

San Francisco Chronicle

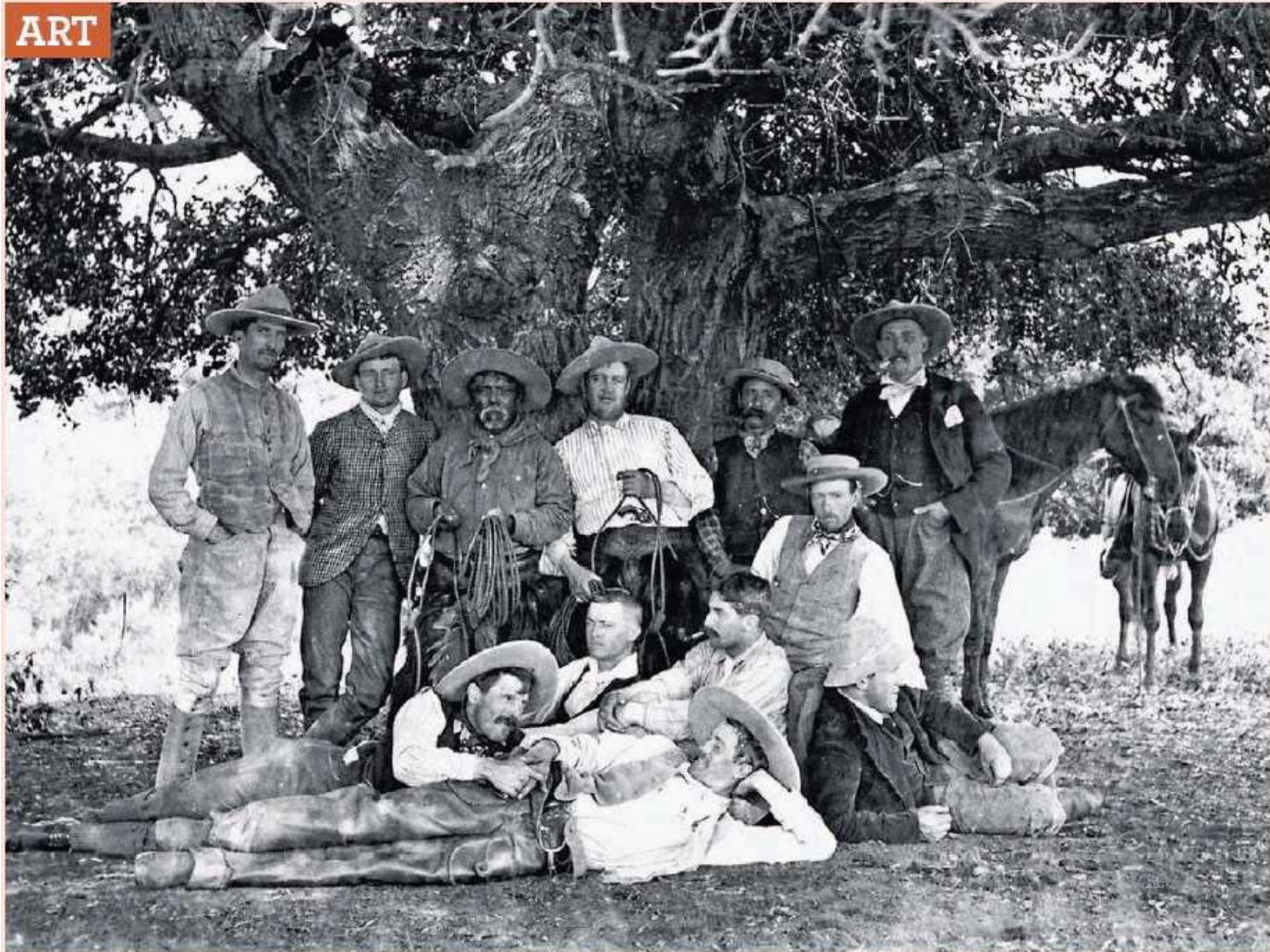
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Ovation

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ART



California Historical Society

Exhibition sees beauty of rural California

By Patricia Yollin

A young man gathers mulberry leaves on a silk farm in 1907. "Miss Wool California" of 1968 poses with a sheep. Forty-three years later, cowboys warm up at a rodeo in Salinas.

I See Beauty in This Life: A Photographer Looks at 100 Years of Rural California: Noon-5 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday. Through March 24. California Historical Society, 678 Mission St., S.F. (415) 357-1848. www.californiahistoricalsociety.org.

