Friends of the Eastern California Museum

SPRING 2026 NEWSLETTER

Back on Track: ECM's Oral History Program

RICHARD POTASHIN

The following is an excerpt from an oral history interview with longtime Independence resident, Anna Kelley. Anna recounts how Southern Pacific locomotive # 18, the Slim Princess came to grace Dehy Park. Later, through a collaborative effort between ECM, Carson and Colorado RR and FECM, # 18 was relocated to the Larry Peckham Train Barn where it currently rests. Katherine "Polly" Connable, the interviewer, was a valued supporter of ECM and devoted to the preservation of the history of the town of Independence.

Polly Connable: *Now I want to ask about the engine at Dehy Park. How did that get to Dehy Park?*

Anna Kelley: *Betty Betts was an assistant librarian for Inyo County and a good friend of mine. And she had been connected with the Eastern California Museum Association for many years. And we heard that the railroad was going to be abandoned. And so Mrs. Betts came to me one day and she said, Anna, you're an ex-railroader. You can get an engine. We have to have something to keep, something that will be ours, to remind us of the railroad that used to run through the valley.*

Connable: *How did you respond to that?*

Kelley: *So I told her, well, I didn't think I could get a railroad, but I would try to get an engine. I wrote to Mr. Russell, who was the general manager of Southern Pacific at the time in San Francisco. And I told him a little bit of my background and about the Eastern California Museum Association and the fact that we would like to have a memento of the railroad. And that we were prepared to take as good a care as possible of an engine and not let it deteriorate.*

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ECM'S ORAL HISTORY
PROGRAM

CURATOR'S CORNER

ANNOUNCEMENT
OF SOUTHERN INYO
RAILROAD TOUR

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INDEPENDENCE, CA 93526
INFO@FECM.ORG

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NONPROFIT ORGANIZATION

CONTINUED

Connable: *Did you have a location in mind?*

Kelley: *We had just obtained an acre and a quarter of ground at the park and put up an excellent historical marker on it. And so, we were given the engine.*

This is just one of many compelling stories residing in Eastern California Museum's Oral history collection. Oral history is the collection of recorded interviews with people having personal experience of the past. The museum's oldest oral histories were recorded in the 1960s. Through oral history, visitors to the museum and researchers seeking to understand the development of Eastern California can immerse themselves in the voices of residents of the area whose memories date all the way back to the late 19th century.

In the 1990s and again around 2012, Richard Potashin collected dozens of oral histories with farmers, miners, mule packers, and other residents of the region. ECM's oral history program has remained dormant since 2012. ECM's collection, of over three hundred interviews, covers every aspect of history and life in the Eastern Sierra—from Native Americans, to railroading, and the Los Angeles Aqueduct.

"Over the past few years in my role as Curator, I have come to appreciate just how valuable and meaningful the museum's oral history collection is. They inspire me and help me forge connections with the artifacts we care for. From silly stories about misadventures on the road or trail to the remembered emotions from a turbulent time long past, oral histories are unique and precious records," Heather Todd said. The collection, frequently accessed by researchers, can be used to format exhibits, pamphlets, and other media. In the future it will play a key role in ECM's re-imagining project.

Now the museum is proud to announce the revitalization of their Oral History project, thanks to the efforts of Irene Reti, Heather Todd, and Richard Potashin. Irene Reti, in addition to transcribing numerous ECM oral histories, is an experienced oral historian having conducted oral history projects in the Santa Cruz area. Heather Todd, ECM Curator, has taken on the role of managing this revitalization. This team recognized the importance of continuing to gather, preserve and interpret the voices and memories of people, communities, and participants in past events in the Eastern Sierra. Since early 2025 they have been meeting to revitalize and reshape ECM's oral history program into a vehicle that can remain viable for many years to come.

Getting this program up and running again has taken nearly a year. Various forms needed to be created, a release agreement drafted, an interviewee data base updated, and volunteer transcribers and interviewers recruited to conduct interviews with local residents.

The first step came at ECM's annual meeting last year where a number of volunteer transcribers and interviewers signed up to join the effort. In May 2025, Irene conducted a transcriber training for the new volunteers. Transcribing is a skilled art in its own right, where a volunteer transforms the digital recording of the interview into a written document.

