

Apparently the first white men to set eyes on Sierra Valley was a group of deer hunters from the mining camps around Downieville. Led by A. P. Chapman, they were hunting on Haskell Peak and from there sighted Sierra Valley. This was in 1850. They returned to Downieville and reported their find. In 1851, Mr. Chapman and another party came back via Mohawk Valley to the "Great Valley" he had sighted the year before. This time he, Joseph Kirby, John Gardner, and L. K. McClannin posted claims for a ranch apiece. From the description of the Chapman site, it would appear to be the old Devine ranch.

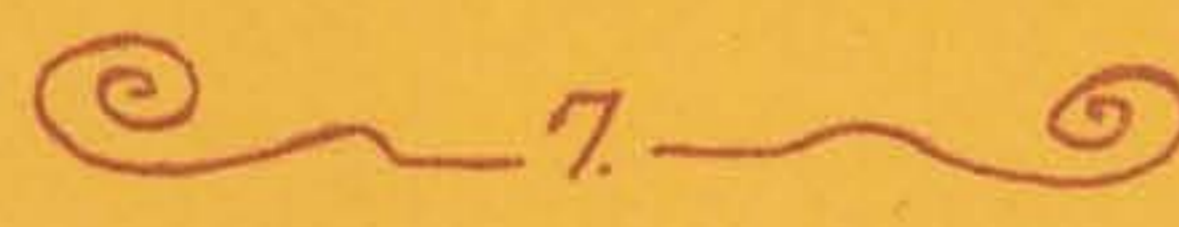
As winter came on they returned to Downieville, and in the spring of 1852 brought men with them and proceeded to build log cabins on their claims. This same spring Jim Beckworth built his place at the north end of the valley. Other claims were taken up at the Randolph area. The first permanent home built in Sierraville was by John Lipscomb, who built on the creek back of the lot between the present home of Mrs. Barrington and the Cold Creek Tavern. He later sold this to William Arms in 1857. Mr. Arms later built a store and a hotel and was also Sierraville's first postmaster.



In 1854 the Smith Mining Company went in to the Smithneck area, built houses and corrals, and planted five acres of wheat. The Indians raided them, killing an ox and burning the buildings. The men escaped to Randolph, and Smithneck was abandoned. The field of wheat was given to T. S. Batelli, who cut it with a hand sickle and harvested it. He lived on the ranch now owned by M. J. Bony, and gave his name to the street that runs north from Main. Two years later David B. Patterson again opened up the Smithneck area, building a log cabin at a spring just west of Loyalton. This cabin was later incorporated into the house that still stands on the ranch owned by the Grandi brothers. During the Civil War, so many volunteers joined the Union Army from this place that the town's name was changed to Loyalton.

With more settlers moving in and more permanent homes being built, many supplies were needed, and so started the many pack trails and stage and freight lines about which I wish to talk.

