The Ponderosa

The Pine Ridge Association Newsletter
Henry W. Coe State Park

Winter 2007

Lick Fire Diary

by George Gray
Senior Environmental Scientist

Monday, September 3, 2007. Passing through Watsonville, a small fire appeared to be burning at Mount Madonna, but as I drove north, the plume moved north too, now appearing to be a medium-sized fire west of Gilroy. As I drove, that plume continued to move north, and my best guess was a large fire east of Gilroy, maybe Henry Coe State Park.

The last guess was right. At home was an e-mail from Bob Patrie with a photograph from Mount Hamilton of a fire that started mid-day on private land on the west end of Blue Ridge. The fire had already run half the length of Blue Ridge, and the smoke column continued to build. A Coe Park neighbor was burning some garbage in a barrel, a burned line of fine fuel led to some brush, and the fire quickly spread east. Ranger Cameron Bowers had gotten there first, picked up the neighbor, and drove her to safety down Hobbs Road.

CAL FIRE was quick to arrive, and with some muscle. Several bulldozers, a dozen fire engines, and some hand crews went directly to Blue Ridge, and more equipment staged at Coe Headquarters. Local Battalion Chief Derek Witmer, familiar with the Henry Coe Wildfire Plan, was the Incident Commander working from Coe Headquarters. During the day, they managed to hold the fire to the north of Blue Ridge Road except at the point near its eastern end where it takes a sharp turn north. There, the fire spread across the road and began to back down to Poverty Flat. On that first day, fuel along roads was bulldozed away from the roads, some ½-acre safe zones were bulldozed, and a hundred burning or burned oaks along Blue Ridge Road were cut down to prevent fire brands from blowing south across the road.

Jeff Frey gave Santa Cruz the call to respond, and Tim Hyland, Chris Spohrer, and I drove over, arriving about dark. The glow from the hills was obvious from the valley. Supervising Ranger Stuart Organo was with the Incident Commander. An unnerving glow emanated from the end of Manzanita Point. It did not seem like a good idea to drive down the steep, narrow road to Poverty Flat, but equipment continued to head down.

Ecologist Amy Palkovic was with CAL FIRE at the toe of Blue Ridge, tracking down a backpacker at China Hole. A helicopter circled in the dark but could not find the spot. The call went to Bob Patrie to get coordinates for China Hole. Within a half hour, the helicopter found the hiker with its light, gave him instructions with its loudspeaker to walk to a point, and he was driven away. He was pretty bold to hold his ground in the path of an intense wildfire. CAL FIRE was reporting flames 400 feet high.

At 11:00 p.m., Incident Command was to be moved to CAL FIRE, Morgan Hill, then to Christmas Hill Park in Gilroy. Coe Headquarters was considered threatened by the fire, especially with eastern winds predicted in two days. Some of the

Inside this issue . . .

A description of the course of the Lick Fire

An initial reaction after the burn

Ranger Cameron Bowers wins an award!

Book about the natural history of the Sierra Nevada

. . . and more!

more priceless items from the Visitor Center were evacuated.

The Morgan Hill meeting marked the change in command. A box of hats was broken open, and the 35 persons assembled from throughout California donned a red ball cap, designating them as "Team 2." Large incidents require this level of overhead. Local Battalion Chief Witmer briefed the group, and the stage was set for the next 10 days.

A film crew from National Geographic was present that night, filming the sequence of events and interactions of a wildfire from its inception, for a television program called "Inside." They would be present for the duration of the wildfire.

Comparisons with the 1961 Bollinger Ridge fire were made. Some predicted a week of work. I felt that the next major hurdle was the East Fork of Coyote Creek. It is fairly wide and sheltered from the wind. If the East Fork held, everything could be wrapped up in a few days.

Chris, Tim, and I slept at Christmas Hill Park.

Tuesday, September 4. The routine of two meetings a day began, the briefing at 6:30 a.m. and the planning meeting at 5:00 p.m. The plan for the day was direct attack, and most of the equipment and personnel had worked the night. More equipment began to trickle in to reach the requested 30 bulldozers, 20 fire crews, and over 100 engines.

Chris and Tim went out on separate divisions to act as advisors. The burning area south of Blue Ridge Road at the toe of Blue Ridge was contained.

