John Keibel

Dollars Well Spent

The dust has settled for now at the John Muir National Historic Site. However, if you had driven by the Martinez, California site last fall, you would have noticed scaffolding around the historic home.

Over the years birds have pecked holes in the siding, "cut nails" have rotted the redwood molding they were meant to secure, sun-battered window sills have cracked, paint has peeled and the redwood rain gutters leak. By this past summer National Park Service specialists had assessed the exterior of the 116-year-old home of conservationist John Muir. Their findings confirmed the local NPS personnel's opinion that the exterior was in need of major rehabilitation, more care than could be provided. On this basis the John Muir National Historic Site, located some 30 miles northeast of San Francisco, applied for funds to proceed with this rehabilitation.

Funding was available through the "fee demonstration project," a trial fee schedule initiated by Congress a couple of years ago to address the mounting maintenance needs at many national parks. Those parks participating in this project charge a higher entrance fee and may, for the first time, retain 80 percent of these fees for their own maintenance needs. The balance is placed into a fund against which any national park may apply. The John Muir National Historic Site's application was granted.

In October, project leader Fritz Rushlow, sent from the National Park Service's Historic Preservation Training Center in Frederick, Maryland, led nine National Park Service craftsmen in the first stage of this two stage project. What they began last fall has been completed.

The attention to quality and authenticity led to many interesting and worthwhile challenges. In 1883, Muir's in-laws, Dr. and Mrs. John Strentzel, constructed this home using vertical-grained redwood, lumber milled in the ways of the 1880s. So that both original and replacement woodwork will receive paint equally well and weather evenly, vertical-grained redwood timbers were procured. The craftsmen used custom milling bits to transform these re-cycled timbers into replacement molding, siding, and trim.

Bernie George, Historic Preservation Training Center, repairing rain gutters. Randy Mitchell, John Muir NHS, is in the back. Photo courtesy the author.

Present-day technologies were called upon frequently. About half of the weathered window sills and rotted soffits have been cleaned and then patched with a space-age epoxy-filler compound. Silvery-white fiberglass fabric impregnated with a resin slurry now serves as a durable and nearly invisible patch across leaking redwood rain gutter joints. And then there were the "cut nails."

The 19th-century "cut nails," removed to facilitate repair, were replaced with 20th-century galvanized reproductions. Over the decades the exposed iron of the original nails and the rain reacted with parts of the redwood exterior causing the wood around the nails to decay. The galvanizing should prevent future decay by sealing in the iron.

Every repair was inconspicuously dated; "1998" was stamped on the back side of each piece of replacement molding, for example. This is a part of the greater documentation process which notes what was replaced or reinforced, where it occurred, and what materials were used.

Costly? Sure. Worth it? Yes. John Muir, among others, left us a legacy of national parks which warrant our care. His self-proclaimed mission, "to entice people to look at nature's loveliness," remains relevant for us and the world. From this house Muir pursued his conservation mission. Through this rehabilitation and the continuing efforts of the National Park Service and its friends this house will remain a platform from which appreciation for our natural resources will be taught and nurtured for generations to come.

John Keibel, an educator and photographer, is a volunteer at the John Muir National Historic Site.