



# California State Parks

## Video Transcript



### *A Tour of Bidwell Mansion State Historic Park*

OFF-CAMERA INTRODUCER: Welcome to Bidwell Mansion State Historic Park in Chico, California. Your guide for this tour is Maggie Gisslow, who is blind. Although Maggie has never actually seen the mansion herself, she has led thousands of visitors through the home of John and Annie Bidwell.

GUIDE: Hi, I'm Maggie Gisslow, and I'm standing in the main entry hall of the Bidwell Mansion. This was the home of General John Bidwell and Annie Kennedy Bidwell from 1868, the time of its completion, until Annie's death in 1918. The home has twenty-six rooms on just a little over three stories, contains approximately 10,000 square feet. And you have to be wondering at this point, "Well, who were the Bidwells anyway, and what impact did they have on this area, and how did they get the wealth to build a home like this?" Well, we're going to be taking a tour through the mansion, and I'll be telling you a little bit about John and Annie Bidwell and why they had such an impact not just here locally but throughout the state of California.

To start off with, let me just tell you something about John Bidwell, he was the founder of Chico by the way. He was born in Ripley, New York, in 1819. He came out to California in 1841 when he was just a little over twenty-two years of age. He ended up working for John Sutter for about six years. He became very good friends with Sutter; he was his bookkeeper and general manager, and he happened to be right in the middle of things when gold got discovered.

So he went up to an area, turns out it was the middle fork of the Feather River, and he made a very, very significant gold strike up there. That's what gave him the money to come up to this area, buy the land for his ranch, which turned out to be about 26,000 acres, and later on to build the mansion.

The mansion became a well-known hospitality center here in Northern California. I want you to, as we go through the tour, use your imaginations and think of what it might have been like if you were guests of the Bidwells 100 years ago, and you were to be able to take advantage of that hospitality. I think one of the first places that you'd get a sense for that would be in the dining room, and so this is where we're going to go first.

This dining room is where the Bidwells would have done a lot of entertaining. I say that because, for one thing, most of the food you get on the table would come directly from John Bidwell's ranch. We have to remember that the ranch was 26,000 acres in size. He had something like 7,000 acres under cultivation at the time of his death, and he produced such a diverse assortment of crops out there, and that really reflected itself on the table. The Bidwells

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would have started their main meal at around noon. It might have gone until perhaps two o'clock in the afternoon. This was according to the typical Victorian style.

You'd notice something, visiting the Bidwells, about their values in the dining room. John and Annie were very staunch prohibitionists, and so they never served anything alcoholic here in the home. They wouldn't even serve wine with the meals, which was very a typical thing to expect on the table in many homes back then. You might notice that that wasn't there, but it didn't really matter because the meals themselves were very complete.

Since the Bidwells did have people visiting from all over the place, they would've accommodated them very nicely. They also would've accommodated their children, because oftentimes guests did bring children to the mansion. One of the accommodations they might have had in the dining room would be something like this little high-chair over here. The high-chair is actually similar to what we might be used to today, except sometimes with chairs you'd have more than one use for them. This one actually converts into a little stroller; and when the meal was over, off you could go with the little one if you wanted to. It was very easy with some of these pieces of furniture to just bring them back up into their original positions again.

You have to assume that, with the Bidwells entertaining people all the time and the mansion having the meals always served in the dining room and everything running smoothly, that they would need a staff. And they did have a staff. They had something like two maids and a cook, which was actually a small staff for running a home like this.

But if you were to need a maid for something, it was very easy to approach a little handle sticking out of the wall like this one is here, and when you rang, this would ring a bell which would have its certain tone. The tone of the bell was to let the maid know which room it was that was calling. Actually the bells are relatively close by, and I think we'll take a look at those. They are through a little narrow area beyond the dining room, which is known as the butler's pantry. The butler's pantry is where you might take care of last minute preparations before the food was brought in onto the dining room table, and it happens to be right in the area of the old kitchen. The kitchen was where the women's restroom is right now, so the old kitchen was right in this location. The bells were right up above it. They're twelve of them, and there are twelve corresponding handles in the mansion. Now remember, if you were to pull a handle, it would ring a bell, and the tone would let the maid know which room it was that was calling. So let's listen to one of these, and see what you think.

