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A ranger's ranger: Don Schmidt retires from State Parks after 32 years



Supervising Ranger Don Schmidt is at home at the grounds of Empire Mine State Park. He will retire in June after more than three decades with State Parks.



Supervising Ranger Don Schmidt says he will miss the people he works with most when he retires this June. Here he talks with volunteers at Empire Mine.



Supervising Ranger Don Schmidt takes a call in front of the Main Shaft at Empire Mine. Schmidt is retiring from State Parks in June after more than three decades.

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For 32 years, State Park Supervising Ranger Don Schmidt worked with the motto, “Take care of the parks, take care of the employees and take care of the public” — in that order.

In June, after a harrowing four years of painful budget cuts and threats of park closures, Schmidt will retire, leaving behind three local parks still intact and operational: Empire Mine, South Yuba River at Bridgeport and Malakoff Diggins.

“Don was, and is, a ranger’s ranger and a true generalist. He could entertain 100 fourth-graders; interpret California History to a group of adults; rescue an injured visitor; act as the highest caliber peace officer while dealing with a criminal activity; plan, build and maintain facilities; successfully follow government policy; and deal with the politics and a myriad of interest groups while still managing resources and understanding that his only true agenda was being a steward for the park system,” said Matthew Green, California State Parks Sierra Gold Sector superintendent.

Ranger Dan Youngren will fill Schmidt’s shoes temporarily until someone permanently fills the position, but Don Schmidt, with his corporate knowledge, cannot be replaced, said Green.

A ranger’s life

Since 2007, Schmidt has been the supervising ranger for the Sierra District serving Donner, Lake Tahoe and the Sierra Gold Sector.

He seems at home walking the manicured grounds of Empire Mine, where he naturally tells the story of the place and the people who lived and worked there.

In one day, visitors can drive to three distinctively different parks in Nevada County and learn about hard rock, placer and hydraulic gold mining. History of the area continues to captivate Schmidt.

“I’ve always had a personal interest in cultural history and the interaction of people with their environment, and that’s really what connects me with our local parks. I wish I could have talked with early Native Californians, the fortune seekers of the 1800s, and the shopkeepers of the 1920s to get their perspectives on things. That would be very cool indeed,” he said.

Schmidt was born and raised in Yosemite, where beautiful landscapes and parks were his backyard. He was the youngest of three boys. His dad worked as a supervisor for a telephone office.

It was the 1960s. His mom was a housewife. Each summer, the family loaded up in the camper and spent three weeks exploring national parks in the West, backpacking and camping.

He grew up with ranger kids and was active in a junior ranger program.

“I always wanted to be a park ranger,” Schmidt said.

In the summer of 1982, at age 21, Schmidt landed a seasonal job as a park aide for D.L. Bliss and Emerald Bay.

In 1984, he graduated from California State University, Sacramento with a Bachelor of Science degree in resource management and then headed to Alaska’s Chugach National Forest for the summer to work at Portage Glacier.

After the summer in Alaska, Schmidt returned to California and found a job in Hollister Hills State Vehicular Recreation Area, where he lived in his Volkswagen camper van and frequently felt tremors from the San Andreas Fault.

In 1986, Schmidt got the call he was waiting for. He had been selected to go to the academy for state park peace officer training.

After graduation, his first assignment was Doheny State Beach, Orange County.

“It was quite the culture shock. I was pretty much a fish out of water. I had spent my life in the mountains, not the beach,” Schmidt said.

The day he married his wife, Lauren, was the day he first transferred to Malakoff Diggins. After a year splitting his days between Malakoff and the South Yuba River, he moved to Fort Tejon State Historic Park before a round of budget cuts threatened the park and triggered another move, this time to Truckee, where Schmidt took a job outside the parks with the Nevada County Sheriff's Department.

It was there, while working with the D.A.R.E. (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) program, that Schmidt rediscovered a love for teaching and decided to go back to school.

"Teaching was one of those things I always wanted to do," Schmidt said.

With his new teaching credentials, Schmidt taught fourth- and fifth-grade students at Tahoe Truckee Unified School District from 1996 to 2004. During that same period, Schmidt spent summers as the ranger at Donner Memorial State Park.

From 2004 to 2006, he served as a full-time ranger at Donner before becoming supervising ranger for the Sierra District in 2007.

Ready to leave the snow, Schmidt transferred to western Nevada County.

He became acting sector superintendent from mid- 2011 to late 2013, during the worst part of the budget issues, what some have called the "Dark Times."

"Our staff — from the maintenance personnel to the front counter park aides — were just hanging on by a thread. We felt like there were just too many holes to plug and not enough fingers to keep the dam from breaking," Schmidt said.

They struggled and did their best to give the public a quality experience despite limited funds and staff.

During his career, Schmidt had weathered three major budget crises, but this was the worst by far.

"We had to give up a lot, especially at Malakoff, but keeping the parks running is always a team effort, and it was even more so over the last four years ... I think that any ranger wants to be sure that they have left the parks in better shape than when they arrived. We've been through some rough times lately, and I'm proud of the fact that we were able to come to workable solutions to keep the parks open while maintaining services and public safety," said Schmidt.

Today, things are improving. Parks are starting to fill positions again and there is maintenance money to do repairs. Fundraisers and volunteer efforts from parks associations have kept the doors open and programming alive. Nonprofit organizations pitched in, too. South Yuba River Citizens League launched an effective river ambassador program to keep river corridors clean, and Bear Yuba Land Trust maintained the Independence Trail.

“We couldn’t have survived very much without them,” Schmidt said of the community support.

Schmidt says it’s the people he works with he’ll miss the most, but he’s looking forward to getting some long overdue rest.

Those long days of rushing to emergency calls and a desk covered with sticky notes are almost over for Schmidt, whose last time on the clock will be June 14 during Malakoff Diggins annual Humbug Day celebration. He plans to settle into retirement and spend his days remodeling the house he bought with his wife and two kids on five acres.

He wants to remain involved with the parks and become more involved with the community. He says he’s always wanted to be a park interpreter.

“That’s my love. If I could do that the rest of my life, I would.”

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