

## SAVING THE UTICA POWERHOUSE MARTIN HUBERTY BRINGS NEW LIFE TO AN OLD STRUCTURE

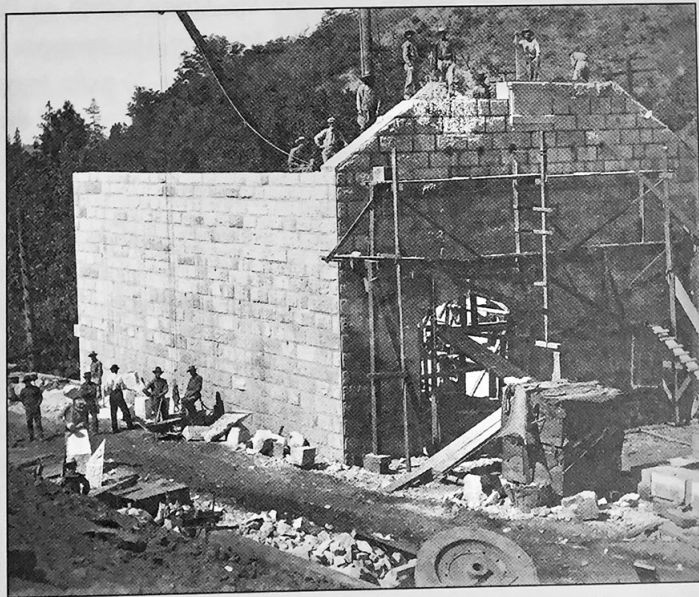
by *Bonnie Miller*

The Big Tree Road and later Highway 4 ran alongside Angels (later Murphys) creek at one time. Today the highway is cut further in to and above on the northern hillside, and the old route is rarely used. It is still passable, and clearly marked as Utica Powerhouse Road. If a motorist is detoured, or chooses to take the side road paralleling the highway, you will see a large multi-story block building alongside the creek. This unique building next to the road always manages to catch the attention of passersby. This was the Utica Powerhouse.

The Utica Powerhouse was originally built as that: a powerhouse. It mightily served that purpose for over fifty years until it was decommissioned in 1952. Suddenly the forces that had brought it

into being turned their backs and no longer wanted it. Sadly it lay abandoned. Even the road that served it was rerouted around it to a new alignment. The shell of the once productive powerhouse lay neglected and dormant. It became an eyesore, an “attractive nuisance”, as the law enforcement types like to brand these unused relics from our past.

For several decades the building lay empty and vulnerable to vandals, with no more adornment than the colorful graffiti that layered its walls. The location was researched as a possible commercial venture. Everything from a bed and breakfast to a restaurant over the creek was investigated. But no one wanted to undertake the effort to finish the interior of the building to a habitable state, or modernize it with facilities such as sewer or



Utica Powerhouse, constructed of rhyolite block quarried from the Adams Ranch, under construction, 1899.

water. Despite the many creative attempts by developers and real estate agents, no one could pawn off this shell of a building onto someone with the naiveté or funds to do something about it.

In 2003 along came Martin Huberty, whose roots are in this Calaveras gold country. He was struck by picturesque setting of powerhouse alongside the creek, the quiet road, and the grand structure itself. Perhaps it was his Hollywood background that had taught him to dream big dreams, where anything is possible. But Martin did make the impossible happen. He took the abandoned shell of that once-magnificent building and brought it to life again, but in a new light. He not only restored the Utica Powerhouse, but the grounds around it, and the historic Huberty Cabin which has a long history in this county as well as a connection with the San Francisco Mint and our own Historical Society. Thanks to Martin Huberty the great Utica Powerhouse now enjoys a new life as a splendid private residence. This issue of *Las Calaveras* celebrates the salvage, restoration and grandeur of one of Calaveras County's great historic buildings that could have been lost to time.