The maid wouldn't hear that, probably, from right in this area unless she happened to be down here; she'd probably be up doing her work someplace else in the home. And she'd hear that, and she'd have to understand that somebody called her, and that meant a certain room had called just by the tone. But there are all these other ones she'd have to learn to distinguish.

It sounds a little difficult, but I don't think that those would have rung all at the same time. I also think that it might have been easier for the maid to come down from where she was, look up and see which bell it was that was moving. The maids did live in the mansion by the way, they lived just above the kitchen area on a split level.

When the maids had cleared the table and our meal was over in the dining room, what Mrs. Bidwell would probably do is invite us into another room where we could relax and socialize.

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Sometimes that would be the parlor. The parlor is just beyond the dining room here, and you'd gain access to it by going through these double doors. These are supposed to weigh about 400 pounds apiece, but they slide really easily.

The parlor was one of the more formal rooms in a Victorian home. This is where you'd want to put your best foot forward a lot; and I'm sure Mrs. Bidwell did that. Mrs. Bidwell was from the higher social circles in Washington D.C., and she would've added a lot of the grace and Eastern formality to a room like this. We're very fortunate to have photographs that helped us a great deal in terms of restoring the home the way the Bidwells might have had it furnished and decorated. And one that's been particularly helpful down here is the photograph that illustrates that the Bidwells really did have flags hanging up just like these ones are now. You can even see Mrs. Bidwell off in the background in that photograph, in the dining room area. She had it very decorated, so something definitely was going on there.

One of the things that she probably wouldn't have had down here would be something like this. This is a hair receiver. Probably all of us ladies would've had some version of this, and it would be up on our dressing table. Whenever women would brush or comb their hair, their hair wasn't cut as often as it would be today, and so they'd have all these extra combings, which they would take, and, instead of throwing them out like they do today, they would place them in their hair receivers and save them. They would use them for different things. Sometimes what would happen is that everyone in the family would save their hair. So I would save mine, my aunt, my great grandmother, all the relatives. And when we had enough, we might take it to a specialist or maybe somebody in the family who would know how to do this, and they'd put it together into what was known as a memorial hair wreath. There's one right up there—that illustrates somebody's family. That's the way you would represent Aunt Margaret, Great-Aunt Rose, because they would actually have some of their hair incorporated into that wreath.

One thing that added a special touch to the parlor was Mrs. Bidwell's piano. She had a square grand rosewood piano sent out here from New York in 1868. Since it came out here at that time, it was a lot more difficult because the transcontinental line of the railroad wasn't quite finished yet. So, this had to come the old way from New York, around Cape Horn, about 17,000 miles just to San Francisco, by ship, and then it came by boat up to Sacramento, by train up to Marysville, and then the rest of the way to Chico by horse and wagon. It was a big buckboard freight wagon that would've brought it into town. It's rosewood, so it weighs about 1,300 pounds. But it made it, and it's held up very nicely over the years. It has a tone similar to what we're used to today, I'll show you a few notes here . . .

This is a little different than pianos back 100 years ago though, because many of them were a little bit more tinny. They were more like what you might hear in the saloons or something, but this had a different quality. And Mrs. Bidwell did play the piano herself, so she probably would've played a lot of Christian music, a lot of Classical music; and it really would've added a lot of atmosphere here.

We talked about the fact that the Bidwells did quite a bit of entertaining here in the mansion, and that didn't mean that the daily operations didn't have to be done. And one of the places that would really take place, particularly with regard to running the ranch outside, would be John Bidwell's office. And we're going to take a look at that next.

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This office is where a lot of the management of the ranch would take place. You might come in here and find John Bidwell perhaps sitting at a desk like this at some point during the day, taking care of all of the record-keeping and the necessary paperwork and the payroll involved in running such a large enterprise.

Since his ranch was 26,000 acres and since he diversified his farming, he didn't just specialize in one crop. He did a lot of experimental farming. He had the ranch subdivided into about twenty different sections, each producing its own crop. So, in other words, you'd have the grain ranch, and the sheep ranch, and the dairy ranch, and there were all of these acres of different fruit and nut orchards. And with the Sacramento Valley being the way it was, it really was helpful to producing a lot of these crops.