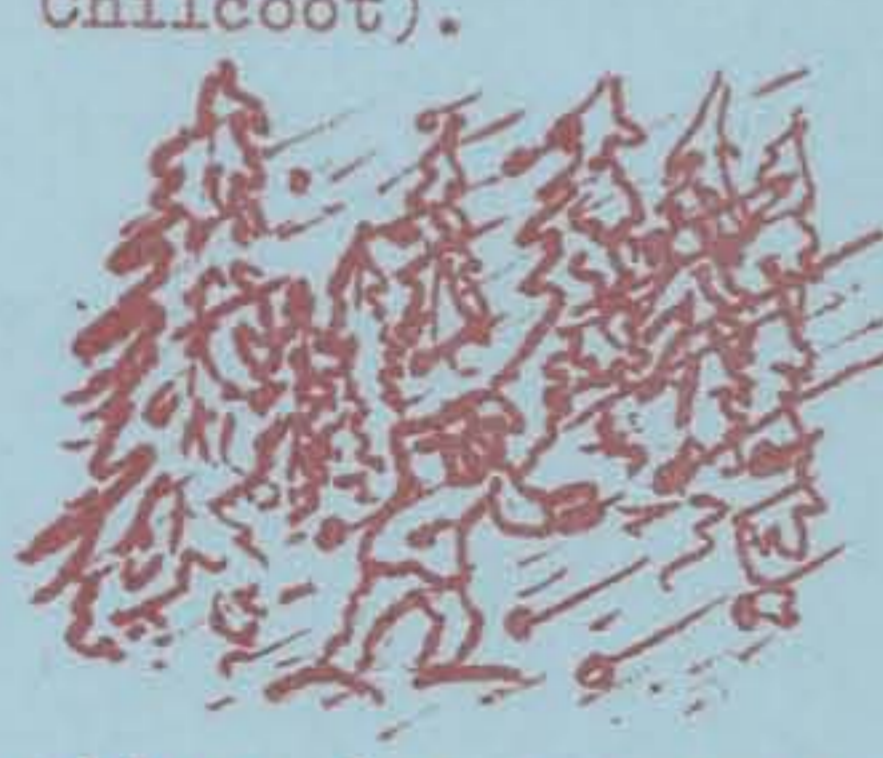
Nathaniel Strang came to the Valley in 1856 - coming across the Isthmus of Panama - and eventually up the Yuba River to Downieville. He took up his claim along the creek that flows through the center of the valley (still called Strang Creek). Two years later his son brought a pack train in from Downieville to get hay for his stock.



The trail then went from Downieville up the river, behind Sierra Buttes and around Haskell Peak, entering the valley at the Chapman place. They cut the hay with scythes, raked it by hand, and baled it with a "dead-fall" baler. This was a weighted lever mortised into a tree stump which tamped the hay into a wooden frame. The resulting bales were taken by mule back - 150 pounds to each mule - and taken back over this torturous route.

In 1864 he drove a herd of cattle from Downieville to Sierra Valley for a Mr. Bailey. This was sort of like taking Mahamet to the mountain. It was easier to bring the cattle to the feed. He blazed a shorter trail, coming in over Yuba Pass and entering the valley through Turner Canyon.