### ***History of the Powerhouse***

The Union Water Company was organized in Murphys on January 29, 1852. The limited supply of water from the creeks was tapped through a variety of small ditches and dams. This company was the culmination of two competing water efforts serving the multitude of miners stampeding the Murphys and Angels areas, and brought water to those areas in 1853. The combined efforts of the Union Water Company eventually became the complex system

of ditches, dams, flumes and reservoirs that reach as far as Elephant Rock Lake in Alpine County.

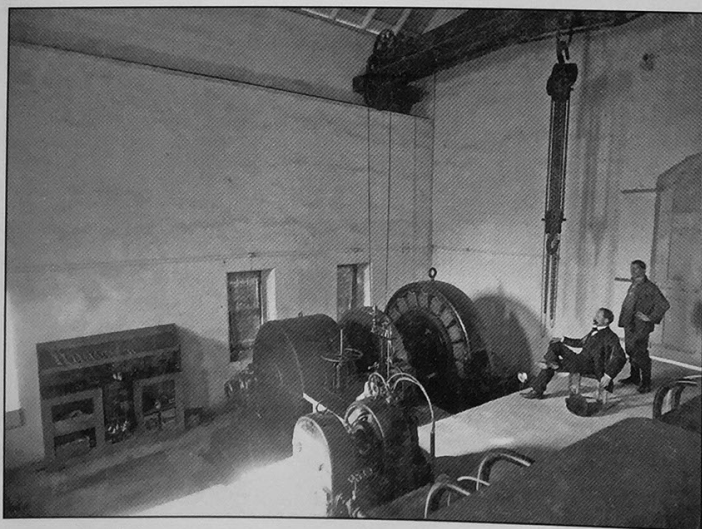
The Union Water Company successfully provided water to the mines and communities of Murphys, Vallecito, Douglas Flat, Carson Hill, Angels Camp and Altaville until acquired by the Utica Mining Company in 1888. The Utica Company then modified the system to serve the needs of its owners rather than its customers.

In 1895 the successful Utica Gold Mine wanted to be even more productive and competitive. They chose to embrace an exciting new technology to advance their mining techniques: electricity. Strings of electric lights were rapidly replacing the miner's candlestick and carbide lantern. Electricity was also powering the mighty crushers that processed the ore, replacing the traditional steam engines. To provide this new commodity, the Union Water Company capitalized on its extensive hydraulic systems and built the first powerhouse in Calaveras County in Angels Camp. This was only the fourth powerhouse to be built in California, and just the eighth to have been built west of the Rockies.

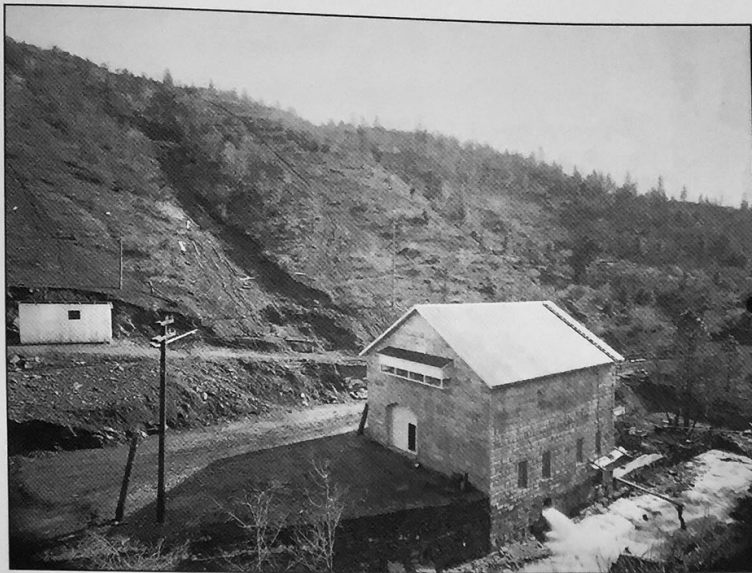
Later that same year the company built a second powerhouse just above Murphys to provide power to mines, mills and residences of Angels Camp. Power to the Utica Mine in Angels was transferred via a huge power cable, remnants of which can still be seen today along the side of the creek. Electricity had caught on like lightning. The demand for power was so great that four years later in 1899 a new solid stone powerhouse was constructed upstream of the first Murphys location. This was the Utica Powerhouse.

