

CHESTER HISTORY TOUR

The town of Chester began as a name chosen by Burwell Johnson and Oscar Martin for the post office established in 1894 at Burt Johnson's freight/stage-stop and ranch. Johnson's was located on the Red Bluff Susanville Road, near today's North Shore Campground, at the very foot of the long grade that still bears his name. Burwell (Burt) had been raised on a Missouri farm across the Mississippi River from Chester, Illinois, and Oscar Martin's family was from the Chester, Vermont area, so the two men settled on that name for the new post office. Burt Johnson, the first Chester postmaster, died of pneumonia in December 1907. In February 1908 the post office operation was moved one and one-half miles west to the Olsen ranch. Olsen cousin Maude Gay, who was keeping house for the Olsen brothers, became the new postmaster, a position she held from 1908 until 1940. Running a post office from the front parlor of the Olsen ranch house was impractical, so the Olsens built Maude a tiny one room post office and store next to the ranch house in 1909. In 1912 it was moved into the new Corner Store, but over the years the post office has moved on to several different locations in town in order to accommodate the growing community.



Text and photos by Marilyn Quadrio, Chester Lake Almanor Museum

1. **OLSEN RANCH/HOTEL SITE**—Peter Olsen, native of Norway, laid claim to this property on the North Fork of the Feather River in 1859, eventually accumulating 1,100 acres. Marrying his widowed neighbor Melissa Bailey in 1870, he fathered three sons: George, Nelson, and Edgar. All but 150 acres were later sold to Great Western Power



Company, and in 1913 the Olsens built a hotel across the front of and adjoining the ranch house. The hotel opened in May 1914, days before Lassen Peak let out a massive steam explosion, heralding the beginning of a series of eruptions. The property was sold to local cattle and sheep man Earl McKenzie in April 1948, the hotel operation being leased out through the early 1950's. It was the site of Chester's first telephone—and the only one in operation at night for several years!

2. **THE BIDWELL/McKENZIE HOUSE**—The basic structure is Annie Bidwell's "Robin's Nest" completed in 1904, after General John Bidwell's death, on the Bidwells' 800 acres in Big Meadows. Earl McKenzie acquired the house in 1926 when Great Western Power Company was enlarging the dam, and therefore the storage capacity of Almanor, which would have flooded it. McKenzie skidded the house overland through the Stover and Olsen ranches to its present site using "Cats" borrowed from Red River Lumber Company. The house served for thirty years



as summer headquarters for Earl when the McKenzie-Stover Cattle Company was in operation.

3. This photo shows Forest Guard Leo Speegle handing out a campfire permit or information on Main Street in front of the tiny Lassen Forest Guard Station in 1926. The cabin was on the lot next to the Bidwell /McKenzie House, now the property of Every Blooming Thing Nursery.



4. RAINBOW LODGE AND AUTO COURT was built in the mid-1930's by Minnie Lee Vest after her first Lee's Lodge burned. Having acquired the land with cabins in place, she enlisted the help of Red River Lumber Company and their carpenters for the construction of the Lodge, a café, gas station and garage.



5. Opened here in 1932 by Alice and Rulon "Bud" Barnes, the RED AND WHITE MARKET was sold to Frank Locatell and a partner in April 1947. When Locatell opened his big supermarket in the newer business district across the river, this building became the Holscher and Guess owned Chester Plumbing, before its metamorphosis as Books and Beyond.

6. This building with owner's quarters in the rear was for many years the HOME MARKET, operated in the 1940's and early 1950's by brothers-in-law Ted Lee and Harry Kan, followed by Fran and Orv Nyhart. Behind this building can be seen the few



remaining cottages from Minnie Lee Vest's Lee's Lodge, built in the late '20's.

7. In the 1930's and 40's a beauty salon operated in the front of this wood framed building, with the La Mont apartment units upstairs.

8. Originally the site of LEE LODGE—Minnie Lee Vest married Charles Lee of the Warner Valley Lee family in 1910. Charles was the foreman of the Red River Lumber Company's dairy near Westwood. He died at age 30, and Minnie moved to Chester, opening a little restaurant, Travelers Inn. With the earnings she bought property on Chester's Main Street, and in 1922 began building the Adirondack-styled Lee Lodge, with small cabins and a café. Completed in 1927, it was the most handsome hotel in the



area. On July 3, 1934, Lee Lodge burned to the ground after a fire started in the well house behind the lodge and the tank house fell over onto the main building. Only some cottages and the little café were left. Minnie was instrumental in getting Chester's fire department established, raising money for the first fire truck.

