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me from officially adopting that infamous bah humbug mindset of that certain miserly chap is the fact that Calaveras County's people are so darned creative and caring. Step into an open house at a business and you'll find not just an owner sharing warmth, but maybe the dog or cat that resides there, too. You can't go anywhere on a weekend in this month and not trip over carolers or singers filling the air with beauty. This weekend's "Nutcracker" production in Angels Camp (see the story on page 21) also sends the corners of the mouth skyward.

Invariably, after witnessing kindness spread all over the foothills like Jack Frost's handiwork, I admit it, I surrender, Calaveras; I jump on the happiness bandwagon and share in the joys of this special season.

Sunday finds an adorable little get together that welcomes folks to one

of our smaller hamlets; Mokelumne Hill gets all Christmassy for its special day, beginning at 3 p.m. The highlight here is watching children get all gooey as they labor to decorate a huge gingerbread house at Ed Cline and Brenda Nasser's house. Many a bright cheery smile can be seen on the faces of kids elbow-deep in sugared sweetness. Worries about my checkbook balancing go right out one of those candied windows once I spy a designer's eye dressing up a caked rooftop or dabbing jelly beans on a fence.

New this year comes Petroglyph Gallery adding some oomph to the event; a reception at the beautiful space finds Gordon Rowland performing on guitar amid a sea of art from 5 to 8 p.m.

Christmas in Mokelumne Hill

WHEN: 3 p.m. Sunday

WHERE: All over Main Street Mokelumne Hill

COST: Free

This gathering is very folksy and familiar; visitors can just step inside Ed and Brenda's place – a kind of artisan's wonderland right on Main Street – where all the tools of the gingerbread trade are at the ready. You can belly up to the historic bar at the Hotel Leger or step into the banquet room, where Santa will hang out and visit with children for photos. Businesses up and down Main Street will have other activities for kids, too.



File photo

Children love decorating the gingerbread house in Mokelumne Hill.

These smaller-than-your-average-town gatherings are my kinds of events for the season; the Grinch is held at bay and moms and dads get to see their children revel in the wonder of it all. Like I said, once they spot Ed and Brenda's ginger-

bread house, all notions of surliness are abated. For me, it's a chance to remember that it's not all about what you've got; it's about who you get to share it with.

Reach Mike Taylor at mtaylor@sierralodestar.com.



Tuolumne Talk

Harmony Wheeler

Having just completed college in May, I understand the importance of a young person taking advantage of every opportunity. My own journey took me to Europe with People to People Ambassadors in high school, had me involved in pageants and artistic skating in my much younger years, brought me through trial periods experimenting with music and theater, had me involved in the Teens in the Newsroom program with the Modesto Bee and led me to three different colleges spread

Sonora High Jazz Band plans to hit the road

throughout the United States, after which I finally graduated with my degree in journalism and public relations from Biola University.

I have yet to find full-time work, but I continue to be involved in areas that I am passionate about and I do my best to support young people in their endeavors, like the Sonora High Jazz Band.

The Sonora High Jazz Band will have a fundraiser this weekend at the Yo Good Yogurt Shop in downtown Sonora. On Friday, also the day of the Bean Feed and Hudson Singers performance at Courthouse Square, 10 percent of sales at Yo Good Yogurt will go to the jazz band for its upcoming trip to Santa

Catalina Island to perform with Avalon School and at the Wrigley Stage, as well as for tourists there from March 28 to 30. According to Dan Parks, whose son plays in the band, the trip is expected to cost about \$15,000.

In the past few months, the band has held a play-a-thon fundraiser, wreath fundraiser, Applebee's Pancake Breakfast fundraiser and held a concert with the Columbia College Big Band. Sonora High's Band Boosters organization sets up the fundraisers and the adults present them to the students. The students then do the fundraising work.

"We always ask for community support through our fundraising endeavors," music director

Yvonne Denton said. "Our community is wonderful and very supportive. We appreciate all the help we have had throughout the years and hopefully years to come."

The band alternates years traveling with the Golden Regiment Band. Denton said that in addition to performing, this year the students will learn about the history of Catalina Island and the town of Avalon, visit the casino building, go sightseeing and have some fun. Past trips for the bands have featured concerts in Phoenix and Kansas City. Parks said the performers also

made a "pilgrimage" to perform for longtime Sonora band director and Golden Regiment founder, Pat Sieben, at the community college he now teaches at in Missouri.

"It is important to have music in all our schools and in all our lives," Denton said. "Music teaches discipline, history, theory, teamwork, focus and is educational, entertaining and really a part of everyday life for most everyone."

Parks said he believes the band is an opportunity for young musicians

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Courtesy photo

The Sonora High School Jazz Band is raising money for a trip to Catalina in 2012.

