

Foresthill Road - Scenic and Historical Guide
February 11, 1996

Written by Gerri Grant

Our beautiful Foresthill Road now begins at Lincoln Way and Interstate 80. It is a 17-mile drive from this point to the unincorporated town of Foresthill, and it is definitely a scenic cruise worth taking. The Foresthill Bridge was built in the early 1960s as a road which was meant to cross the reservoir created by the Auburn Dam, which is yet to be built. The bridge was built, but the dam project is still being disputed by many as environmentally destructive and not earthquake safe. Prior to the halting of the dam construction, much private property was bought by the Federal Government as "take" area, thus leaving acreage undeveloped and unpopulated on the Foresthill Divide from Lincoln Way to about the Monte Verde Inn, 9 miles up the road. This has created a preserve of our canyon view of the Middle Fork of the American River and acres of meadows and trees on the North Fork side, lush and unspoiled by homes or livestock.

Beginning at the bridge which is a half-mile long, we see bikers, joggers, and tourists walking and enjoying the view which is over 700 feet from river to bridge, higher than the St. Louis Arches (a tourist attraction in St. Louis, Mo). From the Foresthill Bridge, we see soaring hawks, eagles, the rushing North Fork of the American River below, the heights of Auburn to the west, and a view of the Sierras often covered with snow caps to the east. In between the distant Sierra peaks and the bridge is the most beautiful Divide in the world (the writer is admittedly biased) -- the mountainous partition of land between the North Fork and the Middle Fork of the American River, called the Foresthill Divide.

The Foresthill Road is an adventure to drive -- even if you do not look at the scenery which is a crime in itself. The road curves pleasantly and often surprisingly to newcomers. The first ten miles from the bridge have been significantly improved in recent years and are only moderately curvy. The next seven miles are much tighter and winding, but scheduled to begin improvement in 1996 (now behind schedule). There is a possibility of seeing deer, wild turkey, bear, skunk, squirrels, and mountain lions during the entire 17-mile drive. In addition, there are oak, black walnut, Madrone, pine, cedar, dogwood, and fir trees filling the landscape, against a smogless sky. We have wildflowers such as the California Poppy, Lupin, and Sweet Pea blooming along the roadside much of the year.

About a mile after crossing the bridge heading up the Divide, the Old Foresthill Road intersects the new. There have been at least four different paths from Auburn since 1850 that have been known as the Foresthill Road, and the Old Foresthill Road here is the most recent predecessor to the current road. Through the years, these trails have borne miners, settlers, loggers, entrepreneurs, outlaws, mules, horses, wagons, stage coaches, and of course automobiles. Each road was at a different level of the canyon and each succeeding road was an improvement on its predecessor with less curves.

A digression at this point seems merited to relate a few tales of the Old Foresthill Road. The Old Foresthill Road begins at Highway 49 in Auburn, heading down the canyon toward the confluence of the North Fork and Middle Forks of the American River. This road was the primary route to the Foresthill Divide and Foresthill between from the early 1900s to the early 60s. Even in days of the automobile, it would take one to one and one-half hours, depending on weather and traffic to reach Foresthill from this point.

The first segment of the Old Foresthill Road (from Auburn to the North Fork, still Highway 49) has a curve where a creek runs down the high side of the road wall and there is a lovely plateau on the opposite side of the road, suitable for a small homesite, with running water and a view. An elderly gentleman decided this was the spot for him and he parked his trailer there for many years on this curve, refusing to be run off. This became known as the Old Man with the Trailer Curve.

"Old Simms" was a Foresthill resident who created his own legend on the Old Foresthill Road. One evening around 1950, Old Simms imbibed too much and realized this fact while driving up the road about 1/2 mile above the old Foresthill Bridge. Therefore, he climbed into the back seat to sleep off his liquor. However, he neglected to turn off the engine and the car was still moving. The car took him down to the river, but he climbed out unharmed. This same gentleman was shot in the head at another time while living on the Divide. The bullet entered his skull and split into two segments, but didn't seem to change anything inside. He lived to be a ripe old age and died of natural causes.

About 75 years ago, a Mr. Sutcliff was making his last return to Michigan Bluff for burial by coffin in a horse drawn cart past the Old Foresthill Bridge moving up toward the Foresthill Divide. The road became so narrow in one spot that the horses had to jump the traces in order to make the turn. When they jumped at this time, the wagon bumped so hard that the coffin bounced out, merrily down to the river, to the horror of the driver. With help, the coffin was retrieved no worse for

the ride, and Mr Sutcliff was buried in Michigan Bluff as planned.

