EARLY ANNALS OF DOWNIEVILLE AND VICINITY

By one of the Earliest Settlers

Number Four

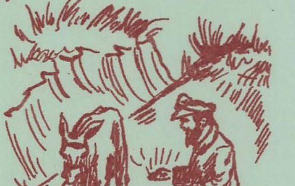
In the last Chapter, the Annalist told of the early events in Onion Valley, Poor Man's Creek, and other localities in that region. He fills us in, now, on what went on in the Slate Creek and Canyon Creek areas, also north of the North Yuba. The next two chapters will recount in detail the opening up of the mines on Pliocene Ridge, south of Downieville.

After reading these first four installments of the Annals, I am sure you will agree that our "Earliest Settler" created a remarkable historical document of gold rush days in the Downieville area.

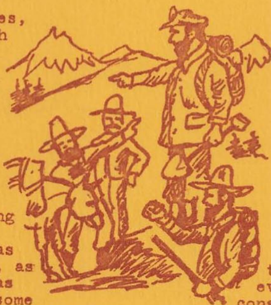
-Wm. Pickiepocke

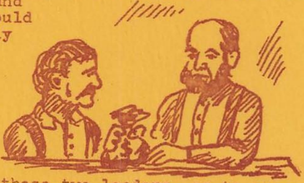
Sear's Ridge

During the spring of 1850, when every person was on the "qui vive" to find new and rich diggings, an old sea captain of the name of Sears, started out prospecting on his own account. Getting belated one night on one of the spurs on the north side of the North Yuba, leading up to the dividing ridge between the waters of the Yuba and Feather rivers, he concluded to stop and camp on a kind of a flat, through which ran a ravine. On noticing, next morning, that where he had staked his mule, what appeared to be a few speks of gold, he filled his pan and tried it; the result was so satisfactory, he concluded to stop and prospect further. Accordingly, he sunk quite a number of shallow holes, in all of which he



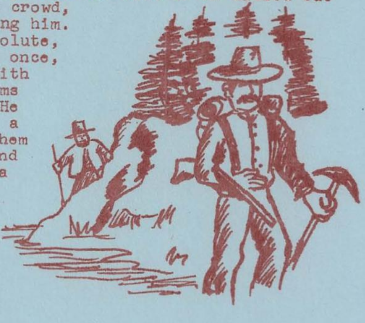
got good prospects. After prospecting a few days and obtaining quite a large amount of gold, he returned to his camp on the Yuba and told his partners of his success. He and his party then packed up, about the last of May, or beginning of June, 1850; but not so secretly, but what word got out that "old Cap. Sears had struck diggings, the amount or extent which was not known, yet up to the very grass roots and rotten leaves, gold was found!" Rumor, which ever makes the most of a story, reported that he had found diggings that would pay a pound to the man per diem. His neighbors seeing him depart, determined to follow him. This they accordingly did; when Sears and his party turned on them and forbid their further progress. The others not being willing to be thus thwarted, answered that the hills were as free for them to prospect in, as they were for him; and there was every appearance of a dispute of some consequence; when Sears' party, finding that it was useless to strive against such numbers, came to the compromise, that the others were not to divulge what they saw, and they, on the other hand, would show them the diggings; only bargaining that the Sears' party should be paid $100 per head, and be entitled to a double claim, in virtue of the discovery. The other party was headed by a man of the name of Gibson. A spirit of rivalry grew up between these two leaders, as to prospecting, which caused some of the most important discoveries of this section of country.





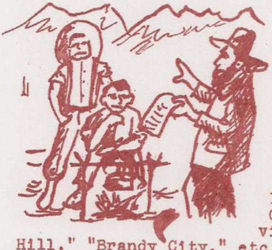
Sears' diggings being mostly of the order denominated surface, Gibson took his clue from this, and having crossed the Slate Creek--then only commenced to be worked--at, or nearly where St. Louis is now situated, soon found that his ridge was as rich, if not richer than Sears'.

