

The Sierran

— A Publication of the Sierra County Historical Society —

The Great Flood of 1937, Downieville, California

By Virginia Lutes



The winter of 1937 had not been remarkable, little snow had fallen at the higher elevations and the winter weather had been fairly mild until early December. Folks living along the North Yuba, who had radios tuned to catch weather forecasts, were fortunate enough to hear a warning of a pending storm. No one expected the torrential rain that struck the general region.

The North and South Forks of the Yuba River had brought fortunes in gold to early settlers of the area. The community of Downieville along this river was proud of the new highway bridge and businesses were flourishing. By the morning of December 10, 1937, the North Fork was carrying a great volume of water, and some folks expressed concern that

flooding may occur. It had been nearly ten years since the last high water in 1928. A vast amount of debris and logs had accumulated along the banks of the streams well up into the timbered mountains. With the extremely swift rise of the water this debris and old fallen logs tore away at the banks of the streams and into the rivers. Both the North and South Fork were running full and congested with trees and debris. Initially the logs, telephone poles and debris passed under the bridges and did not hang up on the bridge piers, but as the river continued to rise, and the debris load increased, the passage under the bridges became more difficult.

The State Highway road crew recognized the possibility

that logs would jam against the bridge support and create a water barrier at the bridge. The head of the local road crew was Chester Butz, and he organized an effort to stage the crew so that they could free the debris by cable and truck. The river continued to rise to reach almost the top of the arches of the bridge, and the gallant efforts of the road crew no longer helped stem the tide of debris and

water, the men barely had time to escape the dam. Within minutes logs and debris were piled against the bridge, blocking the passage of water through the arches and forming a lake. The road on the bridge was level with the business street of Downieville and within a very short time there was two to three feet of water on the street from the lower end to the Upper Plaza. At

the same time homes and garages on Main Street and on homes along Main were lifted from their foundations and began to float before collapsing or being carried downstream before breaking apart from the water pressure. Some buildings were destroyed, some badly damaged. Some buildings that escaped being torn from foundations received extensive water and mud damage.

Meanwhile the area around Durgan Flat and Durgan Bridge (the courthouse bridge) was also facing the turbulent wrath of flood waters and debris as was the Jersey



Photos courtesy of Andy Ponta and Marian Lavezzola

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— THE SIERRA COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY —



The Sierra County Historical Society is an organization of people interested in preserving and promoting an appreciation of Sierra County's rich history. The Society operates a museum at the Kentucky Mine in Sierra City, holds an annual meeting, publishes a newsletter and conducts historical research. Members are sent notices of Society activities, receive THE SIERRAN, and are admitted free of charge to the museum and stamp mill tour. If you would like to become involved in these activities or would just like to give your support, please join us!

MEMBERSHIP INFORMATION

Membership in the Sierra County Historical Society is open to any interested person, business or organization. Members need not be residents of Sierra County. Dues are due and payable each January for the calendar year.

Membership categories are as follows:

INDIVIDUAL	\$15.00
FAMILY & INSTITUTION	\$20.00
BUSINESS & SUPPORTING	\$30.00
SUSTAINING	\$50.00
LIFE (per individual)	\$250.00

Please send dues to the Membership Chair:
Suzi Schoensee, PO Box 54, Sattley, CA 96124

SIERRA COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Office Address:
Kentucky Mine Museum
PO Box 260, Sierra City, CA 96125 (530) 862-1310

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If you have any suggestions or comments, feel free to contact any board member.

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Bridge (the Highway 49 Bridge). Both of these collapsed and were quickly broken up. Only two pillars were left of the Durgan Bridge, near the river bank.

"Raging waters of Yuba Devastate Downieville"

The headline of "The Mountain Messenger", Downieville, Sierra County, Saturday Dec. 11, 1937, Vol. LXXXIV, No. 46, spelled out the not so pretty picture that flood waters reaped upon the county seat. "The Messenger" reported that this storm was of unusual ferocity, not previously seen in this area. The storm arrived over the mountains on Friday morning. This particular Friday brought only destruction.

The following is quoted from "The Messenger":
"Storm of cloudburst proportions takes homes, floods business section" "Huge log jam, gathered by rushing waters of the North Fork blocks new highway bridge, forming dam that raised water level twenty feet above normal flow level; business section in inundated to depth of three feet. Goodyear Bar Bridge approach cut, town isolated, and Goodyear Creek Bridge washed out. Slides on Highway block east and west communication. Telephone and power service interrupted. Food and merchandise stocks ruined or damaged. Families divided by raging waters of North and South Forks. No Fatalities, but near-tragedies mark fight to save homes."