Due to higher humidity and cooler temperatures, the East Fork had held during the night. Today would be the test. By 11:00 a.m., the radio calls began to come in. The fire had spread across the East Fork, and every division of the fire except Blue Ridge reported that the fire had crossed their lines or had spread past unbuilt lines beyond the ability of crews to attack.

There was some talk about catching the fire at County Line Road. Because County Line Road is narrow and brushy, and because there was inadequate time to circle around to hold the road, I thought otherwise. There was an effort to set up, but the fire, driven by prevailing winds from the west, crossed to the east of County Line Road before dark.

Bulldozers began work on four blades of fireline along Cordoza Ridge. With winds from the east predicted for Wednesday, there was fear that the fire could double back and exit the park toward homes near the park boundary.

At the planning meeting that night, the Incident Commander encouraged indirect attack, as two days of direct attack had failed.

Wednesday, September 5. Work continued north of Blue Ridge on Bollinger Ridge and Divide Ridge to stop fire spread to the north. The major effort was spent in preparing Orestimba Creek Road and Red Creek for a huge backfire the next day. The fire, having crossed County Line Road in many places, backed down toward Orestimba and Red Creeks, sometimes driven by winds from the west. To the south, the fire flanked toward Willow Ridge, making moderate progress.

Field crews noted the February 2007 prescribed burn on Willow Ridge and used it as a control anchor for the southern boundary of the fire.

State Park fire employees from throughout California, averaging ten in number each day, began the process of mapping bulldozer lines and other fire suppression damage repair opportunities.

Thursday, September 6. Fifteen miles of backfiring were scheduled for the day. Two separate crews started at Dowdy ranch. One started north on the Kaiser-Aetna Road with the ominous task of firing out both Orestimba Creek Road and Red Creek. The other headed east at the Scherrer Trail, Center Flats Road, and Willow Ridge.

There were inevitable escapes from the backfire. Some occurred near the intersection of County Line Road and Kaiser-Aetna Road, which were contained. However, in late afternoon, Ranger Cameron, observing from Paradise Flat, radioed in with the report of fire from the backfiring operation escaping into the heart of the Orestimba Wilderness toward Robison Mountain. A bulldozer headed up the hill to catch it, but was thwarted by steep terrain.

This was a key moment in limiting suppression activity in the wilderness. Superintendent Mat Fuzie and I lobbied to let the fire burn through the entire northern acreage of the park. Had the crews been fresh, direct attack in the wilderness probably would have prevailed. But the decision was made to back off to the previous year's wildfire firelines on Mount Stakes. This would add another 10,000 acres to the fire.

Due to heavy brush, terrain, and the risk of spotting, the backfiring along Scherrer Trail went slower than expected, only several miles of the seven miles being completed.

Friday, September 7. Because the fire had escaped across the road, backfiring along Red Creek was abandoned. This day was spent holding Orestimba Creek Road and preparing a fireline on Mount Stakes.

To the north of Blue Ridge, the fire was uncontained in several places due to steep terrain and heavy brush. Daily fire spread was slow here. This area would become the last to be contained by fireline, several days down the road.

Willow Ridge backfiring was completed today. The southern fireline was in place and holding.

Saturday, September 8. Firing north past the Rooster Comb toward the intersection of Robison Creek and Orestimba Creek was completed, and firing began on the Mount Stakes fireline. This was the third day of fire spread north from Paradise Flat, and the fire was making surprisingly slow progress. Apparently, the valley of Robison Creek slowed the spread of the fire. The backfiring was completed successfully, controlling the northern and eastern boundaries of the fire.

Two excavators (a rehabilitation rarity) were ordered to close opened roads and return bulldozed soil to its original location.

Sunday, September 9. Burnouts continued along northern County Line Road. Work continued on some unbuilt fireline north of Blue Ridge.

Fire suppression damage repair began in earnest. An excavator erased an old road that had been re-opened near Poverty Flat, and two crews raked out berms along Blue Ridge.

Monday, September 10. Rehabilitation work occurred throughout the area. The second excavator arrived and smoothed bulldozer lines on the east side of the fire. Hand crews raked lines along Willow Ridge.

The area north of Blue Ridge still resisted attempts to establish a control line.

Tuesday, September 11. Containment lines were completed around the fire, and release of equipment began. Repair of suppression damage continued for several days.

