A HISTORY OF SIERRA VALLEY

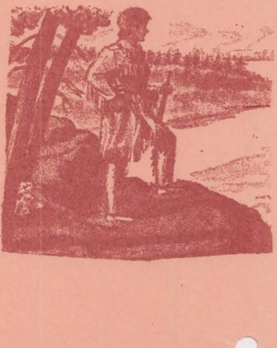
Nestled serenely in the midst of the Sierra-Nevadas lies Sierra Valley. The valley itself appears to have changed little from the days when Jim Beckwourth rode over Chilcoot Pass and beheld the valley. Those who know its history, however, realize what great changes have taken place.

If the mountains which overlook Sierra Valley could speak, they could relate the hardships and pleasures that were so very necessary for the development of the valley. They could tell of the early pioneers, the birth and death of small towns, the labor of the determined farmers and trail blazers, and, lastly, of the countless fascinating incidents which took place at their feet. This article is an attempt to tell you, the reader, what the silent mountains can not tell.

The Valley

Sierra Valley is the largest of the valleys in the Sierra Nevada Range of mountains. It is situated between the snow summit and the state of Nevada and has an area of 170 square miles, At some period of time in the long distant past itis assumed to have been a mamoth volcanic crater.

Sierra Valley, once called Beckwourth's Valley, was settled by James P. Beckwourth, an "old Mountain Man", in the spring of 1851. He led a train of immigrants through Beckwourth's Pass, located in the northeast corner of the Valley, that very summer. In the spring of 1852, Jim established himself in the Valley on the route from the pass. He claimed a piece of land, built a hotel and began trading with the immigrants. Other eyes, however, had gazed upon the Valley before those of Beckwourth.



In June, 1850, a party of prospectors, in search of the fabeled Gold Lake, reached the headwaters of the middle fork of the Feather River. Three of them, A.P. Chapman, George F. Kent and William E. Jones, went hunting one day. From the top of what is known as Saddleback Peak, they spied the Valley lying to the east,

below them. They left with the others, but returned in October of 1851.

Chapman returned in the company of Joseph Kerby, John Gardner and I.K. McClannin. This small party camped the first night amid a clump of pine trees. In the morning they immediately posted notices of their claim of a strip of land straight across the valley for four ranches. Many others followed suit, and by July, 1852, William C. and B.F. Lemmon, Gardner, Kerby and one other, had claimed land in Sierra Valley. That same spring Jim Beckwourth had located his trading post at the north end of the valley.

In its earliest days Sierra Valley attracted men who thought there might be gold in the mountains to the west of the Valley, but the gold was not to be found. Those who settled in the Valley became farmers, teamsters and merchants.

Before the development of the Yuba Pass road, the freight teams over the Sierras crossed the mountains by way of Hennessey Pass, which parted from the present Yuba Pass Highway between Goodyear's Bar and Forest. It passed Webber Lake, went down the Dog Valley grade into Verdi, and then on to Truckee Meadows. It was joined by the roads from Sierraville, via Lemmon Canyon, and Loyalton, via Lewis Canyon, near Sardine Valley. This road was very steep in places, and the Sierra Valley Teamsters soon showed a preference for the route over Beckwourth Pass and through Long Valley to Reno.

The original road west across Sierra Valley began at Beckwourth Pass, as it does today, but about six miles west of the pass, it veered toward the north and served the ranches along the hill and behind the Buttes. Passing on through the mountains, its logical outlet was Oroville. Marysville, at this time, was one of the more important towns of the state, and it was to the interest of everyone in that region to have a direct route over the mountains. In 1867, Indian Valley merchants engaged Arthur W. Keddie to make a survey for such a road.

Keddie's report of his survey was due on March 31, 1867. In his report he advised the north fork route, condemning the middle fork as impassible. His estimate of the cost of the road was $150,000, but his survey was not used until the Western Pacific built its line through the mountains.