"On a mounting crest of raging water, debris accumulated during decades of low water seasons was gathered by the torrent and rushed down upon the unsuspecting dwellers in the mountain canyon at the Forks like a ruthless battering ram.

Staggering before the mighty pressure of water, Jersey Bridge crumbled, and in a mass of iron rods and timbers, lodged against the new state highway span. At almost the same instant, the log jam reached town and piled against the bridge, and it was apparent to the awed spectators that the fate of the buildings on the North Fork was sealed.

On the crest of the waters piling up behind the jam, the Homer Gould home rose majestically from its foundations and like an ocean liner sailed southward along the highway fill to a point just west of the Henry Meyer home, turned and crossed the highway and, gaining speed as it felt the pull of the South Fork torrent, brushed aside the Durgan bridge and hurled itself to destruction in the canyon below Cannon Point.

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The home of Mr. and Mrs. Tony Costa sailed gracefully up onto the Main Street pavement at about the instant Barton's store had risen from its foundation, spilled its contents, and settled again, as though huddling from the angry maw of the torrent. Coming to rest in front of the Meyer & Lusk garage, the Costa home hesitated momentarily and then took the icy plunge into the river and destruction.

Then in rapid succession came the others.

The Meyer & Lusk garage, its southwest corner foundations eaten away by the waters, sagged suddenly, catapulting several automobiles that it was impossible to rescue, into the water.

The Emma Ellison home apparently was dragged into the river when the Gould home fouled the steel messenger cable upon which the telephone lines crossed the river.

The beautiful new bungalow home of Mr. and Mrs. Andrew J. Ponta rode over the highway bridge without touching bottom, carrying every article of household equipment, so quickly did the water rise to claim it. It rode intact as far as it could be seen downstream from town.

The two cottages occupied by Mr. and Mrs. H. Sauber and Mr. and Mrs. Andy Davis left their moorings early in the rise. The Tony Pezzola home shifted onto the foundation of the Gould home. The Schofield home was turned almost completely around.

An observer at the F. H. Turner home noted the moment the water first spilled over the deck of the highway bridge and according to his timepiece, this occurred at approximately 2:05, p.m. He again checked his watch after the last building has passed from view, and found that the indescribable carnage had taken but 35 minutes in its accomplishment."

This exciting although gloomy story captures the momentum of the storm and some of the aftermath. We can only imagine how Christmas may have been celebrated in 1937. The Red Cross, the Clampers and good friends of the Downieville area responded with clothing and food.

The following is quoted from "The Sierra Valley News", Loyalton, Sierra County, California, Friday December 24, 1937, Volume 26 Number 52:

"Downieville Digging Herself Out of Wreckage of Flood"

"Debris being cleared away and hard-hit town is making struggle to return to normalcy.

A good many people from this end of the county have been in Downieville since the flood, to view the wreckage, and unless it has been seen, it is hard to realize just what happened in the county seat. Pictures and stories of the disaster fairly well describe this situation, but it must be seen to get comprehensive ideas of the quick work of the angry waters. Downieville people say they hardly realized just what was taking place and it was all over before they could conceive just what had befallen them.

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The new concrete highway bridge could not withstand the "lake" pressure combined with the erosive damage to the earth filled approaches to the bridge and a break-through at the north end of the bridge. Immediately the flood water burst through toward the Meyer and Lusk Garage. The rear wall of the building was torn out, and several automobiles were sent down the river. The "lake" waters receded rapidly and caused more damage. This period of destruction was around 30 minutes, from the blocking of debris at the bridge to the water break-through.

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The Meyer Lusk Garage in the river. The rivers carried much debris and timber. Photo courtesy Andy Ponta and Marian Lavezzola

One fact that made the experience the more terrifying for them, was the division of the town into three distinct sections, due to the flood waters and absence of the three bridges, which left families divided, and for some time they were unable to check up.

A Teacher, Miss Marian Billings is being highly commended for her good work in keeping the little folk in school, entertained during the time the flood waters were tearing away the town, and they were not aware of the incident until it was well over. She saw to it that the children were given into the hands of parents, or delivered to people who would look after them, and upon closing the school, left a note on the door, directing each parent as to where the children were housed.

