



Historical Society of the Upper Mojave Desert

P. O. Box 2001, Ridgecrest, CA 93556

Vol. 24 No. 3

March 2009

Tales of Borax Mining From 'John Searles'

The Society's March meeting will feature "John Searles" speaking on his pioneering borax operation, with the role of Searles played by Jim Fairchild in period dress to lend a feel for the era.

The meeting will take place on Tuesday, March 17, at 7:30 p.m. at the Historic USO Building, 230 W. Ridgecrest Blvd.

Almost everyone knows that borax played a prominent role in the early history of Death Valley. Most famous are the Harmony Borax Works and the 20-mule teams that hauled borax from Death Valley to Mojave.

What is usually forgotten is that another desert borax mining operation just two valleys west played an equally prominent role in opening up the desert to habitation. This was the mine of John and Dennis Searles at the borax marsh below the Slate Range, less than 20 miles from the western boundary of what is today Death Valley National Park.

John Searles will compare his borax mill in Searles Valley with William Tell Coleman's Harmony Borax Works in Death Valley.

The talk will feature information on the nature of the ore that each used, the methods used to extract the borax, the way the borax was hauled to market using teams of mules and life in the desert at the mills.

Continued on p. 2

John Searles aka
Jim Fairchild



March Field Trip — Explore Barker Ranch



I've had several requests, so for March we'll return to Barker Ranch, located near Sourdough Spring at the eastern end of Goler Wash in Panamint Valley.

High clearance and good tires are necessary, with 4-wheel drive not absolutely necessary but recommended.

March weather can be tricky, so be prepared for anything. There should be some flowers by then.

Remember to bring walking shoes, water, lunch, snacks and camera as well as the usual stuff.

We'll leave the USO Building at 8 a.m., and we should be back by the middle of the afternoon. Call Jim Kenney at 760-371-2458 if you have questions.

— Jim Kenney

At left is Barker Ranch today.

From www.stopcrime365.com

President's Message – Recent Events and Things To Think About



Jim Lamb has resigned from the board of directors and we have accepted his resignation with regret. When he was able to attend, he was an effective board member voicing good ideas. We wish you well, Jim.

This past Friday evening, March 7, Bob and Stephanie Riedel, hypnotist team, put on a very interesting evening to benefit the USO Building Fund.

After giving a bit of background on hypnotism, Bob had three participants come up on stage where he demonstrated various things which could be done under hypnotism. The audience was amused, amazed and entertained.

Thanks are due to the Reidels for generously contributing the funds they raised — and for providing attendees with so much enjoyment. I hope we can have the Riedels back again soon, with a larger audience this time around.

It's that time again when we think of annual meetings, dinners, elections and short reports. The nominating committee is being activated. The names of board members whose terms are up will be announced in the next newsletter.

Borax Mining

From p. 1

The presentation will include seldom-seen photos of Searles' operations, including mule teams hauling borax out of Searles Valley in 1880, three years before Coleman started his Death Valley borax works.

Jim Fairchild and his wife Bonnie have lived in Searles Valley for nearly 45 years. Recently Jim has taken an interest in the early history of Searles Valley, especially the role of the Searles brothers in developing mining in the inhospitable desert.

The story related will be as John might have told it late in his life. Because this was a time when it was often fashionable to embellish stories to make the men appear more heroic than they really were, some of John's tales may be somewhat exaggerated, but certainly they will be entertaining.

HSUMD meets on the third Tuesday of the month. All are welcome to attend. For more information on this or future meetings, call Society President Bruce Wertenberger at 375-2369.

— Andrew Sound

In the meantime, be thinking about whether you would like to be nominated to serve on the board. We expect there to be several vacancies to fill.

Work is proceeding on the renovation of the second floor of the Historic USO Building. Lots of insulation has been blown into the attic to reduce the heating and cooling load.

The walls have been painted, and soon the floors and stairwell will be finished. New light fixtures have been installed.

The basic electrical update on circuit breakers, etc., was done some time ago when the rest of the electrical upgrading was done.

— Bruce Wertenberger

Help Wanted

Thanks to Peggy Breeden, the Swap Sheet each week carries an HSUMD wants and needs list next to the calendar section. Please check it out — and when you take your ads in, remember to let Peggy know how very much we appreciate her. What a great community booster she is — no wonder she won a 2008 Volunteer of the Year Award from the Kern Council of Governments!

Also — we're still in desperate need of volunteers for the gift shop. How about volunteering as a couple and/or a pair of friends? That way you can keep each other entertained when you're not showing people around the building or selling some of our gift items!

The upstairs of the USO Building will be done soon — then we will really need the building to be open so we can show it off. Right now Bob and Virginia Mills are doing a great job of covering the building every Saturday between 10-2. How about dropping in then and finding out from the Mills what's involved with volunteering?

