

The Nevada County Historical Landmarks Commission The First Fifty Years

By Bernard Zimmerman

The 1960s were a period of change and transition in Nevada County. The County was moving away from its original existence as a rural, mining, logging and agricultural area, and began receiving an influx of newcomers, especially retirees, from the Bay Area and Southern California. A major sign of change was the construction of the freeway between Grass Valley and Nevada City. The impact of the construction, especially the razing of historic buildings in downtown Nevada City, ignited a debate about the competing values of historic preservation and modernization. Rising out of this debate was the decision to preserve and restore the Nevada Theater, a campaign led by local preservationist Sally Lewis. By the end of the decade, historic preservation of Nevada City and Grass Valley was here to stay, thanks in part to recognizing that because of the decline of its traditional industries, tourism would be a large part of the area's economy. Against this background, the Board of Supervisors on April 29, 1969, created the Nevada County Historical Landmarks Commission by Resolution 69-102. The Commission's Constitution and Bylaws state its mission as follows:

"The purpose of this Commission shall be to promote the general welfare of Nevada County and its citizens through official recognition, recording, marking, preserving and promoting the historical resources of Nevada County."

The Historical Landmarks Commission held its first meeting on May 5, 1969. Sally Lewis was elected Chairman. The four other members, one from each supervisorial district, were Marian Conway, elected Secretary, Dorothy Fordham, Glenn Jones and Albert Davies. Immediately, the Commission began the process of identifying sites in Nevada County suitable for registering as historical landmarks. Within 3 years, 17 sites were designated as Nevada County historical landmarks.

But the County contained numerous other landmarks; some on the National Register of Historic Places, some designated by the State of California, and others designated by organizations such as the Native Sons of the Golden West, the Native Daughters of the Golden West, The Nevada County Historical Society, E Clampus Vitus and various veterans organizations. So the Landmarks Commission, which had grown to ten members, decided to create a catalog of all those landmarks. Local historian and former Commissioner David Comstock describes the process as follows:

"As early as 1972 Frank and Harriet Jakobs, along with Marian Conway, started to visit and record those sites throughout Nevada County that had been plagued. Frank was the tour driver and Harriet and Marian were members of the Nevada County Historical Landmarks Commission. Mr. and Mrs. Jakobs owned a stationery store in Grass Valley and contributed the looseleaf binder and paper to do the recordings of the location and specific information regarding the landmarks. None of them supposed the information they were collecting for fun and discussion at Landmarks Commission meetings would ever evolve into a printed catalog that would be offered for sale to the public. But this was the origin of *Exploring Nevada County*."

To promote the County's historical landmarks, in 1994, the Commission decided to publish and distribute copies of the catalog. Initially, this was done by the Nevada County Historical Society's book division. Later Comstock Bonanza Press took over the work, and, assisted by a grant from the Board of Supervisors and the Nevada County Library, converted the catalog into an attractive and user-friendly guidebook titled *Exploring Nevada County*. To date, over 2000 copies have been sold.

In 2014, the Landmarks Commission began to move into the 21st century. With the assistance of the County's Geographical Information Systems group, the Landmarks Commission created an interactive map of all the County's Landmarks. Next, the Landmarks Commission built its own website, nevadacountylandmarks.com. The website contains a link to the interactive map, which resides on the County's website, as well as much other information about the work of the commission. It also contains links to many landmark applications and elated historical material, and is the site for periodic posts about featured landmarks and other information designed to stimulate interest in the County's history.

In 2016, Comstock Bonanza Press authorized Bernard Zimmerman, currently the Chair of the Landmarks Commission, and his wife Grace Suarez, who operates You Bet Press, to publish the first electronic version of *Exploring Nevada County*. Going electronic means that the book is current, the last paperback edition was in 2010, and uses hyperlinks to give readers access to much more historical and location information than a paper book can. Within the next year, Comstock Bonanza Press will publish a new print edition that matches the style and organization of the current electronic version.

Soon thereafter, the Landmarks Commission developed a social media presence. Our Facebook page currently has over 500 followers, and our Instagram page has almost 1000 followers. Our followers range from local

residents past and present, potential new residents and lovers of history from all over. Historical photos that are posted are of particular interest and garner the most interaction and discussion.

As it approaches its 50th anniversary on April 29, 2019, the Landmarks Commission has been responsible for the designation of 65 historical landmarks in Nevada County. Coupled with its publications, website and social media presence, it has ably fulfilled its mission of preserving and promoting Nevada County's history.