Downieville people tell of the narrow escapes of citizens, in their efforts to save property or assist a neighbor, and although the thing was tragic, they have numerous comical incidents to relate.

As quickly as possible The American Red Cross from the San Francisco headquarters was brought to town, with food, clothing and bedding, to help those left destitute, but citizens there say that the remaining homes were opened to the less fortunate, and that all people were cared for.

A section of a CCC camp arrived as soon as roads could be opened and as quickly as possible started the work of clearing up. The stream under the highway bridge was diverted from its new course at the end of the bridge, back to its previous channel, and the bridge was cleared of debris so that it could

be crossed by pedestrians. A temporary suspension bridge with catwalk was erected to the court house side, the streets cleared for traffic, and on Sunday things were, in a way, getting back to normal, although the people of Downieville, still have not fully recovered from the shock of the disaster.”

Local newspapers were not the only ones to headline the flood. Excerpts from news articles of the flood appear throughout this article. Some information is repeated, some is exaggerated, some is inaccurate but the impact of the reporting of this flood was widespread and is an important historical record.

Nevada State Journal Sat. December 11, 1937 Reno, Nv Vol LXVII No 32

FLOOD STRIKES DOWNIEVILLE

“Man Missing; Damage Feared Half Million Homes, Bridges in Sierra County Seat Carried Away by Water

SATTLEY, Cal, Dec 10 - (U.P.) - One person was missing tonight in a flood of the Yuba River that swept the historic mining town of Downieville, washing away 15 houses, destroying three bridges and damaging other structures and mines at a loss exceeding \$500,000.

Earl Turner, Sattley rancher who operates a dairy route into Downieville, was the first person to make his way out of the stricken town over the Yuba Pass, turned into a treacherous, muddy mass by constant rainstorms. He was accompanied by Charles Brogdon of Sattley.

The flood occurred when two forks of the Yuba River, converging at the town, overflowed their banks and washed away a small frame house. The house swept against a wooden bridge and tore it away from its moorings.

WRECKAGE FORMS DAM

The house and bridge wreckage jammed against a recently-completed \$100,000 concrete state highway bridge, acting as a dam and sending flood waters throughout the low lying sections of the town. Water reached a depth of five feet along the main business street.

August Costa, 76, pioneer resident and retired mining man, was reported missing by members of his family, and it was feared he had been carried away by the high waters.

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The Great Flood of 1937 (Continued from Page 4)**400 FLEE HOMES**

Turner estimated that 400 persons were forced from their homes during the crest of the flood. He said the 15 families who lost their homes were being taken care of by neighbors and denied reports the town was in need of food and medical supplies.

"More than five inches of rain fell in the last 24 hours and it is still raining plenty hard," the rancher said, "but there was no cloudburst. The waters washed away the frame telephone exchange building and William Brogden's grocery store.

WOMEN RESCUED

"A number of the larger business structures were undermined and weakened. The Masonic Hall, the two-story were among those most badly damaged."

Mrs. Brogden, wife of the grocer, barely escaped with her life as the store building was washed away, Turner reported. He said that she had been saved by three men, Superior Judge Raymond McIntosh, Fred Rixey and Harry Fitzwater.

MINES DAMAGED

Pressure against the new bridge, Turner said, finally caused the collapse of one of its three arches. The wreckage sped downstream, breaking away another Downieville bridge and wrecking an unknown number of structures along the river below.

Turner set damage to private property in the town at \$200,000, to the new bridge at \$100,000, to other bridges and highways at \$100,000 and to mines and property along the two forks of the Yuba at another \$150,000.



Many buildings were moved from foundations, the bridges were destroyed
Photo courtesy Kentucky Mine Museum

HOSPITAL SAFE

Although isolated from other parts of the town, the county courthouse and hospital, located on higher ground, were not endangered. Approximately 75 persons living in homes near the county buildings and another 40 on Goodyear Bar were

isolated when the bridges went out.

"The residents are stringing a cable across the river and should be able to cross by morning," Turner said. "A number of automobiles were washed down the river, many of them out of the town's main garage. The one bridge remaining in Downieville is only to foot traffic.

NO LANDSLIDES

"As far as I could learn, none of the other communities in the area suffered a great deal of damage. There were no landslides in Downieville.