Stone for this new powerhouse is rhyolite tuff, quarried from the Adams Ranch on Pennsylvania Gulch Road in Murphys. The stone was hauled to the site by wagons pulled by 26-mule teams. Other notable buildings in Murphys that used this stone were the Malespina Store which today houses the Gold Country Coffee Roasting Company, and the Valente Bakery (circa 1890) across the street.

A huge state-of-the-art Westinghouse generator was installed inside the new powerhouse. This robust generator was powered by water not from the bubbling creek, but from water fed through a Pelton water wheel from a penstock, from a tank reservoir far above the creek. Today if one stands upstream of the powerhouse building and looks up to the southeast, the trail of the penstock can still be clearly seen in the canyon wall. A large footing is built into the canyon wall in line with the powerhouse floor. The footing acted as the energy attenuator, or "kicker" to prevent the water hammer



**Dan Dyer, first operator of the new powerhouse, watches the new Westinghouse generator, circa 1900.**



**The Utica Powerhouse under full operation, spills water into Murphys creek from the penstock, above left (out of view). Circa 1910.**

from lifting the penstock off of its moorings after its long drop from the water tank above. This was the might of the hydraulic power that ran the generators that launched the west's electric age. (For more information on the impulse water wheels, see *Las Calaveras*, January 2006.)

In 1902 a second generator was added in the powerhouse to provide power to the residents of Murphys. In 1903 the powerhouse was modified so that it could provide power as far away as the Royal Mine in Hodson near Copperopolis. By this time demand had shifted from the Union/Utica Water Company to not just providing water to the mines, but rather electric power to the mines. And there was a growing demand from residential and agricultural customers as well, so that most of the customers of the original Union/Utica Water Company were now ranches and homes demanding agricultural water or residential electricity.

Two years later, fifty years after its incorporation, the Union Water Company was dissolved on May 3, 1904. However, they retained the rights to generate power, still serving the remaining mines at Melones and Sheep Ranch and the communities of Murphys and Angels and those in between. All mines closed in 1942 due to World War II, and the company began negotiations with the Pacific Gas & Electric Company. In 1946 PG&E purchased the entire remaining electrical system, and decommissioned the mighty Utica Powerhouse in 1952.

Eventually the powerhouse became outdated and PG&E built a modern facility downstream after an investment of \$1,335,000. In January

of 1954 it was time to shut down the Utica Powerhouse and replace it with the new 5100 horsepower plant.

PG&E recognized the historic importance of shutting down the Utica Powerhouse and held a ceremony to mark the occasion. More than forty dignitaries attended the event, followed by a luncheon at the historic Murphys Hotel. Selected to conduct the honor of turning off the flow of water through the powerhouse was Al J. Gianelli, who was the Dean of California County Supervisors, and had 40 years of service to the Calaveras County Board of Supervisors. He was selected to shut off the water because, besides being a dignitary, he had been an operator of the plant for seventeen years from 1911 until 1928. Furthermore, as a young man he had helped to build the powerhouse when he worked on the construction crew in 1899, and helped install the second generator in 1902. Said the *Calaveras Prospect*:

“Countless times during his years as operator he turned the big wheel controlling the water which he tugged at for the last time today. As the water ceased flowing, the deafening roar of the machines died down, the great generator wheels slowly came to a stop and swinging needles on the dials of the control board fell dead.”

At the time the Utica Powerhouse was retired by PG&E, it was the oldest hydroelectric plant in the company's system of 57 plants.