The goal was to put together a team of transcribers who could whittle away at the mountain of untranscribed interviews. We'd like to acknowledge Kimberly Hughes, Carola Gregorich, and Laura Janoff for their efforts. In addition, we'd like to thank Andrew Reti for a recent generous donation that will enable ECM to have some of their new interviews transcribed by a professional transcriber.

Next, we turned our attention to conducting our first new round of interviews. Before selecting interviewees, we identified gaps in the existing collection and decided what memories and stories of historical interest we wanted to prioritize. With the help of ECM Museum Administrator Shawn Lum, we chose to focus on the Indigenous, conservation/ science, Hispanic, and art communities in the region.

Lastly, in September, we conducted a day-long interviewer workshop with eight engaged and lively participants: Karen Riggs, Mary Canada, Emily Teroaka, Carola Gregorich, Jennifer Duncan, Alisa Lynch, Yvonne Katzenstein, and Kim Hughes. They learned about the field of oral history, and received intensive practical training in how to prepare for and conduct interviews. Building upon their training, our volunteer interviewers have begun setting up interviews, doing background research, creating topic outlines, and finally conducting interviews. Irene is in the process of interviewing Mike Prather, teacher and longtime conservationist in Owens Valley, and an oral history she did with Carol Christenson, daughter of Dr. Don Christenson of Lone Pine, is in the editing stage. Jennifer just completed interviewing David Rambeau, a member of the Big Pine Paiute Tribe and Carola Gregorich interviewed Donn Shy, a former Southern Pacific Railroad employee who worked the Lone Pine Branch.

Thanks to Heather, many past ECM interviews have been digitized and are accessible to the general public online at the California Revealed website. Their address is californiarevealed.org. Take a listen to old-timers sharing memories of historical events in their own voice.

There are still a large number of oral histories waiting to be transcribed. If you would like to join our team of transcribers, who work from the comfort of their own homes with no special equipment,contact Heather Todd at htodd@inyocounty.us or 760-878-0258. It is a great way to absorb the fascinating history of the Eastern Sierra and help the museum out.

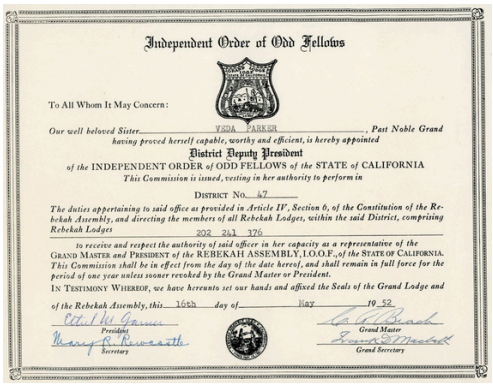
Finally, we'd like to acknowledge the support of Shawn Lum and the Friends of the Eastern California Museum in this effort.

Curator's Corner

HEATHER TODD

It's the start of a brand-new year, and the Eastern California Museum has already received a number of delightful donations! Among them are…

Above: A fabulous Big Pine pennant featuring Palisade Glacier, a bristlecone pine, and (somewhat out of place) a 20-mule team hauling Death Valley borax wagons.



Independent Order of Odd Fellows

To All Whom It May Concern:

Our well beloved Sister VEDA PARKER, Past Noble Grand having proved herself capable, worthy and efficient, is hereby appointed

District Deputy President

of the INDEPENDENT ORDER of ODD FELLOWS of the STATE of CALIFORNIA

This Commission is issued, vesting in her authority to perform in

DISTRICT No. 47

The duties appertaining to said office as provided in Article IV, Section 6, of the Constitution of the Rebekah Assembly, and directing the members of all Rebekah Lodges, within the said District, comprising Rebekah Lodges 202 261 376

to receive and respect the authority of said officer in her capacity as a representative of the GRAND MASTER and PRESIDENT of the REBEKAH ASSEMBLY, I.O.O.F., of the STATE OF CALIFORNIA. This Commission shall be in effect from the day of the date hereof, and shall remain in full force for the period of one year unless sooner revoked by the Grand Master or President.