HOMES AND BRIDGES IN DOWNIEVILLE ARE WASHED AWAY

"The downstairs of the St. Charles hotel was covered with several inches of silt. The streets are full of debris."

Although Turner managed to negotiate the Yuba Pass road, he warned drivers unfamiliar with it to avoid attempting to reach Downieville until the rains subside. The highway below Downieville to Sacramento was believed impassable.

WIRES DOWN

"Telephone and telegraphic communication with Downieville, Sierra County seat and center of a rich gold mining region that dates back to the rush of the forty-niners, was expected to be cut off for several days.

It was predicted a week would be required to construct temporary bridges and repair the highway running down the Yuba river canyon to Grass Valley, Marysville and Sacramento.

Among the houses Turner said were carried away was that of State Highway Patrolman Andrew Ponta, who escaped "with only his coat as the flood came". Many oddities were noticed by Turner. The Post Office although adjoining the telephone building, which

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floated away, suffered only minor damage from debris and silt. In another case, a house floated away from between two others equally exposed to the force of the swirling waters.

Automobiles in the lower sections of the town that were not swept downstream were damaged by the silt and water. The floor of one store collapsed, but the outside frame remained standing.

The rainstorm brought 3.50 inches during the 24-hour period ended at 10 a.m. but heavy rain fell continuously during the forenoon and evening.

Turner said there was plenty of food in the town to last until communications are repaired. He pointed out the dangerous possibility of snow blocking the Yuba pass, completely cutting off the towns only existing entrance to the outside world.

RECORD PASSED

The rancher severely criticized persons who telephoned the Red Cross, saying that the residents were suffering acutely.

The weather bureau in Sacramento reported that the record flood stage along the Yuba River of 19 feet, 4 inches, established in 1928 had been passed."

OAKLAND TRIBUNE Monday Dec. 13, 1937 "SOLON TELLS HOW FLOOD DISASTER HIT DOWNIEVILLE"

Auburn Dec. 13 - The story of the Downieville flood - worst disaster to hit the little Northern California mining town in its 90 years of existence - was related here today by former State Senator B.A. Cassidy.

"There's hardly a town there now," he said.

Cassidy came here last night after a visit to the stricken moun-

tain community, where he talked yesterday with his son, Vic Cassidy, Downieville publisher, and to many other residents of the town.

"There is enough food but that's about all you can say that sounds hopeful," he declared. "Few of the people have a home now; lots of them haven't a change of clothing. There's no fuel to speak of and the weather's cold and getting colder."

CHILDREN MAROONED

"One part of the town, where the courthouse is, was isolated from the rest from Friday noon, when the water struck, until

yesterday. Some 30 or 40 children who had been in school could not reach home. Their parents found it impossible to learn the children's fate. It was one miracle after another that saved lives, one act of heroism after another. Half the residents would have lost their lives had it not been that the others, with no thought of themselves, jumped into rescue work."



Cassidy reached Downieville by driving to Goodyear's Bar, Sierra County, five miles below Downieville on the North Fork of the Yuba River. The bridge there had been swept away - along with three other bridges in the county - but Cassidy crossed by means of a cable apparatus and caught a ride in a truck to Downieville.

WENT DOWN RIVER

"They told me how the town- most of it - went down the river," Cassidy related. "You know it's built straddling the Yuba, with one bridge connecting the two sections."

"They said the Yuba commenced to rise, getting quite high about noon Friday. Finally, it started to wash away some of the smaller houses along next to the river. It rose up almost to the level of the bridge.

"The next thing everybody knew, it had picked up the new \$7800 house of Andy Ponta, State Highway inspector, and banged the house up against the bridge.

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“Logs and trash floating down the river piled up around the bridge and the house and backed the water up into the town.

“Finally, water rose high enough and carried the house up over the edge of the bridge. Its roof tore through the power lines crossing above the bridge. There was a flash, the people said, like lightning when the lines broke. Then the house tumbled over and broke up like kindling.

“The bridge gave way soon.

CORRESPONDENT’S QUANDARY

Senator Cassidy said he found his son, Vic, was among the most fortunate of all the Downieville folk. Vic’s home and printing office, from which he issues the Downieville Weekly Messenger, one of the State’s oldest newspapers, both escaped damage.

“The Senator said that his son, who also is the Associated Press correspondent in Downieville, was much disturbed over conflicting demands of his obligations as a news reporter and his duty as a neighbor and citizen.