**The interior of the powerhouse was thoroughly vandalized and full of graffiti by 2003.**



**Bullet and shotgun holes had destroyed the roof, albeit artistically.**

The following year the 15-ton generator was moved out of the Utica Powerhouse by tractor. It was relocated to the back of the Angels Camp Museum next to the large overshot waterwheel where it resides today. The move was witnessed by Wash Burns, then 81, who wistfully recalled that he had driven an 18-mule team over half a century before. In 1895 he had brought the first generator from the railroad terminal in Milton to a Mother Lode power plant owned by the Utica Mining Company.

The shell of the beautiful building was stripped of its valuable components and it was abandoned to natural forces where it lay dormant for almost fifty years. The powerhouse building sat vacant and relatively neglected. It became an eyesore, a party destination, or a romantic getaway over the babbling creek for teenagers, depending on your perspective.

In 1989 it briefly caught the attention

of the American Society of Mechanical Engineers. They investigated nominating it as an early example of a National Engineering Landmark for the ASME and the Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers. The powerhouse employed “two phase, 400 volt revolving armature generators representative of the early Westinghouse practice.”

In 1991 the powerhouse was again researched for designation with the National Register of Historic Places. Despite its unique history it did not garner either of these awards. Rather, the powerhouse remained vacant for more than ten more years when it began its rebirth.

### ***Martin Huberty***

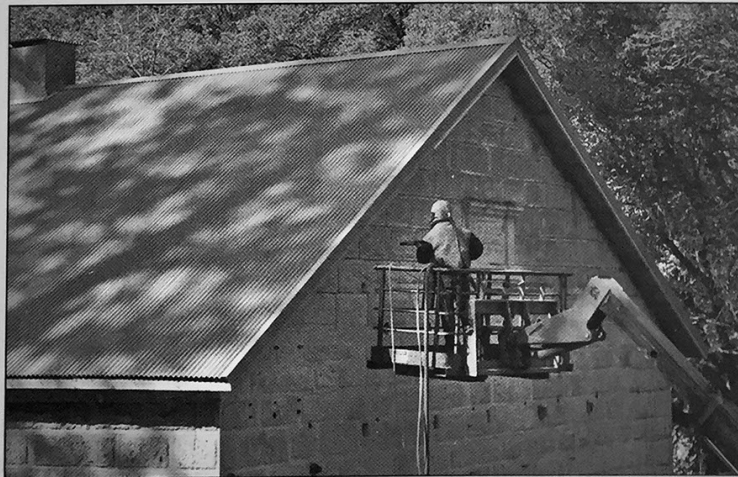
In 2003 Martin Huberty had enjoyed over fifteen years of achievements in the fast-paced life of Hollywood movie production. He had seen numerous successes with such movies as *Fried Green Tomatoes*, *You Can't Hurry Love*, *The Mighty Ducks*, and *Up Close and Personal*, to name just a very few of his projects. But Hollywood had taken its toll and Huberty was ready for a break.

He came to Calaveras County, as he said “to restore my soul.” He wanted to return to the land that had been home to his family for many generations.

