Allensworth State Park hosts Black History month event

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(Photo: Michael Alvarez)

COL. ALLENSWORTH STATE HISTORIC PARK – Susie Smith says she easily could have been a resident of Allensworth, the only town in California founded, built, governed and populated entirely by African Americans.

Smith is a volunteer docent at the state park that now sits near the former township in southwest Tulare County formed in the early 20th Century. Allensworth is also the lone state park in the county.

"It was no different than where I grew up," Smith said. "I was born in 1944 in Charleston, S.C. It was no different."

As she has done since 1979, Smith, who now lives in Fremont, was volunteering Saturday as the Col. Allensworth State Historic Park hosted a day-long event in observance of Black History Month.

"I enjoyed it," Smith of her docent volunteering. "All you have to do is get me going talking about it. It's a pleasure, an honor to talk about Allensworth."

Activities included visiting the refurbished buildings, a memorial service for Alice Calbert Royal, who was born and grew up in Allensworth, and the unveiling of a plaque at the camp host site in memory of former volunteer William Smith, who was Susie Smith's husband. Other events including a blacksmith demonstration by Steven Ptomey, the park's manager, and the showing of the film "Allensworth: A piece of the world."

"This is real black history," said Amanda Moore, who was volunteering at the park's library building. "That's what the event is all about.

Moore continued: "If you want real Black history, come out to Allensworth."

Moore, a retired teacher, taught at Allensworth School in the early 1960s. She lost her teaching job when student population declined. She then taught in Delano, where she's the president of the Delano Chapter of the Friends of Allensworth.

Royal, a long-time docent, died on Dec. 9, but relatives and friends wanted the memorial service to coincide with the Black history event held at the state park, Susie Smith said.

As envisioned by Allen Allensworth, a former slave who joined the Union Army and worked as a civilian nurse, the town of Allensworth was to be a haven for recently-freed slaves. Coming out West, Allensworth invited others to join him and established a farming town, that at its height, had 200 residents, including business owners, teachers and, of course, farmers.

The town thrived for a few years. But a list of obstacles, including the death of Allensworth, lack of water and the construction of a rail spur to Alpaugh, combined to derail the town. In the mid 1960s, the location became a state park and several of the buildings were refurbished.

On Saturday, the refurbished buildings served as a way for visitors to envision what life was like in the early 1900s.

"It takes me back in time. You see how thing might have been different," said Victor Salazar.

Saturday's visit to Allensworth was the first one for Salazar, a Fresno resident, who learned about the state park's event after reading a newspaper article.

"It's interesting history," Salazar said. "What impressed me is the independent spirit they had to have for the foundation of this town. It's all about independence."

Jim Warkentin, of Clovis, agreed.

"It had to do with the leadership," he said. "Allensworth was able to motivate others to follow him."

Fresno's Teri Fane said she had previously visited the state park. But no buildings were opened at that time. Saturday was different.

"It's really nice," she said. "I toured the school house."

Fane, who was visiting the park with her family, said she was impressed with the history of Allensworth and its founder.

"He came out and build this town," she said. "They worked hard and they did it nice."

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