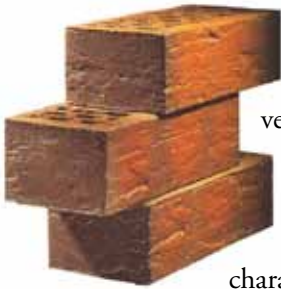
— Chris Caine/Prosser

Our Wine Tasting – What an Event!

Congratulations to Kathy Armstrong and all the other creative people who brought us wine and music on Feb. 27! Here are a few glimpses of the fun. *Photo montage by Liz*



Be a Brick By Getting One!



There's still plenty of room in front of the USO Building for you to honor a favorite person, memory or even yourself with a commemorative brick carrying your very own message on it!

Please help the USO Building restoration effort by buying a 4- x 8-inch brick for \$100 or an 8- x 8-inch brick for \$250. The 4x8 brick has space for three lines, with 21 characters per line, and the 8x8 brick has space for six lines, 21 characters per line.

You will have an opportunity to review and approve what you want the brick to say before it is engraved. Just print your brick's message on the appropriate part of the form below, then send this entire page to **Historical Society of the Upper Mojave Desert, P. O. Box 2001, Ridgecrest, CA 93556**, with your check made out to HSUMD.

Have You Paid Your 2009 Due\$?

Your support is very much needed for the continued activities of HSUMD and our Historic USO Building — and our dues are modest, considering what you get in return — great programs and activities, plus the satisfaction of knowing that you're helping keep the history of our town alive.

Your 2009 dues are now past due — please send your check (\$20 family membership or \$30 business membership) to Treasurer, HSUMD, P.O. Box 2001, Ridgecrest, CA 93556.

HSUMD is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, and your dues are tax-deductible to the full extent allowed by law.

\$250 for 8 x 8 BRICK • Any Symbol (Period, Comma, Dash) Is One Space

\$100 for 4 x 8 BRICK • Any Symbol (Period, Comma, Dash) Is One Space

EXAMPLE • All Text Will Be Centered Unless Otherwise Noted

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John Di Pol displays a recent acquisition donated by Carl McCammon.

The Historical Society is grateful to have this wonderful old assaying mortar and pestle that belonged to Alfred Giraud back around the turn of the last century. Note that Giraud made sure everyone would know who owned the mortar — his initials are on it. To refresh your memory about this pioneering local shepherd and miner, take a look at our September 08 issue for John's reprint of some of Giraud's reminiscences. (You say you no longer have that issue? You're in luck — thanks to Webmistress Janet Westbrook, you can easily see a copy on the HSUMD website.) We are also happy to announce that HSUMD member Carol Porter has agreed to take on the job of sorting and documenting our accessions. Do you enjoy looking at and researching historical artifacts? Carol could use some help!

Photo by Liz Babcock

A Glimpse Back in Time

Next month we'll feature another fascinating article from John DiPol. Our historical feature this month is from the pages of the *Rocketeer of Wednesday*, Feb 21, 1951, and serves as a reminder that sometimes things don't turn out exactly the way we thought they would.

“Cross Country Highway Route Blocked by Randsburg Project

“Obstacles confronting the proposed cross-country highway project in this area were discussed at a meeting Thursday in Ridgecrest.

“The occasion was a meeting of the Cross-Country Highway Association, attended by highway, Navy, and civic officials.

“The proposed route, which would cut across Searles Valley from Westend has been eliminated by the Navy's Randsburg Wash project, it was brought out.

“S. W. Lowden, state highway district engineer, . . . estimated that the population of California will be 14,100,000 by 1960, and that there will be 6,800,000 cars in the state then. A contract has been let for construction next year, he said, of a four-lane divided highway north of Cajon pass on Highway 395, but that the section from Four Corners to Johannesburg must wait until further funds are available. . . .

“Paul Hubbard of Randsburg summarized by advising association members to have patience and wait until the Navy, which is putting a good road through Randsburg Wash, is finished with its work in that area and the public can then have use of the road.”

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**You could be seeing this
newsletter in color!**

Check out our web-site, www.maturango.org/Hist.html, for an archive of our newsletters. Thanks to our gracious webmistress, all the recent issues are included in the archive as color PDFs.

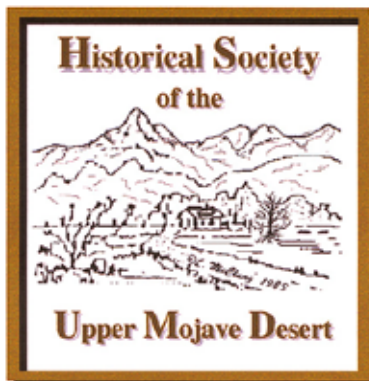
Important Reminders

- ★ Annual dues are \$20 per family for the calendar year.
- ★ Business Member dues are \$30 for the calendar year.
- ★ Please remember the Historical Society in your wills, trusts and other gift giving. We are a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization.

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MARCH 2009 MEETING

Tuesday, March 17, 2009, 7:30 p.m., Historic USO Building