Early Sierra Valley was taken up at first by Easterners, many of whom sold out to Swiss immigrants. These Swiss immigrants began drifting into the valley, working the various farms, and stayed to play a very important part in the developement of the Valley.

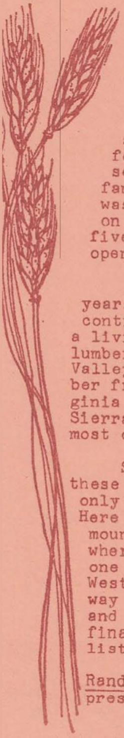
Just why or when the first Italian-Swiss came to Sierra Valley is uncertain. There were Swiss in the valley at least as early as the 1870's. Old histories record that of these early Swiss, many, in both Plumas and Sierra counties, engaged in businesses such as hotels, stores, and ranching.

The early settlers found the country fitted to dairying and grazing. Much cheese and butter was produced in the early days. The cattle raised in the Valley were driven through the mountains and marketed as far away as Grass Valley and Marysville. The mountain valleys were natural meadows, a fact appreciated by the early cattlemen. The story is told of a man named Poor, who started from Oregon in the spring and followed the grass through the mountains with 1,000 head of cattle. He passed through Sierra Valley and arrived with his cattle, fat and healthy, at Sacramento in the fall.

Fine horses were also raised in Sierra Valley. Joseph Dyson bred race horses, and traces of his private track still

remain on the ranches owned. Dr. Webber, for whom Webber Lake is named, also had a horse ranch on which he raised first-class horses for stage use and driving.

The fine native grass made excellent hay, and many a rancher received a great part of his income from hay he had sold. In the early days, hay was hand mown and bailed in one hundred-pound bales. Isaac Church carried hay up over Haskell's Peak, which seems to have been one of the earliest trails into Sierra Valley from the gold mines.



The country was settled in what was apparently a much wetter period than now. There are stories of driving sleighs across country without any regard for fences, and because of snow, taking several days to go a few miles. The most famous winter was that of 1889-1890. There was reported to have been ten feet of snow on the level in Sierra Valley and twenty-five feet on the Yuba Pass, which was not opened until July 4 of that year.

Farming and ranching, during the early years of the history of the Valley (1850-1870) continued to be the main way most people earned a living. In the 1870s through the present time, lumbering also was an important industry in the Valley and the mountains near the valley. Lumber from Sierra Valley mills was used in Virginia City, Nevada, in the many mines in the Sierra County and Plumas County regions, and in most of the towns near Sierra Valley.

Several towns grew in the Valley. Some of these communities still exist today and some are only memories in the minds of the old-timers. Here and there, around the Valley, an old cemetery, a mound of rocks, or a crumbling rock or brick wall indicate where at one time a thriving little town existed. If one were to drive into the Valley today from the South West direction (over the Truckee-Sierraville road, Highway 89) he would first reach the town of Sierraville, and then if he continued East, then North, then West and finally South, he would pass through or near the towns listed below.

Randolph: The cluster of houses at the western end of the present town of Sierraville is what remains of the early

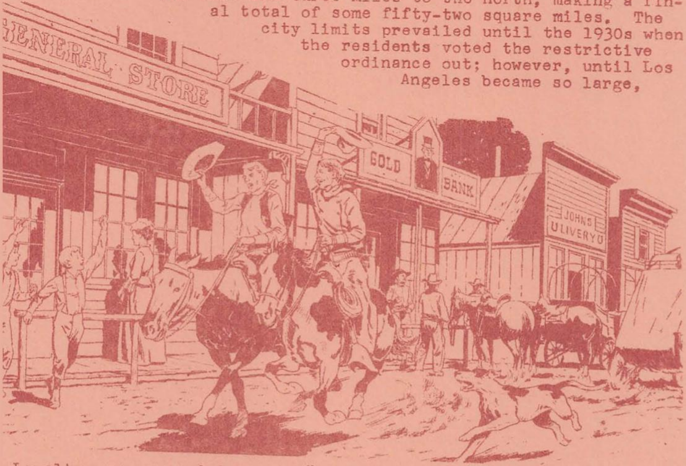
town of Randolph. The town was originally one mile from Sierraville and contained about one hundred people. The first house vas built in 1853 by one W.C. Lemon and Ezra Culver. The town eportedly grew up around this house. The town, at one time, conained a store, a hotel, a saw mill, a shingle mill, two saloons, blacksmith shop, a shoe shop, a grist mill and a number of nice esidences. Today the limits of Sierraville include what was at ne time Randolph.

