



The Rhoads School

By **ELIZABETH PINKERTON**

There is a school in Elk Grove Regional Park that is filled with history, but most people who see it there do not know about its past. They more than likely wonder why the little one room schoolhouse is sitting there in the park and what it is supposed to represent.

The school is near the swimming area at the east entrance to the Park, and it is the Rhoads School that was built in 1872. Though the building is 144 years old, it has been in the Park for only 40 years - since 1976. The Rhoads School goes back to some of the earliest settlers in the Cosumnes River area, and it was in full use educating children on Sloughhouse Road until 1948 when it closed.

The little school sat empty for many years, but it has a new life now. The Rhoads School is once again educating children with a Living History program that is sponsored and organized by the Elk Grove Historical Society.

A trip to the past will help everyone learn the story of this amazing school and how it made its journey to Elk Grove Park.

In the early 1970s, our nation was getting ready to celebrate its Bicentennial in 1976, and people in every state were encouraged to participate with historical projects. There was no city of Elk Grove at the time, and there was no Elk Grove Historical Society, but residents of the little town in south Sacramento County became very involved with community activities. Some joined the Sacramento County Bicentennial Commission, and they looked for an Elk Grove project.



Led by Carl Amundson and Anabel Gage, a group of Elk Grove folks decided to move the Rhoads School from its home on Sloughhouse Road on property owned by Beth and Stanley Engs in order to save it for future generations to enjoy. With a lot of planning and resolving of difficult issues, the school was moved to Elk Grove Park on May 19, 1976.

Moving the school was the first step, and much followed to restore the school and make it usable for children and families. It was decided that the school should look as it did in 1900, and that children would have lessons there that would be similar to how children learned at that turn of the century time. Lucinda Woodward, an Elk Grove High School graduate, did the research of country schools of the past that helped with the design of the Living History Program.

Margit Kloss, Kittie Sheldon Cothrin, and Ellen Rosa provided valuable assistance from their memories of attending one room schools. Students from Joseph Kerr Junior High and Elk Grove High School spent many hours sanding and painting, and doing other tasks. Blackboards were restored, little desks were built, and the school was ready to start its new life. Gayle Moore, Meg Waegell and Louise Downs were instrumental in creating the first lessons for students at the restored Rhoads School.

The grand opening took place, and the school was ready for students in 1982. Marcia Adreani, Kathi Goldsberry, June Daehling, and Mary Ann Crawford were pioneer teachers at the Living History program. Over the years, many people took part in the classes and the tours of the school for visitors. Frances Fite and Merry Leverton were key leaders in the Rhoads School program over the years. In 2015-16, 80 classes of elementary students from Elk Grove Unified School District spent a day at the Rhoads School learning the way students learned more than a century ago. The program is now organized by Roberta Tanner and classes are already taking place.

Louis Silveira is the scheduler of the classes, and this is how he describes the tasks: "We are preparing and conducting the Living History Program for any school in the Sacramento County, especially the Elk Grove Unified School District. Teachers of 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade classes can schedule dates for their classes to come to the school, and experience the life of a 1900s classroom. It seems real and that is how it is taught. The teachers go through the normal curriculum subjects and have recess and lunch. There is a lot



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of preparation including a pre-visit by a docent a few weeks before to prepare the class including making the clothes of the 1900 student.

"I am the reservation specialist and responsible for all the scheduling of the schools, making contact with teachers and docents and coordinating everything to make it happen.

"This year so far we have 49 classes scheduled with 10 others waiting to be finalized. Besides the organization behind the scenes, the keys to the program are the six docents who schedule their pre-visits and who teach the all day classes. The docents are Roberta Tanner, Carol Dunkel, Helen Diepenbrock, Pam Don, Sue Davis, and Susan Hernandez. Without them the program wouldn't exist. They are all into the history of the area and dedicated to making this experience one to always remember.

"There is no electricity in the Rhoads School building so there is no air conditioning, and the heat is provided by a small log stove. They use a chalk that is the type used in those days. They use small slate boards to write lessons on and erase with cloths because erasers weren't invented yet. They use special primer books for lesson study at the time. There is recess where they can jump rope, use a stick to move along a giant hoop, and a large bell rings to let them know recess is over. Girls wear bonnets and long dresses, and boys wear shirts and bib overalls."

From the Bicentennial project of the Rhoads School, we not only gained the wonderful school in Elk Grove Park, but the project was also the beginning of our Elk Grove Historical Society. The Bicentennial leaders were committed to making sure that our history would never be forgotten. And, we will continue to do what we can to preserve it for future generations.



The history of the Rhoads School is fascinating as it goes back a long way. The school was established in Sloughhouse and named the John P. Rhoads School. It was one of many little schools that sprouted across the southern portion of Sacramento County in the mid and late 1800s, when early settlers were involved with gold mining on the Cosumnes River. The first Rhoads School was built by Jared Sheldon who had married Catherine Rhoads, the daughter of Thomas and Elizabeth Rhoads who were the first settlers along the Cosumnes River. They were Latter Day Saints who were friends of Brigham Young and had come to California searching for a new life that was safe for followers of their religion. Sheldon named the school after Catherine's brother, John P. Rhoads. The school opened in 1849 and was close to the Cosumnes River. It was the first real school in the area, and almost like a private family school...but open to all children. It was officially recognized in the records of Sacramento County from 1857, until it closed in 1860. Children got sick from what was likely malaria, spread by mosquitoes, so the school was closed.

The parents of the area chose a new site for the school – on high ground on what was then called New Road. Later this road was called Sheldon-Slough House Road, and today, we know it as Sloughhouse Road. It's the link from Grant Line Road to the Jackson Highway.

The farmers and ranchers decided that their children needed a school closer to home. In 1872,

they built the second John P. Rhoads School, and it too was a little one-room country school capable of providing education for young people from grades one to ten.

The new school was also named for John P. Rhoads, the hero of the Donner Party rescue. John Rhoads was a giant of a man who made three trips up to the Sierra Nevada to bring down survivors of that ill-fated wagon train. *Big John*, as he was called, carried little Naomi Pike on his back all the way down the mountain to safety – so it states on his tombstone at the Sloughhouse Pioneer Cemetery and in the letter that Naomi wrote to him years later.

Humphrey Taylor donated land for the new school, and members of the community provided cash and labor. For the school, outhouse, and simple furnishings, \$1,300 was raised from family donations and fund raising activities such as a benefit ball and party complete with refreshments and a cake auction.

The Rhoads School provided education for the children of the Sloughhouse area from

1872 to 1948 when the school was closed. The children then attended the new Cosumnes River Elementary School.

The Rhoads School is enjoying its new life in Elk Grove Park, and hundreds of children and families enjoy it all year long.

Note: More information about the school and the Rhoads family can be found in *History Happened Here, Book 2, Fields, Farms, Schools* that I wrote in 2002.

BOOKS *By* ELIZABETH PINKERTON

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