

The Sierran

— A Publication of the Sierra County Historical Society —

Living on the Shore of Lake Beckwourth (Sierra Valley)

By Judy Lawrence

Editor's Note

Often, when I'm walking around my property and cabin situated on the west side of Highway 89 between Sierraville and Calpine, I look out over Sierra Valley and imagine what the view would have been approximately 10,000 years ago when I would have had lakeside property on a receding Lake Beckwourth! So I decided to learn more about the body of water that filled this beautiful basin that many of us call home.

According to Cordell Durrell, author of *Geologic History of the Feather River Country, California*, Sierra Valley was formed in the Quaternary period – the geologic time period that began about 2.6 million years ago and continues to the present – as a result of faulting along the northeastern edge of the Sierra Nevada. More than half of the entire area of the Sierra Nevada is comprised of plutons of granitic rock that invaded the older rocks that record earlier deposition, vulcanization, deformation, and metamorphoses. Two million years ago the basin-and-range structure developed wherein upthrown blocks became mountainous areas and other blocks were downdropped, forming basins, including Sierra Valley.

During this time of upthrown and downdropped blocking, the basin that later became Lake Beckwourth was created when the floor of the valley dropped downward with respect to the surrounding lands. Later, the valley became filled with water from a stream that flowed along a fault where Little Last Chance Creek is today below Frenchman Dam.

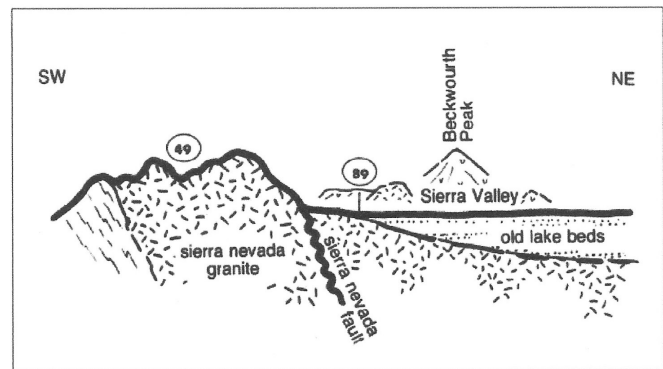


Figure 3. Section Across the Steep Eastern Face of the Sierra Nevada. (Reprinted from Alt 1996: 128)

"Lake Beckwourth was named by John Van Couvering in honor of the pioneer James Beckwourth. Its shoreline was at an altitude of about 5,100 feet. The area of the lake was about 180 square miles. Excluding a small part of the valley immediately west of Beckwourth, the floor of Sierra Valley is the exceedingly flat surface of the sediment deposited in the lake," according to Durrell. He points out that the lake went through periods of higher levels and lower levels during the thousands of years it existed. The lake dropped to just 160 feet eventually as water drained intermittently through an outlet channel from Lake Beckwourth into Mohawk Lake. The fluctuating levels are evidenced today by gravelly terraces around the valley that are really old beaches.

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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!

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Become a Member!

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.....	\$20.00
FAMILY & INSTITUTION.....	\$25.00
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In addition, Museum Renovation Project donations are gratefully accepted.

Please send dues and donations to:

S.C.H.S.

c/o Don Yegge, Membership Chair
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President's Message

