This year Jessie Bequette, of Three Rivers, will be “ringing out the old” with a new, familiar sound. A keyboard sound.

“It’s funny,” she says, “how the circle came full round.”

The circle she means is a musical instrument. It came to Three Rivers in a huge crate in the year 1916—a brand new Kingsbury piano from the Cable Co. in Chicago, a resplendent upright made from golden Oakwood with columns carved in relief on each side of the music-rest.

Jessie’s “Grandma” – Mrs. Walter Fry, wife of the Tulare County judge, ordered this piano for her ten-year-old granddaughter, who had lived with the Fry’s ever since the tragic death of the young girl’s father two years before, and the consequent relocating of her mother to Tulare to work and provide a living for Jessie’s baby sisters, Edith and Thelma.

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“For two years she studied with Carrie Swanson, who lived across the river, faithfully practicing at the beautiful piano in the Fry home. She came, after all, from a musical family. “Grandpa” Walter “did chording” (accompanied with chords) on the keyboard while Grandma played the guitar. Uncle Clarence was a violinist. Jessie’s mother, Bessie, was also an enthusiastic pianist who had studied at the Fresno Conservatory of Music.

Bessie, a lively, hardy lady who had spent two winters failing in farming in wild Saskatchewan with Jessie’s father, loved the piano probably more than any other single possession. When Bessie gave up her music studies to marry John MacKinnon in Fresno, her husband’s wedding gift to her was an upright piano, which she used constantly. It was this wedding piano which, in a strange irony, after surviving the moves from Fresno to Saskatchewan and back to Three Rivers, would cause the death of Jessie’s father.

In 1914, when Jessie was not quite eight, the house which John and Bessie had built in Three Rivers not far from the Fry’s—a handsome structure, the first in Three Rivers with a proper bathroom, says Jessie—caught fire. Everyone was safe outside, but Jessie’s father wanted to save the piano. He dashed back into the flames to try to get it out of danger. He was caught in the blaze and burned to death.

Then it was that Jessie went to live with her grandparents. Jessie began lessons on their handsome piano. But in 1916, fire struck again, and this time the Fry’s lost their piano along with the whole house.

At that time, however, Judge Fry was serving as the first civilian superintendent of Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks. (Jessie has glowing memories of accompanying her Grandpa, he on horseback and she on pony as he made the rounds to all the key stations from Clough Cafe up to Mineral King and back by Atwell’s Mill; or else, up past Morro Rock to Sequoia and Grant Parks and back by Badger.) The main office for the Parks was then in one room of Judge Fry’s home, so the Fry’s were quick to have a new place built. And—a new piano was ordered, to replace the old one—just for Jessie, who was surely Grandma’s favorite.

As Jessie grew into her teens, however, other interests replaced her music. She spent less and less time at the piano. In 1920, when Jessie was ready to start High School, her mother moved back to Three Rivers, now the wife of Kenneth Weckart. Bessie came to be the first secretary ever hired by the Park Service in the County. Along with her she brought a new piano, again a wedding gift—this time from her second husband.

Now Jessie went to live with her mother and sisters— and later a little half-brother, Russell. With no granddaughter about to use the keyboard, Grandma Fry decided to make a gift of the golden oak piano to the Three Rivers Women’s Club, and ever active organization which then leased the shingled building which is now the Three Rivers Arts Center. As Jessie went on with life, at work and in marriage, she forgot her piano lessons and how to read music.

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I cannot believe we actually opened the Bequette House. You really need to see what has taken place over the past several months. The construction work and all the time and work that volunteers did was and still is amazing.

Next is resurfacing the floors and some final trim work followed by a new bathroom/restroom. We have to build up funds in order to add the restroom because it also includes handicapped access and parking by county code.

So whether you were at the opening or coming for the first time, stop by and see the changes the biggest antique that the museum has………….the Bequette House.

Its membership renewal time. Letters have gone out and we hope that everyone will renew to help us with all our programs for the community and building projects. Life members of course have automatic renewal and like the yearly memberships we are asking you to consider an additional donation.

What's next.... If you drive by the property you may find a drilling rig fixing up and testing a well that was done in 1995 but not used yet. We are hoping it contains “sweet water” that will be used in our Barn Project which is starting to take shape. In addition we are having our current well updated and cleaned.

Painting.... You may have noticed that our main Museum building has a new paint job thanks to Deb Condon who volunteered to paint the front door and has not stopped yet. Thank you Deb, it’s an incredible job.

It’s almost July.... And that means Hot Dog Festival, July 8th, 10am-4pm. This year we are adding competition games between the fire departments.

That's it....see you next issue

Britten's Store
Here are some excerpts from a story by Thelma Crain

In the early 1920's when residents of “Old Three Rivers” mentioned going to the store, they probably were referring to the establishment of Nellie and Noel Britten. There was another grocer in the area of which the proprietor’s initials were “H.P.” and were jokingly referred to as meaning “High Priced.” this may have been my mother’s reason for opting to shop with the Britten's.

The definition of “store’ covered many things other than just foodstuffs. There were such things as coal oil, chicken feed, lanterns, coal oil lamps, shoes, work clothes, etc. some staples in larger amounts were kept in the back room such as sugar in 100 pound sacks to be bought at canning time when the fruits were ripe.

