

KINGS COUNTY MUSEUM  
By Martha Bentley

Excitement was in the air in the early months of 1927 as preparations were being made for the celebration of Hanford's 50<sup>th</sup> birthday! One idea that met with great approval was to have a homecoming and pioneer celebration. This has continued as Kings County Homecoming and Pioneer Day.

In discussing its role in the planned celebration, the Exchange Club came up with the idea of collecting items from bygone days in the county. By the time of the May 6<sup>th</sup> celebration, an outstanding array of items had been gathered, ranging from artifacts left behind by the Indians who were the earliest known inhabitants of the area to an impressive collection of household and farming implements.

When the May 6<sup>th</sup> celebration ended, the question arose of what to do with the items collected. The popularity of the collection caused the Exchange Club to step forward once again and stage several benefit events to set up a permanent exhibit in two rooms in the basement of the Civic Auditorium. In addition to allowing the free use of the rooms, the city also provided a substantial sum each year for a caretaker and for new equipment.

For \$1500, the Exchange Club purchased an outstanding collection of Indian and other early relics from Dr. Frank Griffith, early day livestock inspector and county veterinarian. Collecting antiques was his hobby and, as he traveled throughout the county, he amassed an impressive collection of mortars, pestles, arrowheads and other items. Los Angeles County had offered \$3,000 for his collection, but he preferred that it remain in Kings County and sold it to the Exchange Club for \$1500.

On January 21, 1928 the museum was opened with a 49er Camp and old time dance. By the early 1950s, patronage had declined and wall seepage threatened the collection with decay. The city asked that the museum be removed from the premises. There were strong feelings that the collection should be preserved and remain available for exhibition, but leaders were in a quandary as to how to proceed.

The offer of C. R. Swanson and his wife, Bernice to build and donate a building at Burris Park to house the museum was accepted, and the facility opened at that location on May 22, 1955. As the exhibit has grown, two rooms have been added to the main museum and historic vehicles and items from a blacksmith shop are housed in the building vacated by the Kings County Fire Department at Burris Park when they built a new station on Clinton Avenue.

SOURCES:

The Hanford Sentinel, April 19, 1931; February 26, 1966; February 18, 1978;  
May 12, 1983

The Fresno Bee, July 24, 1998

