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History to Come Alive at Farm: Fund-Raising Campaign Kicks off to Restore 112-Acre Homestead in the Laguna

By Carol Benfell, Press Democrat

The effort to restore a historic Sonoma County farm and turn it into a place where the public can learn about the Laguna de Santa Rosa's natural and cultural past begins today at the Occidental Road property.

The 112-acre Stone family homestead will become a demonstration farm similar to those that covered Sonoma County more than 100 years ago.

Plans include a yet-to-be-built interpretative center for exhibits, programs and lectures to explain the Laguna's colorful past and encourage visitors to join in its restoration. It will be similar to the heritage farms popular in the Midwest that recreate farm life of the early 1900s.

The Santa Rosa-based Laguna Foundation is behind the projected \$3.7 million project and hopes to restore the farm within five years. The nonprofit foundation has raised \$650,000 in community donations.

“It's essential to have a place where people can go and learn about the Laguna, where some connection can be made,” said Dan Schurman, the foundation's executive director. “People know about the Laguna, they drive by it, but until they get down there and experience it we don't think there will be the political will to restore it.”

Today marks the launch of a fund-raising campaign to restore the 133-year-old farmhouse and haybarn and recreate a long-vanished water tower and bunkhouse. A team of farm horses will plow the first furrow in a symbolic start to the restoration effort.

“We'd like a working blacksmith shop,” Schurman said. “We might grow heritage grain and have a grain-to-bread demonstration, where kids could pick grain and make bread. We could have a chicken coop and a small-scale vegetable garden.”

The boarded-up farmhouse is believed to be one of Sonoma County's oldest surviving farm buildings still in its original setting.

“It's a beautiful building that has been sitting there for years without people paying attention to it,” said Guy Smith, a member of the Sonoma County Historical Society board. “Agriculture has been very prominent in Sonoma County history. Anything we can do to perpetuate that and introduce school-age children to the farming community is great.”

The restored farmhouse is slated to become the headquarters of the Laguna Foundation. The haybarn will continue to be used for agriculture. A long-vanished water tower will be rebuilt and used for restrooms. The interpretive center would be housed in a building that looks like a bunkhouse of that period.

Local American Indians are working with the Laguna Foundation, developing programs and exhibits for the interpretive center.

Coast Miwok and Southern Pomo villages once lined the Laguna. Their inhabitants fished in the Laguna's lakes and hunted the elk and antelope that came to the water to drink, said Greg Sarris, chairman of the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria.

The area was one of the most densely populated in North America at the time of the first European contact, Sarris said.

“This is an opportunity to learn the rich history of the place itself, and to learn from that history how we might restore it,” Sarris said.”