If you were an employee on the ranch, probably you'd make about a dollar a day. This was average pay for employees who worked here. One of the people that was a little bit higher paid was John Bidwell's ornamental gardener. He had some other talents besides gardening. He had been a taxidermist at one point before he worked for Bidwell, and he did the collecting and the stuffing of the birds and animals in this display. Most of these things in the display are typical of what you used to see in this area. There was a lot of wildlife out here. There are a few exceptions to that though—there's a really large ostrich egg in there, which probably you wouldn't find as a rule out here on the ranch at anytime. But, for the most part, the things in there are pretty typical.

Besides his agricultural involvement, one of the things Bidwell did was land surveying, and he did a lot of map work besides that. This is the desk he used, in the center of his office here, for map making. It's a little bit lower, so it's made to stand over, not to sit at. It has a nice broad surface where you would spread your map work out, and when you were finished, you could store your maps in drawers like this.

Bidwell had purchased the first part of the ranch back in 1849. He bought the rest of it around three years later. The mansion wasn't even started until 1865, and it took three years to build. But when he first got established out here, one of the first homes he lived in was a little log cabin, which burned down. The next home he built was an adobe structure, illustrated in the painting up above the mantle. That was very close; it was near the front of the mansion, a little bit closer to the creek; in fact, the creek even shows up in the painting itself. He had that one torn down about four years after the mansion was completed. That is where he lived, though, as a bachelor before he married Annie and started living here.

The employees who had business to deal with, in terms of working with Bidwell, would probably come in from the ranch at some point and they wouldn't come in through the main entry doors of the home. They would use a little side entrance, which is just outside Bidwell's office here.

We're actually coming back out into the main entry hall again, but I wanted to show you something that really dominates this hall. There is a portrait of John Bidwell which Annie had done about three years after Bidwell's death. She had commissioned an artist to do this by the name of Alice Matilda Redding. And she used a photograph of Bidwell to copy from, but she was able to get across a particular effect called "vanishing point perspective." You can see

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that if you stand at one end of the hallway and you walk down to the end of the hallway, the painting actually appears to follow you. You can see the eyes, the hands, the feet, and the whole figure actually turning with you. This was done by using the effect where you have the lines going out at different angles and then they'd be all brought in toward a central point someplace in the portrait; in this case it's the center button of his coat.

To the right of Bidwell is a portrait of General Sherman. He was a guest here at the mansion at one time. Of course we have George Washington to his left. He was not a guest here, but he influenced the Bidwells a great deal in terms of their patriotism. There's a picture of Annie down at the far side. This picture was done when she was a lot older. Annie was very short; she was about four-foot-eight. You can't really see that in the picture, but she was a very small person. Across from her is Susan B. Anthony who really crusaded for women's suffrage. Annie and she shared a lot of the same ideas on that. In fact, Ms. Anthony was a guest here at the mansion at one point.

There are several other photographs in the hallway, which just show the mansion as it was decorated for one particular occasion. One of the gardeners had a real talent for using flowers and shrubs from the outdoors, bringing them in and using chicken wire to decorate for whatever special occasion might be going on.

Now the library was a room which was a little bit more informal when you got together to socialize. This would be, for instance, if we were guests and we were good friends of the Bidwells or the relatives, we'd come into this room a little bit more often than the parlor. And I'm sure Annie would have added a lot of her gracious touches to this room as well.

You might be wondering at this point, "John and Annie Bidwell had to meet somewhere." And actually they did meet back in Washington D.C. John Bidwell served in the 39<sup>th</sup> Congress in Washington in the mid 1860s, and he met Sir Joseph Kennedy, who happened to be Annie's father. By the way, he was no relation to today's Kennedys, a different person. He was very distinguished; he was the first official U.S. Census Director, quite a renowned statistician, and he would invite Bidwell to the Kennedy home. Bidwell was really impressed right away with the type of lady Annie was. When he first suggested marriage, she did not accept right away because it was a big decision; it was a big step. She would have to leave her family back in Washington, come all the way out here to this little primitive Chico, California. So, she didn't know about this right away. But after about a two-year period in which John Bidwell came back out here to pick up with managing the ranch and they wrote letters back and forth, she eventually did say yes, that she would marry him. They married in Washington April 16<sup>th</sup>, 1868. And he brought her out here then as his bride. She would've seen the mansion for the very first time when she came out here.