When this road was built, there was another narrowing around a point that was only wide enough for a car in each direction. The rock in this area was so hard, the construction crews gave up on widening the road here, so they put up an iron pipe rail to deter automobiles from going into the canyon. This Iron Railing became a stopping point to get out and look over the edge, as many do today on the Foresthill Bridge.

This Old Foresthill Road has been newly repaired. It was closed at Mammoth Bar between the Foresthill Road and Highway 49 due to a severe washout undermining and collapsing an expansion of about 100 feet of road in the early spring rains of 1995. The night the road washed out in Spring, 1995, a sign was put up indicating the road was closed due to "slide." This sign has been posted many times in the past and regular commuters who used this route had learned that the "slides" were often easy to maneuver around and still get through to Highway 49, saving about 15 minutes of driving rather than going through Auburn. Thus, a regular commuter happened upon the "road closed due to slide" sign on his daily drive from Todd's Valley in the wee morning hours while still dark. Deciding he could handle a little old slide as in the past, he ignored the sign and went around it, driving at a "normal" speed. When his headlights came upon the washout, it was too late to stop, and he began the roll into the canyon in his car. On the way down, he was thrown out of the car, while the car proceeded down the canyon and has yet to be found. He was fortunate enough to have only broken ribs, and made his way on foot back up to the Foresthill Road, where he hitchhiked to medical aid.

Back again to the present day Foresthill Road after crossing the Foresthill Bridge, you will next pass Lower Lake Clementine Road on the North Fork side of the road leading to Lake Clementine, a small lake built during depression years by the U.S. Government to employ people and to be used for a reservoir for tailings from hydraulic mining in the area. At that time, it was thought that bringing back hydraulic mining in the area could help an economic recovery. A second "holding dam" was to be built at Rucky Chucky; however in testing for seismic faults, the Corps of Engineers used a stick of dynamite in an existing tunnel which resulted in a big slide into Rucky Chucky Canyon, causing abandonment of the project. The hydraulic mining was never revived because of strict legislation enforcing the control of tailings, thus making it unprofitable, so the lake never served its intended purpose, but is a lovely recreational area in the summer. The slide into Rucky Chucky Canyon accounts for the huge rocks at the bottom of the canyon which can be driven to via Driver's Flat Road, a few miles up the Foresthill Road.

Robbers' Roost is a turnout on the left-hand side of the road with a view overlooking the North Fork. The Roost is the huge rock cliff that stands alone about 10:00 when standing at the viewpoint. The Rock is so named because it was used as a lookout by stage robber accomplices during the gold rush days. A lookout would be stationed at the Rock, ready to signal the horseback bandits coming up the Divide to meet the stagecoach. From this vantage point, the lookout would be able to determine if the stagecoach was accompanied by armed guards or a posse. The lookout would signal his/her bandits by mirror reflections from the sun whether or not to pursue the hoist. One version of this tale is that the holdup group was led by Black Bart and the signal person was his girlfriend. Supposedly Black Bart retired as a gentleman, paid off by Wells Fargo to never rob again since they had been foiled for years in trying to apprehend him in an act of robbery.

On the Middle Fork side of the road is the remains of an old stone cellar. The Bureau of Land Management burned this house down after purchasing the land. This land was known as the Spargo Ranch. Addie Spargo Quinn and her retired taxi cab driver husband built a restaurant they called the Grizzly Bear House in honor of the gold rush days, when "Grizzly Bear" was a stage stop at the same location. The proprietors in the roadhouse days kept "pet" deer that they would identify with red ribbons around their necks and sometimes bells. One hunter saw a forked buck during hunting season on his way up the Divide. The hunter stopped his car and went for his broken down rifle in the trunk of his car. The buck just stared at him, motionless. The amazed driver assembled the rifle while the buck stared. He aimed the rifle and killed the buck. He was mighty proud until he went to tag him and saw the red ribbon on his neck.

Just beyond Grizzly Bear, on the opposite side of the current road, is a level area of meadow which was called Driver's Flat. Here tired horses and mule teams would be given a welcome respite from the steep grade of one of the old Foresthill roads for about a mile or so of travel. A road further up the Divide is named Driver's Flat Road because a politician was mistaken on where the historic Driver's Flat actually was.