IN TESTIMONY WHEREOF, we have hereunto set our hands and affixed the Seals of the Grand Lodge and of the Rebekah Assembly, this 16th day of May 19 52

President — Grand Master

Secretary — Grand Secretary

Above: I.O.O.F. documents from Veda Parker, donated by Helen Waitkus. How many of you know what I.O.O.F. stands for? You can still see the historic I.O.O.F. building next door to the Dechambeau Hotel in Bodie!

Left: Dr. Don Christenson's black doctor bag, still filled with his medical instruments, graciously donated by his daughter, Carol Christenson, who was recently interviewed for the Oral History Program by museum volunteer Irene Reti.

A book from Mary Austin's personal library (signed by her on the inside front cover!) titled *The Soul of the Indian: An Interpretation* by Charles Alexander Eastman. We are so very grateful to donor Jeffrey Burbank for sending us this rare treasure.

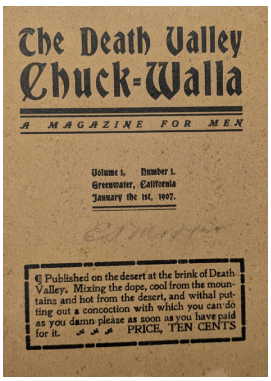
Scott DeYoung offered the museum a number of books from his library, and have added several titles to the collection, including *The Kid from Mono Mills* by August Hess and *Western Wayfaring: Routes of Exploration and Trade in the American Southwest* by J. Gregg Layne.

A research inquiry alerted us to a book titled *Denmark and Slesvig, 1848-1864*. This publication contains several letters written by a Danish cowboy named Daniel Bruhn, who was a member of a wild horse drive in 1871 across the Sierras. Bill Michael acquired a copy on behalf of the museum—thanks, Bill!

Former Museum Director Bill Michael outdid himself and donated three very early, very rare 19th-century local newspapers to the museum, including issues of *Bishop Creek Times, Inyo Independent,* and *Mammoth City Times*.

Bill's donation was particularly timely, as I am proud to announce that the museum recently completed the first phase of a newspaper digitization project. Prior to the loss of funding in 2025, Brian Geiger of the California Digital Newspaper Collection agreed to digitize all the Inyo County newspapers in the University of California's microfilm collections. He contributed thousands of pages of the *Inyo Independent, Inyo Register*, and *Owens Valley Progress-Citizen*, for which I am eternally grateful.

The Eastern California Museum submitted our own microfilm reels containing issues and titles not held within the UC system, including the pre-1909 issues of the *Inyo Register*.

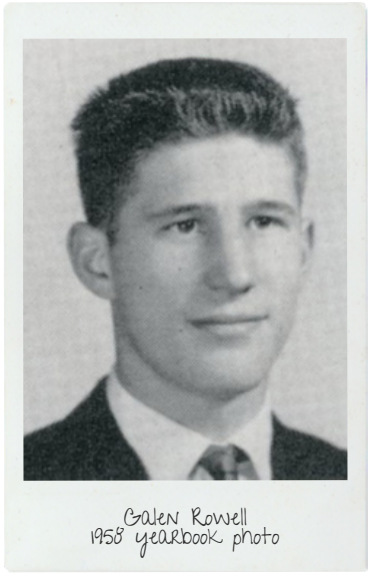

The Death Valley Chuck-Walla

A MAGAZINE FOR MEN

Volume 1. Number 1.
Greenwater, California
January the 1st, 1907.

¶ Published on the desert at the brink of Death Valley. Mixing the dope, cool from the mountains and hot from the desert, and withal putting out a concoction with which you can do as you damn please as soon as you have paid for it. PRICE, TEN CENTS

Left: In addition to microfilm, Wes Carter and Carl Carter, employees of Newspapers.com and Ancestry.com, came to the museum and spent an afternoon digitizing our physical newspapers, of which we have quite a few. This included issues of the *Coso Mining News, Death Valley Chuck-Walla, Homer Mining Index, Inyo Lancet, Keeler Post, Mt. Whitney Observer, Panamint News, Skidoo News,* and many more!


Galen Rowell
1958 yearbook photo

Above: FECM members Sean and Amanda Langevin very kindly sent us a Berkeley High School yearbook from 1958, the year that world famous photographer Galen Rowell was a Senior! Even at a young age Galen was an impressive fellow—his activities and accolades included Science, Math, A Cappella, Science Fair, Young Democrats, and National Merit Finalist.