“Vic was all worked up trying to decide whether to leave town long enough to file a story of what had happened - there’s no way of telephoning or telegraphing from Downieville- or whether he ought to stay right there and help the relief workers.

“He told me - ‘here I’ve got the best story of my life, and I can’t get it out to give it to anybody, unless I walk out on my neighbors.’

“I told Vic I’d try to report it for him.”

OAKLAND TRIBUNE December 12, 1937

“Heroism Saves Drowning, Downieville Dec. 11” “Residents of this small mining community looked on receding flood waters with feelings of relief and tales of the heroism that prevented loss of life. Mrs. Julia Luedke, 23, told of her experience crossing the steel bridge in the heart of town when a wall of water swept down on to it. ‘I was crossing the lower bridge. I saw the wall of

water coming. I screamed and raced across the bridge, leaping to shore just as the water struck and crumpled the bridge with a roar I shall never forget. Persons who had seen me running across the bridge thought I was dead. But I went to the schoolhouse and got my daughter Delores 6, thank God, we are safe together tonight’.

Another mother Mrs. Antone Lavezzola, told of rescuing the three children of her brother from the steps of their home just as the water struck. Others recounted having seen men throw themselves into the water to save others. One man said he had a dozen machines swept from a garage and buried in the silt of the river.”

OAKLAND TRIBUNE Dec. 13, 1937

“The Red Cross was busy also in Downieville, where many houses were demolished and other badly damaged... Blankets and food were taken into Downieville, isolated from highway communication by means of a bucket and cable line strung over the Yuba River.

FAMILIES CARED FOR

“Reports to the Red Cross in San Francisco said 200 families were being cared for in Alturas and 200 in Red Bluff. Relief work in Downieville was hampered when the temperature dropped to 15 degrees last night.”

The “Sacramento Bee” Superior California News Saturday, December 11, 1937 contained news of the flood, and



a feature and photos of Downieville. Food supplies were limited, and “an attempt to install a cable across the streams to convey food to those isolated. The new bridge collapsed from the weight of the water, when the house of Josephine Costa became lodged in the main span, backing up water and creating a dam. The dam swept flood water

to the Barton Store and Masonic Lodge. The roar of the water from the state concrete bridge grew louder until finally it cracked and one of the bridge supports collapsed. The flood burst forth taking with it many houses.”

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The storm fairly well isolated Downieville and Goodyear's Bar from the rest of the county and the state. Relief crews from the Forest Service, the State and CCC crews reached the area via Truckee. The "Sacramento Bee" reported that all transcontinental highway routes to Reno were closed; with the only highway in the area open being that between Reno and Truckee. Three bridges were washed out in the vicinity of Nevada City. A big slide at Depot Hill was said to have taken away a half mile of the mountain, and washed away a large portion of the road. The Indian Valley Bridge on the North Yuba River had water flowing over the top, and part of the newly constructed highway in Indian Valley was cutout entirely. Two highway maintenance employees, J. A. Taylor and Paul Cross narrowly escaped death when an avalanche of rock came down a mountain.

Reno Gazette Journal Dec. 13, 1937

"Waters of the Yuba river that destroyed a large section of Downieville, historic mining town in the Sierra Nevada, dropped today, leaving almost all of the 450 residents homeless and many of them suffering in the below-freezing weather.

Red Cross workers and state truck crews rushed clothing, bedding and medical supplies to Downieville, reconnected yesterday with the outside world by a cable rigged across the river at Goodyear's Bar, several miles west. Four bridges were washed away. There was ample food for residents for the next ten days."

"San Francisco Chronicle" Vol. CLI, No. 150 dated Sunday, December 12, 1937 used as a front page story a



feature photo of Downieville and article concerning the flood. The headline read "30 Towns Flooded, Damage in Millions as Storm rips State". Concerning Downieville, it was reported that State Officials reached the isolated community to find "the 650 men, women and children safe and sound"; but that they found only the ruins of the picturesque town. All but a few of the major buildings were destroyed by the raging waters, or undermined as to be beyond repair. The citizens were blaming the highway division for the near disaster, which they said was caused by the bridge constructed over the town's protest. District Attorney A. J. Just was quoted in the article: "We'll build again". Damage was estimated at \$500,000. The Chronicle Staff Writer, Stanley Bailey, noted that seventeen houses were swept away, but that not a human being was lost. Many close escapes were spoken of, and the town was divided into three sections by the receding water. A very descriptive quote on page A follows:

"Down from the mountains, roaring through canyons swept the brown water into Downieville. Telephone poles and trees were carried along like paper boats in a butter stream. The flood became an avalanche of debris, crashing against buildings, piling up in fantastic jumbles...every new burst of water added to the wreckage. And still the piles of uprooted trees and snapped telephone poles grew in size and number."

