

# GENERAL HISTORY OF THE FORESTHILL DIVIDE REGION

Compiled By Sandra Missioni

## "A Brief History of the Foresthill Divide"

By Norman Mc Leod

After the first gold discovery on January 24, 1848, at what is now the town of Coloma, on the South Fork of the American River, it was natural that the early prospectors began to explore the Middle and North Forks of the American River. As early as the summer of 1848, a party of sailors off an abandoned ship in San Francisco Bay found its way up the Middle Fork as far east as Rector's Bar (in the shadow of what later was to become the town of Michigan Bluff, east of Foresthill). Late that same year, two argonauts found extensive gold deposits on Rich Flat, that set off the Auburn Ravine area stampede. This new settlement was christened "Auburn" at a public meeting in November of 1849.

For a time Coloma remained the hub of the expanding network of foot trails throughout the surrounding area, that later became El Dorado and Placer Counties. The first settlement on the Foresthill Divide was at Todd's Valley, in June of 1849. Above Rector's Bar, near Michigan Bluff, a trading post called Bird's Store was established early in 1850. Also in 1850, the town of Yankee Jim's was founded on the north downslope of the divide, three miles from present Foresthill. The year 1850 saw heavy foot traffic from both Coloma and Auburn to all three places.

On the ridgetop between the North and Middle Forks where the trails intersected, three men decided the spot would be good for a trading post so they erected a house and hotel. Nothing is known about these three men except their names: M. and James Fannan and R. S. Johnson. The hotel they built became known as the Forest House, in the center of a dense forest of pine and oak trees. In 1851, other cabins were erected and the Forest House became an important trade and travel center.

In 1850, Foresthill's main street was laid out 200 feet in width, as it is today. Mining was conducted sporadically in the neighboring gulches, but it was not until the Winter of 1852 - 53 that a natural disaster led to the opening of the deep mines that made Foresthill famous. It was a hard winter, full of heavy rainstorms that loosened the earth. During one storm, a great earth mass was dislodged at the head of Jenny Lind Canyon that slid downhill, covering the mining operations of Snyder, Brown & Co. The dismayed owners, upon investigating the damage, discovered huge gold chunks in the uncovered soil. In gathering them, the owners realized a daily profit of up to \$2,500. This led to the opening of the rich Jenny Lind Mine that for years thereafter was a leading producer in the area.

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With the discovery of the Jenny Lind Mine, mining began in earnest on the Divide. Towns like Yankee Jim's, Iowa Hill, and Michigan Bluff grew quickly. When miners could dig no deeper they began hydraulic mining, washing the sides of the canyons down with powerful jets of water destroying much of the original landscape of the Divide.

As the gold played out, the towns died and some of them now are just a memory such as Deadwood and Damascus. Yankee Jim's, which in 1852 had an approximate population of 4,000 is now a small hamlet with a few homes and a historical marker on the site of a once thriving town.

During the height of mining on the Divide, lumbering was an important industry. Wood was needed for building the towns, shoring up the mine shafts and heating the buildings. When mining waned the lumber industry continued and became the economic backbone of the Divide.

As the years passed the population dwindled and by 1880 the Placer County census reported 2,940 people on the entire Divide. There was only one winding and rather treacherous road crossing a bridge over the Middle Fork joining the Divide to the Auburn area. This kept the Divide in a form of isolation from the mainstream for many years. Only the diehard families from the mining era decided to stay on and continue to mine small claims or work in the several lumber mills.

The North Fork Bridge (Foresthill Bridge) was dedicated in 1973 and re-opened the Divide to a new "rush" of people. First it was the outdoor enthusiasts looking for new pristine areas to camp, fish, hunt and hike with easy access. Many of these people liked what they saw and decided it was a great place to retire and so developments, such as Todd Valley Estates, began growing. In recent years, a younger population has started moving onto the Divide, enduring the long commute to jobs in Auburn and Sacramento in order to escape the stress of city living. Sugar Pine Dam was completed in September 1982 and supplies water to this fast growing area. With only one lumber mill in operation and essentially the only industry on the Divide, recreation and new growth are the economic mainstay of the Divide today.