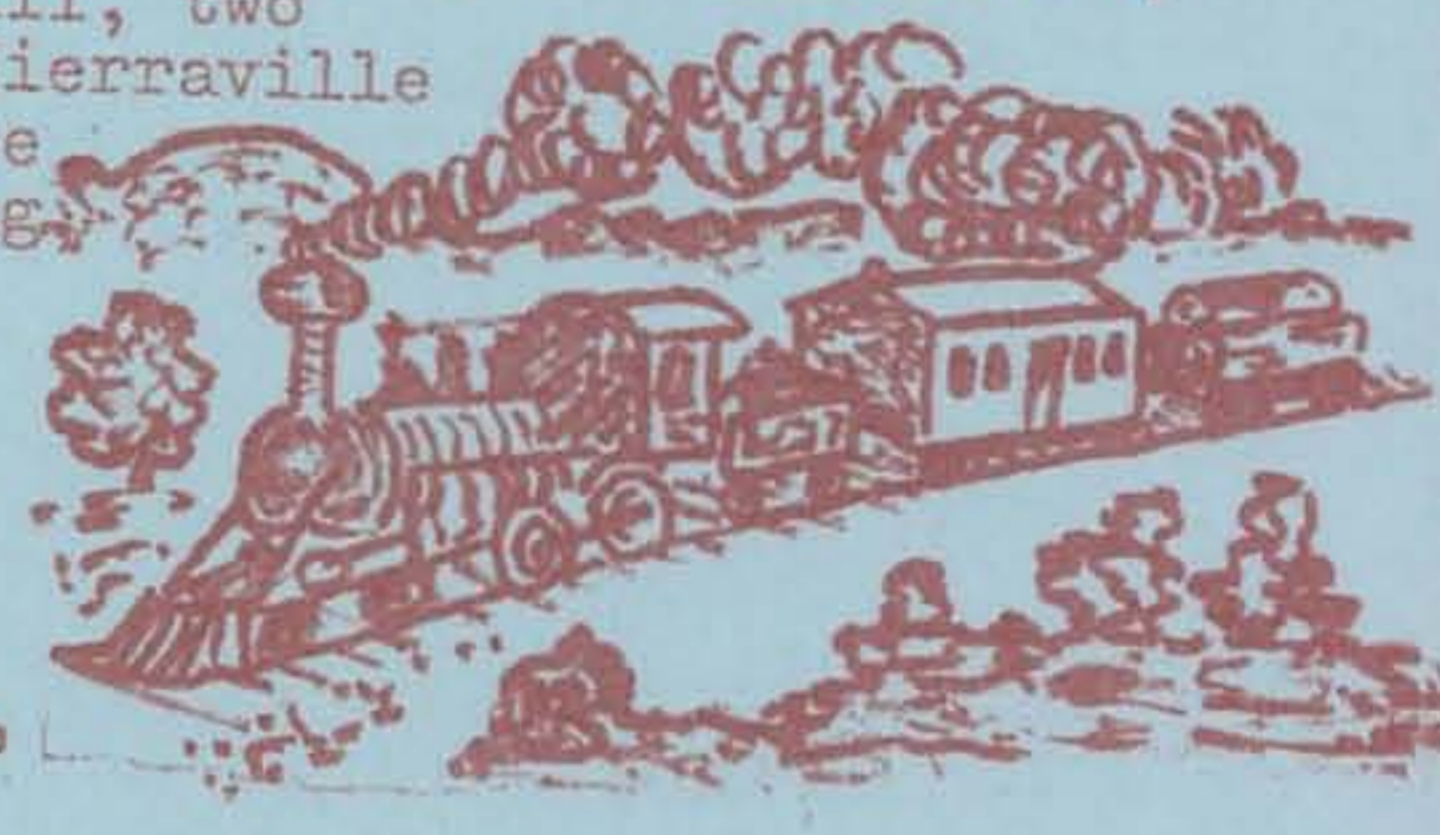
In 1872 Heartwell Franklin and Henry Turner (of Sattley) took a contract to build a wagon road over this route for \$20,000 (a twenty mile stretch). It followed, essentially, the same route of our State Highway 49, presently in use. Supplies came in this way, as well as by Beckworth's line from Chilcoot summit to Quincy and over Buck's summit to Marysville. This also drew much business to and from Long Valley and Honey Lake, the main freight depot being at Summit (near Chilcoot).



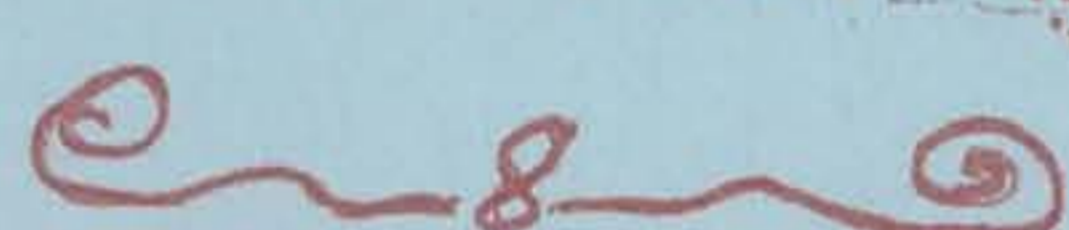
With the discovery of gold and silver in Virginia City in 1859, it became necessary to haul huge amounts of supplies from the boats at Marysville. Their wagons came up the Yuba River to Freeman's Crossing (just below Camptonville) and over the Henness Pass. This followed the high crest of the ridge from the crossing at Freeman's - past Weber Lake, Kyburz Flat, Sardine Valley - through Dog Valley to Verdi and on to Reno. These early road builders liked to stay on the crests of the ridges for two reasons. First, there was less grade, as the ridges hold to a fairly constant elevation, and, second, the winds kept the very top blown clear of snow, the drifts piling up just over the crests. As traffic moved over Henness Pass it eliminated much of the use of the Yuba Pass road, it being a much shorter distance to meet the supply trains at Kyburz, and coming down the Cold Creek canyon, a relatively easy route.

