

The Carmelo Athletic and Social Club
by
Elizabeth Barratt, CVHS Historian

Sitting at the entrance to Robinson Canyon Road, the white mini-barnlike structure has seen a series of occupants since it was completed in 1895. Situated opposite the Farm Center, the building was intended as a convenient gathering spot for residents of both the lower and upper portions of Carmel Valley.

For decades, the Carmelo Athletic and Social Club served as a place for town hall style meetings, holiday celebrations, birthday parties, dances and grange meetings. The original membership listed names from the Valley's early pioneer families: Martin, Snively, Meadows, McDonald, Wolter, Feliz, Stewart, Hitchcock and Berwick, among others

Club minutes dating from November 19, 1894 (according to a July 5, 1956 article in the Monterey Peninsula Herald) report that the families were seeking funding to complete a hall for dances and gym activities such as boxing matches. The property itself, originally owned by the Berwick family, was later sold to the club membership for a dollar.

Before the club was built, according to Carmel Valley old-timer Joe Hitchcock, dances were held in someone's home or at the Carmelo School. After the proposed social center was organized, local Carmel architect Delos Goldsmith was hired to design the structure. The Stewarts, Martins and Berwicks oversaw the construction, with a number of other Valleyites pitching in to complete the project. The convenient location was meant to draw residents all the way from Corral de Tierra, Jamesburg and Cachagua, as well as ranchers who lived closer to the mouth of the Valley.

Dances with live music were especially popular at the club, with musicians paid ten dollars for the evening's performance. At first there was no door fee, but someone would pass around a hat to take up a collection, usually a dollar per couple, to pay the performers. "At midnight an old-fashioned Quadrille was called, and supper was served," Joe Hitchcock wrote. "The refreshments, usually sandwiches and cake, were always provided by the ladies. When everyone was exhausted, we drove our buggies home and sometimes fell asleep on the way. But our trusty horses always brought us back safely. Usually the young ladies fell asleep, and we had a difficult time trying to drive [the horse] with one hand and hold up the young lady with the other."

Events at the club were so popular that gate-crashing attempts soon resulted in a "members and their invited guests only" policy. At a July 21, 1895 meeting, it was decided that "no person not invited by a member of the club shall be made welcome in the hall." The order was signed by Mrs. R. H. Martin.

Occasional plays were also held at the club. The Monterey Weekly Cypress reported on August 31, 1895, "About 150 people were present on Friday evening of last week to welcome the farce, 'The School Ma'am,' played under the auspices of the Carmelo Athletic and Social Club at its hall in Carmel Valley. There were eleven characters, all of whom did admirably well. Between acts instrumental and vocal solos were rendered. A social hop and refreshments followed the play."

Despite its title as both an athletic and social club, athletic activities were only observed during the early years, when the club sponsored a baseball team called the Wood Ticks, who played a Carmel team called the Sand Fleas. By about 1910 the athletic portion of the club activities was dropped in favor of dances.

Holiday social activities included a Washington's Birthday Ball, as noted in the Monterey New Era newspaper on February 25, 1903, which stated that "all had the customary good time." For years, members held large Fourth of July celebrations at the club, with activities spilling outdoors at the back of the property facing the river.

There were periods when the club was inactive, and other times when interest was revived, with the space used for Carmelo School graduations and other community functions.

Monthly dances continued at the club through the 1950s. Live music, when available, was provided by a 3-piece band. When the band wasn't available, dancing was done to records. The old-fashioned country dances started at 9:00 PM and lasted until 2 AM. Raffle prizes at the event might include a ham, plus other door prizes. According to an August 2, 1957 interview in the Carmel Valley News, only coffee was served at the functions, at least indoors. Stories abound of patrons stepping outside for "a breath of fresh air."

Membership attendance began to dwindle from about the late 1950s. In time the former club space evolved into a series of businesses, including a saddlery shop, a plumbing business, a woodcarving shop and a sculpture studio.

But in its heyday, the membership enjoyed a singular claim to fame, when locals believed that the Carmelo Athletic and Social Club was one of the oldest clubs Monterey County.