## REFERENCES

"A Brief History of the Foresthill Divide", By Norman McLeod  
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mined at Sutter's Mill, because the *Star*, of San Francisco, on the 25th of March, had stated that gold-dust had become an article of traffic at New Helvetia—Sutter's Fort, or now, Sacramento. Early in April, Mr. E. C. Komble, the editor of that journal, made a visit to the mines, and, returning, declared them a "sham!" He had scarcely printed his paper containing the condemnation before half a pound of the dust was offered for sale. More came, and before the end of April so many had left San Francisco for Coloma that the population was perceptibly reduced. On the 30th of April, Mr. Spect says there was no excitement, and that he paid very little attention to the gold mines. Still there evidently was excitement among some classes before that, as, he relates, some rich strikes had been made, and the Spaniards reported fabulously rich diggings. This gentleman had kept a diary, from which his account is written.

Such records, together with the reports, correspondence, opinions and advertisements in the papers, of which there were two—the *Star* and the *Californian*—furnish indisputable facts of the spread of the news of the gold discovery, and of the rise of the excitement in California. In January the discovery is made and communicated to Captain Sutter at New Helvetia. Marshall appears to be the only man excited, or much interested about it. In March it is first told in San Francisco; in April gold-dust becomes an article of traffic, and in the latter part of this month and in May the rush begins, and the excitement is intense. In June, Lieut. E. F. Beale reports the discovery in the East, but it is regarded as nothing extraordinary, and little attention is paid to it; but in September he comes again with the confirmation of his first report, and bearing the gold as a proof, and from that date the news was known to the world.

#### EXPLORING THE RIVERS.

"In the summer of 1848," says the "Placer County Directory" of 1861, "the principal tributaries of the American River were explored by a company of Oregonians, and rich prospects obtained upon almost every bar, as far up the Middle and North Forks as they proceeded. At this time the bars were generally explored as high up the Middle Fork as Rector's Bar, which, proving as rich as any diggings the explorers expected to find, and it being difficult to travel further up the river with horses, they ceased traveling, and worked the mines until the winter season set in, or their provisions gave out, when they returned to the settlements in the valley or to their homes in Oregon.

"Early in 1849, the system of washing the auriferous dirt with the common rocker was introduced upon the middle fork of the American River, and was regarded as a great improvement in gold mining. During this year miners flocked to the bars on the rivers in large numbers from the "Old Dry Diggings" (Placerville), Sutter's Mill (Coloma), the settlements in the valleys, and elsewhere; whosoever

the news of the rich discoveries had reached contributed laborers for the gold-fields, and, during the summer, settlements were formed in many parts of Placer County, including Auburn and Ophir in the foot-hills; Rector's Bar, Stony Bar, Oregon Bar, and Poverty Bar, on the middle fork; and Barnes' Bar on the north fork of the American. The population upon the rivers was quite sparse, and depredations were frequently committed by the untamed savages upon the stock and camps of the whites."

#### MINERS IN THE WINTER OF 1849-50.

The region northeast of Auburn was included in Yuba County. Some miners had ascended the north and middle forks of the American River in 1849, and many of the overland immigrants of that year had settled on the ridge as far up as Illinoistown. A few people had settled upon the divide between the North and Middle Forks.

The "Historical Sketch of Placer County," published in the Directory of 1861, says:—

During the winter of 1849-50, the population of the now rich and populous Townships five and six, consisted of Dr. Todd and three or four companions, at Todd's Ranch; Yankee Jim and his companions, six in number, at Yankee Jim's Dry Diggings, near where Forest Hill is situated; six young men, one of whom was named Lewis, near the head of Mad Cañon; two men at Birds' store, and about thirty persons at Stony and Rector's Bars. The whole white population amounted to not more than fifty persons.

