Editor's Note: On September 13, 1970, the Native Daughters of the Golden West, Sierraville, Sierra County Chapter (Imogen Parlor), will dedicate a parking area a few feet from the original Beckwourth cabin and ranch. Because of the work done by Imogene Parlor, N.D.G.W., and the activities which will take place during September, we feel that the following article is very timely.

JIM BECKWOURTH
SIERRA VALLEY PIONEER

Snuggled up to the eastern crest of the magnificant Sierra Nevada Mountains, at an altitude of about 5,000 feet, lies the beautiful Sierra Valley. Completely surrounded by mountains, its peace and beauty is magnetic.

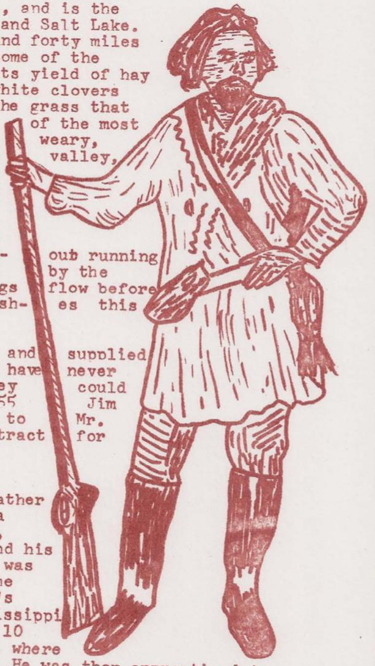
For the past century the inhabitants of this valley led quiet and industrious lives, ranching and logging, the supporters of those who dynamically moulded the history of the surrounding area. During the "Era of Gold" they provided food for man and animal and timber for mines and railroads.

But this was not always so. The history of this valley begins with "tourists". The first such tourists to see this beautiful valley were the Gold Lakers in 1850--men who traveled from the Downieville area in search of the lake of gold. Some of these men returned the following year and staked out a different kind of claim, giving up prospecting for farming. Today there are still those who, once having visited, feel compelled to return and settle, giving their families a little less of the material world but a little more of God's world.

The most notorious wanderer to come under the magnetic spell of this piece of earth was James P. Beckwourth. For thirty eight excitement filled years Jim Beckwourth traveled the western United States as a mountaineer (connected with Bent, Ashley and the Sublettes), a Crow Chief, a trader, and an Army Scout. It is no wonder then, that while traveling the Pitt River country of California in the early spring of 1851, he thought the low place in the mountains to the south to be a pass through the formidable Sierras. With a small party he went to scout the area while his companions went to prospect. In April he entered the Sierra Valley at the head waters of the middle fork of the Feather River and found his guess about a pass to be true. He returned to American Valley, Bidwells Bar and Marysville to obtain subscriptions for a road through this pass. After an enthusiastic welcome for his idea, and the promise of financial aid, he put men to work on the road and returned to the Truckee Meadows to divert a wagon train. In A ugust he reached Marysville with the first train of 17 wagons to cross into California by this new route. The financial aid

he hoped for was not forthcoming because the Marysville businessmen had to rebuild after the fire that leveled Marysville in that month. Jim reported that he spent $1,600.00 of his own money to improve the road, for which he was never reimbersed.

In 1852 Jim returned to Sierra Valley and established a trading post and hotel for the emigrants who were now using his recently discovered route. Sitting on the porch of the first building erected here he says of this place:



> "My house is considered the emigrants' landing place, as it is the first ranch he arrives at in the Golden State, and is the only house between this point and Salt Lake. Here is a valley two hundred and forty miles in circumference, containing some of the choicest land in the world. Its yield of hay is incalculable; the red and white clovers spring up spontaneously, and the grass that covers its smooth survace is of the most nutritious nature. When the weary, toilworn emigrant reaches this valley, he feels himself secure; he can lay himself down and taste refreshing repose, undisturbed by the fear of Indians. His cattle can graze around him in pastures up to their eyes without running any danger of being driven off by the Arabs of the forest, and springs flow before them as pure as any that refreshes this verdant earth."

Here Jim greeted the emigrants and supplied some of their needs. He is said to have never refused any one in need, whether they could pay or not. In the winter of 1854-55 Jim relaxed and dictated his life story to Mr. T.D. Bonner. (Copy of original contract for this story is at end of article.)

He was born in Fredricksburg, Virginia, on April 20, 1798. His father served in the Revolutionary War as a Major. A Denver paper, years later, noted that his mother was a slave and his father an Irish overseer. When Jim was eight years old, his father moved the family and 22 slaves to "Beckwourth's Settlement" at the fork of the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. At the age of 10 Jim was sent to St. Louis to school, where he studied for the next four years. He was then apprenticed to a blacksmith, but at 19 he had a fight with his boss, supposedly over Jim's girlfriend, and this led to his father giving him

$500.00 and sending him off on a hunting trip. Thus began Jim's career in the western mountains.

