Carrie had migrated to California with her family in 1874 at the age of fifteen. She was the only daughter of Union veteran Charles H. Robinson, who served with the 47th Illinois Volunteer Infantry during the Civil War. Carrie's family settled in Parlier, California. She attended boarding school and was issued a teaching certificate in November 1879, which allowed her to teach at a secondary grade school in Parlier before her marriage.

After a long courtship, Caroline Knowles Robinson married John Epler Sage on April 6, 1882. Just five days later, on April 11, they left on their "long talked of trip to the coast." Throughout her journal of the trip, Carrie carefully described her surroundings, particularly the quality of the homes and gardens that she saw along the way. She gave detailed descriptions of plant life and liberally commented on the apparent thriftiness of the ranches and settlements they passed on their journey. The family camped along the way and took advantage

1

Tuesday, April 11, 1882.

This morning at half past nine o'clock we started on our long talked of trip to the coast. We had expected to start yesterday but the rain storm delayed us. We stopped a few moments in Kingsburg; saw Mr. Bare there and had a little chat with him. Aunt Anna's folks started earlier than we did; but we overtook them at Cross Creek, where we took our lunch. In crossing the Settler's Ditch which was very full of water Uncle Vet lost his stevedran off into the water, he thought the water was rather too cold to make a bath enjoyable; so he calmly let it float down stream. After we had eaten our dinner I took a walk to see what was to be found; I saw no flowers but some yellow snapdragons. After resting about an hour we came on to Mr. Hausch's where we staid all night. We found the

of the holiday to hunt and hike. The family enjoyed their first experiences of the Pacific Ocean, Carrie wrote on May 9:

After dinner some of us concluded to go in bathing; so John put up our tent for us to dress in, and Uncle, mother, father, John and myself went in. As we had no bathing suits mother and I put on our old dresses, and the men kept on their drawers, and shirts. I own that I am afraid of the water and I would not go out alone where it was very deep; but when John had hold of hands I went out to where it came up to my shoulders. It was fun to have the breakers roll in on to us. Being so near the ocean has made us enjoy every moment of the time today.

The diary ends when the extended family returns to the San Joaquin Valley on May 19, 1882.

Carrie and John Sage settled in Selma, California. Carrie had four children, but only two daughters survived to adulthood. Mary Sage was born in August 1885 and Lucille Sage was born in January 1887. John was a capable mountain man who owned and operated a sawmill near Pine Ridge, southwest of Shaver Lake, California, from 1887 to 1915. He also spent time exploring Yosemite Valley and Kings Canyon, often documenting his appreciation of nature through poetry. Throughout their lives together, John and Carrie enjoyed experiencing the joys of nature together. In 1892, Carrie joined her husband in an expedition that climbed Mount Whitney. On April 6, 1932, Carrie and John celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary at their home in Selma, joined by over a hundred friends and relatives. According to an article in the *Selma Enterprise*, they were celebrated as one of Selma's leading pioneer families. The detailed description of California communities from their earliest development is the true value of this remarkable document. A transcript and digitized scans of the diary can be found at the Fresno Historical Society website ([www.valleyhistory.org](http://www.valleyhistory.org)) under "Featured Story from the Archives."

In addition to the manuscript collections, the archives house an extensive photograph collection, including glass plate negative collections from local photographers. These photographs show the growth and development of the central San Joaquin Valley and the city of Fresno. From scenes of downtown Fresno to ethnic celebrations and family collections, our photograph collections reflect a broad range of regional history. The A. W. Peters Glass Plate Negative Collection contains a series of images from 1895 and 1896 recording the construction of the San Joaquin Electric Company's first hydroelectric power plant on the North Fork of the San Joaquin River. During those months in the Sierra Nevada, Peters became friends with the Mono (Monache) Indians and, because of those friendships, was able to record a series of images detailing their lifestyle during a period of transition. Another fantastic glass plate negative collection is the Paul Hutchinson Collection, which reveals the ethnically diverse community of Fowler, California, in 1914. The photographs of businesses, family groups, and individuals highlight the strong African American and Japanese communities.

These manuscript and photograph collections are complemented by a varied artifact collection that contains costumes and textiles, audio and video recordings, books, and medical, musical, and kitchen implements. The archives also house a Native American basket collection, farm equipment, furniture, and a section of the Shaver Lake logging flume. The Fresno Historical Society continues to receive new and exciting donations that illuminate unique facets of regional history. We hope to continue to engage and educate the public by collecting, preserving, and interpreting Central California history for another hundred years.