These people come alive in a new exhibition at the California Historical Society in San Francisco, titled "I See Beauty in This Life: A Photographer Looks at 100 Years of Rural California." Their images are among 150 or so pictures that show a side of the state that is little known and rarely seen.

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The "I See Beauty in This Life" exhibition includes this photo of cowboys posing at Rancho Santa Anita around 1890.

Exhibition's photos capture beauty of rural California

"Rural" from page F1

"We're happy to buy our oranges from Esparto (Yolo County), but nobody even knows where it is," said writer and photographer Lisa M. Hamilton.

The exhibition she created represents a new direction for the 141-year-old nonprofit, inaugurating a "Curating California" program that invites accomplished state residents, such as Hamilton, to delve into the vast holdings of the historical society.

"What we really want to do is bring the collection out of the storage area," said Jessica Hough, managing curator of exhibitions. "We send somebody in and see what stimulates them."

Hamilton spent six months exploring the archives, which contain about 500,000 photographs, and a sister collection with 23,000 more images housed at the University of Southern California. The historical pictures she selected date back to a shot of a flour mill in 1880. She also included 24 large color photos she took last year — traveling 10,000 miles around the state — for her "Real Rural" multimedia project.

"When you picture rural California in your head, some very familiar images come up," Hamilton said. "The Central Valley and that landscape, maybe the timberlands in the far north or the deserts in the south. But those images are pretty limited."

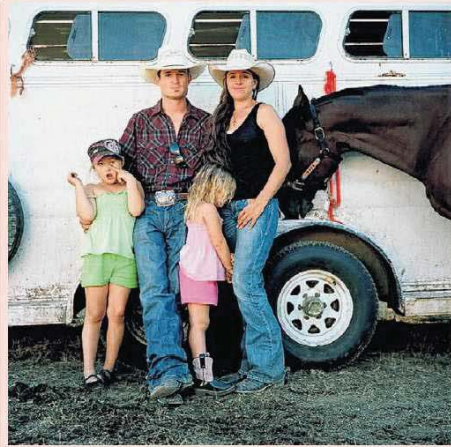
The photographs in the exhibition go far beyond the obvious. They include: a 1922 message burnt onto rocks by dying miners, a Chemehuevi Indian holding a coyote, government forces whipping mice to stop a rodent invasion, and a small black girl crying in a cotton field in 1920.

"Sometimes it was hard to predict what Lisa would go for," said Mary Morganti, the society's director of library and archives, who guided Hamilton through the collection.

"I was decidedly not looking as a historian but as a storyteller and artist," Hamilton said. "I'd ask myself, 'Is this visually interesting or compelling, and does it tell a story — and a different one — from what we're used to?'"

Occasionally images from well-known events resonated with her. She selected two intimate photographs of a 1969 march by striking grape pickers from Delano to Sacramento. One zoomed in on the faces of three women; another showed an exhausted man taking a break in front of a statue of the Virgin.

"Those are the kinds of moments I was looking for," said Hamilton, author of "Deeply



Keith and Leah Roquemore, with daughters Raci and Riata and horse D.H., at the 2011 Mendocino County Fair Rodeo in Boonville.



A boy named Sebastian, who is 11 years old, practices boxing in the Riverside County town of Thermal in 2011.



A California Historical Society exhibition depicting images of rural California includes this picture of an apt California license plate circa 1960.

Rooted: Unconventional Farmers in the Age of Agribusiness," a book published in 2010.

Most of the historical photos were taken by unknown photographers and have never been displayed. Hamilton defined "rural" as places where the culture and economy are determined by using natural resources.

"Whether you've been here 10,000 years or 10 years, you don't have to go very far back to find a link to a rural life," said Anthea Hartig, executive director of the California Historical Society, who is a third-generation Californian and great-granddaughter of a sheep farmer. "Our connections are still very tangible."

Although California is 94 percent rural geographically, according to the U.S. Census, 95 percent of the population lives in urban areas. Exhibition curator Erin Garcia said she hopes the show will serve as a bridge of sorts. Hamilton agreed.

"This great surge of interest in food and where it comes from, and supporting the right farms, hasn't really transcended self-interest in a lot of ways," Hamilton said. "When you go to a farmers' market and you're talking to a farmer, you want to know why there isn't any basil yet, rather than asking about that person's community."

The title of the exhibition comes from an interview she did with Linda Husa, a poet and rancher in Modoc County, partly quoted in a text panel: "I always wanted people to understand what was going on in the rural areas. And that there certainly should be some regard for the people there. Because I see beauty in this life. I don't think it is lone-some. And I don't think it is dumb."

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A young Chemehuevi Indian holds a coyote around 1900 in this Charles C. Pierce photo.

California Historical Society photos