

New Life for Historic Capay Valley Landmark

Yocha Dehe working to save Cañon School

To speak of a one-room schoolhouse is to call to mind the better angels of American history. These plucky little buildings have come to symbolize ingenuity, self-improvement, community, and mutual respect— all things worth preserving. So, it is welcome news to many in the Capay Valley that planning is underway to preserve the Cañon School, a one-room schoolhouse on California State Route 16.

The Cañon School building is a classic example of its architectural type and the enduring importance of these schools to their communities.

In 2018, the Yocha Dehe Wintun Nation purchased land adjacent to the schoolhouse for growing alfalfa. The historic structure—where some Tribal citizens once learned alongside Anglo and Hispanic students from the Capay Valley—came with it.

“This history of Yocha Dehe and the history of Yolo County are one and the same, even in this little, one-room schoolhouse. We have elders who learned in that special building too, and we are determined to preserve it,” said the Tribal Council of the Yocha Dehe Wintun Nation.

Persevering is nothing new for the schoolhouse. It was built and rebuilt three times, starting in 1861. The initial structure was replaced in 1868. When that second structure was destroyed by fire, the present schoolhouse was built on its current site in 1884.

“It represents the history of the valley,” explained Wyatt Cline, a lifelong Capay Valley resident whose relatives attended the school. He describes it as a place where “all children from every background were welcome to go to school.”

20 to 35 students in grades Kindergarten through 8 attended. The day started when the bell rang—the wooden belfry was added as a class project in 1902—at 9 a.m. From that time until 4 p.m., one teacher taught all grades and subjects.

Mary Stephens Dewall is a retired Yolo County Librarian. Her mother, Anna Louise Birch Stephens, worked as a long-term substitute teacher at Cañon School in the late 1940s and early 50s.

“I remember her saying that the kids were so nice and helpful,” Dewall said. “There was a wood stove, and there

were clothes drying all over. The students got out brooms to sweep. Everybody helped out.”

The building was more than just a place of learning. It also served as a gathering hall for the Capay Valley community and the setting for many an ice cream social.

The school closed in the early 1960s with the advent of school busses and consolidation.

In 1972, the Cañon School was placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

In the application for that recognition, then-owners Herman and Delores Schwarz wrote, “It was a focus for community pride and pleasure...Its creation and improvements over the years were a direct result of the collective efforts of the local population.”

While the plans for future use of the school building are still preliminary, Yocha Dehe is actively collecting artifacts from the school’s storied past.

“It’s important to preserve history so we can tell our stories, positive and negative, and learn,” said Cline. “Knowing where we come from helps us know where we are going.”