The hardships endured by the few individuals who remained upon the river at Stony and Rector's Bars during the memorable winter of 1849-50, can never be half told. The writer of this sketch, being one of the unfortunate individuals whose reduced fortunes forced him to remain upon the river at Stony Bar, in order that he might eke out a scanty subsistence by working in the banks and on the high bars, when a temporary cessation of falling rain and snow permitted him to venture forth from the canvas tent, which served him and his companions as a winter dwelling, cannot, at this day, after a lapse of more than ten years, repress a shudder, when revolving in his mind the many incidents attending his residence during the winter upon the Middle Fork.

The rains, which had set in towards the last of December, continued to fall almost constantly until the second week in February, covering the mountains on either side of the stream to the depth of four feet with snow, blocking up the trails, and so completely destroying every trace of them, that none, except in the last extremity, could be prevailed upon to venture to break a trail to Georgetown or Coloma, the nearest points at which supplies could be obtained. To add to the hardships of the little settlement of pioneer river miners, they not only had not comfortable houses in which to live, but ere the winter was half gone, their supplies of pork, flour, coffee, sugar, salt, beans, etc, were totally exhausted, and they were reduced to the necessity of living upon fresh venison, without salt or bread. But starvation was not the foe most to be dreaded by the unprotected settlement. The temporary shanties, or huts of the men, were scattered along the river for a distance of two miles; in each of which lived

from two to five persons. No guard was kept at night, and in case of an attack by the Indians, the men scattered and poorly armed, as they were, could have offered but a feeble resistance.

The heavy snows, higher up in the mountains, had forced a band of Indians to venture down the cañons to the vicinity of the camp of the whites, in search of horses, mules, cattle, or anything else which could serve as food for their starving squaws and children. They were discovered by the whites, and a meeting was called of all white men known to be upon the river, in reach, for the purpose of ascertaining the number and condition of the guns, and the amount of ammunition in the hands of the miners. The number of guns on hand amounted to one to every three men, and among the whole number there were not more than three pounds of powder. An organization was immediately effected and men were started out with directions to proceed down the middle fork of the American River until they had reached a point where supplies could be purchased, and to procure all the arms and ammunition they could obtain and bring into the camp. The relief party, after scrambling over the rocks for two days, reached the Big Bar, in El Dorado County, where they purchased some powder, lead, caps, salt, and tea, and one rifle gun, and returned to their companions.

With these additions to the stock of arms and ammunition on hand, after making a show of strength by sending small parties out in search of the Indians, one of which came up with a party of the red skins, and attacked and killed some of their number, the whites felt quite secure from an attack and remained quiet the balance of the winter.

Toward the last of February, 1850, the weather turning warm and the news of rich discoveries having been made the fall previous, between the head-waters of the middle and north forks of the American, having spread among the miners of Hangtown (Placerville), Weaverville, Coloma, Georgetown, Kelsy's, and other thickly settled places in El Dorado, a general stampede took place, and the men came in hundreds, making Bird's store (Bird's Valley) their place of rendezvous, until the number of men gathered there amounted to two or three thousand. Here they were compelled to remain until the snow settled sufficiently for them to penetrate the mountains and cañons higher up on the slope of the Sierra. Early in the spring good prospects were obtained in El Dorado Cañon, and companies were soon engaged in mining in the bed and banks of the creek from its junction with the North Fork to its head.

#### ADVENTURES OF PIONEERS.

Among the pioneers of Placer County in 1848 was Thomas M. Buckner, now a resident of Spanish Dry Diggings, in El Dorado County, who emigrated to Oregon from Kentucky in 1845. When the news of the gold discovery in California reached Oregon, several parties immediately fitted out and left the latter Territory for the gold-fields; and one of these—a company under the leadership of Captain Martin, numbering sixty-two men, nearly all of whom were young—Buckner joined, and, after various adventures *en route* overland, arrived at Sutter's Fort on the 2d day of August, 1848. Stopping at the fort a few days, a party of sailors arrived from the mines with a considerable quantity of gold-