ierraville: Sierraville was at first just a trading post. It oon grew into a good sized community. William Arms, who later uilt a ranch at the north end of Sierra Valley, was among the irst people in Sierraville. When it came time for the town's eople to pick a name for their community, they suggested the name rmsville, but Arms suggested Sierraville instead, and the latter ame was chosen. On August 31, 1881, the entire business section f the town, except Darling's Livery Stable, was laid in ashes by huge fire. The first fire (of mane to follow) destroyed two otels, two stores, an I.O.O.F. Hall and several other buildings. ne town, however, was promptly restored. It has remained an imortant little community of some three hundred people ever since.

oyalton: Loyalton was originally known as Smith's Neck, although ne buildings of the Smith's Neck enterprise were some two miles rom the present location of the town of Loyalton. The name, mith's Neck, came from a party of miners who were associated toether under the name of Smith Mining Company. In the spring of 54 two of these men went east to purchase a large band of cate. The others went into Sierra Valley to claim land for grazing d agriculture. They claimed five sections of land on either side a stream which empties into the middle fork of the Feather ver, and called it Smith Creek or Smith's Neck Creek. The men o had been sent for cattle failed to return, and that winter the ith Company failed. The Indians raided and burned the buildings ich had been built on the ranch, and the location was abandoned. om the time it was abandoned until the summer of 1857, Smith's ck remained unoccupied. From 1857 to 1860 people again began to side in the Smith's Neck region. In the early 1860s there apared in the area a Doctor Adam G. Doome, who seemed to have been e guiding spirit of the area. He was a doctor, a minister, a tel keeper, and a bar tender. Much of the present town of Loyton is built on land previously owned by Doome. He sponsored the ganizing and building of the first school, and was the first st master. When Doome was appointed post master in 1863, he cald the post office Loyalton. This name was derived from the loyty that the town had shown to the Union during the Civil War when e entire population responded to war subscriptions. A school s built in 1865, a Babtist Church in 1870, and a Methodist Church 1871. In August, 1879, Loyalton a fire devistated the town and ined most of it except for Keye's Hotel, the Methodist Church and ew other buildings. The town was quickly restored, lumber mills e built in town and nearby, and the town has continued to exist

to the present day.

One of the most appealing phases in Loyalton's history was the distinction earned when members of the governing body enacted an ordinance which forebade the sale of liquor within the "city limits". The city limits were then made some forty miles square as the then city fathers continued to widen the city limits to discourage lumber jacks from walking beyond the city limits for a drink of liquor. As a result Loyalton became the second largest city in California. When the city was incorporated, it had reached an area nine miles to the west and nine miles to the south and east and three miles to the north, making a final total of some fifty-two square miles. The city limits prevailed until the 1930s when the residents voted the restrictive ordinance out; however, until Los Angeles became so large, Loyalton was regarded as the "largest City west of the Mississippi River."



Vinton: Vinton came into being as a town in 1896 when the Peterson brothers rebuilt the old Sierra Mohawk station into a store. Until that time it had been only a railroad station and section. The town was destroyed by fire three times, but was always rebuilt and managed to support a hotel, bar, store and a post office which was established in 1897. The town still exists as a pleasant little community of some 150 people and has a post office, a store, a service station, a cafe and equipment business. It is also the site of the Sierra Valley Grange Hall.