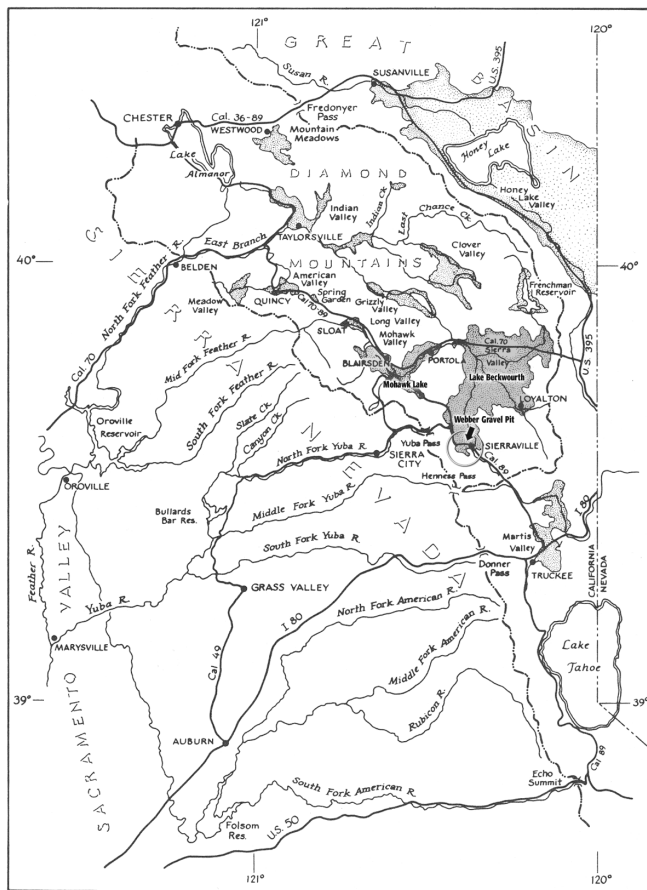
By Mary Nourse

The Kentucky Mine Museum has lovely new wood laminate floors thanks to the efforts of numerous Sierra County Historical Society members and supporters. After a rigorous fund-raising campaign, which included the Sierra City Sesquicentennial celebration last summer, volunteers were called upon to become even more hands-on in preparation for the installation of the flooring. They painted the interior of the museum and packed up and stored all the artifacts for the duration of the project. Then the big guns (Sierra County's road crew) were called in to move the heavy cases, safes, pianos, and a giant monitor. Their combination of brains, brawn, and good humor made the daunting move manageable.

The cases and furniture are all back in place and the artifacts are ready to be reinstalled in their respective exhibits. If you would like to help out with this last moving phase please contact sierracountyhistory.org or call Mary Nourse at 530-862-1123.

A celebratory event, "A Night at the Museum", is planned for spring or early summer so that SCHS can properly thank the many volunteers and county workers that made the renovation possible.

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Durrell points out evidence of these ancient shorelines are visible today beside State Highway 49 on a hill four miles north of Loyalton, and on another hill 5.5 miles west of Loyalton. He notes that the shore line is fairly well marked on the hill slope southwest of the town of Beckwourth and on the east side of the Buttes, 3.5 miles each of Beckwourth, which once was an island in the lake!

Wells drilled in the lake sediments have yielded clues about the depth of the basin that became Lake Beckwourth. A well drilled near the center of the basin penetrated 1,275 feet of lake sediment below which there are 950 feet of volcanic rock, the same kinds of rocks that are present in the highlands surrounding the basin. This would suggest that the lake at the well site was about 1,500 feet. "This value compares rather well with the present maximum depth of Lake Tahoe of 1,600 feet," according to Durrell.

So what happened to the large, deep Lake Beckwourth which is now the beautiful, flat Sierra Valley dotted with trees, grasslands, and grazing cattle? Durrell notes that the only outlet for the water in the lake is the canyon between Beckwourth and Portola. The water flowed through this channel and entered Mohawk Lake at Portola. The shoreline of Mohawk Lake was 60 feet lower than that of Lake Beckwourth, so "the short river that connected the two was probably a fast-flowing stream," according to Durrell. He believes that the two lake levels became nearly the same which would have resulted in the stabilization of Lake Beckwourth at a depth of about 160 feet. However, Durrell believes that a "quite sudden event" occurred that further lowered Mohawk Lake, and ultimately Beckwourth Lake. How much this lowered Lake Beckwourth and how long this draining continued will not be known until the shorelines of Lake Beckwourth have been studied further, Durrell concludes.

Before



After



Before and After photos were created by, and appear on, the website "Natural, Prehistory, & History of Portola and Mohawk Valley"

We Go Above

Editor's Note:

This account of a young girl's stagecoach trip from Nevada City to Sierra City was contributed by Mary Nourse. The manuscript was given to Mary many years ago, without identification of the person writing the narrative. We would appreciate any input as to the identity of the person who wrote this fun and interesting story. It will be printed in two parts in the Sierran, beginning with Part 1 in this edition.