dust, and informed Mr. J. D. Hoppe, who was also there, and with whom they were acquainted, where they had obtained it, and of the probability of there being much more in the vicinity. Mr. Hoppe immediately engaged a party of seven men, besides himself, of which Buckner was one, to go with him to the "Sailor's Diggings," having obtained unmistakable directions as to the route and distance, and about the 10th of August left the fort. In those days there were circuitous trails, for though the objective point of the party afterward proved to be the place called, the following year, Rector's Bar, after an Oregonian of that name, on the middle fork of the American, they proceeded to Sutter's Mill; thence northerly to Long (now Greenwood) Valley; over the ridge by Spanish Dry Diggings and down into the cañon of the Middle Fork to what was afterward named Spanish Bar, across the river and up the hill to the top of the ridge, up which they traveled on the trail made by the sailors to the place now known as Bird's Valley, where they fixed their camp. One of the men, named Jonathan Keeney, was the first to go down into the cañon of the river, where he creviced with good results, and returned at evening with his gold. Thenceforward the entire party followed Keeney's example—going down to the river in the morning, working during the day and returning to camp on the ridge in the little valley at night. The only tools used by these primitive miners were butcher knives, iron spoons, an occasional small steel bar, and a pan, as they sought for gold only upon and in the crevices of the bed-rock which the high waters of years had flowed over and denuded of all loose material. The gold was coarse, and while some of the crevices worked would yield many pounds of gold, others frequently contained nothing. This rendered the success of the party variable, and though generally lucky, when provisions began to get scarce toward the rainy season, a separation took place, Buckner, Richard Finley and Jonathan Keeney (both of the latter now living in Oregon) starting over an unknown route, with no trail, hoping to reach Johnson's Ranch on Bear River. In this, however, they were disappointed, for the first evidences of civilization they saw were upon arrival at Sinclair's Ranch.

Knowing nothing about dry or ravine diggings, and believing then the tales of trappers and others that it would be impossible to winter at the mines along the rivers, Buckner went to San Francisco and thence to the redwoods, known as the San Antonio, and Prince's Woods, in the hills back of the present city of Oakland, where he found employment making shakes, pickets, whip-sawing lumber, etc. At that time these redwoods contained scores of men of various nationalities and divers professions—run-away sailors, beach-combers, lawyers, doctors, etc.,—all similarly occupied from present necessity.

Among these homogeneous spirits who were temporarily inhabiting the redwoods was Capt. Ezekiel

the valleys; made a constitution guaranteeing freedom, with laws of justice and equality, and impressed a character upon it which will never be obliterated.

#### DOMESTIC HABITS OF THE PIONEERS.

For the satisfaction of curious women who wish to know how their fathers and brothers managed housekeeping, and for men who never tried pioneer life, and have no prospect or necessity of trying it, this is written. Many exaggerated stories are in circulation concerning the habits and characters of our early settlers. Bret Harte, Joaquin Miller, and a score of other writers, have taken some odd sample of humanity, added some impossible qualities, and set him up to be laughed at, or perhaps admired; when the fact is, the caricature is about as near the original as the Indian maiden of romance is to the filthy squaw of reality. The '49er is represented as having pounds of dust loose in his pockets, which he passed out by the handful for whisky or whatever struck his fancy; as carrying an arsenal of knives and revolvers which he was wont to use on the slightest provocation—"rough but generous, brave, and kind." While it is true that an ideal '49er occasionally made an appearance in those days—for it is almost impossible to draw a monster, physical, moral, or intellectual, that has not some familiar features—the fact is, that the mass of the people had no resemblance to the ideals of Bret Harte or Joaquin Miller. They were sober, industrious, and energetic men, who toiled as men with ambition and strength can toil. The labor these men performed in damming and turning rivers, or tunneling mountains, was not the spurt of enthusiasm born of whisky. Many of the men had families at home whose letters were looked for with the most eager interest. The younger men, who had not families, had ties perhaps equally as strong. The exceptions, which have given such a false character to the '49er, were unprincipled adventurers from every State and nation, gamblers in bad repute, even among their own kind, frontiersmen who acknowledged no law, and fugitives from justice everywhere. This was the class that made a vigilance committee necessary in San Francisco in 1850 and 1856; which occasionally aroused the wrath of the mass of miners by robbing or killing a peaceable citizen. The description of this class is not the object of this chapter; they have already, in the hundred books which have been written of them, had more notice than they deserved. The substantial, honorable, and industrious must now claim our attention.

