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“All this stuff is so almost soul-sucking, but when you do the music, it’s soul-filling,” he recalled. “If I had a gig that wore me out totally, that’s when I could sleep. That’s when I felt best.”

Now, things are looking up for Swiss Link.

The business is becoming fun again, Huffman said, and customers—including antique shops, surplus stores and specialty shops—are calling. He’s also been amassing new gear and novelty items—such as British Royal Mail carrier bags—and looking forward to moving into a new 20,000-square-foot building. Construction is underway.

On a recent walk through his warehouse, Huffman noted a particularly interesting collection he found while on a trip to Italy last year: boxes full of porcelain made for Italian Air Force officers in 1950. He shipped back tea cups, saucers, plates, bowls and egg cups—all of which feature the military branch’s insignia.

“This stuff is awesome,” Huffman said. “It’s so much fun to find new, exciting things.”

After the fire, Huffman and his wife, Robin, a former member of the Paradise Town Council, moved into a straw bale house in the rolling hills west of Corning. After living in cities and towns, Huffman said the solitude of life on a ranch has taken some getting

Swiss Link will move from its current location (shown) on Hegan Lane in south Chico to nearby Midway later this year.
PHOTO BY ANDRE BYIK

used to. But there is one comfort: very few trees. He acknowledged he has yet to shake the trauma of the fire and its spread through the pines in Paradise.

Huffman considered re-establishing Swiss Link on the Ridge, but he’s approaching his 60th birthday and said joining the years-long rebuild there didn’t make much sense. Plus, he’s looking forward to entrenching himself in the business community in south Chico, where Build.com and Lulus.com have operations.

Then there’s the music. Huffman said his goal, by the time he’s 61, is to complete a small bus tour, playing nightly. He’s reacquired instruments and built a small studio.

“I’m having time to do some music, which is really good,” he said. “I got all my instruments back. I just did a really fun gig at the Torch Club in Sacramento and discovered I could still do it.”

Further, about three months ago—with the help of a friend at Thanksgiving—he had a breakthrough.

“The melodies started coming in again,” he said.

Huffman has been working on a song since then. It’s incomplete, he said, and the lyrics are a work in progress. But it has a title.

“Shine On,” Huffman said.

—ANDRE BYIK

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Along the way he founded the California Greenhouse Vegetable Growers Association and served as Vice President of the American Greenhouse Vegetable Growers Association.

He also taught UC Extension Courses, won multiple campus wide awards, and was inducted into the Gamma Sigma Delta Honor Society of Agriculture.

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