Establishing a camp at what is now called Gibsonville, he proceeded to mine on a large scale, employing a number of men--half partners, half hirelings--who were to work the ground whilst he prospected with a small chosen party of enterprising and determined boys. He soon struck diggings at "Secret Ravine," when, if report speaks truth, he took out thousands of dollars before the rest of his party suspected him of anything foul. Upon the discovery that Gibson had made a successful prospect, great dissatisfaction was manifested by those left behind in Gibson's camp, and his claims were immediately jumped. This brought about a row, when Gibson returned; but they told him pretty plainly that as he had played them false, they intended to work the claims, and if he did not like their proceedings to help himself. Gibson talked of shooting and using force, but they told him that if he killed but the smallest boy in the crowd, they would certainly hang him. Gibson finding them resolute, abandoned his claims at once, and contented himself with reserving his rich claims in "Secret Diggings." He had the tact, for quite a long time, to deceive them as to their locality; and although they were but a short distance from his camp, to make them believe that they were located several days journey off. Accordingly whilst men were out in search of him toward the head waters

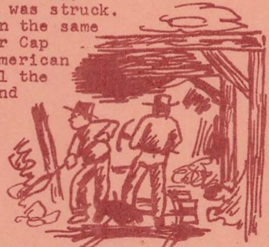


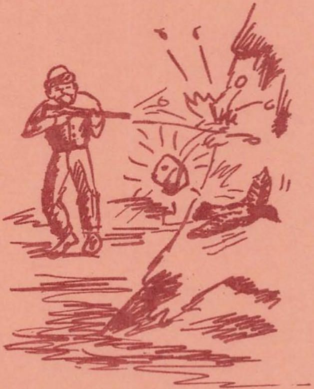
of Feather river, he was quietly, with his party making a large fortune.

Sears, in the meantime, was not idle. Setting his party to work, he drew up the rules and regulations of a grand joint stock company, the great features of which were, that the company would divide equally, both miners and prospectors. Unity of feeling, however, as in all very large companies, did not long last, and a division took place in a short time; but not before the foundation was laid of quite a large number of camps. "Pine Grove," "St. Louis," "Chandlerville," "Port Wine," "Poverty Hill," "Brandy City," etc., were successfully struck, in the space of three or four years. This split in the company took place in the summer of 1850; and although it materially lessened the profits of Sears, was of some consequence to the public; for as fast as each party separated, they spread out through the different divides, striking diggings in all directions. Indeed I am not sure that any section of country, in the same scope, has ever been so rich as this has proved. "Port Wine" was, however, struck unexpectedly by some packers accidently leaving a keg of port wine in the bushes. Some prospectors coming after, found it, after having broached it, went in search of water. As they found the ravine to have good gravel, they washed a few pans, and finding a good prospect located there, named the diggings "Port Wine." All these diggings were first called surface diggings; but as time grew on, they were worked down lower, the hills were tried, and after repeated failures, found to be rich.

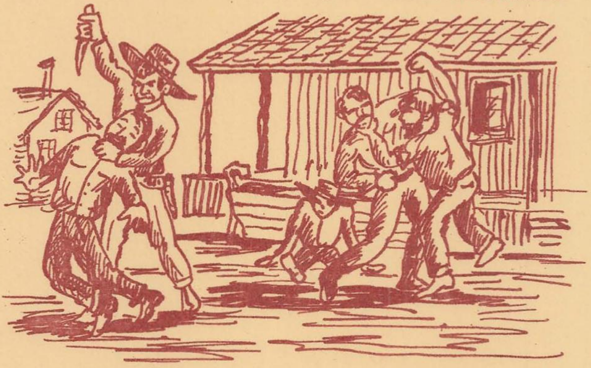


In the years 1854 and 1855 I believe the first tunnel was run into the Saddle Mountain; but at first too high, and they had to return and commence again three several times, until the deposit in the basin was struck. Others followed soon after in the same mountain, as well as in the Fir Cap Mountain, Manzanita Hill, American Hill, and, indeed, in almost all the hills as far as Pilot Peak and Blue Nose; the first at the head of Poormans Creek, and the other beetling over Hopkins Creek. It was in 1856, that the first tunnel was run in these two last peaks. In the same year also, an excessively rich quartz vein was struck by a Frenchman and a Spaniard in a very curious way. Being out hunting, the Frenchman fired at a bird on the divide, directly above the Slate Creek House, and missed it; but struck a piece of quartz, which rolled down the hill. The Spaniard picked it up and found it to be richly studded with gold. This made them both hunt about, until a vein was found dividing the Slate Creek, immediately on the creek of the divide, which showed on the out-cropping, extremely rich. One piece about as big as an ordinary bar-room pitcher was broken off and carried to Pine Grove, which was about two-thirds gold. A company of twelve was soon organized, and the Frenchman getting drunk, a Mr. Ship, of Pine Grove, induced him to sell his share to him for $1600. As soon as he got sober he repented his bargain, and tried to induce



