

A General History of Sierra County

Author: William G. Copren

EARLY BEGINNINGS

The area now comprising Sierra County, California has been occupied for over 5,000 years. Ancient petroglyphs, which are scattered from Kyburz Flat to Lacey Meadows and Hawley Lake, bear witness to the existence of early Native Americans in the region. The Miwok tribe lived here, mostly on the west side of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. The Washoe tribal area included the region that is now Eastern Sierra County, including the Sierra Valley.

IMMIGRATION

In 1844 the first American immigrants passed through what is now southeastern Sierra County on their way up the Truckee River. By the next year migrant groups had found a route through Stampede and Dog Valleys that avoided the need to move their dray animals in the river. The Donner Party apparently used this trail to reach their winter camps in 1846. By 1847 thousands of migrants had moved over this trail to California. That year, members of Stephen Kearney's Mormon Battalion returned to the East along this route. In 1848 gold was discovered at Sutter's Mill precipitating the Gold Rush of 1849. Despite the frantic quest for gold, none of the travelers thus far had remained in this area.



**Big Lucy
Washoe Indian Woman
with papoose**

SETTLEMENT

Cut-eye Foster's Bar on the western boundary of Sierra County appears to be the first location occupied by migrant miners in late 1848 or early 1849. Miles and Andrew Goodyear were mining at the present site of Goodyears Bar in early 1849, and they sent workers up to the forks at the North Fork of the Yuba River. Philo Haven's party who worked at the forks in 1849 had discovered the famous Tin Cup Diggings.

William Downie and others arrived there by October 1849. Some miners stayed for the winter and decided to name the diggings "Downieville". In February 1850, there were approximately 1,000 people in the region and by April, the estimated population was 5,000. Downieville, also known as the "Forks," became the commercial and social hub of the area. Unfortunately during the July 4th celebration that year, a young woman, Josepha (Juanita), was lynched by an angry mob. This event gave Downieville worldwide notoriety; even the London Times published an account of the hanging.

POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

California had been acquired by the United States from Mexico as a result of the Mexican War and became a state in 1850. The current area that constitutes Sierra County was a part of Yuba County for the first two years of statehood. In 1850, during the infamous Gold Lake Rush,



Sattley School
was moved three times following the students.

northwestern area of present day Sierra County and into the southwestern area along Kanaka Creek. In 1851, the Lemmon Brothers were busy developing the Hennessey Pass route from Marysville to Lake's Crossing (Reno) at the behest of the people of Downieville.

EARLY GOVERNMENT

The eastern reaches of Yuba County were too difficult to govern from distant Marysville, and so in 1852 Sierra County was created out of Yuba County. Downieville was established as the county seat, and the region was governed by the Court of Sessions made up of the justices of peace of various Sierra County communities.

GOLD MINING

Gold mining in the region developed from placer mining into industrial underground quartz mining. The Sierra Buttes mine was started in 1851 and mined over \$7,000,000 of gold in its first decades when the value of gold was below \$16.00 an ounce. Hard rock mining in western Sierra County has continued to the present. The Bald Mountain Mine in Forest City produced gold for decades. The Brush Creek Mine at Goodyears Bar was a producer of gold until the 1980's. The Original Sixteen-to-One Mine has continued in production since the late Nineteenth Century. Hydraulic mining also was significant in the western, particularly the northwestern, portion of the county with large mines at Pine Grove, Morristown, Brandy City and Jouberts Diggings.

POLITICS

Sierra County politics have been all over the page and at times chaotic. For its first two years, 1852 and 1853, the county voted heavily Democratic. In 1853, District Attorney, Thaddeus Purdy was killed accidentally during an attempt by persons from the Alleghany area to release one of their number from jail in Downieville. In 1854, the Whig party elected Sierra County's state senator and assemblyman. A year later the Know Nothings (a nativist and anti-Catholic

miners standing on the top of the Sierra Buttes discovered the Sierra Valley in the distant east. The following year, A.P. Chapman and others, traveling over what is now known as Chapman Saddle, made it to Sierra Valley to a spot between the current sites of Calpine and Sattley. Chapman preempted a farm at this location.