The next phase of this project is to identify the holes in the digitized newspapers and try to locate those missing issues. With luck, one of our fellow Inyo County organizations might have the missing issues within their collections! Thank you as always for your support, and I'll have news to share about yet another big undertaking in the next FECM Newsletter!

2026 Members Meeting and Election Results

Robin Flinchum, historian and author, was the guest speaker at our Annual Members Meeting and Potluck held on March 21, 2026 at the Independence Legion Hall. Robin contrasted and compared the lives of two of the women she wrote about in her book *Red Light Women of Death Valley.* She profiled the women known in the trade as Lola Travis and Diamond Tooth Lil, who together bookended the mining era: Lola in the early California Gold Rush days and the heyday of Cerro Gordo, and Lil at the turn of the 19th century, who lived well past the waning days of mining in Nevada and California. Both women are legendary-Lola largely due to her astute business sense and endeavors, Lil for her dance hall talent, flamboyant style, and self-promoting.

The annual meeting was well attended by folks far and near, the potluck dishes varied and delicious, some board members wore era appropriate attire, and Robin's thoughtful presentation was well received and appreciated. In FECM board election news, we are excited to welcome two new members: Shannon Romero and Bridget Wall. Additionally, longtime member Richard Potashin has stepped back from the board, but he will still be active in the museum's oral history program and FECM events committee. Thanks to Richard for all his contributions, and welcome to Shannon and Bridget!

Additionally, the FECM recently received its first Lifetime Member tier donation, which came from Ricki and Beth Hogan (pictured below, far right). Thanks, Ricki and Beth!

Announcement of Southern Inyo Railroad Tour

The FECM and Carson & Colorado Railroad will present the event "Along the Rails: Southern Inyo Railroad" on Saturday, May 16, 2026 from 8:30am-3pm. Join us as we venture along the original Southern Pacific narrow-gauge line following the route of the Slim Princess. Travel back in time exploring historic railroad landscapes. BBQ lunch at the ECM's #18 train barn. Attendance is limited—visit fecm.org for RSVP information.

Paver Stones: Leave a lasting Legacy

Help the Eastern California Museum continue to grow while honoring a special person, event, memory, or location by ordering a permanent **paver stone** for the Museum Founders' patio. Each stone is 8" x 8" and will contain an inscription of your choice.

Select a paver stone level and notate the desired description in the grid below.

☐ Friend | Terracotta paver - $200 ☐ Founder | Granite paver - $1000

Paver Inscription (maximum 5 lines of text with 16 characters each line)

Enclosed is payment of $_____

Make checks payable to FECM. Mail with the completed form to:
FECM, PO Box 33, Independence CA 93526 or scan the QR code to submit your paver stone order online at fecm.org/pavers through our secure website.

2026-2027 Friends of the California Museum Board of Trustees

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Bridget Wall

Join the Friends of the Eastern California Museum!

The Friends of the Eastern California Museum work to promote, preserve and protect the important collections and memories that make up Inyo County's only regional museum. The Friends raise funds and contribute time and work to help maintain and improve the Museum's buildings and grounds.

We support special exhibits and arrange for speakers, field trips, and programs that inform and entertain Inyo County residents and visitors who come from far and near. We have partnered with the Carson and Colorado group to display and promote the restored Slim Princess steam engine. We also provide funds to maintain the Museum's collections and enhance its permanent exhibits. Every March we hold our Annual Meeting, with a potluck dinner and guest speaker. We invite you to join us to support the Museum. FECM is an all-volunteer 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation. Members receive a newsletter, email invitations to special events, programs, and field trips, and a 10% discount at the Museum Bookstore.

NAME _____

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ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP LEVELS:

_____Individual - $25 _____Family - $40 _____Contributing - $100 _____Supporting - $150__

_____Business/Org - $150 _____Patron - $250 _____Sustaining - $500 __Benefactor - $1000 +

_____Lifetime -$5,000 (includes an honorary paver stone to be displayed on the Museum Founder's Patio)

____ Please email my newsletter ____ Please use regular mail to send my newsletter

Enclosed is payment of $_____

Make checks payable to FECM; mail to FECM, PO Box 33, Independence CA 93526
You can also pay for your membership with a credit card at www.fecm.org
(select the Membership tab) or use the QR code.