#### THE MINERS' CABIN.

When the lucky prospector had found a paying claim, the next thing was to set up his household. From two to four was the usual number of the mess. The summers were long and dry, and there was no discomfort in sleeping out of doors. But even in summer a house, though humble it might be, had many advantages over a tent for comfort and secu-

rity. A stray horse or ox would sometimes get into the flour-sack or bread-sack, upset the sugar, or make a mess of the table-ware. Wandering Indians would pilfer small things, or take away clothing which might be left within reach; but in a cabin things were tolerably secure from depredation. A site for a cabin was selected where wood and water were abundant. These things, as well as the presence of gold, often determined the location of a future town. Bottle Spring, Double Springs, Mud Springs, Diamond Springs, Cold Springs, and Soldier Springs, at once suggest their origin, as places of encampment, as Ophir, Secret Ravine and Dry Diggings did places of gold. In the earlier days, log-cabins were soon put up, for suitable logs were found everywhere. Though these cabins are in the dust—passed into history—there is no need of describing them, as the books are full of the "settlers' log-cabin," and no boy of the present generation, who has arrived at the age of ten, would need instruction in building one.

In the western settlements a floor made of hewn timbers (puncheons) was usual, but the ground served for a floor, and was considered good enough for a *man*. The sleeping places were as various as the minds of men. Sometimes a kind of *dais*, or elevation of two or three feet, was made on one side of the cabin, where the men, wrapped in their blankets, slept with their feet to the fire. Generally *bunks* were made by putting a second log in the cabin at a proper elevation and distance from the sides, and nailing potato or gunny sacks across from one to the other, making in the same way a second tier of bunks, if necessary. Some fern leaves or coarse hay on these sacks, with blankets, made a comfortable bed. A good fire-place was necessary. Most of the mining was in water, necessarily involving wet clothes. A rousing fire, especially in winter, was necessary to "get dried out." Some of these fire-places would be six feet across, and built of granite or slate rocks, as each abounded. There was not much hewing done to make them fit. When the structure had been carried up four or five feet, an oak log was laid across as a mantel-piece, and on this the chimney, generally made of sticks or small poles plastered with mud, was built. A couple of rocks served for rests for the *backlog* and *forestick*. A shelf or two of shakes, or sometimes an open box in which pickles or candles had come around the Horn, would serve for a cupboard to keep a few tin plates, and cups, and two or three cans containing salt, pepper, and soda. A table of moderate size was also made of shakes, sometimes movable, but oftener nailed fast to the side of the house. Those who crossed the plains would often take the tail-gate of the wagon for this purpose. A frying-pan, coffee-pot, Dutch-oven, and water-bucket completed the list of household utensils. As the miners became prosperous, a soup-kettle for boiling potatoes, and also for heating water to wash their clothes on a

roll of paper, with pen and ink, with which to correspond with the folks at home.

