

Published September 2nd, 2009

A Fumble Fingers Farewell

By Glenn Nosse



Elfie Pingree shows Cooper a rock with animal features Photos Glenn Nosse

businesses in 1960.

An endless line of rock fans like Sleepy Hollow third grade teacher Kay Aaker and her grandson, Cooper Smith, stopped to say farewell and pick-over what was left. "The manipulative and tactile aspects in a place like this is how children learn and remember, better than pictures. I used this place many times for my classes," said Aaker. "I see a platypus in this one," says Cooper, a second-grader at Happy Valley Elementary.

Elfie Pingree, still sharp and with a big smile, balks at shaking hands because she feels hers are dirty. Guth says Mom always sees animal faces in the rocks while she (Guth) sees landscapes, memories of rock hunts all over the world, and old customers and characters even more interesting than the rocks.

The name "Fumble Fingers" stuck when, over breakfast one morning fifty years ago, Guth says Dad would fumble over the plates and silver as he lost the feeling in his hands from years of working his tomato fields. A verse from an old poem, yellowed and tacked to the wall, said it all:

A rockhound is truly
a person apart
His pleasures are
simple and few

He will pound on
a ledge in the blazing sun
Or dig when his
fingers are blue

Elfie Pingree and daughter Nancy Guth are looking for storage space for the unsold rocks. Their shop, on Brown Ave. in Lafayette, is for sale.

In a tiny shack, by today's commercial standards, time stopped on a beautiful August Sunday. A fifty-year old original, Fumble Fingers, closed its doors and said goodbye.

"How sad, generations have come by with their kids, saying they remember stopping by when they were kids," says Nancy Guth, the daughter of the original rock hound, Aaron Pingree, Fingers' founder.

Aaron and Elfie Pingree first opened a fly-fishing store, "launched with \$800 in 1960," says Guth. "Dad switched to rocks after realizing that fly-fishing stopped flying, back in the early 60's."

Pingree started as a tomato farmer with three acres at the end of Acalanes Road, switching to fish at forty years old following a heart attack. "Dad never stopped learning and exploring, up to the day he died last year," recalls Guth. "I can remember measuring grit and polish and bagging them for customers at eleven years old." That was in the Cresco building on Mount Diablo Boulevard, shared with two other



Kay Aaker and grandson, Cooper look-over the collection

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