Nearly all persons who tour the fire have the impression that suppression damage to the park was minimal and the repair work did an adequate job of returning the park to a "state park" appearance.

It can be said that, with 30 bulldozers working in the park for a week, more suppression activity occurred in a unit of the state park system in the Lick Incident than has ever occurred in California history. And from most accounts, it looks pretty good.

Burn Walk

by Mike Meyers

The sun was bright, the sky was blue, but the earth was smudged all over with soot, and black sticks stood up at crooked angles across the hills. We walked up a road lurching forward because of the steepness and came to the first rise. We stood under brown trees and looked out, then went higher up. Ron Fischler, who was taking pictures, finally set up on a dark slope full of sun, and I pounded a big nail into the soot under the tripod and tied a flag. Across the canyon, Robison Mountain was charred, and many trees still had green, but around us the oaks were brown, and the trunks always had some blackened spot. All the leaves were brown, and they didn't fall. It was like some woodland of brittle, brown, crackly trees and stick black chaparral. The chaparral stood on hillsides like singed hairs on a burnt head. Afterward we walked up the road moving west, and Ron set up again on a hillside, and I went over a hump to wait. I checked out a bleached pelvis that was charred at the edges. I looked at it for the aesthetic merit, maybe Ron would take a picture, but there was no art to it. In the sky, a cloud streaked half way across. It was smooth at the edges like a piece of creek wood, and you could almost look at the sun, the cloud was coppery and blue near where it covered it. Below it in the hard blue sky were some cloud fragments farther off in the southeast, whips and strands, just dogs cavorting, lacy-like and whipped like a girl's hair all artfully disarranged. I felt a big pull from it all, then Ron's head poked above the hill, and he came down, and he was mad because the time-stamp wouldn't attach to the electronic pictures the way it should.

We walked through the black sticks on the road and then went off south onto the hills, for then we were headed down into Robison Creek. We passed a pond of dried mud and a meadow with no grass. The gray pines stood tall on the sky with no needles and a line of cones across the tips of the branches similar to a persimmon but with all the black fruit at the top. I looked at two pines on the edge of a dam, to see if the dam covered the root mound or not. The bark was shiny black, and one had golden drops of sap dropped around it on the black dirt, like tears. I hated to think, because that tree could not live. But I carved into the bark, and it was not burned through but was brown inside. We saw two or three oaks that were not brown but green, and it was luck, I guess. Then there was one little oak all brown with some green leaves, new leaves, it seemed, and it being November we thought the tree had to do it to prove it was alive to itself, and it was. Ron believes most of the trees will come back. Maybe. Ron made pictures from a tripod with moon landers, and I stood behind rocks or walked across the land until I couldn't see him and he couldn't see me. At the creek the sycamores shed their bark and were white big trunks with brown leaves and char that went 6–8 feet up the trunks, black on white, black black like deep space, on white. I saw a pine trunk charred and lumpy shiny black, and the trunk held by the root mass a foot off the ground like it couldn't give in and

die, but it was dead. Another one was gone, holes in the dirt mound where the big roots had been and only a line of white ash on the ground 80 feet long. An oak outline in ash, perfect drawing of a tree. We walked up the canyon in the creek, and it was all burnt but one place suddenly full of green leafy bushes and trees hanging over, and it was sweetness in there, and all good things condensed right there, you could feel it and know what was missing everywhere else. We went up out of there onto a ridge and Red Creek to the west, and it was all burnt up. They say fire's a good thing, good for the land, helps it grow healthy again. There's a picture on a website showing the burnt landscape, and when you put the mouse over it, the picture changes to a picture of the same place full of chamise and a small tree by the road. You take the mouse away and it's gone, you put the mouse back and it's there. That little tree in the picture, I notice trees like that sometimes. There's no hurry and you look at them and they come alive to you. Death is part of the cycle of existence, but I still don't get it.

Ron Fischler's panoramas and other photos related to the fire can be seen at *http://coefire2007.info.*

This photo during the fire was taken by State Park Maintenance Chiefs Sterl Cogar and Jim Dascoulais on September 7. Only chamise skeletons remain; smoke from the fire can be seen in the background. The photo was taken on Blue Ridge near the top of Jackass Trail.

