

STAR TOWN

Nuggets from the Past

By Norman McLeod

Trip contrasts then and now

Saturday morning, Nov. 3, Mark Storey and I tagged along with Gene Markley and about 40 members of his Gold Camp Class from Auburn. Our long motor caravan followed the Mosquito Ridge Road once again, as far as the Last Chance turnoff, 24 miles from Foresthill.

We followed the turnoff nine miles, skirting a deep valley, with Peavine Ridge opposite us. This was a well-graded dirt road, except the final three miles that were rough and rocky. Along the way were large, ugly patches of clear-cutting, but with new growth evident.

About two miles from Last Chance our caravan halted. The vehicles were parked and we followed an old logging road in an easterly direction, carrying our lunches. It was 11 a.m. Our destination was the site of an old gold mining settlement, Star Town, that still appears on the Department of Interior's Geological Survey map, Duncan Peak Quadrangle, dated 1952.

From his map, Mark estimated our elevation at about 5,000 feet. The weather was clear and sunny and our pace was brisk. We shortly turned off the logging road and followed single file a faint trail supposedly leading to Star Town. This footpath pointed downward into a deeply wooded gorge, the canyon of the North Fork of the Middle Fork.

After a short time we stopped at a spot on the slope where Markley announced Star Town once existed. We looked around us with curiosity. We observed slight depressions in the ground and flat spots where cabins once stood. Also, lying around were iron stove parts and rusty tin cans, signifying that humans like ourselves once lived here.

To us the site didn't appear ideal for a town, but Markley explained the key to it was its close proximity to the mines, which would have been top priority to the argonauts.

About 1,500 feet below us coursed the river, with little water running in it. It had carved out its narrow, rocky chasm, perhaps through centuries of drainage.

After Star Town we climbed the trail back to the top. By this time people were

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hungry, but Markley announced he had selected a choice spot for us to eat, on the lip of the same canyon we had just left but in a different location. After hiking a short distance along the top we again descended, followed a second trail until we arrived at a sun-kissed, open promontory overlooking the deep gorge of the river below. Here we opened our packsacks and enjoyed our lunches. Markley was right; the view in three directions was magnificent.

Before we left the area, Gene explained a little about Star Town. "Not much is known about it," he said. "It probably didn't exceed 100 people. There must have been a store here and a boarding house, plus the cabins."

Its site was only about two miles from Last Chance, a larger town.

Next, we hiked back to our vehicles and drove the two miles to Last Chance, where we observed one rustic building still standing. Here most of the class hiked the quarter-mile to the cemetery, where Markley related the interesting saga of Allen Grosche, who lies buried in it.

(In my new book I devote an entire lengthy chapter to Last Chance, with four separate tales about it, including the tragic story of Allen Grosche.)

As I had already visited the cemetery three times, I remained at the site of downtown Last Chance. It had a parklike atmosphere, with tall pines on both sides of the road, and a kind of hallowed silence surrounding it. In my new book is an old photograph showing the same spot, filled with buildings on both sides, the street overflowing with residents and horses. Also on both sides were the trees, smaller then but undoubtedly the same huge pines we see today.

Here is where the historian most enjoys his avocation, comparing the *then* with the *now*, imagining how people might have lived *then* and feeling their long-forgotten presence in the *now*.

By this time the afternoon was half-spent, with our inspection of Hell's Delight — another old mining settlement in the near area — still on the schedule. Markley, however, announced a cessation due to the lateness of the hour. There were no protests.

The vehicles deserted Last Chance one by one, their seats carrying tired but satisfied adventurers. The return trip to Foresthill over the scenic Mosquito Ridge Road was another event to remember ... as it always is.