Summit: In 1859, C.T. Adams operated a hotel near the highest point of Beckwourth Pass. The hotel was called Summit House and was accepted by the Post Office Department as an address. In 1861 the name was changed to Summit. By 1864 the settlement had a stone building which housed the Wilkinson Store and a cemetary to the north of town. In 1897 the population had shrunk to such minute proportions that the Federal Government ordered the post office removed, and the name of the village was removed from the Post Office Department listings. Today the ruins of the old stone store, the cemetary, one of the original cabins, and newer houses still stand on the site of Summit.

Chilcoot: By 1899 the people of Summit, the town having grown again, asked the post office department for a post office. The government agreed that a post office was necessary for the town, but in the time interval when the post office was closed another town of Summit had been given a post office in another part of the U.S. The people chose the name Chilcoot for their new post office, reportedly in a salute to the miners of the Alaskan gold rush who had crossed the Chilcoot Pass in the Yukon. Construction of the Western Pacific railroad through Beckwourth Pass brought new prosperity to the Chilcoot area. The mouth of the new railroad tunnel opened right beside the older town of Chilcoot, but the railroad station was placed about one half mile to the west of the tunnel. In time the town followed the railroad station and the town still exists in that location.

Beckwourth: The first house built in Sierra Valley was reportedly built by James P. Beckwourth, a Negroe government Indian scout, in the spring of 1852. A post office was established in 1866. For a time the name of the town was spelled "Beckwith", a mistake made in the Post Office Department in Washington, D.C., but the proper spelling was restored in 1932. The town of Beckwourth still exists and has some two hundred residents, although the original cabin built by Beckwourth (and still standing) is some 3/4 of a mile from the town.

Calpine! Calpine was so named for the California Pines which grew in the vacinity. The land was first owned by George W. and Charles M. Knuthson, who sold the real property, about 400 acres, to the Davies-Johnson Lumber Company for a cash payment of ten dollars. In 1939 the Davies-Johnson Lumber Company sold a portion of this property to J.J. Farrar. The lumber company closed and Mr. Farrar sold lots to people who formed the town of Calpine. Calpine is still a delightful spot in Sierra Valley and is attracting many people as a vacation or retirement area. The original deed between the Davies-Johnson Lumber Company and J.J. Farrar is interesting because of its rather severe restrictions. The following were part of the deed, recorded in the Sierra County Clerk's Office, Deed Book, No. 38, pages 18 and 19:

1. The premises were to be used exclusively for

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residence purposes. No buildings or structures for the conduct of any kind of business could be errected.

2. No part of the premises were to be sold, conveyed, leased or rented to any person who was not of the white or caucasion race. None of the property could be used or occupied by any such persons, unless they were under the employ of the resident, owner, or tenants.
3. No alcohol, vinous, malt, spirituous or intoxicating liquors of any kind or nature could be sold, exposed for sale or stored on the premises.

It is good to note that the people of Calpine have become much more Christian in their attitudes concerning race, and much more liberal in their attitudes concerning liquor, and that none of the previously mentioned restrictions still exist.

Sattley: Sattley was originally called Church's Corners, after the Church family which settled there. A post office was established in the town in 1890. Ezra Church, Jr. was the first post master, and the post office (and hence, the town) was given his mother's maiden name, Sattley. Frank Church, born in 1861, was reportedly the first white boy born in Sierra Valley. The town of some one hundred residents still exists.

Other villages and post offices existed in the past in Sierra Valley, but they have ceased to exist, and it is even difficult today to find their location.

Notes on the Author:

We welcome a new contributor to the Quarterly, Mrs. Joan Roth of Loyalton, California. Mrs. Roth was born in Santa Rosa, Calif., in 1951. She moved to Loyalton when in the fifth grade and continued her schooling in Loyalton, graduating from High School in 1969. Her interest in the history of Sierra Valley grew from an assignment she had in High School. She presently resides in Loyalton and is the mother of a little girl. Her husband is in the Military Service.