W

e Go Above - Part 1

It was still dark at five o'clock on that October morning as we three travelers, breakfastless but dressed for the journey, stood awaiting the stagecoach for our first trip "up above." We were ready none too soon, for the stage did not keep us waiting. A photograph made in 1893 shows the Downieville stage much as I remember it on that morning, with its great iron-bound wheels, its shabby leather curtains, its racks on top and at the rear for bags and trunks, and its high front seat, on which perched the driver and one or two favored passengers. Hitched to this vehicle were four horses of a most dejected aspect, as though anticipating the toilsome journey before them. The horses, as we were soon to learn, would be changed every ten to fifteen miles, but unhappy passengers who, like ourselves, were going all the way from Nevada City to Sierra City, could look for no such speedy relief. The Downieville stage in its daily progress must cross all three main forks of the Yuba River, together with uncounted minor tributaries, as it wound its way along the recent toll roads. These had followed old trails worn by forty-niners up and down river gorges and across mountain ridges. These in turn had followed paths used by Indian hunters in pursuit of wild animals, which had first made them ages before on their ways to and from the water courses.



Stagecoach in front of Old Sierra City Hotel

With some difficulty and aided by the driver, we managed to climb up the steep side into the interior of the coach. It disturbed Mother to find a rear seat occupied by a Wells Fargo messenger, his shotgun guarding and express box. However, he proved to be a kind and helpful companion, arranging a bed of mail sacks on the floor of the coach, on which we could settle poor little Brother, who suffered all through the long day from motion sickness. Mother and I wore "dusters" of gray or beige linen, and Mother had tied a veil over her hat as additional protection from the thick clouds of dust through, or rather in which we should travel.

Crossing Deer Creek bridge and leaving Nevada City, our course first led down the steep ten-mile "Purdon Grade" to "Purdon's Crossing" of the South Fork of the Yuba River. This bridge had earlier been known as Webber's, but originally as Wall's. Here our next point of interest proved to be the town of North San Juan, which, other than its name, seemed to have nothing of the Spanish. We might rather have fancied ourselves in a New England village as we entered a street lined with white houses set well back in gardens and orchards.

The hotel before which the stage drew up was a frame building since destroyed by fire. I remember the dining room with French windows opening on the street where we sat down to our belated breakfast, where we were offered a choice of "ham and eggs, bacon and eggs, steak and eggs", served with accompaniments of cooked cereals, potatoes, and hot cakes. This we were to learn was the unvarying, boring

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menu in every mountain inn. We saw a number of business buildings built of the brick so commonly used in the Northern mines. All seemed prosperous, but we were looking at a dying town.



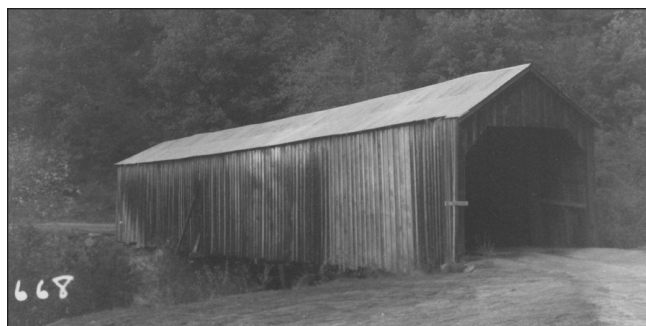
The Malakoff Diggings was the site of intensive hydraulic mining activity.

North San Juan had begun as a placer mining center in 1859 and had for years served as a principal supply town for the great hydraulic mines which had developed along the San Juan Ridge, site of the Malakoff Diggings and many others. Here the world's first long-distance telephone line had been set up to operate the vast system of flumes and ditches bringing water for these mines down from higher up in the Sierra.

Not two years before this day of our journey, Judge Alonzo Sawyer had pronounced his famous injunction, which spelled the end of California's hydraulic-mining industry, paralyzing all this activity and leaving an estimated \$400,000,000 unmined along the ridge.