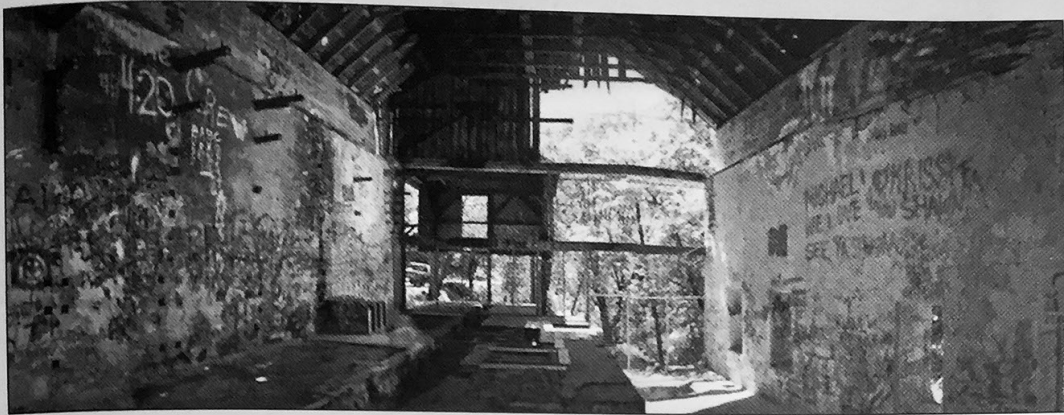
Martin's great-great-grandfather John Huberty had emigrated from Luxemburg in 1854 and settled on a ranch on Fricot City Road. John Huberty raised eleven children, and his family and their offspring continue to live and work in and around Calaveras County yet today. Two of Martin's relatives were Joseph Huberty Sr, a barrister, and Joseph Huberty Jr, a Jurist, both of whom had an association with PG&E shortly after it assumed electrical operations of the Union Water Company. The Huberty family has a rich history in this

county, and much has been documented in the pages of *Las Calaveras* over the years.

Martin's father was Richard Huberty. He ran a store and the tent camp at Lake Alpine around 1960. This is where he met the glamorous Manhattan girl named Jesse who became his wife. Together they had three children.



**Careful blasting of the soft rhyolite with walnut shells was necessary to preserve the hewn blocks.**



Little was left of the downstream wall of the building when Martin Huberty purchased the powerhouse.

The family lived in Sacramento but Martin always looked forward to their summer adventures to the Fricot City ranch or to Lake Alpine. It was in search of these peaceful foothill memories in 2003 when he stumbled across the neglected Utica Powerhouse. There must have been a strong pull, or it must have been serendipitous, as the waters from Lake Alpine are part of the complex Union Water system that flow under the Utica Powerhouse.

### *The Restoration Project*

What Martin Huberty saw in the Utica Powerhouse was a unique home. In reality what he was buying into was the abandoned shell of a former industrial building, and a monster fixer upper project. But Martin had the vision and drive that few home owners can imagine.

It was important to Martin that the building retain its historic character. As a result of his vision, the three foot thick rhyolite block walls remain intact, as well as the hand hewn beams, iron bars and pipes that were all part of the original structure. Restoring these features to an attractive appearance took almost two years.

“You would not believe what we had to cart away...” recalled Martin as he reminisced about some of the more unique debris that had to be removed just to gain access to the building.

Martin needed a creative approach to allow a retrofit of modern upgrades while maintaining the original character and skeleton of the powerhouse. To achieve the desired affect, Martin worked with local architectural historian Judith Marvin and architect Rudy Ortega. Along with contractors and friends who had an interest in seeing the powerhouse restored, and who were caught up in Martin’s enthusiasm, the team worked to bring Martin’s dream to fruition. However most of the work was still done by hand by Martin himself.

One of the more complex aspects of the reconstruction was exposing and preserving the block walls. After



Martin’s vision is realized in this photo almost three years later where the light shines through the same wall in a new way on the antiques he’s used to furnish his new home.

years of layers of graffiti, they were no longer attractive and would not make a pleasant wall covering even in the most cosmopolitan of settings. However sandblasting would have damaged the chiseled look on the stone, according to Martin, so the blasting was done carefully with walnut shells instead.

Martin worked carefully around the building’s original features, such as the hand-hewn wooden beams, rather than remove or replace them. This was more time consuming and costly, but maintained the building’s authenticity. Iron braces used to hold the building square were left in place. The concrete split-level floor needed to be restored, but it was retrofitted with radiant heat first.

From the outside the building looks little changed other than the addition of landscaping, with occasional whimsical accents reflecting Martin’s humor. But on the inside the building is finished as a home. The vast space is now divided into rooms and furnished with antique pieces and period as well as contemporary lighting. The large arched opening in the front, or the upstream end of the building has been fitted with fifteen foot high 1870s era doors that Judith Marvin found in San Francisco.