#### HOUSEKEEPING AND COOKING.

Cooking was sometimes done turn-about for a week, and sometimes seemed to fall to the lot of the best-natured one of the crowd, the others bringing wood and water by way of offset. Not much attempt was made at neatness, and oftentimes one had to console himself with eating only his own dirt, for there were camps where the dishes were not washed for months. Sometimes a little hot coffee turned on a plate would take off the last-formed dirt; but washing dishes—the everlasting bane of woman's housekeeping—was, if possible, more repugnant to man, and was frequently omitted; it made the gold-pan grousy (the miners prospecting-pan served for washing dishes as well as gold, also as a bread-pan, and wash-tub on Sunday); there was no time to stop after breakfast, and they worked so late that they could not delay supper for the dishes to be washed, and so they were left from day to day. The cooking was a simple matter, boiling potatoes, making coffee, frying slap-jacks and meat being the usual routine. Bread?—yes, I am going to tell you about that. All sorts of bread but good bread were made at first. The miners knew that their wives and mothers put in soda, so they put in soda. Some of them brought dried yeast across the plains, and undertook to make raised bread, but as a general thing miners' bread was but sorry, sad stuff. The most successful plan was to keep a can of sour batter (flour and water mixed), with which to mix the bread, neutralizing the excess of acid with soda. Some of the miners became quite expert with this, judging to a nicety the exact amount of soda required. Dough mixed in this way and set in the sun would soon raise, and, if the soda was rightly proportioned, was palatable and wholesome. The sour batter was splendid for *slap-jacks*. The old story that a California miner could toss his slap-jack up a chimney, run out doors and catch it as it came down, right side up, is too old to be repeated; but it is a fact that they would turn the slap-jacks with a dexterous *flip-flap* of the frying-pan, though when the batter was made stiff enough to stand this kind of usage the cake would answer for half-soleing a boot. The better way was to have two frying-pans, and turn the cakes by gently upsetting the contents of one into the other. Thirty years' experience and observation suggest no improvement on this method.

Practice made many of the miners expert cooks. New methods of cooking were sought out, and new dishes invented. Think of using a dry-goods box for an oven, and baking a pig, or shoulder of mutton in it! No trick at all. Drive down a stake or two, and on them make a small scaffold, on which to place your roast; now build a very small fire of hard wood, at such a distance away that a moderate

arrangement will keep the fire burning steadily, replenishing once or twice, and in two or three hours, according to the size of the roast, you may take it out, done in a rich gold color, with a flavor unattainable by any other method. Steaks were roasted before a fire, or smothered, when sufficiently fried by the ordinary process, in a stiff batter, and the whole baked like a batch of biscuit, making a kind of meat pie. Game sometimes entered into the miner's bill of fare. Quails, rabbits, hares, coons, squirrels, and hawks, were all converted into food, as well as deer and bear.

#### THRIFTY CHARACTERS.

Among the heterogeneous elements who thronged the golden regions, there were odd characters among the men; and incidents comic and otherwise were constantly occurring. Tools of various kinds were very scarce, at Murderer's and Buckner's Bars in 1849, but the Vermont Company, comprising many mechanics, was the best supplied, and the thrifty habits acquired in the State whence they came followed them into the land of gold—more so in small details than in the larger transactions of the period. Thus they would rent to a neighbor on the bar a two-inch auger, or a cross-cut saw, for the paltry sum of only \$2.00 a day; and other tools proportionately. Following their example, a Campbellite preacher named Parker, from Missouri, rented out a sledge hammer for \$1.00 a day, and, having a diminutive-sized grindstone, would only charge a half-dollar for its use in shaping any kind of a tool; and as Sunday was the time which many set apart to do their tool sharpening, and the old gentleman would give the miners a preach in the forenoon, one of his sons—of whom there were two—and a son-in-law named Green, then young men, would stay by the grindstone and collect tolls. Many people were irreverent enough to think that the old man had in his time been "up to snuff," for, as he would occasionally pass by the tent, where betting at monte was pretty lively, while pretending to not know the cards, would watch them as the dealer turned them up and involuntarily utter a suppressed "oh! ah!" from time to time till the deal was out. By his thrift he got very well off that fall and went back to Missouri.

#### MEANNESS AND ITS REWARD.

A company of eleven men located upon the river, and according to rule each one took turn-about at cooking a week, the usual diet being bacon, beans and slap-jacks or bread. Some of these men turned out to be the champion mean ones of the region; for, when it came to the week of one of their number for cooking, he thought he would vary the bill of fare and have something good. By way of astonishing his companions, he laid low, and at supper time brought on to the table biscuit sweetened with molasses. A growl was started at the extravagance of the cook; some of the party would not eat at all,