The flood left memorable impressions on those who lived through the disaster. Two Downieville residents who were very helpful with this article were Marian (Butz) Lavezzola and Andy Ponta. Both were children in 1937. Marion remembers that she was in school when the flood hit. Her teacher was Belle Alexander, who allowed the children to go to the Catholic Church to watch the flood, with the stern warning to stay at the Church. Marian remembers that it was a terrifying scene. Following the flood two girls stayed with the Butz family until they could return to their families. She also remembers that the Clampers obtained the names and ages of each Downieville child, and a gift was delivered to each for Christmas. There was a San Francisco radio station that played a recording each Christmas for many years of how the Clampers saved Christmas that year of 1937. Tom Villas also played the recording at the hardware store for many years.

Marian's father, State Highway Foreman Chester Butz had a great curiosity over the sudden rise of water, and the "blame" that

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some people were putting on the California State Division of Highways for designing the new concrete bridge. In days following the flood, he and state officials traveled up river to see if they could determine what may have happened. In earlier years miners had built an earthen dam in the Spencer Lake area near the headwaters of the Yuba.

This was located approximately 15 miles from Downieville, and was built for the 4 Hills Mine. Mr. Butz found that this dam had given way with great force. Marian has a wonderful collection of photos that her father Chester Butz collected of the flood, and of the remains of the miner's earthen dam that gave way.



Andy Ponta, age four at the time, only remembers holding his cat tight when his father grabbed him (but not the cat), and ran out of the house. Mrs. Costa, a neighbor warned the Ponta's to leave their home. Mrs. Ponta grabbed a suitcase and fled just moments before their new eleven month old house began to shake,

then floated across and slightly upstream before being carried downstream and smashed against the highway bridge. Andy's older brother Mel was in school at the time. The only possession (beside Andy and the clothes on their backs) saved was an empty suitcase. Mr. Ponta was the Highway Patrol Officer at the time. His gun, holster, leather jacket were all taken by the flood. The jacket was found and

the badge returned to Officer Ponta, but the other possessions were never recovered.

The Flood of 1937 was not the first nor would it be the last the visit the Downieville area, but to date it was by far the most devastating.

Sources used:

James J. Sinnott "Downieville Gold Town on the River" and the publications listed above. A special thank you to Susan Haren for the loan of the newspapers used in this article, and to Marian Lavezzola and Andy Ponta for photos and interviews.

Presidents Message - January 18, 2008

 Our annual meeting Sunday, October 7, 2007 was held at the Historic Holly House in Sierra City. Mary and Richard Nourse gave several tours of the Holly House, and Mary gave a presentation on its history. A surprise birthday cake and song was given to our lovely member Maren Scholberg.

Bill Copren lead a group (members only) to the secluded petroglyphs. If you have the opportunity to accompany Bill on a possible future trek, contact Bill. It is a memorable adventure.

Many improvements have been made to the Kentucky Mine Museum and the Amphitheater.

The Lagomarsino-Keirn cabin restoration is coming along. We might consider having our 2008 annual meeting at the

new Loganville Scenic Highway Visitor Center, which will consist of a parking area, picnic sites, toilets, drinking water hydrants, and a trailhead providing access to interpretive trails leading through the historic townsite of Loganville and to the cabin.

After many years of devotion to our Society, Lynn McKechnie Membership Chair has resigned. Our sincere appreciation to you Lynn, and to our present Board of Directors for overseeing all of the many projects that our organization handles. Many hours are donated every year to keep this Historical Society a viable organization.

Respectfully yours,
President Bud Buczkowski

Washoe Subsistence Strategies Included Visits to Sierra Valley - Continued from The Sierran, Fall 2007

By Judy Lawrence

One of the stopovers in the Washoe subsistence cycle was toward Pyramid Lake, where they net fished during the spring spawning runs. Although the Northern Paiute tribe inhabited an area including the eastern shoreline of Pyramid Lake, the Washoe visited the lake to fish seasonally, according to Warren D'Azevedo. He states, "The Washoe and Northern Paiute also jointly used fishing and gathering sites around Honey Lake and eastward to Pyramid Lake."