At San Juan we were 600 feet below the altitude of Nevada City, and still another plunge downward was before us on the way to the famous Freeman's Crossing of the Middle Fork of the Yuba. Here two deep canyons came together, as Oregon Creek with its covered bridge joined the Middle Yuba less than a half mile above the Crossing. And here we heard the story of the great flood two years before, which had destroyed a former covered bridge at Freeman's Crossing and done great damage to some of the buildings there.

It was caused by the breaking on June 18, 1883, of the English Cam, situated on the headwaters of the Middle Yuba about six miles above the present Milton Dam. A hundred-foot wall of water rushed down



The covered bridge over Oregon Creek which joined the Middle Yuba above Freeman's Crossing

the canyon sweeping away everything in its path. The Oregon Creek bridge was lifted from its piers and deposited 150 feet below its original place. The Downieville stage to Nevada City had just crossed the Freeman bridge and moved a hundred yards beyond it when the bridge was struck and carried away. Several feet of water ran through Freeman's tow-story hotel, while his blacksmith and carpenter shops entirely disappeared. It is thought that this flood hastened the end of the long dispute between the valley farmers and the hydraulic miners. Officers of the Milton Mining and Water Company, which owned the dam, entertained a strong suspicion that it had been blown up by powder, and this doubtless contributed to the resentment felt in the mining counties against their valley neighbors.

As we crossed the Middle Fork, we entered Yuba County and our road began to mount the slopes above Oregon Creek on the way to Camptonville, 1,000 feet above the creek. It was a sufficiently tedious climb, for the old road makers had given little thought to easy grading or nice adjustment of curves, and our poor horses made but slow progress in pulling the heavy stage up the hills. The heat of the October day and the depth of dust in the dry roads added to our discomfort, not to mention the number of rocks over which the stage jolted, sometimes actually dislodging passengers from their seats.

In a spot where trees overhung our road, Mother chanced to observe suspended from a limb one of her dining room chairs, and was not so greatly cheered as perhaps she should have been by this evidence of good speed made by our furniture freight.

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We Go Above - (Continued from Page 5) —

The present-day motorist driving from Nevada City to Sierra City may catch on one side or the other an occasional glimpse of what looks like a piece of an old dirt road. This is our ancient stage road, which practically paralleled Highway 49 as far as Camptonville, after which the modern driver will not again see its traces until after leaving Downieville. 49 by-passes Camptonville and then begins a descent into the beautiful canyon of the North Yuba River, through which it makes the rest of its way up to Sierra City.

But our party is still in the old stagecoach with its four horses straining to pull the heavy load up the Camptonville grade, and horseless carriages and hard-surfaced roads are still in the unknown future. Camptonville at last! We were happy to learn that this town was the halfway point on our journey. Here, when winter snows were deep, the upbound stage and its passengers would tarry for the night before changing to a sleigh and putting the horses on snowshoes for a second day of travel.



Before the construction in 1859 of the Hennes Pass Road, Camptonville had been an important trading center, the terminus of the freight-road from Marysville and the transfer point from which all supplies going up the North Fork to Goodyears Bar, Downieville,

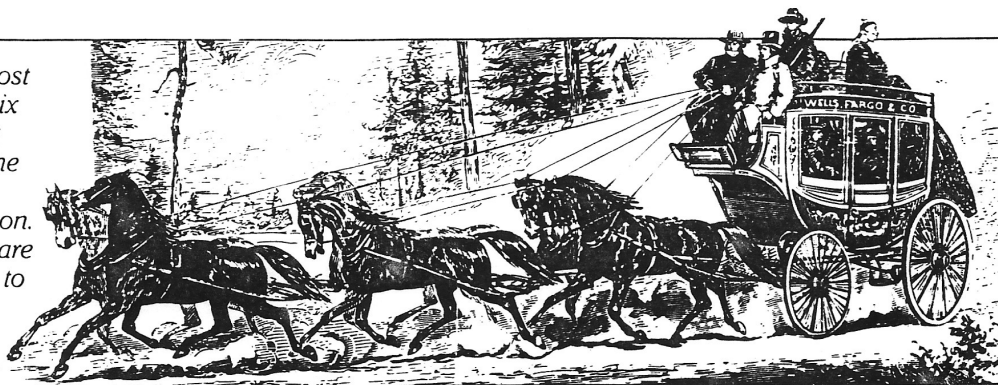
Sierra City, and scores of other camps, must be packed in on muleback. Camptonville is said to have been moved twice to make way for hydraulic diggings, and vast scars show the extent of the operations there.