9. THE ELK'S LODGE BUILDING was built by Bob Pasero in 1946 as the Sportmen's Club. In 1955 it was purchased by Joe and Pat Martin and became the new Bear Club after the original Bear Club collapsed under a heavy snow load. It remained a popular local bar and restaurant until the early 1980's, the Elks taking ownership in 1984.

10. LASSEN DRUG STORE #2 opened here May 22, 1945 (Lassen Drug #1 was in Susanville) under the ownership of Larry Hope and Jim Warner, who hired pharmacist Cecil Good to manage



the new store. Being next door to the Chester Post Office its fountain became a convenient stop for Chester folks to exchange gossip over coffee or ice cream.

11. THE LOG CABIN BARBER SHOP was a fixture in Chester for many years, with its attractive striped barber pole a popular feature until it was stolen in the 1990's. Cheryl Hathaway continues the barbering tradition in this historic spot.



12. This log façade for years fronted DINTY MOORE'S SPORTING GOODS store. Dinty was queen of the local sporting goods businesses with the newest lures, fresh bait and latest updates on the hot spots for those rainbow and German brown trout.

13. Chester's first SHELL GAS STATION was built on this spot by partners Lou Martine and Bob McAuley. McAuley left the partnership to build his own service station up the street, and Martine's half-brother, Harvey Bundy, came on as the new partner. This was the first gas station built independently of another business.



14. This large lot was the property of the pioneer OSCAR MARTIN FAMILY. The Jonathan Martin family of Vermont established a dairy and cattle ranch on 1300 acres of meadow here in 1873. Son Oscar was



the first landowner to subdivide some of his holdings into lots, creating Lassen Avenue and the lots on the upper side of Main Street in 1909. He and daughter Edith donated land for most of Chester's public buildings. Across Feather River Drive, originally a section of the Red Bluff-Susanville Road, sat Oscar's big freight barn, taken down to make room for the Chester Fire Department, now St. Andrews Academy. Ironically, the Martin house, long-time summer home of Chester's benefactress, Edith Martin, was burned in the mid-1970's as a fire department practice exercise.

15. This unique granite building was the second of **JAKE STOVER'S MEAT MARKETS** on this spot, the first a small wooden structure. This building, built about 1933, included a grocery store, complete with slot machines. A Richfield Station, the store became the **RICHFIELD CAFÉ** under owner Elmer Broker in 1940.



16. Chester's landmark **CORNER STORE** was the first business built on what became Main Street. Built by the Olsen brothers in 1912 on the corner of the Red Bluff-Susanville Wagon Road and the Prattville Road, now First Avenue, it also housed the post office and the first lending library for a time. It was one of the first buildings in Chester with electricity after a generator was installed in the well tank house next to the store. The Olsen brothers subdivided some of their land on the lower side of Main Street in 1911 to help supply the demand for lots for summer cabins and businesses, as plans were in place for Big Meadows and Prattville to be inundated by the new lake being created by Great Western Power Company.



17. **OLD BEAR CLUB SITE**—The first Bear Club was a popular watering hole and gambling joint during the years Chester was known as "Little Reno". Complete with craps and poker tables, slot machines, and a



bear cub named Jimmy, it was the scene of some of Chester more exciting moments. When it collapsed during the winter of 1955-56, Joe and Pat Martin transferred the name and liquor license to the former Sportmen's Club on Main Street.

18. **CHESTER BOWL** began life in the 1920's as a dance hall owned and operated by Corner Store owner Jack Wardlow. Owned by Leo Speegle after 1926, it was part speakeasy and dance hall, then bar and restaurant (the **EASTSIDE**), and later **THE FURNITURE CENTER** (1945). In



1949 it became **CHESTER RECREATION CENTER** (pool hall) owned by Leo's son Wayne, but operated by Leo and wife Jessie. Two, then four, bowling lanes were added and it became a winter hot spot for Chester's many bowling teams.

19. **MT. LASSEN CLUB/VARIETY STORE**—Chester's first granite building was built in 1930 by Maude and son Randall Gay. Maude ran a store and the Post Office in the right side for a time, before leasing to other store operators, who most often had variety-type stores. The left half was always leased out to restaurant and bar operators. For a short time Gordon Purdy ran his **OASIS BAR** in this building, but it has retained the name The Lassen Club or Mt. Lassen Club most of its life. For part of the 1930's and most of the 1940's it served Chinese and American food under the management of Frank and Mon Gee.