But Progress doomed the Henness Pass road in its turn. The Southern Pacific railroad was opened in 1869, the first train moving through Truckee on May 10th of that year. Freight came into Truckee by rail and the road to Kyburz was extended over Sagehen into Truckee.

Sierraville became the hub of a network of lines, with the wagon trains coming in from Truckee and branching out into three main lines: one to Johnsonville, one to Sierra City and Downieville, and one to Summit through Loyalton. At this time Randolph sported one hotel, one livery stable, a grist mill, saw mill, two saloons, and a blacksmith shop, while Sierraville had two hotels, three saloons, and three livery stables. It was a busy, bustling, noisy place.



In 1890 a narrow gauge railroad called the Sierra Valley Railroad was built in from Reno Junction (where it met the N.C.O.R.R.) - over Beckworth pass to Vinton - on to Clairville and Clio. This brought freight, mail, etc.,



closer yet, and Vinton (formerly called Cleveland) was the pick-up spot with a shuttle network of teams and pack trains feeding into the established lines.

In 1901 another railroad was built from Boca to Lewis Mill - about half way between Loyalton and Sardine Valley. This replaced the old steam traction wagon trains then in use in the logging and lumber operations. These were steam powered, with two huge cleated rear wheels and one small driver wheel in front. It pulled a string of wagons - logs or lumber.