The books that are in the library here really reflect a lot about the Bidwells' values: a lot of books on temperance. We were talking about the fact that they were against alcohol use. They were really staunch supporters of women's suffrage; a lot of books on the suffrage cause.

And again you can see some of their progressiveness in here. There are a few modern conveniences that, if they had them, they might like to show off. This is one thing you could get, called a vacuum cleaner. And it was supposed to make life so much easier because

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instead of having to take up your carpets every six months and take them out and beat them, you would simply use this. It had a pumping mechanism on the inside, and you would work this very quickly across the carpet. The suction would pick up the dust just like magic, and the dust bag would fill up after a very short time. It might take me a good six months to get the vacuuming done, but it was one of these new modern conveniences you could be the first on your block to get.

There is something I think people would have enjoyed; there's an old Edison Gramophone over here. And if you had one of these, everybody would love to come and listen to pieces of music over and over. These are the old wax cylinders that are on this gramophone. When you got it started, and you'd simply cause the cylinder to turn, after this was cranked up, and you'd have a sound like this

[Gramophone plays an old-time song with woman singing]

So if you were in a real romantic mood you could just play that sort of thing over and over.

Something else you might be able to get a hold of, particularly in the summer, would be a little alcohol-fuel-burning fan. This came out around the turn of the century, just like this gramophone did. You'd light this little lamp underneath; the hot air would work with the room temperature air to run two pistons inside that fan. When the pistons went, the blades would turn; it would circulate the air. Actually, I'm not sure how effective it was at cooling, but it was supposed to be a cooling fan.

Also in the library besides the books and all the modern conveniences, this was another room where you might have really neat artwork. There are several vases on one of these cases here that I think were actually gifts to Annie's side of the family; so these did belong to her. Another thing the Bidwells had that I think Annie would've been very proud to have in here—some Indian baskets. These were made by the local Indian people who lived here in this area. They were the Mechoopda Maidu Indians. Their village was right on the ranch, very close to the mansion. These were some of the work they would have made during the time the Bidwells lived here, and we'll give you a little more information about these people a bit later on.

After we'd finished socializing in the library, particularly if we were going to be staying here a while, probably one of the things that would happen is we'd be taken upstairs to be shown the guest room where we might be put up for the night. So we're going to take a walk upstairs now, and we'll take a look at those.

We're now coming up to the second floor of the mansion. This would be the area where the sleeping quarters were for both the Bidwells and their guests. The ceilings on the first level are about fourteen feet high, so, by the time we get to the second level here, we'll have climbed just a little bit over fourteen feet.

We're now coming into a room which is known as the main guest bedroom. This would be where you could be put up if you were going to be spending some time with the Bidwells. The Bidwells were very hospitable people. But, besides that, travelling was so much more inconvenient back 100 years ago. You'd probably come by railroad if you came from any

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place distant. You might even come by horse and buggy, and it took a long time to get here. So, it was almost expected that you might end up staying the night, or the week, or however long.

If you slept in this room, you'd have one comfort of sleeping in a feather bed. Feather beds are often like this. They have several feather ticks piled one on top of the other. We cheated with this one—we have a more modern mattress under here. Normally you'd have ropes worked into the woodwork and the ticking would sit on top of those. These kept you very, very warm in the winter.

I was referring to the Bidwells accommodating children earlier. The Bidwells didn't ever have any children of their own. But when guests would visit, when they brought children, they could be easily accommodated, particularly in this guestroom here. This little cradle is something, again, that was extremely progressive, because it has on the end a little crank. And the idea was to put the baby into this cradle, connect the crank, wind it up just like a clock, give it a little start, and it would probably rock for approximately forty-five minutes. It reminds us of the little swings that we have on the market nowadays, although this was actually patented in around 1862. I've a feeling some of the mothers might've thought it was just a little bit too automatic for their taste back then. But you could get one of these back then.