20. THE CHESTER CLUB/BLEU FOX—The Blue Fox was owned and operated during bootlegging days by Blackie Walters both in this building, and one that sat next door in today's parking lot until that building burned. As the Chester Club it was owned by Ben and Donna Judish, who sold the business to Ted and Inez Veach in 1949. It was always famous for the delicious fried chicken dinners, as well as the notorious shooting of a straying wife in 1952, "I guess you know what this means, Bernice..." said Ed Pusheski, before firing four bullets as patrons dove out of doors and windows.

21. WESLEYAN METHODIST CHURCH—within the walls of this structure is a small one-room church, originally used for Presbyterian services. The cabin was built by John Bidwell in 1898 on the Bidwell property in Big Meadows from building materials hauled up the

Humboldt Road from Chico. It was skidded in to this site in 1912 by Oscar Martin's team of twelve horses, on to land donated by Nels and George Olsen. At first, church services were provided by any willing visiting pastor. The bell was donated



by Ben Pratt in 1938. It came from a Red River locomotive which wrecked coming down grade from the woods near Juniper Lake. A church fire in 1951 necessitated rebuilding which has obscured the original little church.

22. MEMORIAL HALL—The property at this site was reserved as a school lot when part of a 42-acre parcel sold to Peter Olsen by Jonathan Martin in 1875. The very first school at this end of Big Meadows was held in a log cabin on the Olsen ranch, soon outgrown, and replaced by the first school building built on this site c. 1875. That building is now in the Plumas County Road



Department yard west of Chester. Larger classrooms were gradually added to this site in the 1920's and 1930's. The present day elementary school opened in February 1949 on land donated by Edith Martin, Jonathan's granddaughter. Seneca School District then deeded this property to American Legion Post No. 664 in 1949 as a public meeting hall. It became county property in 1959, but still serves the local community, as well as the local VFW and American Legion posts.

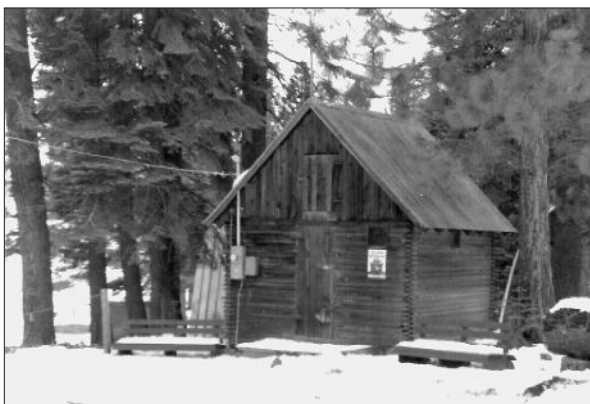
23. CHESTER LIBRARY/MUSEUM—After Jack Wardlow purchased the Corner Store the lending library there was moved down the street to Gay's Grocery/Chester Post Office for a short time. In 1928 Edith Martin donated over an acre of land here beside the river for a library and community building. Library funds were raised by holding community events like plays and dances, and building materials were donated by Fletcher Walker of Red River Lumber Company. In 1929 an old-fashioned log raising was held under the leadership of George Olsen and Charlie Yori, who also completed the interior.



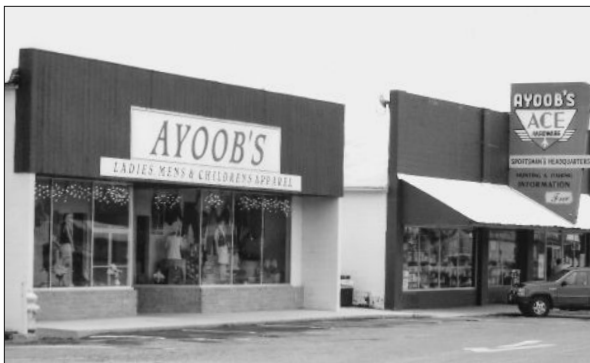
24. COURTHOUSE SITE—Prior to 1948 local Justices of the Peace held court in their homes or businesses. In October 1947 a contract of \$3500 was awarded to local contractor Larry Shea to construct a simple justice building on this site. This building was moved to Willow Way before the current sheriff's office and civic complex was built. The old building was a meeting place for Chester Boy Scouts until its purchase by the Antlers Hotel.