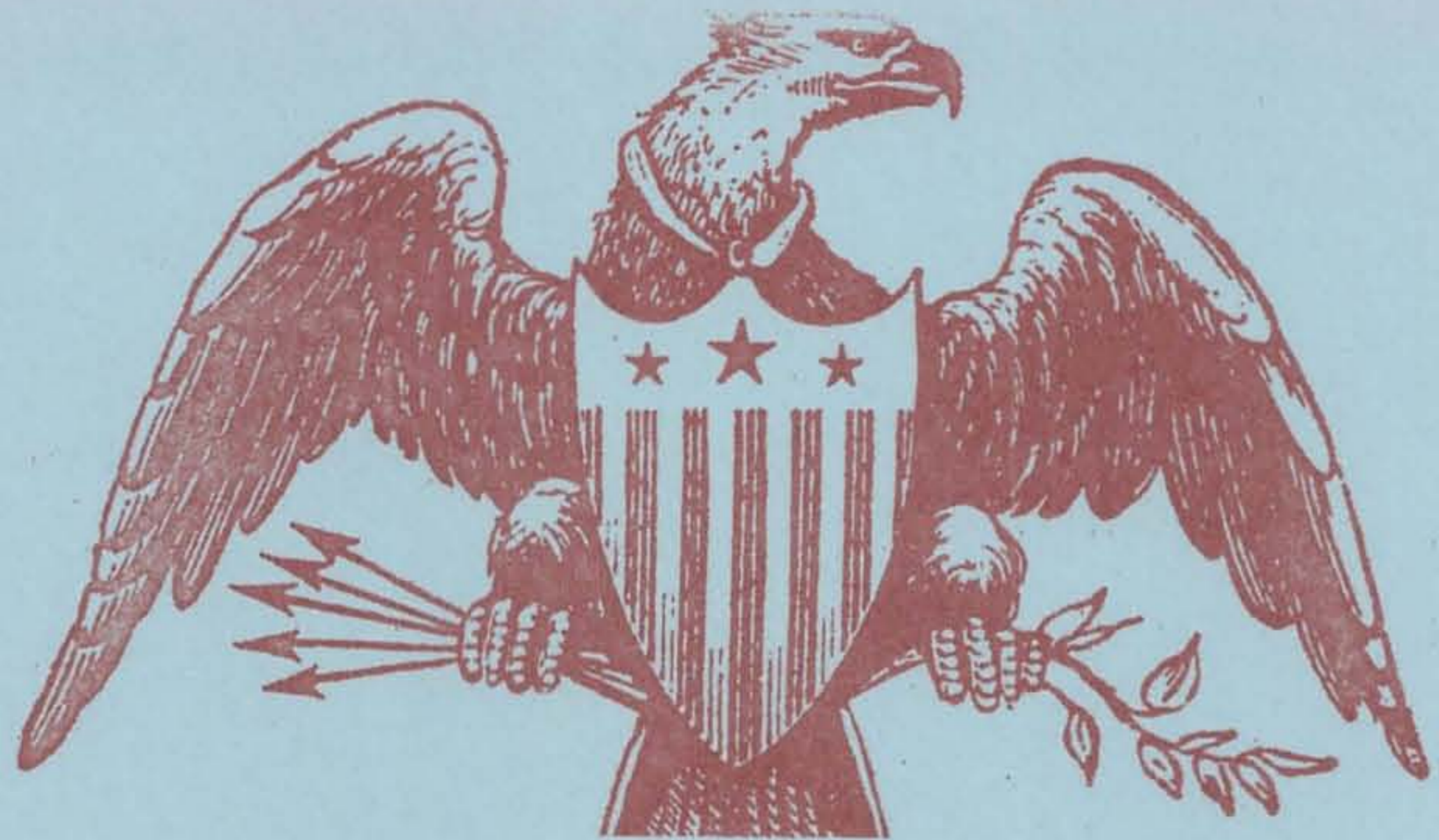
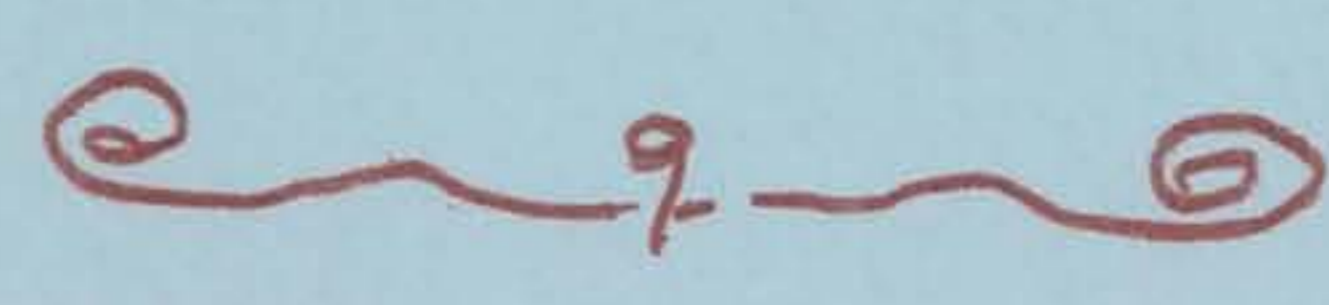
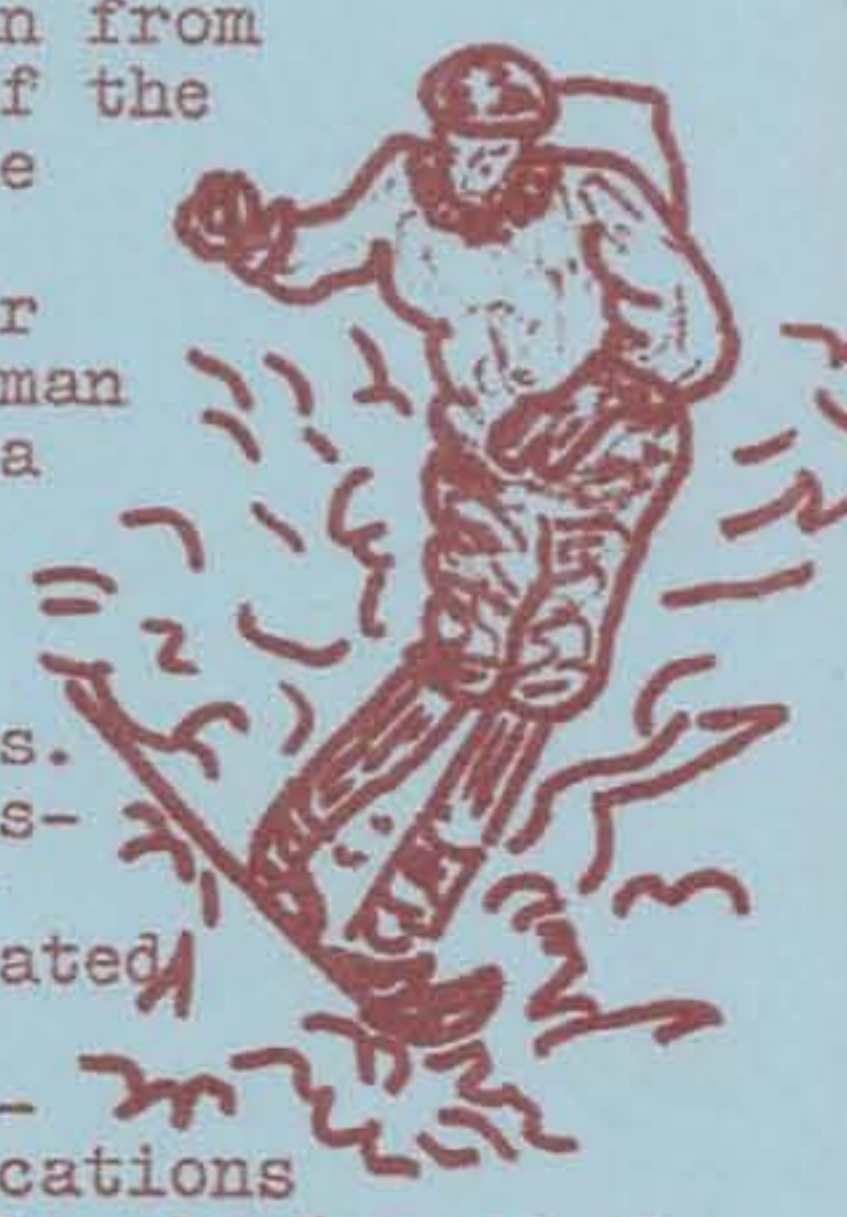
This railroad was later extended into Loyalton and was known as the B & L (Boca and Loyalton). At this time there were five saw mills and three planing mills in Loyalton. When they pushed on across the valley to join with the Sierra Valley rails at Horton Junction (near Hawley), a spur continued on to Horton's landing and another to the ice pond at Gulling or Grizzley Creek.