One thing about this room, and about many of the rooms in the house, the Bidwells of course had to have some source of heat. And actually they had eight fireplaces throughout the mansion. This is one of them here. It's a little misleading in a way because it looks like it's marble, and it isn't; it's actually slate. The slate has been enamelized—it's been put through a particular process, and they've gotten it to look like marble. On this particular one you can tell because it's actually broken on the corner, and you can see the layered effect of the slate showing through there.

Something else the Bidwells had here that follows in the mode of being progressive—they had walk-in closets. Many homes didn't; many homes would have a wardrobe. Their closet is pretty special because not only is it a walk-in but a walk-through closet. You can come through this way, and this brings you into another closet, which leads into the nursery. Now, for a mother who had a child to take care of in the nursery, it was easy for her sleeping in, say, the main guestroom to come through the closet. She wouldn't have to worry about going out in the hallway and being seen by anybody, and she could walk right through into the nursery and take care of her young one.

This room is pretty self-explanatory. The fact that the Bidwells didn't have any children doesn't mean there weren't a lot of people put up in this room, a lot of children of guests. One of the things different for children back then is many of the toys they would get, unlike today, were handmade. This is a real common example of something probably several of us even have had at some point or another. And another example would be something like this.

[Sound of toy going up ropes and down]

And if you wanted to save up your money, you could afford to buy a little toy stove. And there are a lot of young ladies who would want to have something like that, I think.

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The Bidwells had to have put up more than one person at a time, and so there actually are several guest rooms up here. We're going to take a look at another one at this point. This is another guestroom where guests could be put up. It's a little bit lighter than the first one we were in. And there's one particular aspect of a lot of these rooms I think people would really benefit from.

John and Annie Bidwell had running water in the mansion. They had washbasins, which were apparently very efficient. Bidwell had what is known a hydraulic ram, which would transport the water from Chico Creek outside, up to the third floor of the home where there was a big 300-gallon holding tank. When you turned on any of the faucets down here, the water would come down by gravity-feed and that's how you would get your pressure. The plumbing that's down underneath here is all lead pipes, so you'd wonder, "Well, would this be drinkable?" I have a feeling people didn't drink the water too much, they mainly used it for washing. But if you did drink it, there's a little brass fitting behind that plumbing that would carry the water to the faucet, so you wouldn't have to worry. Also underneath we have the ol' chamber pot, that was very commonly used in many homes. The Bidwells would not have used that because they did have automatic-flush toilets, which we'll see a little bit later.

A different experience sleeping in this room—because the bed in here is stuffed with horsehair. Horsehair was common, it was economical, it was easy to get; except when it worked its way up through the furniture, which it always would do, it would get very itchy. So that was just one of those little facts of life you just had to put up with back then.

We found that this room was referred to as the Alexander Room. And this was because one of Mrs. Bidwell's nephew's, Will Alexander, apparently spent some time here in Chico. When he stayed here, he was put up in this particular room. His picture is above the mantle, and it illustrates an interesting point—that a young man between the ages of six and twelve years old, when he was to get really dressed up and go to church or town, would dress up like that. So those outfits probably got quite popular, particularly with the mothers back then.

The Bidwells didn't only have guestrooms up here. There were rooms that had other different functions. We're going to take a look at one of those next.

This is a room that could have been used as a bedroom at the very beginning, but Mrs. Bidwell set it up for a whole different purpose shortly after she came here. She set it up as a sewing school, and this is where she taught the local Indian women and girls of the area to sew. We were referring to these people a little bit earlier regarding their baskets—the Mechoopda Maidu Indians. Their village was very close to the mansion.

When Mrs. Bidwell first came out here, she took it on as one of her responsibilities to educate these people and teach them about the gospel and Christianity. Annie Bidwell was a very devout Presbyterian. She'd had a lot of missionary experience back east. When she started working with these people, it was a little bit difficult at first because she did not speak their language; they didn't speak English, particularly the women and children. So she started out by using a technique where she would come to the village, and, mainly by showing them articles of clothing and fabric, she would invite the women and girls to come to the mansion where she would teach them to sew. Whatever they learned to make, they would keep it. The sewing school started, it got very popular, and it grew into other things. She taught the



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children reading, writing, and mathematics. She taught the women and girls to sew, and everybody learned about the gospel. In fact, eventually Annie gained status as an ordained Presbyterian Preacher, so she could preach to the students on Sundays. One of the students who worked with Mrs. Bidwell was someone who is known as Lady Mary. She was one of the Mechoopda people who lived right in the village.