25. OLD JAIL—Chester's original jail was this one room wooden stake building that stood next to the river on the east side of First Avenue. During Chester's wild and woolly days, its inhabitants were drunks and brawlers who provided free entertainment for early residents and visitors. It was replaced by a multi-celled concrete structure, which sat near today's civic complex site, and was later moved to the Plumas County Road Department yard when the new civic building was built in the 1970's. The original stake building now functions as the "library" at the North Shore Camp-ground.



26. AYOOB'S DEPARTMENT STORE—One of four Ayoob stores in Plumas County, a dynasty begun by Mike Ayoob Sr. with the original store in Greenville, this business was built by Ed Neuman and wife Helen Ayoob Neuman in 1946. After its celebrated grand opening on October 25, 1946, this store provided many necessities for Chester residents over the years, from clothing and gifts, through appliances, building supplies, and furniture. 2016 will mark its 70th anniversary, though only the hardware store remains.



27. CHESTER THEATRE—After the first theatre-one mile out of Chester on Highway 36-burned on December 30, 1947, owner Ed Blair acquired this property next to Young's Market, and built this theatre with the latest up-to-date seating and projection equipment. It opened Saturday, January 29, 1949, the scheduled Friday opening delayed by frozen pipes. The first film shown was "Scudda Hoo, Scudda Hay".

28. YOUNG'S MARKET—Built by Guard and Christal Young, the first modern supermarket built in Chester opened March 8, 1946. At the time, property on this side of the river was considered to be outside the town's boundaries, and businesses advertised that they were only one-quarter mile, or one half-mile, or one mile west of Chester! The store was a popular place to shop with wives of Collins Pine employees. Guard allowed credit accounts that were paid off when the mill's employees cashed their bi-weekly payroll checks in the store. This led to Chester's major tragedy. There was no bank in Chester, and major business owners had become accustomed to driving to the bank in Westwood to withdraw the larger funds necessary to cash payroll checks. It was on one such trip on October 10, 1952 that Guard Young, accompanied by his three small daughters and the young son of his renter, was waylaid by the now notorious John Santo and Emmett Perkins, and all were beaten to death except for the baby, three year old Sondra Young, who survived a fractured skull.



29. Guard Young built this business duplex in 1950 to house the **CHESTER POST OFFICE** on the left side, and a business on the right. The first business was a barber/beauty shop opened by Roy and Mary Keeno from Westwood. It has since housed liquor stores, an art gallery, jewelry stores, and flower shops, the latest Sonshine Flowers, and Rusty Chandelier Antiques.

30. LASSEN DRUG COMPANY, now Lassen Gift Store, moved to this site in December 1955, just in time to weather the famous Feather River flood of 1956. It is still home to the famous soda and ice cream fountain, the stools of which are filled to over capacity every summer. The pharmacy department moved into the Holiday Market in June 1999.

31. **BANK OF AMERICA**, prompted by nationwide outrage over the Young murders, and petitions by the Chester and Plumas County Chambers of Commerce, opened Chester's first bank on this spot in 1956. After being enlarged twice, the Bank of America site was taken over by Plumas Bank April 1, 1998.



32. **KNOTBUMPER RESTAURANT**—The small front of this popular restaurant was originally the clubhouse for the Chester Golf course, built by a man named Taylor in the meadow east of town next to the Bidwell House property. In the 1930's it was the site of tournaments and play by locals including Nels Olsen and Gordon Purdy. Moved to this site following the flood of 1937, it functioned as a small private home until its conversion to the Knotbumper.



33. This business site was originally the family home of Harry Kan, owner of the Eastside Café in 1930's, and co-owner of the Home Market in the 1940's and 50's. Built by Harry Kan up town on Gay Street, it was moved from its first location to this lot next to Stover Ditch in 1947, and converted to commercial property in the 1980's.

34. **STOVER DITCH**—This is an example of an early irrigation project by one of our local ranchers. Built by Reuben and Thaddeus Stover to supply more water to the Stover Ranch, established in 1862 on the ranch property behind First Street and Fourth Avenue.

35. **RED FEATHER SALOON Site**—Another popular spot for gamblers, bootleggers and brawlers built in the 1920's by the Irwin

brothers. Al Irwin, who was the Justice of the Peace for several years, was one of the men accused of stealing the "Brubeck Bar" from the old Amadee Hotel in Lassen County. The bar is now in the Lake Almanor Tavern. The Red Feather was later converted into apartments, but caught fire and burned down January 16, 1946.