© 2007 California State Parks

Cameron Bowers Receives the Land Manager of the Year Award

by Paul Nam
ROMP Henry Coe SP Liaison, former ROMP President

Backcountry Ranger Cameron Bowers is recognized by Responsible Organized Mountain Pedalers with their 2007 Land Manager of the Year Award. Cameron deserves this recognition because he exemplifies excellence in his role. This year Cameron distinguished himself, going beyond the usual call of duty. He met the extraordinary challenge of the Lick Fire and played a key role in its containment.

We are grateful and lucky to have a man like Cameron Bowers serving in Coe Park. As the sole Coe park staff-person with CDF training, it fell upon him to represent California State Parks during the fire-fight. He worked around the clock under potentially hazardous, even fatal, conditions. Of course all of us who know "Cam" will know that he will modestly downplay his role, grin and laugh off any mention of heroics. But it is true, Cam is a true hero among us, and here is why:

Cameron is ready for any emergency in the park. If someone is lost, tired, thirsty, hungry, or hurt, Cameron will aid them and be a hero. And while that may be a part of his job, it is also a big part of his big heart. You see, Cameron loves people. You can see it in his smile and the way he looks you in the eyes. And while I haven't yet required his rescue, I have no doubt that his concerned gaze would be one of the most reassuring things I would ever see.

This year, the park itself became a victim of an accidental and rapidly spreading fire, and Cameron came to the rescue. Cameron's first acts were to respond to the source of the fire. He actually evacuated the woman who started the blaze, along with her husband, and extricated them from a perilous circumstance. As an enforcement ranger Cameron Bowers was obligated to declare that anything Margaret Pavese might say could be used against her in court. There is no doubt the he treated her with every courtesy, despite the fact that he well knew a disaster of grave proportions was unfolding and threatening the very park he is sworn to protect. Cameron is a gentleman, too. He was forced to change his evacuation route by the rapidly spreading fire as he drove them out from the ignition site. His knowledge of the roads and trails in and around the park would be invaluable in the days to come.

Cameron's respect for people is heroic. Where others might reach for quick unproven judgments, Cameron forbears and gives people the benefit of any doubt. I have seen this in action. An example is when he sees someone preparing for a trip into the backcountry at the trail-head. Perhaps he may see someone who is not well experienced or prepared. Cam makes a mental note, but withholds making pointed remarks. You see, he treats people with dignity and understands that we learn from experience. He knows that recreation and nature

lovers yearn for and deserve a rich experience; one that springs from a native self-reliance and develops organically. And you know what? More often than not, people prosper when given a chance.

This is the way it is with Coe Park. Like we may be with our children, sometimes we are overprotective, when we know in our hearts we must set them free. Cameron knows and loves Coe; it is a part of his family to take of. So when the fire got started, he personally was involved. We all were. It was hard to watch. Cameron showed that maturity and wisdom he has been developing all these years, and measured the sacrifices that were being made, and immediately realized the benefit in the doubt.

Fuel loads in Coe had increased to unsafe levels in many places, and it was appropriate to let the Lick Fire do what people had not been able to do. But it was not easy to watch. As the aftermath of the 2007 Southern California Fire Siege vividly illustrates, disastrous results were possible for the Lick Fire. Cameron was in the right position to influence events. He was able to help the CDF balance the equation by the seat of his pants; to let the fire burn a needed course in the park, and lament the damage, over the risk to private property outside the park.

As a field coordinator with the CDF Incident Command (IC), Cameron provided the insight that only an intimate local can and made key recommendations. He was also able to provide an effective radio communications conduit using the State Park repeater system when the CDF system was inadequate due to the terrain. Cameron kept the welfare of the park, its wildlife, resources, and trails in mind as the fire was fought and contributed to their preservation by keeping watch over CDF processes and reminding them when he felt necessary. This was aided in no small way by the fact the IC Battalion Chief was an old friend and boss of Cameron's from his days in the CDF.

Cameron has been a Helitack Fire-fighter, a CCC Crew Leader, a Fish and Game Intern, a City of San Jose Ranger, a Santa Clara County Parks Ranger, and a Henry W. Coe State Park Aide, among others. Cameron is also an avid football coach. All of these hats he has worn give him that diverse background and experience that informs him. Since he began his current post at Coe in the final months of 2000, Cameron has watched over the backcountry, enforced regulations, assisted the public, and facilitated volunteer activities with an unrelenting enthusiasm and competence.