There were plenty of sewing machines in here. But there were other things besides—hand-operated equipment such as irons, and something like this called a fluting iron. This was an accessory you'd use for putting ruffles on things, like men's shirt cuffs and collars. Since it's an iron, you had to heat it up. So what you did is to heat these over your wood stove—you'd actually get them red hot—and when they were, you'd put them back into your fluting iron without holding them in your hand. Then you'd take a starched shirt collar, stick it in between the two rollers here, which would be very hot, turn the little crank—bring this out like this—and you'd have ruffles ironed right in there. These would come out every time you did your laundry, so it was something you had to keep doing over and over. But collars and cuffs were detachable, so you just did that more often in the first place.

There are some other things that add to the décor of the room in here. One thing that's particularly unique hanging up on the wall is a quilt. It's not just an ordinary quilt. It's all made out of silk cigar bands. The names on the quilt are actually names of the cigars, because when you purchased them back then, they would have a silk band wrapped around that would have the company name of the cigar actually on the band.

The next room we are going to see has a totally different purpose, and it's something that would be very unique to many homes back in that time. So we'll take a look at that next. One room that was not common to many Victorian households back then was a bathroom. Well the Bidwells had four bathrooms in their home. They were fully equipped with washbasins and bathtubs; they had automatic-flush toilets. I think the flush toilet would be the hardest for people to get used to, because normally back then people had outhouses. The outhouse was something that belonged outside the home; that was the proper healthy place. To consider putting something like that in the house was kind of disgusting for some, not to mention the fact that flush toilets were very noisy. But this is what the Bidwells had.

Just beyond the bathroom, in the hallway here, they had something that was a bit more common for people—something called a speaking tube. This would save you a lot of steps because the other end of this went up to the third floor of the house. So if you wanted to speak to somebody up there without running up stairs, you'd simply blow through one end and it would whistle on the other end. The person hearing that would come and respond just by carrying on a conversation with you right through the tube.

The hallway extends a little bit further down. It actually goes down to a back staircase which goes to a split-level between the first and second floors. This is where the staff lived—the maids and the cook who worked for the Bidwells. And then the staircase goes on down to the bottom floor.

There were a lot of times when the Bidwells had some pretty distinguished guests visiting the mansion. And one room that was particularly set aside for these people was the room we're

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going to see next. The Bidwells had a room set aside for when they had very distinguished or very special guests who would visit the mansion.

A lot people visited here. John Muir was a guest here, several times. Susan B. Anthony was a guest. One of the U.S. presidents stayed here at one point; it was President Rutherford B. Hayes when he came out to California at one point on a formal tour out West. He came through Chico, and he was put up for a day and a night here in the mansion. This was the room he and his wife stayed in. But there are a lot of things in here people would use in general all the time.

One thing that was extremely useful to have in your room, or anyplace in your home, was something called a bootjack. Boots back then were very, very difficult to take off, and one of the reasons why is because they would fit very tightly. They also didn't have certain things we're used to today like laces and zippers. So in order to pull your boot off, you'd either have to have someone help you all the time, or if you had one of these, you'd simply put your foot on it to hold it down while you put your other foot through like this. You'd be hooked in at both ends of your foot. This was often referred to as a woman's bootjack because when a woman pulled her boot off, her ankle wouldn't show and she'd be a lot more modest, because this was a modesty board in front here.

One real dominating piece of furniture in here is a dresser referred to as a highboy. Sometimes these dressers would have more than one use for them. You have a regular drawer which is dovetailed. But when you get a little bit further down on this dresser, it's a whole different setup because you'd release this; it goes into a desk. You'd have compartments where you could put pen and ink, paper, writing material—whatever you might want to keep in there safe. By the way, you could lock this whole dresser up—take this little panel, close it over the whole dresser, and lock it with a key, and no one would be able to get into your valuables.

There are several pictures in this room. One of them happens to be President Rutherford Hayes. There's another picture that shows the mansion the way it looked originally. What a lot of people don't realize is that the mansion underwent several changes after Mrs. Bidwell died.