When the spawning run ended, there is evidence that the Washoe may have travelled from Pyramid Lake through



Beckwourth Pass

any or all of the many mountain passes that created natural routes, to what is now known as Beckwourth Pass, the only northeastern pass leading into Sierra Valley. Elston and Davis have found what they term Martis house-sites at Bordertown Pass, situated at the California-Nevada state line (Gortner 1986). Martis is

believed to be an ancestral Washoe culture that exhibited a tool assemblage adapted to their unique subsistence environment. The Bordertown Pass would have been a natural link for the Washoe as they made their way from Pyramid Lake to Sierra Valley. From the southwestern side of the lake the Washoe could have made their way through the pass between Dogskin Mountain and Hungry Mountain to Antelope Valley, following Antelope Valley south to the Bordertown Pass, and then turning north through Long Valley until they reached the opening of Beckwourth Pass leading into Sierra Valley. From Honey Lake, located approximately 25 miles northwest of

Pyramid Lake and within the northernmost range of the Washoe according to d'Azevedo, the Washoe could have made their way south through Long Valley and then used Beckwourth Pass to enter the northeast corner of Sierra Valley, which is where the Buttes Site, a major camas processing site, is located.

Washoe elder Dinah Pete remembers her uncle telling of the "big loop" he and other Washoe people made during their seasonal subsistence migration. "He always talked about being in Sierra Valley," Pete said.

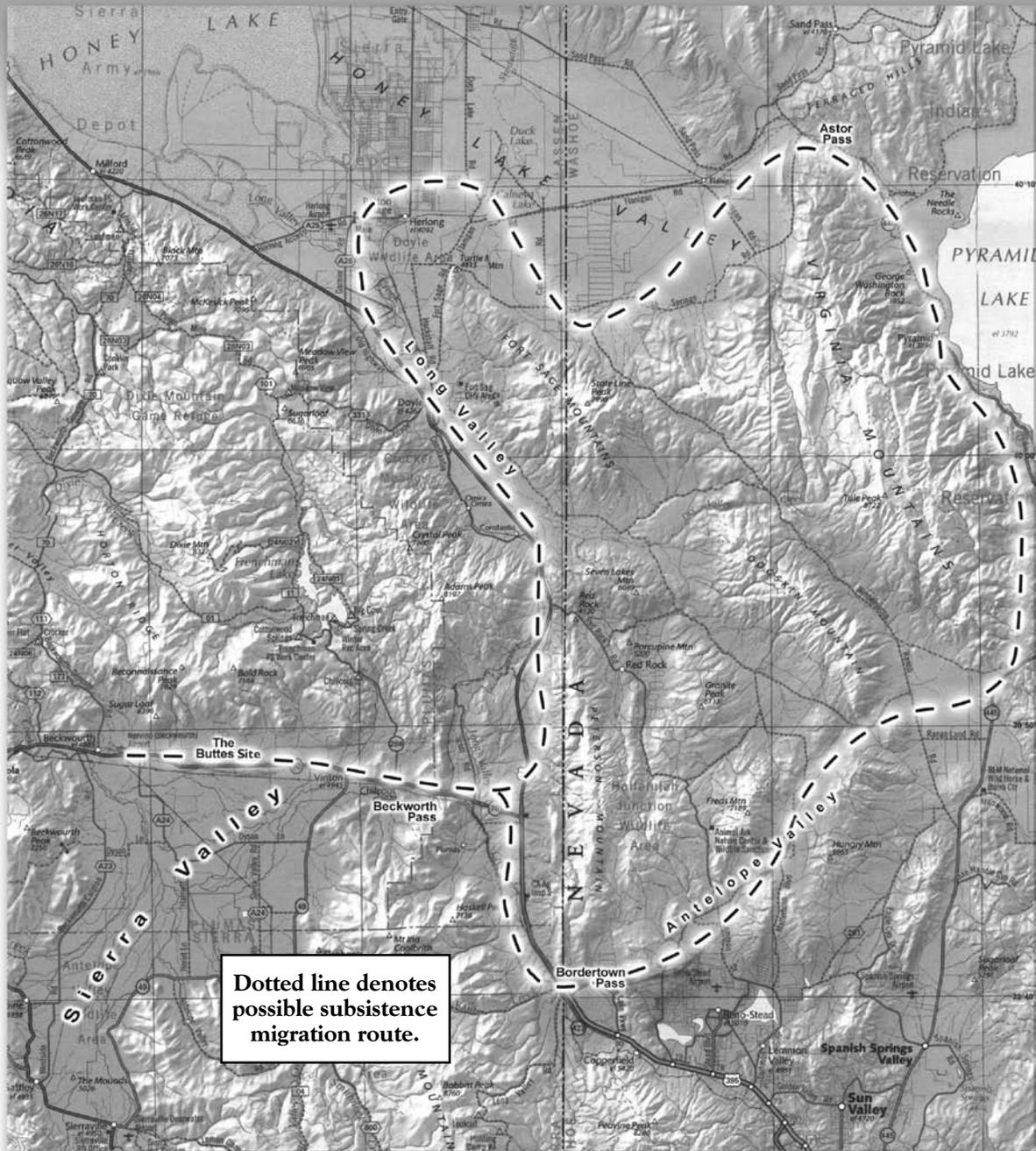
Once inside the valley basin, the Washoe had access to immense fields of camas plants which normally begin blooming in the valley from mid-May to June. It was important for the Washoe to be present in the valley during the camas blooming period because the color of the camas flower is the indicator of edible versus poisonous species – the blue flower indicating that the bulb is edible, the white flower indicating the poisonous species. Archaeologist Penny Rucks has studied and conducted site analysis work concerning Washoe subsistence patterns in the northern California/Nevada area. She is the author of several papers and reports on the subject. During her research, Rucks interviewed a Sierra Valley woman who, as a child, witnessed Washoe in Sierra Valley harvesting camas. The woman related to Rucks her memory of Washoe people walking through fields of blooming camas, placing sticks in the ground beside the poisonous white-flowering camas plants in order to identify them once the blossoms had dried and lost their color. This would help them avoid the poisonous bulbs when they began harvesting them in July.