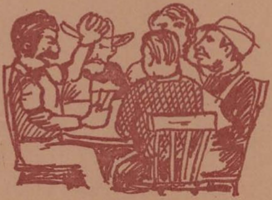


Ship to let him pay him his money back.--Ship refused, and held on to his bargain, although many thought he ought not have traded whilst the Frenchman was drunk. Ship gave a Capt. Davis--a hard charactor--a share, to see after his own portion of the profits in the lead. Quite a large camp of Spaniards was soom collected on the flat at the head of Slate Creek, and, as usual when Spaniards congregate, much cutting and shooting began to take place. Davis, for some time, was very regular in his settlements

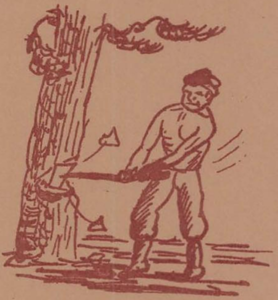


with Ship. However he managed his cards so well, that no one suspected him. Having collected some $19,000 he suddenly one evening was among the missing, and as he had hitherto been very regular in his visits to Pine Grove, they began to fear that he had been waylaid and murdered; especially, as on enquiring at the Slate Creek House, Ship was told that he had started from there about 4 P.M. the day before. He was known to have a large sum with him, and was heard at the lead in loud altercation with the Spaniards. The neighbors were raised, and strict search made for him; but nothing was heard then of him. The miners now decided to break up the rest of the Spaniards at the camp on the flat. Accordingly, they were notified,

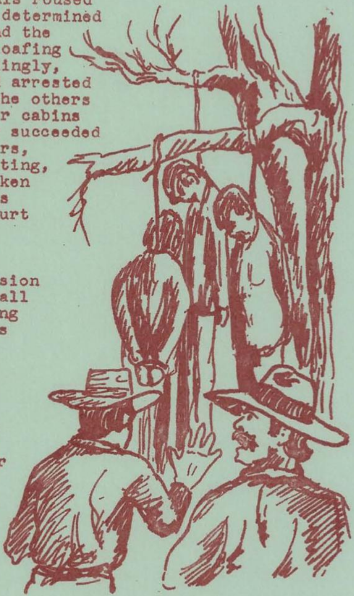
that no Spaniard, but those actually interested or at work on the quartz lead, would be suffered to remain there; and twenty-four hours was given for them to depart in. The Spaniards obeyed and left, and soon after the quartz gave out, and I believe is not now worked. It was months before anything was heard of Davis; but at last authentic news arrived that he had decamped with the gold, and made his way to Central America, where he was then settled.



Whilst I am speaking of this place, I will refer to a bloody murder which occurred at the Slate Creek House, in 1851. The story is that McDonald, who then owned the house, one night got into a game of poker with his cook and three other men, miners in the neighborhood. McDonald quarreled with the men and the cook struck him with a bar of iron, and the others finished him. They then buried him in a hole about three foot square, divided his money--some $400, only--among themselves, and departed. The cook gave out that McDonald had gone below, to San Francisco; and he remained two weeks, keeping the house as usual. He however did two things from which he was suspected. The first was he hired a man for $3 to fell a tree in a particular direction which would have covered up the grave of McDonald, but the axe was dull, and the man desisted after a little, remarking he would be damned if he would cut a tree with such an axe. Whilst talking with him, the man saw some blood on the helve and remarked it was singular to have blood on the chopping axe. The cook



colored up, and stammered out something about chopping some meat with it. This incident led to inquiry about McDonald, and some of his friends wrote to the San Francisco papers to advertise for him. About this time the cook sent some money down to a lawyer, to send home for him. The lawyer having seen the advertisement, instead of sending home the money for him, came up to Pine Grove and made a statement. This roused the miners, and they determined to arrest the cook and the others who had been loafing around there. Accordingly, a crowd came over and arrested the cook, but found the others had gone home to their cabins on Canon Creek. They succeeded in arresting two others, but the fourth, resisting, and refusing to be taken alive, was shot in his tracks. A miner's court was then held on the principles of Judge Lynch, when it being proved, by the confession of two of them, that all were guilty, and having pointed out McDonald's grave, they were all sentenced, and hung inside half an hour. The bodies were left hanging in a ravine, about a hundred yards from the house, and next morning came near frightening to death a party of emigrants, who had arrived that night, and who were out hunting their mules.



1970 Membership News, Continued From Last Issue

The following people have become members of the Sierra County