Actually, she had hoped that it could be used by the Presbyterian Church as a co-educational school. The church didn't really have the money to run it as a school, so it eventually was sold and purchased by the college, which at that time happened to be Chico Normal School. The college used it for a number of different things: it was a girl's dormitory for about ten years, a gentleman's dorm for several years, and then it was used for other things—the art department, the home economics department, different administrators had their offices here. And it was used for about a forty-year period, at which point it got very run down.

The State has acquired it and has had it since 1964; and, along with a lot of community support, they've been working on restoring it. The room which you don't see in the picture is what we now refer to as a visitor's center, which was added on by the college in about 1927. That eventually will come off when this home gets fully restored.

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We've been seeing all of these rooms up here, and we haven't seen Mr. and Mrs. Bidwell's room yet. Well, we're going to take a look at that room next. I think the Bidwells had one of the most pleasant rooms in the mansion. One of the features about this room, and about actually all the rooms up here, was that you could have access to the veranda. When the Bidwells had the home built, they had step-through windows; these simply raise up, and you could step out over the ledge and onto the veranda itself. This goes most of the way around the mansion on the second floor. So you could simply go out there when the weather was nice and enjoy the surroundings.

There's a feature about this room that was very convenient to the Bidwells—they had their own bathroom right off of this room. Theirs was sort of a combination bathroom-dressing room, though. So you had the bathroom right at this entrance, and that had another wash basin and bathtub, and then just beyond is the dressing room portion. There's another entrance to that that leads into the hallway. But there's some real interesting accessories in there. We have a few things that belonged to Mrs. Bidwell. As a matter of fact, one of them is a little travelling case with some of her belongings in it.

One of the things about this room that was a little bit harder to deal with, perhaps, was the fact that the Bidwells had the most windows in here. That sounds fine most of the year, but when you got into the summer, when Chico gets over 105 degrees, it gets very, very warm, particularly in the afternoons. And I often wonder how Mrs. Bidwell stood it, because she was indeed very progressive and she believed in women getting a right to vote and this kind of thing. But, she lived during that time and she would have dressed like everybody else did.

And I'd like to show you a few things that were very typical of all of us women to wear back 100 years ago. These are all ladies undergarments. To start out with, for a woman who was going to get dressed in the morning, this is what she would put on first. This is called a chemise. This wasn't too uncomfortable; this would fit somewhat like a nightgown, very loosely around her shoulders, but it would mainly protect her from the next thing that was going to go on, which is the corset. The fashion back then was for a woman to try to get her waist to eighteen inches. This illustrates what a twenty-one-inch waist would be like. Eighteen inches would be about this size. So in reality, I don't know how many people could truly get down that far, but that was the ideal. Besides the corset, they would have on several pairs of pantaloons and petticoats, and something called a bustle. This is an example of a very elaborate bustle. I guess women thought it was worth it to dress this way, because the final result when you put on all of this was something like this. Your skirts would flow out nice and gracefully in the back and around the sides.

But you sacrificed a lot because, for one thing, women would start dressing like this when they were quite young, maybe twelve years old. They were still girls, and at that age their bone structures weren't fully matured yet. So if you started wearing your corset every day and trying to get your waist down to eighteen inches, later on in life you might cause something like this to happen. So, you also caused a problem with fainting. Very commonly women fainted back then because they were cutting off so much of their oxygen intake when they dressed this way.

The Bidwells had a number of accessories in this room that we still have. We have a really interesting hatbox over on the dresser here, which I believe belonged to John Bidwell. He could probably take it when he went travelling or when he campaigned for his political offices.

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He did run for governor several times, so he would have traveled a lot when he did that. Another thing he could take with him was a little shirt collar case, and all of his collars would be kept in there.

There's a third story to the mansion, containing a number more rooms. The Bidwells accommodated probably a lot of guests up there. So we're going to take a look at that area next. Before we go up to the third floor, you might notice the fainting couch. This was something that could be used by the ladies who wore their corsets too tightly.

The third floor has an entirely different atmosphere than that of the first and second floors. Actually, the mansion is built according to a particular type of architecture—this is known as Italianate architecture. One of the things that that would call for a lot would be a large central room on the third floor of the home. Oftentimes this was used for ballroom dancing. Mrs. Bidwell was a very devout Presbyterian; the Presbyterian church at that time didn't feel ballroom dancing was that good of an idea; and so she never did have dances up here. She used it for other things—one of the things was to move her sewing school for the Indian women and girls up to this area. We also feel that later on she may have used it more like an attic, for storage.

