

# Hop the rails this weekend in Jamestown

One of the great things about living in the foothills is our proximity to so many state and national parks. One could, for example, take a day trip to Yosemite or visit Jamestown and Columbia in just one or two days. Coincidence though it may be, both Jamestown and Columbia hold historical events this week.

Forgive me, Columbia State Historic Park, for taking so long to get to the age-old song, but “Happy birthday, to you.” Good luck getting that song out of your head. The park had a birthday on Tuesday, celebrating the day the Hildreth party discovered gold there.

Over in Jamestown, another party begins on Saturday as Railtown 1897 State Historic Park resumes weekend train rides with opening weekend events and free rides for residents of Calaveras, Mariposa and Tuolumne counties (with proof of residency).

“We always invite people into the roundhouse to watch the locomotive get prepared for the day – we are one of the few places where you can actually see this going on; but on opening weekend, we make a big deal about it,” said Kimberly Baker, the park superintendent. “Everyone is very excited to see the season start.”

For Saturday’s kickoff, you’re invited to attend the “Early Bird” program that starts at 7 a.m. in the roundhouse to watch as the crew lights the fire and prepares the locomotive for the day. Knowledgeable guides will be on hand to narrate every step of the process. Then, interested spectators can follow the locomotive out into the yard and watch the turntable in operation as the crew moves the locomotive into place at the depot. Vietnam veteran Jim Sutherland performs the National Anthem and a flag will be raised at 9:45 a.m., followed by a grand entrance and ceremonial whistle blowing. Mark Twain (portrayed by Pat Kaunert) will call out the first “All

aboard!” for the season at 10:45 a.m.

Volunteer Stephanie Tadlock said there is an air of excitement as volunteers and paid staff have trained all winter to get ready for opening weekend.

“All the personnel you will encounter are volunteers, which means they are there because they want to be there,” Tadlock said. “Opening weekend has a lot of high-energy excitement surrounding it, but just about every weekend is the same for our volunteers because we all want to be there and we want to keep running trains.”

“The world has plenty of history museums and preserved house museums, but there are few places where one can see heritage technology in action, and this is one of them,” Baker said. “The shops are open and accessible to the public; you can stand right by as the locomotive is prepared for the day, then watch the crew bring it out onto the turntable and onto the line. Once in operation, our crews use historic hand signals and operate the historic air-brake systems on the cars, use the old switches and even fill up from the old water tank. This used to be an everyday way to operate in small towns across America, and now most people can only read about it in books. People literally come from around the world to see this place in action, and we really want to encourage our local residents to come out and see it, appreciate it and support it.”

Throughout the day Saturday and Sunday, many other special activities will be offered as well, including live music performed by Dave Rainwater onboard the trains, tours of the roundhouse and demonstrations of the historic belt-driven machine shop.

The number of tickets available for steam train excursion rides during opening weekend is limited, so Baker encourages guests to arrive early. All tickets include park admission and are available on a first-come, first-served

basis at the ticket window beginning at 10 a.m. on days when the trains are running. Advanced tickets can be purchased, but free tickets are only available at the window this weekend. Ride tickets are \$13 for adults, \$6 for ages 6 to 17 and kids 5 and under ride free.

After the weekend festivities, Railtown offers steam-powered rides behind the Sierra No. 3 locomotive on Saturdays and vintage diesel locomotives on Sundays throughout the 2012 operating season. Because the schedule is subject to change with expanded service on holiday weekends, visitors are encouraged to call 984-3953 or visit railtown.org for updated information.

While Railtown does appear on a list of state parks that may ultimately be shuttered, Baker is optimistic the historic site will be preserved and maintained.

## Tuolumne Talk

Harmony Wheeler



“We are proceeding with optimism that we’ll be open, at least in some capacity, into the future, but we are working with many entities to make that a reality,” Baker said.

She said that several Rotary Clubs are organizing fundraisers, including an April 17 Celebrity Waiter event at Seven Sisters restaurant at Black Oak Casino in Tuolumne, as well as the auctioning of a Corvette later this year.

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File photo

Known as “The Movie Railroad,” Railtown has welcomed Hollywood to Tuolumne County many times for television and movie production.

# Thankfully, there’s usually no one dead nearby

Slicing north and south through the heart of Gold Country, Highway 49 is perhaps the most historically significant road in

California. Yet alongside its nearly over-celebrated gold mining, cattle ranching and homesteading landmarks, there exists a plethora of

often overlooked geologic marvels.

Of the many significant and dazzling rock formations that scatter the shoulders of this foothill highway,

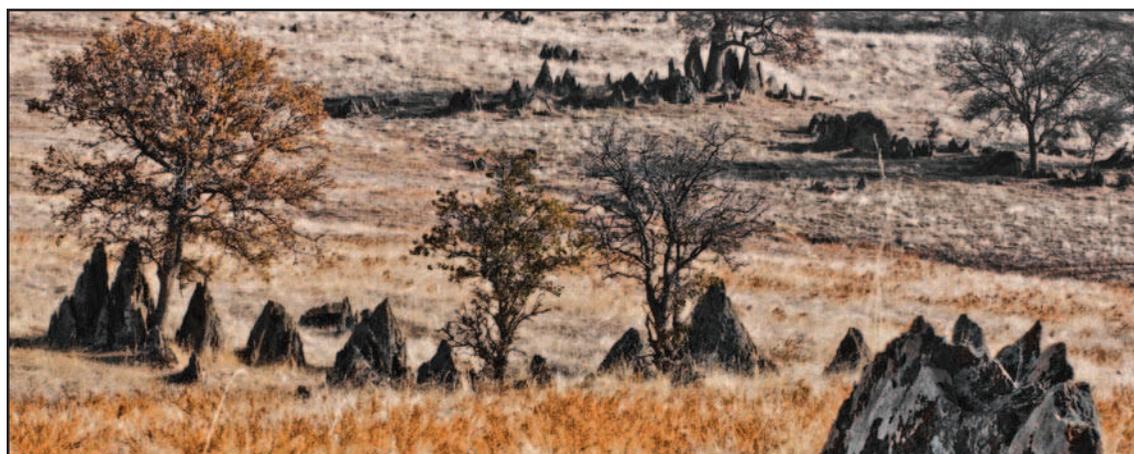
one of the most recognizable features strikes a familiar – if slightly creepy – resemblance to sights usually reserved for cemeteries. Tombstone rocks are – according to the well-known guidebook “Geology of the Sierra Nevada” by Mary Hill – “slabs (that) reminded early miners of an untended cemetery, hence the names ‘tombstone rocks,’ ‘grave-stone slate’ or ‘gravestone schist.’”

If you’ve driven the northern portion of route J-59 south of Jamestown toward the small town of Snelling and the city of Merced, or taken Highway 49 through the peaceful cattle-grazed and oak-studded fields north of Calaveras County, you’ve certainly glanced out the window and noticed some jagged spires of rock jutting into

the Mother Lode skyline.

These phenomenal landmarks are “the product of undersea volcanoes of 140 million years ago now upended and changed by mountain-building forces,” Hill wrote. The mountain-building forces that she refers to are earlier explained as a process called plate tectonics, wherein large masses of the Earth’s crust collide, shift and pull apart to lift the world’s tallest mountain ranges to soaring heights. During this process, rocks buried under the soil in foothill areas like the rolling

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Photos by Dean Fleming

Many of the unusual tombstone rocks can be seen along county road J-59 in Tuolumne County.



## Light on the path

Dean Fleming