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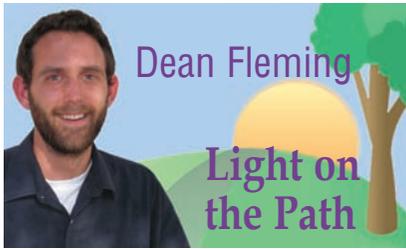
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There's nothing like the summit for a view

mountain ranges, drastically changing California's topography. Geologists refer to this historically significant event as the Mehrten Formation.

There's something unique about gaining a landscape's highest point. The human urge to stand on top of tall things could have spawned from self-defense – from a time when people needed to view encroaching threats from all directions. Or perhaps this desire was developed even earlier, when tribes of ancient civilizations sat atop high ridges waiting for herds of grazing animals.

No matter how the aspiration to gain high points originated, there's no doubt that the desire to hit the highest point still remains in modern human beings. Even in a time of 12-lane freeways, soy milk lattes and iPods, gazing out toward an uninterrupted panoramic view after summiting the highest pinnacle in an area summons a primal sense of satisfaction in us.

With a combination of rolling peaks and low valleys, the western foothills of the Sierra Nevada provide extremely easy access to amazing vantage points. Adding to this area's already phenomenal vistas are some of California's most astounding geologic features. Between 10- and 14-million years ago, a series of volcanic eruptions frosted California's landscape with molten lava and debris flows. These lava flows filled river channels and coated

One of the largest lava flows that occurred during the Mehrten Formation was the product of a caldera eruption near Bridgeport. The subsequent lava flows ran down the western slope of the Sierra, filling the ancient Tuolumne River Canyon from the top of Sonora Pass to just beyond present-day Lake Tulloch. Over time, the surrounding sediments were eroded by wind and water, producing a virtual cast of the ancient Tuolumne River Canyon. Today this incredible geologic marvel's flat-topped summit ridge is especially prominent in the lower foothills where it reaches vertical heights of more than 200 feet; it is aptly known as Table Mountain.

The Table Mountain formation creates drastic vantage points for area hikers and sightseers. Accordingly, the hiking trail to the top of Table Mountain (located off Shell Road outside Jamestown) is one of the most popular low-elevation walks in Tuolumne County. But it's not just the views from Table Mountain's summit that are spectacular; in fact, there are a few places nearby that exceed the height of Table Mountain and provide unique views of its surprisingly flat top and sheer cliff sides.

The Peoria Flat area just west of Jamestown is probably best known for cattle grazing along historic Peoria Flat Road. This short and relatively flat road also provides access to the New Melones Dam, where the roadway dead ends near the striking Peoria Ridge. Since the construction of the dam, there have been some restrictions placed on user access near the end of Peoria Flat Road; however, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation has managed to keep a wonderful trail system to the top of Peoria Ridge open to the public. In addition to keeping this trail available to pedestrian users, the bureau



Photos by Dean Fleming

The view toward Lake Tulloch from Peoria Ridge can be breathtaking.

has developed a delightfully spacious parking lot, trail maps and signage for the Peoria Ridge Trail system.

The loop-style hike to the top of Peoria Ridge is 4 miles long and has been rated by rangers at New Melones as "difficult," due to the steep nature of the trail near the summit of Peoria Ridge. I found the trail slightly more difficult than the Table Mountain Trail at Shell Road, but the steep section is so short that anyone in relatively good health should be able to reach the summit.

There are technically three trails around and over Peoria Mountain, all of which require some sections of steep climbing. These three trails can eas-



Blue oaks thrive along the Peoria Ridge Trail.

ily be connected for added length and difficulty. All of the trails in this area are designed for hiking and mountain biking, but are best

accessed for equestrian use. The extra-large parking area is perfect for parking trailers and the trails

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to improve their skills.

"I'm really glad to have such a robust music program," he said. "In this economic environment, music programs are often targeted in cost cutting, so it's great to see the Sonora High Jazz Band continue to thrive."

Denton said the Golden Regiment Band will travel to Southern California next year to march in a

St. Patrick's Day Parade, and the high school is currently planning for the 30th anniversary celebration of the Golden Regiment Band, which will be sometime during the 2012-13 school year.

"Our Golden Regiment Band students are outstanding," Denton said. "They are truly wonderful to teach and work with. They are energetic, fun, exciting and doing a fabulous job of learning and performing. I am

very fortunate to have the opportunity to work with these students."

To donate to the band or for more information on fundraisers and trips, contact Denton at 532-5511, ext. 451 or email to ydenton@sonorahs.k12.ca.us.

Send your Tuolumne County events to Harmony Wheeler at hwheeler@sierralodestar.com and mtaylor@sierralodestar.com.

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