Cameron deserves greater honor and recognition than the humble ROMP Land Manager of the Year Award can provide. Public servants are not thanked enough for the jobs they do day in and day out. Heroes are rare, and should be celebrated. Please remember to cherish those you love. This award has nothing directly to do with mountain biking. It is about respect for the right thing to do, and honoring those who do it.

Congratulations to Backcountry Ranger Cameron Bowers, 2007 Land Manager of the Year! Whether it is confronting poachers, pot farmers, dealing with curious journalists, overenthusiastic mountain-bikers, or fighting a big and expensive blaze, Cameron is the kind of person we need. Thank you, Cameron, you are a true hero.

More information about ROMP can be found at their website at *www.ROMP.org*. If you would like to read about the implications of the fire at Coe from the perspective of a bicyclist, read Paul's article titled "Coe Park after the Lick Fire," which is featured on the ROMP website. Eds.

From under My Sugar Pine (or News from a Pine-Covered Ridge)

by Barry Breckling, retired Coe Ranger

Back in the early 1970s, I began many months of training to learn how to be a ranger, and even after that, they had to keep sending me back to be trained almost monthly. When the work schedule said you started work at 0700, you were up, uniformed, awake (if the coffee had been made at 0600), and out the door at 7 a.m., or maybe 7:04 a.m. Also, working for the state, there were always deadlines (although I often considered these dates as guidelines).

Retirement has been a whole different state of affairs. It took me less than a week to learn how to do it, and no additional training has been necessary. And, yes, Judy and I are enjoying getting up in the morning at any dang time we want. When there's a job to do, it can always be done mañana.

The main reason I'm writing this article is to tell you about a wonderful new book we've been using up here in the Sierra Nevada, but more about that after I tell you a little about our new mountain retreat.

Our new house has turned out even better than we could have imagined. We're in a ponderosa and sugar pine forest with black oaks and canyon live oaks. Many plants that grow at Coe Park we've also found growing here. Through a break in the trees, we have a marvelous view of a valley below us (occupied by a tidy little llama ranch) and in the distance the snow-capped Clark Range in Yosemite. Between the valley and the Clark Range are undulating, pine-covered ridges set at various heights and distances. We thought the only man-made structure we could see was the rooftop of one other house off to the south, but recently I found a barely visible rooftop of a second house off in the distance.

We've told many people about our little town of Greeley Hill, whose city limit sign says "Greeley Hill: population friendly, elevation just right." And the people are very friendly, maybe only because the sign tells them that they should be, but we find, for example, that people we don't even know wave to us as we drive to town.

We live in a county that has a grand total of two stoplights, and they're just temporary lights at the rockslide on highway 140 between Mariposa and Yosemite. Although we seem to be living way out in the boonies, rather than a half hour drive each way to Safeway when we lived at Coe, we now have a five-minute drive to the Greeley Hill Market, which has a very good selection of food for a mountain market and prices that are at least as low and often lower than Safeway's prices. Now if we need a couple of onions, we just go and get them.

I was getting grief about my giant deck, but when Judy dreamed about adding a bit of deck on the front of the house (something we should have done from the get-go) and after the additional decking was completed a few months ago, I've found I no longer get disparaging comments. And, besides, when we've had a bunch of people up to visit, the giant deck has been appreciated.

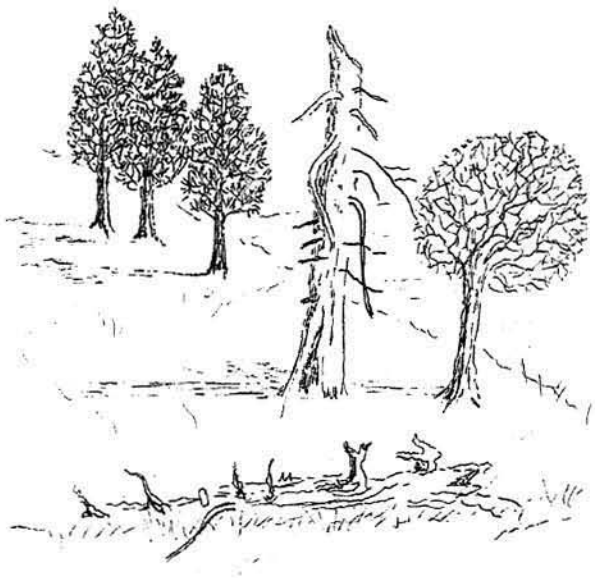
Judy and I will be back to visit Coe for some of the events and probably a spring wildflower trip. Coe and the whole Bay Area are very special to me. Since I was young, I've had the idea of putting together a book on the natural history of the Bay Area: a book covering the common flora and fauna. That project will likely remain only a notion, but we do intend to do some Sierra Nevada work, a wildflower book for Yosemite maybe?