On the North Fork side of the road, just above upper Lake Clementine Road is Tin Can Flat. Tin Can Flat was once the home of a reclusive bachelor by the name of Shorty Balderson. He lived in a little shack, his only proud possession being a grand piano. The shack was of a size to provide room for a small cook stove, a small table, and the piano. Shorty's bed was a youth-size mattress on top of the piano. Shorty would get into his "spirits" and sometimes play a mighty fine piano until the week hours of morning. His tunes could be heard coming and going on the Divide.

Just above Tin Can Flat was once a huge water tank which was used to fill water trucks in times of forest fires. The concrete tank is still there today.

Upper Lake Clementine Road on the North Fork of the American River leads to a lovely camping ground on the river before it flows to Lake Clementine.

On the Middle Fork side of the road, just above Lake Clementine, is the site of McSaveny's sawmill. It was one of many sawmills which have come and gone on the Divide. The mill was notorious for a huge sawdust pile which has succumbed to nature over the years.

Butcher Ranch on the Middle Fork side of the road - where an aging corral still stands, was one of many stagecoach stops on the Divide. (The only true remnant of the original ranch are the rock walls of a foundation.) There, horses could be watered, bought, or sold, there was a blacksmith for shoeing, and a hotel with card room and bar. The Centennial Mine is located in this area -- one of many gold mines from the Gold Rush days. The climb up the Divide was extremely hard on horses. They often could not go any further when they reached a stagecoach stop and the owners would sell them and buy fresh ones from the proprietors. The proprietors would then rest and fatten up the horses and resell them. In depression years, the Ranch was used as a post office for general delivery by many inhabitants who did not have a home, but weathered out the depression on the Foresthill Divide. A recent proprietor was Mike Walmer in the 1930s. Mike moved to Michigan Bluff and operated the old hotel and dance hall further up the Divide.

Driver's Flat Road is on the right-hand side of the Foresthill Road misnamed as previously mentioned. You can reach Rucky Chucky River and a camping/picnic/fishing area by driving down this road which is adequate for standard passenger vehicles.

Myers' Rock is a large rock on the North Fork bank of the Divide. One road improvement was charted to go through the spot where the rock is today. When the time came to move the rock, the road crew attempted to move it first by towing, then pushing. It would not budge. They then resorted to explosives, but it would not destruct. They finally dug the road around one side of the rock and left it where it was. It was named for its former property owners - who also had a slight reputation for stubbornness.

Just beyond Myers' Rock There is a road on the North Fork side of the Divide which leads to the Hadsel quartz stamping mine, no longer in existence, a noisemaker that has not been sorely missed.

Next is a turnout on the Middle Fork Side overlooking the Rucky Chucky River to the left, and the Middle Fork to the right. The Rucky Chucky area seen from here is the camping and picnic area located at the end of Driver's Flat Road.

The Cracker Box House on the Middle Fork side was located where there is now an old apple tree. The house built by Basil Pavilla was higher than it was wide, and it had no interior stairway. Access to the second story was only by ladder on the exterior of the home.

What is presently the Monte Verde Inn -- the lovely plantation-type house on the left hand side of the road was formerly the Chicken Ranch in the late 1800s. There was a toll road leading to the Chicken Ranch. The owner used to perpetuate the mud holes on the road so he could get additional money for pulling wagons out. There was also a huge truck garden at this location that supplied vegetables to the whole Foresthill Divide. After the Chicken Ranch, this ranch was eventually purchased by a sea captain named Walker. Captain Walker had a beautiful home built on this prime land in the early 1930s. Just as it was about finished, a worker was taking some paint off some boards, using a blow torch. The house ignited and burned down before anyone ever lived there. Captain Walker rebuilt the house, but he died before he had the opportunity to move in. He had two spinster sisters who inhabited the ranch after it was rebuilt. It is now a bed and breakfast inn, and its owners are not related to the original builder.

Old Joe's Grave is a monument on the right-hand side of the road. Old Joe was not a human, but a lead horse for a stage coach. At the time of his demise, a strong lead horse was very valuable and highly revered. The stagecoach was held up one day when Old Joe was in the lead. The robber decided a little fear was necessary to speed up delivery of the loot, so he shot Old Joe. The grave site and monument honor his memory, and it is said that the community would not have been quite as upset if the driver had been the one shot.