At approximately the same time, James Beckwourth, coming up the middle fork of the Feather River discovered the valley and the pass that bears his name today. Miners had moved into the



Sierra Buttes Miners
Sierra City

political party) elected W.T. Ferguson to the state senate. Ferguson was considered the leader for the U.S. Senate position until he was killed in a duel in 1858.



Loyaltown

Meanwhile, the Democrats had returned to power in the county for the period 1857 to 1860 when the county voted for Stephen Douglas for President. With the coming of the Civil War, Sierra County moved heavily into the Unionist fold and sent men into the Union Army. The populace voted Republican for decades. The town of Smith's Neck changed its name to Loyaltown, and Sierraville named its streets Lincoln, Grant and Meade. In the period after the war, the Republicans retained shirt and constructing a political machine under H.K. "Boss" Turner. Even though Turner came from Sattley, the Downieville gang controlled the politics of the county.

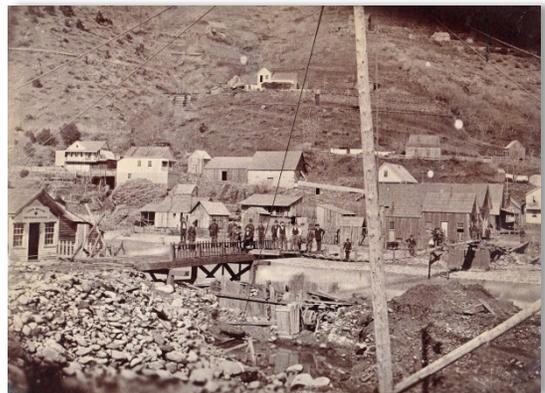
Attempts at reform were crushed including the apparent assassination of reformist candidate for Sheriff, Jack Campbell, in 1882.

With the construction of four sawmills in Loyaltown and the end of large-scale hydraulic mining due to a Supreme Court ruling, the political center of gravity shifted eastward in the 1890's. The reformist, inflationist, rural-centered Grange found its way into Sierra Valley in this period. The voters supported the Populist Party and William Jennings Bryan in the last years of the Nineteenth Century. Early in the next century, it is said that it was the Sierra County votes that tipped California, and then the nation, to give Woodrow Wilson the presidency. After the First World War, as depression overwhelmed the rural areas of the country, Sierra County continued its move into the Democratic Party of the New Deal. The county remained with the Democrats until the 1980's when the electorate became more and more conservative.

POPULATION

Sierra County reached a recorded population of 11,867 in 1860. The number of inhabitants decreased to 4,017 in 1900 and reached its lowest ebb in 1920 at 1783 persons. Since that time the population has ranged from about 2,200 to 3,500, changing a few hundred one way or another with each census.

Downieville incorporated as a city in the 1890's and then disincorporated soon thereafter. Loyaltown was incorporated in 1902 as a result of the growth of the lumber industry. The centers of population included the county seat and Sierra City on the North Fork of the Yuba. La Porte, Gibsonville, Howland Flat and Poker Flat grew into sizable communities with La Porte eventually being moved into Plumas County. The southwestern area around Forest City and Alleghany expanded as hard rock gold mining spread across all of western Sierra County. In the agricultural east, Sierraville grew as a crossroads



Downieville

trading center, Sattley as a cattle-raising and sawmilling area and the company town of Calpine was established and constructed by the Davies-Johnson Lumber Company. As late as the 1970's many of the houses in Calpine sat on skids as they had been moved into town from the surrounding logging camps by the donkey engines.

