

## Nuggets from the Past

*By Norman McLeod*

# Solution to murder mystery didn't reveal mine's location

In mid-September 1850, four Ohioan prospectors arrived at an inhabited spot on the Foresthill Divide north of Antoine Canyon, called Burke's Station. In their possession they carried about 75 pounds of gold dust they reportedly found in a canyon nearby, within a short time.

The story of this huge success spread rapidly from camp to camp, resulting in many argonauts spreading out in their frantic searches for the newly christened "Ohio Diggings," located somewhere on the Divide. Among these was a small party composed of James W. Marshall, Jonathan Favorite, John Winters and about six others, who continued their search unsuccessfully for fully two months.

This was the same James Marshall who first discovered gold in January 1848 on the South Fork of the American River. Despite his fabulous discovery on land belonging to John Sutter, Marshall had yet to strike it rich for himself.

Late that fall, Marshall and Favorite, all that remained of the original party, followed animal paths leading to the south and eventually found themselves on a large flat with numerous towering oak trees situated between the Middle and North forks of the American River.

Here they discovered plentiful indications of previous occupation, by both whites and natives. It was a beautiful spot, as it still is, today known as Big Oak Flat adjacent to the Mosquito Ridge Road. Marshall and his friend camped near the flat alongside a spring in a small canyon sweeping around its base on the northeast.

Further exploration in the area resulted in a ghastly discovery, the lifeless bodies of four men and the carcasses of four saddled horses. Every horse had been shot

through its head. The four men evidently were surprised while in camp. Two bodies were found close to the remains of their campfire, while the positions of the other two corpses indicated they were shot while attempting to escape.

The fact that the horses' saddles and gear obviously were of Spanish origin stirred Marshall's memory. He recalled that early in the spring of 1850 four Spanish-Americans loaded with considerable gold dust left Kelsey, in El Dorado County, for the mountain regions to the north. He learned subsequently that, upon reaching Todd's Valley, they deposited their rich payload with a man named James Williams, who owned and operated a trading post there, and with whom some of the Spaniards were acquainted. A few months later Williams either abandoned or sold his business, desiring to relocate in Santa Cruz on the coast.

This necessitated the four Spaniards to take back their gold dust and pack it with them farther into the Sierra. It appeared to Marshall that the murders must have been committed in early September. By the time the bodies were discovered, in late November, the remains were dismembered and scattered by wild animals, making identifications impossible.

Marshall and Favorite entertained no doubts they had solved the mystery of the enigmatic "Ohio Diggings." The actual site of this so-called fabulous gold strike never was found.

The four Ohioans, now suspected murderers and robbers, disappeared from the Divide, undoubtedly divided their loot, split up and returned east. No record exists that they ever were apprehended.

On this same trek Marshall found himself on a small flat a short distance south of the miners' trail leading from the ridgetop down to Sailor Bar on the North Fork, near the spot where the trail began its descent into the steep canyon. Here with the chisel-point of his miner's pick, he cut the initials of his name — J.W.M. — in letters six inches high on a large rock nearby. Undoubtedly these same initials can be seen today by someone fortunate enough to locate the rock with its inscription.

Sailor Flat doubtless is where the rock can be found. A discovery of this kind would have historic significance. If any Foresthill old-timer reads this and can direct this writer to the Marshall initials, please make contact. I'm in the book.