A roadhouse called "Everybody's Inn" on the right-hand side of the road has changed names many times over the years, best

known to old-timers as The Old Oaken Bucket. During the commercial gold mining days, there was a practice by many miners called "hygrading." This meant they pilfered some gold while being paid to take out all gold for their employers. Before the restaurant was built, a Foresthill resident leased the land, and with the hygrader and one other miner dug a tunnel through serpentine rock behind the current restaurant, calling it a "mine." The only gold ever "found" in their tunnel was the hygrade already procured, but it was now pronounced legitimate.

The intersection of the Spring Garden Road and the Foresthill Road was formerly a busy location. There were beehives, teepees, and a one-room school house here for many years in the first half of this century. There was also a post office there for a long time. The road was originally the only road from Auburn to Yankee Jim's -- a settlement at the end of the Spring Garden Road which was once a thriving mining town, so this was a thriving intersection of traffic.

On the middle fork side of the road, just across from the intersection in an outcropping of rock, a gold prospector buried some gold to come back and retrieve at a later date. To his misfortune, he bragged to someone who betrayed his friendship and dug up the treasure before the prospector returned to retrieve it.

Just beyond the intersection of the Spring Garden Road on the North Fork side of the Divide was the Talley Ranch. There was a baseball field built there about 1931 or 1932, which hosted many a lively game between the settlements of Todd Valley, Foresthill, and Spring Garden. The Souheads are an Indian family of long standing on the Divide. Jack Souhead, one of this family, injured his leg in a baseball game at this field and it was amputated as a result.

Another post office on the Divide was located on McKeon Road and operated by the DeMaria Family. It was utilized by many miners and squatters for general delivery during the depression..

During the depression years, the CCC - Civilian Conservation Corps, had a camp located at the Red Rock/Cold Springs Roads area of Todd Valley Estates, just off the Foresthill Road on the Middle Fork side.

There was a "Duncan Ranch" between the the upper and lower Todd Valley Roads on the North Fork side of the Divide.

Todd's Valley Estates -- On the Middle Fork Side of the Divide was named after a Foresthill Divide pioneer who had a ranch further up the road, Dr. Todd. A medical doctor, he established an roadhouse/stagecoach stop that predated the gold rush. This housing development which was named for him has evolved into beautiful home sites of 1-acre and 2-acre lots. Deer and turkey roam with abandon through Todd Valley Estates, somehow sensing they are a protected species by the inhabitants who are primarily migrators from larger cities, seeking to maintain the wonderful environment they "happened into." Todd Valley Estates was formerly part of the Bradley Ranch.

Then there is a hill, now called Peckham Hill, and before road improvements it was a steep incline that challenged horses, mules, and even the automobiles in adverse weather conditions. The name was originally North Star Hill; however, there was a sign at this particular point in the road, pointing to an area which was named by its founders as Peckham Hill, about three miles off to the right. People eventually started calling North Star Hill "Peckham Hill" when they wanted to describe the spot where they got stuck because of the sign.

Just below the current Idlewheels Mobile Home Park entrance was an old wagon stop and roadhouse owned by a Sam Frasier. The Divide had many roadhouses, often close together, because prior to automobiles and strong headlights, people would have to stop where they were when darkness fell, pitch black, as it does on a moonless night on the Divide.

The Foresthill Middle School on the Middle Fork Side of the Divide is a former site of two reservoirs which were built to catch and store water for Pond Pit. The head waters of the two ditches were the south branch of Shirttail Canyon, just below the confluence of Finning Mill Creek and McBride Creek. The ditches took water from each tributary stream they crossed -- Kent Canyon, Yellow Jacket, Brush, MillCreek, Temperance, etc. Pond Ditch headed in Volcano Canyon and traversed near the south edge of the present town of Foresthill.

The grocery store on the right (Worton's) is a modern-day supermarket to the folks on the Divide because the Divide because its predecessors were small, narrow-aisled Mom & Pop stores with limited selection and quantity. The view of the canyon from the parking lot and inside from the meat section is spectacular and worth taking in. Dardenelle's Pit, directly southeast under the market, picked up water from Secret, El Dorado, Bulion, Volcano, and other small tributaries.