In the front, on the right side, one encountered glass cases with esthetic and more colorful goods such as hair ribbons, lace and eyelet for by the year, and perhaps some boxed candies to be used as gifts, and sometimes an odd assortment of toys left over from the previous Christmas season. Across and on the left side above and behind the counter which held the large metal cash register were a variety of shelves which held canned and boxed goods. These shelves were inaccessible and “off limits” to the customer, with the clerk assuming the task of retrieving them once he had been advised of one’s wishes. No meandering around the place with a grocery cart to pick and choose at one’s will. What a ridiculous idea this would have been!

Near the entrance was a small post office where some residents picked up their mail. The majority of citizens were served by a mail carrier driving up and down the roads depositing mail in boxes along the way. Sometimes workers in the post office were willing and able to pick up interesting facts about the town by accidentally glancing at barefaced postcards written to the locals.

Noelie, as he was affectionately called, was usually on duty to take care of customers. He was not what one would call swift on his feet and many times my mother would get frustrated at the length of time he would use to shuffle here and there to put up her order. He sometimes disappeared into the back room to retrieve something and she thought he was never coming back.

Well, Noel, Nellie, the mailman, and my mother are all gone now and one day I shall also which will finally put an end of drivel such as this. so be it.
Then, in the mid-60s, the Three Rivers Women’s Club moved its activities to the new Memorial B building, and took the Fry piano there with them. It served staunchly for various group events and shows until last spring, when the Memorial Building passed from joint Woodlake-Three River’s management to a solely local Three Rivers Board of Directors. The Three Rivers School has meanwhile acquired a console piano (handier for stage purposes) for use at the Memorial Building. The Women’s Club was asked to remove their piano, since space was limited.

In the meantime, Bessie had died in 1972, leaving the Weckart piano. Since her niece Rachel played piano, Jessie felt the instrument should go to her. Not long after, however, Jessie was heard to say that if the Women’s Club ever planned to sell its piano at the Memorial Building, she wanted to know.

A few weeks ago, Women’s Club president Jean Darsey phoned Jessie to say that the Club board wanted Jessie to have the old Fry piano – as a gift.

It had come “full circle”, as Jessie says with a glowing smile that takes years off her life. She hired husky Tom Pappas and three rugged cohorts to bring the 70-year-old piano “home”. (Jessie lives close to the spot where her parents built their house.)

I had a terrible time making room for it”, says Jessie, “but I knew I had to have it here.” And as icing on the cake, her Canadian cousin, Howard MacKinnon, who has come from Winnipeg to build a home in Three Rivers, is able to tune pianos, along with playing other instruments, and will certainly have Jessie’s pride and joy sounding beautiful.

Does Jessie play it again? “Oh, I just have it for sentimental reasons ... I do play for my own amusement. But just by ear.” Won’t she give a concert? “Just do ‘chording’. I guess I inherit it from Grandpa.”

One day in winter, when our swimming pool was empty, I went out to see if there were any frogs. There was one and I was glad, because I had a plan. My idea was to name the frog and then fix him up. First, I named him Chief White Streak because he had a streak of white down his back.

I went to my Mother’s bedroom. On her dressing table were her perfume bottles. I picked out one of them and also a box of face powder.

I didn’t know the perfume was the best she had. Then I went to where I kept Chief White Streak in a glass jar. I took him out.

First I put the powder on him, then I sprinkled him with the perfume. While I was doing all this, my Mother was at the store buying groceries. After I fixed up Chief White Streak I put him on the piano where I was going to practice. He was awfully “gooey” but he smelled good. I practiced one piece on the piano. Chief White Streak seemed to like it. He closed his eyes and seemed to be smiling. After a few minutes my Mother came in. Before I could explain to her what I had done she said, “What smells so good?” With that, I began telling her what had happened. For a minute I thought she was going to spank me, but instead she burst out laughing. Then she hugged and kissed me and made me promise never to touch her perfume again. am I not lucky to have such a nice Mommie?

The next day was Sunday. My Mother went to a piano concert. She invited the man who played the piano to come home for supper. He came.

He was a nice man. I told him about Chief White Streak. Then I showed the little frog to him. He thought that Chief White Streak was so cute that he wanted to make up a song about him, which he did. I don’t have Chief White Streak any more, but when I get lonesome for him, I take out the song and play it and remember him. It seems like I can see him again, sitting on the piano, smiling in his sleep, and he smells so good!
Established - December 1991
Museum Opened - October 2000
501(c)3 Non-Profit Organization

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Have you seen it yet?

2017 Historical Society & Museum Events

HOT DOG FESTIVAL
July 8 - 10am to 4pm
At The Museum

NATIVE-AMERICAN DAYS
September 19-20-21
Education Program For 4th Grade Students about Native-American Life In Our Region. Public Welcome To Observe

HOLIDAY BAZAAR
November 4, 9am-4pm
Senior League, Arts & Crafts Show At Memorial Building

LIVING HISTORY DAY
November Date To Be Announced
At The Museum

COMMUNITY CAROLING
December 2, 5pm-7pm
At The Museum