Many spurs ran from all these many grizzlies into mills and logging camps - one of the longest being from Horton's landing into Clover Valley. This operated until 1957 when the big trucks took over the log hauling.

Distance was being eliminated all the time. Freight, passengers, and even the mail came in to Loyalton, except in bad weather when the letter mail came via Vinton - as snow created a problem on the B & L. In 1910 the Western Pacific built the second trans-state railroad up the Feather River Canyon - crossing the north end of Sierra Valley. This compounded the troubles the B & L were having and they discontinued operation on December 1, 1916. However, the W. P. bought the section running from Hawley to Loyalton and continued operation of it - Clover Valley sharing its use until 1957. This is the only section of the old B & L still in existence.

Charles Dubordieu was the last of the old stage lines to operate under horse power. He followed such old timers as Laity, Linus, Dolley, and A. S. Nichols. Between 1912 and 1915 the stages modernized and motorized - but still served the surrounding communities.

Most of the mail to Downieville still comes in from Chilcoot and over Yuba Pass, though without most of the early hardships. Now a rotary snow plow clears the way, whereas it used to go on skis in the winter time. One legendary man by the name of Tom Sawyer carried the mail for many winters. He was a huge man and could carry 100 pounds a trip, skiing to Sierra City one day and back the next. Snowshoes on horses and even an early model of a snowmobile were used. This contraption had two tank-like, bullet-shaped runners with spiral, grooved surfaces. Ever working towards faster and more improved transportation! Now we sit in heated comfort and enjoy our "instant" communications and wonder at the stamina of the men our mountains produced. How did they do it?



(Previously printed in the Magazine Section of the San Francisco Chronicle, July 3, 1960)