36. **ALMANOR TOWING**—built by Earl Phelps as his new Almanor Garage and Service station, it opened in May 1947 across from the then Chester Theatre. After Earl's death of a heart attack in 1950 it was leased out for a time, then purchased by Wes Mock Sr.

37. **THE BURGER DEPOT**—the site of a dance pavilion converted into Chester's first theatre. Owners Ed Blair and wife lived in a house on the back of the property, and after the theatre burned in 1947, they built the little group of cottages next door—The Chester Motel and Auto Court which opened in 1948, one-half mile from Chester!



38. **THE GREEN PINE CAFÉ**, built in the early to mid-1940's, was operated by long time Chester residents Pete and Gracie Peterson in 1947, and later Margaret and Lee Baker, before their decades long stint at the Mt. Lassen Club. It was a popular hamburger spot with local teens, and an equally popular watering hole with the local lumberman and loggers.

39. **THE CANDY KITCHEN** was the Green Pines' neighbor to the left. Operated by an elderly retired couple, the Witchers, it featured homemade fudge, pralines and divinity, as well as the much-loved penny candy counter, a favorite stop with Chester youngsters. The

tiny building was moved down the alley to an empty lot on Irwin Street when construction began on the big retail building housing Chester True Value Hardware.

40. Also from this period was the **STOVER MOUNTAIN TEXACO SERVICE** owned by Al Foote, then Al Irwin, operated by Art Gibson, later Gene McKittrick, and then owner Jack Bonner, who built the house behind the station in the late 1940's.

41. **COLLINS PINE COMPANY**—The original stand of timber was purchased by 1902, but construction of the sawmill didn't begin until 1941. It began mill operations in 1943. The lumber mill has been a major factor in the town's growth,



and was a settling influence in the 1940's. The Collins and Goudy families have made many contributions to community life: the establishment of Chester's first medical services (Dr. Robert Greenman), Seneca Hospital, the United Methodist Church, the Chester-Lake Almanor Museum, and Collins Pine Museum to name a few.

42. The tiny **BUTT LAKE DINKY** was built in 1887 by the famous H. K. Porter locomotive works in Pennsylvania for the Nevada Mill Company. It hauled ore from the Eureka Mine to the stamp mill near Carson City, Nevada for a number of years before it was purchased by Utah Construction Company.



It was freighted to Big Meadows to haul gravel for the construction of the earth-fill dams at Almanor and Butt Valley. Left in Butt Valley after the completion of the Butt Lake dam in 1924, it was covered by the waters of Butt Lake until May 1996.

43. BUILDER'S SUPPLY—The Collins retail outlet opened with great fanfare Saturday, January 31, 1948. Managed by Beryl Robinson, it supplied many of the building and appliance needs demanded by Chester's and Lake Almanor's burgeoning growth.

44. ROGERS FIELD—The Chester Airport was a dirt strip put in during the depression, some say at the behest of Standard Oil of California officer

Richard W. Hanna. Hanna wanted he and his guests, like Herbert Hoover, to be able to fly in for vacation visits to the Hanna Ranch, near Mill Creek. In 1947 the airfield underwent



extensive development with the paving of the airstrip, and leasing of its management to Harold Rogers, who built the first hangers and repair facility, as well as his family home, on property adjoining the airstrip. The importance of its later role supporting the U.S. Forest Service Air Attack Base can't be measured.

45. ST. BERNARD LODGE—this old-world styled lodge was established by the Fink brothers, opening about 1929. The Finks

were from the small town of Junkerath in northeastern Germany. The three brothers, Carl (1893), Mike (1897) and Ernest (1902) came to America one after another in the early to mid-1920's,



bringing Elizabeth, their widowed mother, who became the cook for a café Mike and Ernie owned in Los Angeles. It was Carl who discovered this area, and first acquired property bordering State Highway 36 from the pioneer ranching Baccala family. Family disputes resulted in Mike taking over St. Bernard Lodge with his St. Bernard dogs. Ernie, wife Gertrude (Susie), mother Elizabeth, and Carl moved down the highway a short distance and built Deer Creek Lodge. Following the Second World War sister Ada Fink Albert and her son, Walter, joined the family, and opened Black Forest Lodge.



The Next Era... Lynn Winchell and Joanne Lyman in the early 1950's

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