RAILROADS AND LOGGING



Steam Donkey Logging

Railroads were crisscrossing all of eastern Sierra County by the late Nineteenth Century, and the county utilized them for logging early in the Twentieth Century. With the construction of the Lewis Mill south of Loyalton, the lumber industry changed from a small animal-driven industry to a larger steam-driven operation. Logs were skidded with large donkey engines and loaded onto railroad cars or Best steam tractors for delivery to sawmills which often operated around the clock. Mill after mill located along the fringes of Sierra Valley, while much of the timber in the southeast went to the

Verdi-Hobart areas. The Boca and Loyalton Railroad connected the Loyalton mills to the

Southern Pacific Railroad in the south. Logging in the east continued to use the rails until well into the 1950's. f

Eventually the creation of a forest road system and the improvement of the state and county highways led to the development of truck logging. In this type of logging, large heel-boom jammers and, then, front-end loaders sat in carved-out landings and loaded trucks from dawn to dark. Clover Valley Lumber Company ran the last big Loyalton sawmill, planing mill and box factory until late in the twentieth century when Degorgio Corporation acquired it. Sierra Pacific Industries was the final owner when the mill was closed.

On the western side of the county, the miners had removed much of the close-in timber to use in the placer and quartz mines early in the Gold Rush. Durgan had a sawmill in Downieville in the early 1850's, but there remained heavy stands of old growth timber further back from the mining camps. So, subsequent to the Second World War, the United States Forest Service encouraged the development of the sawmilling industry in western Sierra County. Cal-Ida sawmill went into operation and logged some of the largest timber seen in the county. Cal-Ida operated for the better part of two decades until the big timber was gone in the western county. It then closed.

AGRICULTURE

Agriculture started in Sierra Valley to feed the livestock necessary for mining and freighting operations. A.P. Chapman had preempted a farm (the precursor to the Homestead Act) in Sierra Valley in 1851, and the beef cattle industry quickly grew into the principal agricultural pursuit. The ranchers' cattle were allowed to run free since there were no fences in the valley. The cattle were jointly driven to Steamboat Springs (near present day Reno, Nevada) in the fall and returned to the valley in the spring. Once the transcontinental railroad was completed, the cattle were driven to the Southern Pacific yards in the Truckee area each fall and transported into the Sacramento Valley for winter. These drives continued into the 1950's until it became

more efficient to move cattle by truck. The valley continued with its beef industry through the years, but meadow hay also became an important product, as did a number of different grains. Insect predation and heavy frosts essentially ended the grain experiment. Haying with horses continued into the 1950's, even though many ranches had gone to motorized buck rakes and the storing of loose hay in the famous Sierra Valley barns.

The severe depression of 1893 actually began on the farms in the late 1880's and the ranching industry suffered severely around the turn of the century. At this time, dairying began in the valley and grew into a primary industry. The main product of the dairy ranching was butter, which was preserved in firkins and shipped to the San Francisco Bay area, Reno, and the Sacramento area. The Great Depression, which began in 1929, had actually started for agriculture immediately after the end of World War I. This depression was extremely hard on the farmers and ranchers. The New Deal creations of the Rural Electrification Agency and the Soil Conservation Service aided the suffering agricultural community. Additionally, almost every eligible man living in Sierra Valley during the depression worked for the Works Progress Administration (WPA) at one time or another. The dairy business ended in the valley shortly after the end of World War II when severe regulation of milk production was too difficult for small operations to meet. With the development of well drilling technology, farming moved to the raising of alfalfa grown under large sprinkler systems. Today, meadow hay, alfalfa and beef cattle are the products produced in eastern Sierra County agricultural area.



Strang Barn

SIERRA COUNTY TODAY



Headwaters of North Yuba River

Much of Sierra County's land base is held by the federal and state governments. The county includes three national forests and a large state wildlife management area. Presently, even though some logging continues and the agricultural business is fairly stable, the county is becoming a recreation-oriented area. Mountain biking and river rafting have become significant businesses in the west, and road bike activity is growing in the east. Hunting and fishing remain constant while winter snowmobile action is heavy throughout the mountainous areas of the county. The population has stabilized at around 3,000 people making the county the second smallest in California.

Sierra County is still a beautiful place to live and raise children. Visit us soon.