The next landmark is the former mill site which was owned respectively by Bendix, Stockton Box, and Georgia Pacific, who closed it down in 1992 in a downsizing effort. The site has been designated as a location for a high school, hopefully in

the near future, and 110 acres have been purchased for this purpose by Placer Unified School District. Prior to the big-name mills, there were two major lumber mills in the Foresthill community, the Finning Mill and the Hughes Mill (which was purchased from the Finning family and relocated to just above the town on the Middle Fork side of the Divide). Lumber has been and will probably continue to be the major resource on the Divide for many years. In present day, the remainder of the current mill site has been sold to a group of businessmen who plan to develop an industrial park for small/light industry.

Mosquito Ridge Road branches off to the right just below Foresthill and leads to French Meadows and Hell Hole - two lakes with campgrounds surrounded by nature at its best, Big Trees - a grove of giant sequoias, and a spectacular scenic drive on winding mountain road.

Continuing on the Foresthill Road past Mosquito Ridge, a pizza and hamburger establishment called "Johnny's" is the antecedent of the Red & White Grocery which was a family-owned business, built in the mid 1930's by John Ford. A bizarre robbery about 20 years ago cannot help but draw a smile in the telling. The proprietors were burglarized and came running out when they heard noises, only to find the robber jumping into a beat-up car, filled with family members, including kids, and threw his car rapidly into reverse to exit the area. However, he stripped his gears in his haste and could not get the car out of reverse. The proprietors called the police and when asked what kind of car the culprit was driving, the woman said she "couldn't tell cars too good, but it should be easy to find 'cause it's the only one going backwards down the Foresthill Road." The robber was apprehended.

The Courthouse Cafe on the right was the home of a well known and much respected Judge Schuller and his family for fifty years prior to 1994 when it was sold uninhabited and decaying to its current owner. An expensive renovation has made this a delightful coffee house with fine desserts, tea, and light meals. The tiny gift shops in its surrounding village have been added in the renovation and are refreshing in their decor and commodities.

An old-fashioned hardware store - Grant's Plumbing & Hardware is one-half block left on Gold Street. Grant's has been in business for 50 years and they feature camping supplies as well as traditional hardware items.

The Boardwalk -- the historic buildings in red on the left was a former social center of town. The building on the corner housed Langstaff's Store - a grocery business for many years. The grocery also had an assayer's office where gold was weighed and paid.. Next to the now-empty store is an antique shop, an ammunition and ladies' nightwear store, a general store, and Merriam's Photography - with old-tyme photographs and modern photo services as well.

This "settlement" of Foresthill is an unincorporated village which has been another stage-stop since the 49er days. The Forest House has been a hotel and restaurant in town since about 1860, as well as being a social center for meeting, greeting, and dancing since the 1900s, although it burned to the ground more than once. It has housed a brothel in past years and featured a gambling salon beginning 1948. (Slot machines were common in business establishments in the late 1940's and the 1950's in Foresthill.) It is currently a hotel, with unique old fashioned rooms, but modern plumbing, fine dining in the Cedar Room, and a coffee shop.

Church Street crosses the Foresthill Road and a right turn here leads to a 49er era cemetery and a breathtaking view of the canyon descending to the Middle Fork of the American River, and looking across to the Georgetown Divide -- directly to a settlement called "Volcanoville." The cemetery was started in the early 1850s, but the oldest readable marker is 1858.

Continuing up the Foresthill Road just past Church Street you will see the Tin Roof Bed and Breakfast on the left-hand side of the road -- a recently renovated historic home.

Just past the grammar school on the right is a church bell which is all that remains of St. Joseph's Catholic Church which dates back to the 1860s. The bell was cast in Sheffield, England, shipped to Boston in 1860. From there it was shipped around the Horn to San Francisco. It was boated from San Francisco to Sacramento, then pulled by a six-horse team to Foresthill. The local miners raised \$3500.00 to pay for it, which was quite expensive in those days. St. Joseph's Church burned to the ground in 1952, and the bell is all that remains.

The Catholic Cemetery is ahead on the left-hand side of the road. The Catholics and the Protestants needed separate cemeteries to facilitate sorting when it came time for heaven or hell. This cemetery is a little younger than the Protestant one, dating back to the 1861.

This completes the 17-mile drive to Foresthill. The Foresthill Road continues 30 miles further to Robinson Flat (a camping area), where automobiles can choose a rough dirt road to Soda Springs just off Highway 80, or a rough dirt road to French

Meadows and Hell Hole, eventually arriving back at the Foresthill Road to exit down the Divide. A third and more comfortable choice would be to turn around and return the paved Foresthill Road.