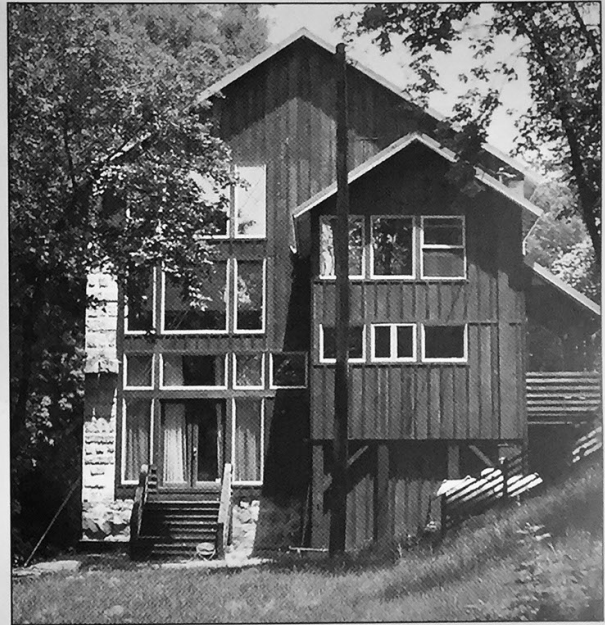
Much of the original downstream walls had been destroyed by the time restoration began in 2003.

### *The Huberty Cabin*

Historical Society members may remember an interesting project years ago whereby another relic of the past was saved by the Society. A miner's cabin on Nellie Nuner's property in Angels Camp was loaned for display to the San Francisco Mint. Nellie Nuner was Martin Huberty's great-great-aunt. The Mint was no longer minting coin, but was functioning as a museum. The cabin was displayed as an authentic gold-rush era example of a miner's domicile. When the Mint Museum closed its doors to the public in 1994 it came to the attention of the Calaveras County Historical Society that this cabin could be lost. Fortunately the Society was able to obtain permission from the Mint to bring the cabin back home to Calaveras County.

Regrettably the Society may have acted in haste. Now that we had this cabin, just what were we to do with it? Clearly it was as big as a house, albeit a small one, so it needed room to squat. With the good will of our neighbors at Frogtown, the cabin found new ground as a small display building on the grounds of the County Fairground. The cabin enjoyed that home for several years until again it, too, became neglected and began to fall into disrepair. Despite its colorful, well-traveled, and most recently public life, this little wooden board and bat building was possibly seeing the end of its life.

Shortly after Martin Huberty had purchased the Utica Powerhouse he learned of the demise of the Huberty Cabin at the fairgrounds. He went to visit the sad little



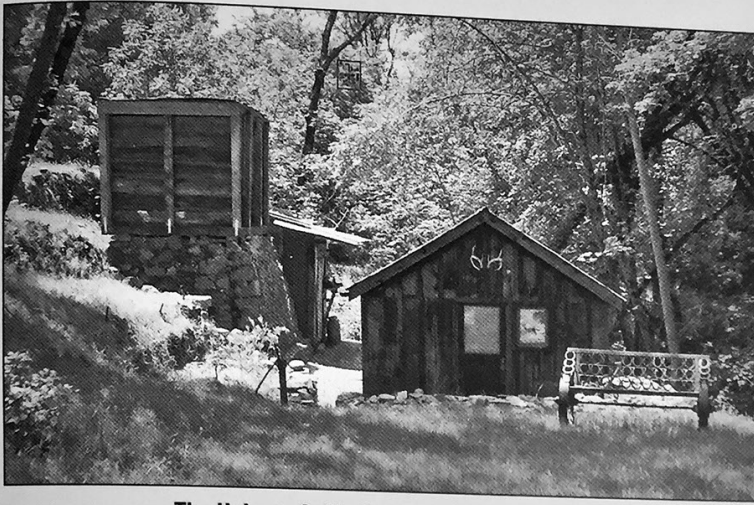
It took a lot of vision and perseverance to turn the damaged old powerhouse into this beautiful new home while maintaining the building's historic lines.

building that he was related to. The building was full of cobwebs and vermin.