Leaving Camptonville, we found ourselves on the old Yore toll road to Downieville, which first turned eastward and then made its way up and along famous Gold Ridge, passing between the deep canyons of Oregon Creek to the south and the North Yuba to the north. Three miles from Camptonville stood Sleighville House, a two-story hotel. Originally the home of the Yore family, Peter Yore had built it in 1849. Near by lay the family burial ground of the Yores, in which one of the inscriptions dated back to 1853. We were now in Sierra County and on one of the main freight roads from Marysville to the Comstock. Anxiously our driver listened for the bells on the freighter's mules, for only in certain spots on the narrow road would it be possible for two vehicles to pass.

As we gained altitude, the character of the forest changed. The yellow pine trees were taller and "Digger" pines, madrones, and live oaks were replaced by firs, incense cedars, and black oaks. Our road climbed nearly to the summit as it continued on its northeasterly progress across the ridge. A diarist who journeyed from Marysville to Downieville in 1852 has left a description of the scenery along our route, for the ridge was one of her "plateaus." "Our trail," she wrote, "forced us constantly to ascend mountains almost to their summits, and while descending this panoramic view disappeared from sight; but at the summit of each mountain scaled there stretch a plateau from which the eye could see in every direction an endless chain of ranges that unfolded like the waves of a swelling sea, all covered with dense forests of oak and pine that measured, almost without exception, from one to two hundred feet in height."



Driving a six-up is almost a lost art. The driver manipulates six reins by "climbing" or sliding them individually between the fingers. This technique was passed down from father to son. Today few men and women are dextrous and daring enough to handle six spirited horses.



Tips For the Stagecoach Traveler

The best seat inside the stage is the one next to the driver. You will have to ride with back to the horses, which with some people, produces and illness not unlike sea sickness, but in a long journey this will wear off, and you will get more rest with less than half the bumps and jars than on any other seat.

When the driver asks you to get off and walk, do it without grumbling. He will not request it unless absolutely necessary. If a team runs away, sit still and take your chances: if you jump, nine times out of ten you will be hurt.

In very cold weather abstain entirely from liquor while on the road; a man will freeze twice as quick while under its influence. Don't growl at food stations; stage companies generally provide the best they can get.

Don't keep the stage waiting; many a virtuous man has lost his character by so doing. Don't smoke a strong pipe inside especially early in the morning, spit on the leeward side of the coach. Be sure and take two heavy blankets with you; you will need them.

Don't swear, nor lop over on your neighbor when sleeping. Take small change to pay expenses. Never attempt to fire a gun or pistol while on the road; it may frighten the team and the careless handling and cocking of the weapon makes nervous people nervous. Don't discuss politics or religion nor point out places on the road where horrible murders have been committed, if delicate women are among the passengers.

Don't linger too long at the pewter washbasin at the station. Don't grease your hair before starting or dust will stick there in sufficient quantities to make a respectable "tater" patch. Don't imagine for a moment that you are going on a picnic; expect annoyance, discomfort and some hardships. If you are disappointed, thank heaven.

Reprinted from the Omaha Herald, October 3, 1877.



The Lagomarsino-Avignone Family in Sierra City



his photograph and notes about her family, were contributed by Joanne Busch.

Joanne writes that the photo is of her great-grandparents, Teresa Lagomarsino and John Baptist Avignone, and their five children, including Joanne's mother, Sarah, and families. Joanne said that her family "probably came to Loganville in the 1870s, and moved to Sierra City in the early 1900s. Their house is still standing."

Pictured standing from Left to Right: Stella Avignone, Ed Dolley, Vera Avignone, Richard Avignone, Sarah Avignone and husband Herman F. Busch (Joanne's grandparents), Elizabeth Avignone and Joe Brizzolara.

Seated from Left to Right: John Baptist Avignone and Teresa Lagomarsino (Joanne's great-grandparents) and unidentified children.

