Lonely historic site awaits much-needed help

By Jerry Bowen

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It lies on a windswept knoll above the confluence of the San Joaquin River and the Sacramento River. Slowly but surely, giant windmills move stealthily ever closer to the deteriorating wood shell covered adobe. Mold on one of the interior walls appears as a small sinister-looking waterfall from a leak in the roof.

Outside a chain link fence damaged by brain-dead vandals and the elements surrounds the disheveled structure, giving it a false sense of security. A large tree that fell sometime in the past narrowly missed the building and shoulder-high weeds surrounding the gloomy scene foreshadows a possible final doom by inferno to National Historic Site number 1972000260.

Lansford W. Hastings, who wrote an immigrant's guide to California, is blamed as the primary reason the Donner Party took what is known as "Hastings's Cutoff" over the Sierra to save time. This was the chief factor for the disaster we all know today as the Donner Party Tragedy that resulted in the death of many of its members.

In 1846, Hastings, acting as an agent for the Mormons, was to establish a new colony he named Montezuma and built the adobe. The Montezuma Hills near Rio Vista are a beneficiary of the name. The Bear Flag Revolt and war with Mexico ended the future of the colony. After the war, Hastings returned to the adobe to live for another three years and operate a crude ferry from an inlet near the adobe to the city of New York (Antioch today) in Contra Costa County. He finally abandoned the site in 1849 and moved to Monterey to participate in the convention to draft a constitution for the new state of California.

The house was in poor shape in 1853 when Lindsey Powell Marshall occupied it and made repairs to the adobe. Sometime before 1857, Marshall brought his wife and six children from Missouri to the much-improved ranch. They raised stock and gradually expanded their operations by systematically acquiring additional acreage. Between 1866 and 1873, Marshall and his sons added more than 1,000 acres to their original holdings through a combination of cash entry patents, patents of swamp and overflow lands, and a homestead claim. In the ensuing years, Lindsay Marshall divested himself of all but 400 acres. After his death, the property passed to his wife and, in 1897, to his eldest son, Lindsay P. Marshall Jr.

Around the turn of the century, the old adobe passed into the hands of the Stratton

family. The Strattons constructed a wooden shell over the original structure, added a living room, and continued to use the adobe for sleeping rooms and a kitchen. No effort was made to modernize the original historic old rooms with their rough heavy timbers, thick wooden doors and hand-hewn woodwork. Even though other additions and modifications were made over the years, the Strattons always maintained the majority of the original adobe in its original configuration.

The Strattons sold the property in 1964 to PG&E, which had planned to construct a nuclear energy plant on the site but the project was ultimately abandoned. After the family moved from the ranch, bottle and artifact hunters caused considerable damage to the site and buildings.

In 1972, the adobe was placed on the National Register of Historic Places through the efforts of local historian Wood Young, and the Solano County Historic Society. Repairs were made and the roof of the wooden enclosure surrounding the adobe was renewed.

Due to its remote location, lack of funds and community disinterest, the old adobe has slowly deteriorated once again.