These ramblings are all leading up to a recommendation for an extraordinary, new book about the natural history of the Sierra Nevada. Many people who enjoy hiking at Coe also spend time in the Sierras (what would you rather do in August . . . hike the Blue Ridge loop or hike to Little Yosemite Valley?). If you have any interest in what lives in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, you'll want to get yourself a copy of *The Laws Field Guide to the Sierra Nevada* by John Muir Laws. It's a fairly comprehensive field guide for identifying Sierra mushrooms, trees, shrubs, flowers, insects, spiders, fish, amphibians, reptiles, birds, mammals, clouds, and even constellations.

That's enough news for now. I need to get some chores done around the house. Or . . . maybe I'll get to them tomorrow.

Oops . . . .

In the last issue of *The Ponderosa* we wrote that Barry had served 30 years as a ranger. That was incorrect. He was a ranger for more than 37 years, and 30 of those wonderful years were spent at Coe Park. We regret the error. Eds.



New Members through October
by Margaret Mary McBride

We are pleased to welcome the **new members** listed below. Thank you for your support, and welcome to the Pine Ridge Association!

Mike Flores & Amanda Hubert, Berkeley
Michelle Geary, Saratoga
John Guglielmino, Morgan Hill
Sue Harwager, Morgan Hill
Michael Hussen, Richmond
Richard Migues, Santa Ana
Lyle Pittroff, Hollister

We need your help to keep our membership list current and accurate. If you are a paid member, your *Ponderosa* mailing label includes an expiration date. (No expiration date for life members and organizations.) If you have any questions regarding your membership or if you would like to update your address, please contact us.