In addition to the ethnographic evidence concerning Washoe camas processing in Sierra Valley, archaeological evidence of Washoe people harvesting and processing camas bulbs is abundant at the Buttes Site. The earth oven features are very similar to those found at other sites in southern Sierra Valley and in adjoining Mohawk Valley, as well as earth ovens excavated at established camas processing sites in Oregon and Washington. Preliminary study of the site and the features and artifacts found there has already provided much information about the site

The Washoe in Sierra Valley (Continued on Page 11) —

The Washoe in Sierra Valley (Continued from Page 10) —

PROJECTED WASHOE SEASONAL SUBSISTENCE MIGRATION PATTERN



Suggested routes for Washoe subsistence migrations in the Sierra Nevada foothill and western Great Basin areas.

The Washoe in Sierra Valley (Continued on Page 12) —

The Washoe in Sierra Valley (Continued from Page 11) —



habitation and use. That it was a communal bulb processing site is evidenced by the large number, and size, of the earth ovens and the presence of ground stone and metates.

The earth ovens vary in size from as small as 60 centimeters across, to up to 2.45 meters in width. They are deep, rock-lined cooking features – indicated by charcoal and pollen deposits collected from the bottom of the earth ovens. Some measure approximately one meter in depth. The rocks used to line the earth ovens are rounded and grey in color. They have been carefully fitted together to completely cover the bottom and sides of the earth oven. Some of the earth oven features have upturned rocks, usually five, arranged in circular formation at the center of the bottom of the earth ovens. Theories concerning the purpose of these upturned rocks include their possible

use as supports for a grill-type platform, which would have elevated the camas from the rocks in the center of the earth oven bottom. Charcoal has been collected from the rocks at the bottom of several of the earth ovens, as well as on the ground surrounding the earth ovens. The charcoal and faunal material in and around the earth ovens will be more fully analyzed in the future. Other features excavated near the earth ovens have been preliminarily described as cache pits where harvested and/or processed camas bulbs were stored.

The absence of any evidence of more permanent dwelling structures would suggest that the site was only seasonally occupied. Further study and analysis of the Buttes site will answer questions concerning other artifacts collected including the lithic assemblage and intriguing center-hole-drilled clay disks which may represent ornamental objects.



Earth oven excavation in progress at Buttes Site-summer, 2002.