We have had a lot of leeway as far as the way that we can display things on this floor. We usually change the displays periodically, and one of the things that we've emphasized at this point is children's display articles. We have some interesting things up here in the center. There's one little pedal wagon up here which actually can convert. You could have your choice—if you were by yourself and you didn't have anybody to push you, you could push the pedals if you wanted to; or you could be pushed. There is what is known as a perambulator, which is just another word for a stroller, which is kind of interesting.

One thing that's real special about this area up here is that there are a number of rooms that go around the edges of the third floor. And the first room that we want to take a look into is an interesting shape. It's actually a lot larger than what you think it's going to be; it has sort of an "L" shape to it.

This would be a room that probably would be ideal for a little girl to come up by herself and read a good book perhaps. The room next to that is a room that had another purpose—it was used more or less like a little office some of the time. Later on in John Bidwell's career he ran for the U.S. Presidency, this was in 1892. He was running on the Prohibition Party ticket. And to write his acceptance speech he needed to come up to an area that was private, and we think this little office is where he came to write that speech. Also, Mrs. Bidwell, when she wanted to be, maybe, away from things downstairs, she could come up to this area as well.

The staircase just before the entrance to that room goes up into the tower, which was another common part of the architecture in homes like this. And it could have been used for, maybe, surveying what was going on in the ranch or just enjoying the view.

Several of these rooms were just general guest bedrooms, and they're quite a bit smaller. One of the things that does change the atmosphere is that the ceilings are lower, the windows are much smaller.

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One room up here looks pretty much like a tool room at this point, although it did have a specific purpose as well. There is a water tank in there, and that's what supplied the water for the running water system in the mansion; it held about 300 gallons of water. The other device in there that would normally not have been in there at all is a generator that made up the gas for the lights here in the mansion. John Bidwell had carbide gas lighting throughout the house, and the generator for that was an acetylene generator located outside the home. The gas was made up in that, and it was run through a pipeline to the house to work the lights inside.

Out in the room again there are a couple of neat things we kind of forget about nowadays, but they were a real common part of life back 100 years ago. In order to get around, you had to do a lot of riding, and we know that John and Annie would have done that. In fact, this sidesaddle is actually one that did belong to Mrs. Bidwell; this is one that she used. There's a picture that illustrates the Bidwells riding on mule back, which they did pretty often, especially in the more rural areas that were more rough.

One room here is just another guestroom, but it's interesting because, again, the size illustrates how large it is. There are two beds in there instead of one. And there is something known as a sitz bath, which actually was found down in the basement of the mansion, so that could have been something that belonged to the Bidwells as well.

We've already seen three floors of the mansion, and, for another perspective, let's take a walk up to the tower of the mansion. This will be the final leg of our tour. In homes built according to Italianate architecture it was typical to have a tower such as this one. In the case of the Bidwells it's hard to know how often they came up here. But it's likely they would have found it an ideal setting for observing the ranch operations or simply enjoying the view. When the Bidwells did come up here and take in the surroundings, I often wonder if they had any idea that this home of theirs would still be here today.

I think a lot is owed to the Department of Parks and Recreation and to the Chico community for ensuring that this home would always be preserved as a monument to the Bidwells and to their many contributions to our local heritage. Now, when visitors come to the mansion, they have the opportunity to view the Bidwells from many different perspectives. After all, John Bidwell was an early pioneer; he was Chico's founder; he was a politician, a Prohibition Party presidential candidate, and a significant contributor to the development of agriculture in this state. Annie Bidwell was a cultivated socialite and a devout Presbyterian who was active in the causes of suffrage and temperance and who was particularly dedicated to educating and Christianizing the local Mechoopda Indians.

But perhaps one common perspective that visitors share these days is the sense of hospitality, which still seems to prevail here in the mansion. It's really not that difficult to imagine what it might have been like had we been invited guests of the Bidwells, and, in some ways, when you stop and think about it, we still are.

Running Time: 45 minutes  
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