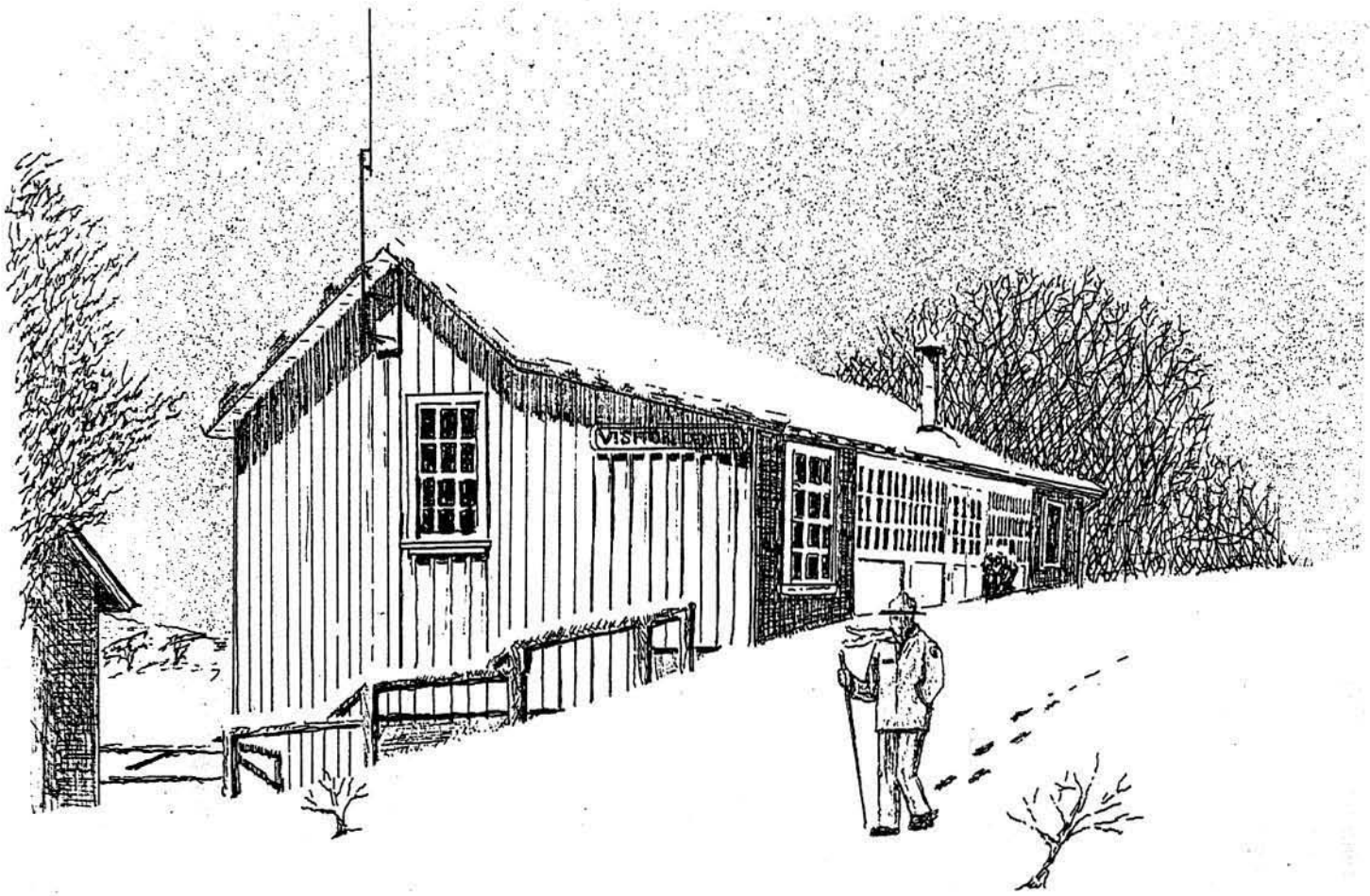
E-mail: PRA@CoePark.org
Snail mail: 9100 East Dunne Ave., Morgan Hill, CA 95037
Fax: 408/778-5749
Phone: 408/779-2728

PRA Calendar

Saturday, February 2, 2008: **The PRA Annual Meeting.** All PRA members are invited to attend the association's annual meeting and graduation of the new class of uniformed volunteers. A flyer containing more information will be distributed in January.

See you at the park!

We wish you and your family
a very happy and healthy
Holiday Season!



Nonprofit Org.
U.S. Postage Paid
Morgan Hill, CA
Permit No. 160

Pine Ridge Association
Henry W. Coe State Park
9100 East Dunne Avenue
Morgan Hill, CA 95037
408/779-2728
http://www.CoePark.org

DATED MATERIAL, DO NOT DELAY

PRA Board of Directors
Bob Patrie, President
Kevin Gilmartin, Vice President
Winslow Briggs, Secretary
Dan McCranie, Treasurer
Priscilla Campbell, Volunteer Committee Chair
Ann Briggs
Barbara Bessey
Ross Campbell
Ron Erskine

Stuart Organo, Supervising Ranger

The Ponderosa Staff

Editors:	Kevin Gilmartin	Barbara Bessey
Mailing & Distribution:	Heather Ambler	Margaret Mary McBride
	Phyllis Eastman	Diane Scariot
	Stew Eastman	Pat Sharfe
	Jodie Keahey	Martie Sinclaire
	Linda Keahey	Carolyn Straub
This Issue's Reporters:	Barry Breckling	Mike Meyers
	George Gray	Paul Nam
	Margaret Mary McBride	
This Issue's Illustrators:	Barry Breckling	Rosse Hemeon
	Sterl Cogar	Bob Patrie
	Jim Dascoulais	

The Ponderosa is a publication of the Pine Ridge Association with approximately five issues per year. The PRA's mission is to enhance and enrich the public's experience at Henry Coe State Park through education and interpretation. Articles and artwork relating to the natural history, history, and management of the park are welcome. Please send submissions to the editors at 127 Glenwood Avenue, Woodside, CA 94062-3512; or call 650/851-7813.

© 2007 The Pine Ridge Association

recycled paper