

Nuggets from the Past

By Norman McLeod

Trail connecting Divide gold camps was no easy highway

No facts support the naming of the settlement of Michigan Bluff. However, it is supposed that its name derives from a party of prospectors from Michigan who, in 1852, camped under Sugarloaf Hill, a rounded prominence rising 250 feet above their campsite.

The town grew, became a rich gold-mining hub, with a population of 468 in 1880. In time it became the main supply point for two other gold mining settlements, Deadwood (1852) and Last Chance (1850), all three connected by a well-traveled pack-mule trail.

It was not a hike on the level. Rather, from Michigan Bluff the trail descended 2,500 feet over 3-1/2 miles into El Dorado Canyon, and another 3-1/2 miles up the other side to Deadwood. The same mileage and depth were repeated from the latter town to Last Chance. It was not an easy trail; the packers and mules that traversed it had to be in top condition.

In the 20th century these 14 miles of pioneer trail were absorbed into the now-

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famous Western States Trail, the 100-miler from Squaw Valley to Auburn, over which horses and runners compete. This 14-mile section officially was listed on the National Register of Historic Places on June 26.

On Sept. 12, in Michigan Bluff, the Western States Trail Foundation celebrated this historic designation by unveiling an interpretive sign that describes the importance of this gold-rush trail during the early discovery days on the Foresthill Divide. A bronze plaque from the U.S. Department of the Interior describing the trail as a historic reminder of the past also was unveiled.

A crowd of more than 100 was in attendance. Tahoe National Forest's Foresthill District Ranger Richard Johnson handled the introduction of various official speakers. In the crowd were several Tevis Cup riders and their mounts, some of which had just recently traveled over the trail from the site of Deadwood to Michigan Bluff.

One speaker, Norman Klein, enthusiastically told of the inclusion of this 14-mile stretch of trail into the planned American Discovery Trail that will extend 4,600 miles from Point Reyes to the state of Delaware, through 13 states.

In August, 1863, the first recorded account of the Western States Trail from Squaw Valley to Foresthill was written by William H. Brewer in his book, "Up and Down California," a portion of which we quote as follows:

"At noon we struck a mining town, Last Chance — hot, dusty in the extreme. Here we found we were on the wrong trail and had to cross three deep canyons. A trail is cut down the steep sides. We descended some 1,500 feet*, then rose another volcanic table as high as the first — the top of this canyon, from table to table, is not over three-quarters of a mile, its depth about 1,500 feet. We crossed this table, passed the little place called Deadwood, and then we had the El Dorado Canyon to cross — still worse — nearly or quite 2,000 feet deep, its sides still steeper. Here is a toll trail, very narrow — often a misstep on the narrow way would send the horse and rider, or mule and pack, down hundreds of feet to swift and certain destruction. It was fearful, yet we had to pay \$1.50 for the privilege of passing it. There is a cluster of mining cabins in the canyon. A nugget has just been taken out that weighs 78 ounces (over eight pounds) and worth some \$1,500.**

"Well, we came out of that and stopped last night at Michigan Bluffs, a mining town. The town is supported by claims in 'washed gravels' that form bluffs nearly 2,000 feet above the bottom of the canyon, yet stratified by water..."

Author's note: Several years ago when I was hiking with Gene Markley's Gold Camp Class out of Auburn, I hiked the stretch of trail from Michigan Bluff down 2,500 feet to El Dorado Creek — twice. It was easy going down, but coming back — ugh. The creek area was beautiful and green, a park-like setting. We ate our lunches beside it. One can still see today the foundations of the cabins Brewer referred to. The trail today is not hazardous but is steep and winding.

* Today, this distance is more correctly measured as 2,500 feet.

** Today's value of a gold nugget this size would be \$27,011.