"I was embarrassed it had the Huberty name on it" said Martin. He made a proposal to save this building and provide it a permanent home. At his expense he moved it onto his new grounds at the Utica Powerhouse. The tiny cabin is now thoroughly stabilized and secured on a stone foundation that once supported a transformer behind the building. It is now nestled into the hillside between the old road and the creek, looking as though it had always been there. One can almost imagine it as the original powerhouse caretaker's home. In fact it proved so natural a fit for the property that Martin was able to live in it until the powerhouse was habitable.

Restoration of the powerhouse was completed in 2006 as a home. Martin decorated it with antiques he had collected throughout his life. The antiques coupled with contemporary accents inside the restored block building prove a winning combination.

Today Martin enjoys a different busy life. He shares his time between the beautifully restored powerhouse and England. He continues to observe the movie industry but only vicariously through his partner, Grant Armstrong, who works full time as an artistic director in the business. Rather, Martin has redirected his boundless energies toward new endeavors. He has a two new jobs, one as the Chief of Staff/Creative Director for Sarah Ferguson, the Duchess of York; and the other as the father to a new baby boy.

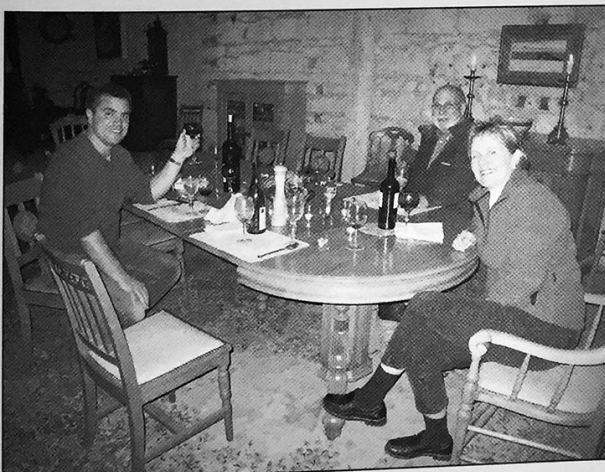


**The Huberty Cabin finds a permanent home.**

### ***Over One Century Later***

Symbols of the powerhouse's former life and function are still evident around the structure in the protruding pipelines, stone footings, pieces of the electrical cable. Subtle residential improvements have been added such as the landscaping and a patio beside the creek. Homage is paid to its past with the presence of electrical insulators decorating the vigas. An understated slate sign decorates the mighty doors advising visitor that this isn't any old stone house they're visiting, this is "THE OLD POWERHOUSE."

Some people complain about changing the use of an historic structure, but ask yourself this, just what *do* you do with an old hydraulic powerhouse? The skeleton has been faithfully preserved. Martin arrested the degradation and turned around what had become an eyesore. Today the



**Martin Huberty, left, enjoys dinner with friends Barden and Annie Stevenot in the restored Utica Powerhouse surrounded by his antiques against the backdrop of history. Photo by Judith Marvin, 13 April 2007.**

building serves a new purpose and has new life, and is as grand if not better than it used to be. This project may prove that restoration of some of our greatest treasures may lie at the hands of private benefactors.

"I really believe that people should take care of historical buildings and care that they are not destroyed" says Martin. We couldn't agree more.

### ***Acknowledgement***

*Las Calaveras* appreciates the assistance of historian Judith Marvin. All photos were contributed by Judith Marvin, Grant Armstrong or taken by Bonnie Miller. *Las Calaveras* and the citizens of Calaveras County are grateful to Martin Huberty for his monumental efforts in restoring this magnificent building to its former grandeur.



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**The mighty Utica Powerhouse is no longer an eyesore and once again graces the side of Utica Powerhouse Road in Murphys.**