He joined trapping expiditions, associating with such well known mountaineers as Caleb Greenwood, Jim Bridger, and others of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company. His motivation was money enough to make him and his intended bride well off. That never happened, however, for on one trip back to St. Louis he found his love had married another. Jim promptly returned to the mountains.

According to Jim's story it was Caleb Greenwood who, on meeting a band of Crows, told them that Jim was really a Crow who had been captured by the Cheyennes. The Crows told the story around their camps and sometime later, when captured by these tall handsome Indians, Jim found himself surrounded by old squaws eager to reclaim a long lost son. One old mother announced suddenly that if Jim had a mole on his eye lid, he was indeed her son. When the eye lid was inspected, there was a mole! Jim was pampered and paraded as "Morning Star", the son who returned. I wonder if that old mother just happened to notice a mole in all the confusion, and desperately needing a son in her old age, decided that the mark would get her one? Anyway, Jim says he lived with the Crows for 12 years, becoming such a brave and daring warrior that he was made a chief, and at one time had eight wives, with lodges for each.

But the need for money again took him to St. Louis where he traded off his pelts. Hearing of the Indian wars in Florida he headed in that direction and was there for a while. When he returned he joined Sublette and Vasquez in trade with the southern Indian tribes.

This led him to opening his own trading post in Taos, and it led him to another marriage. His wife was Senorita Sanderville. When he became bored with Taos he loaded a big train of mules with whisky to use for trade for pelts, and traded his way to the "Golden State" that he had been hearing so much about.

In 1844 he was in the Pueblo de Los Angeles when discontent with the Mexican government led to Civil War, and Jim was reportedly in the midst of it! He fought on the side of the revolutionaries until he heard that war had been declared between the United States and Mexico, and that Fremont was coming in from the north. Jim decided it was time to leave. Just to make sure that they wouldn't be used against his own country, Jim rounded up 1,800 horses from the surrounding ranchos, and proceeded to trade his way back to New Mexico. There he joined General Kearney as a dispatch carrier, and it was this operation that led him back to California. His last mission for the army was to

carry messages from Fort Leavenworth to Monterey. In California "gold fever" raged, and feeling that there was more profit in selling than in digging, Jim took a partner and opened a store in Sonora. As was his custom, he got bored--sold his share in the store (for $6,000 he says) and went in search of wilderness, by way of Sacramento, Murderers Bar and then the Pitt River. It was this discovery that led to the discovery of what we now call Beckwourth's Pass.

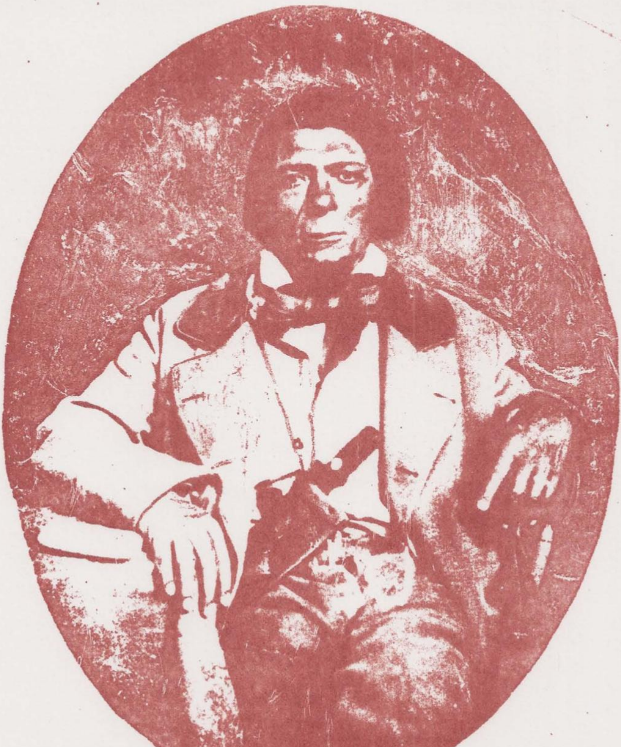
Jim was not allowed to live out his years here in the peace he wanted. Ours was a new state then, flooded with emigrants in search of gold and riches. What did these people care for an old man full of tales of daring exploits and brave encounters. He had been a Crow, and Crows were notorious horse thieves; why, Jim even bragged about his thieving exploits. Says T.D. Bonner, his biographer, in a manuscript now in the Bancroft Library,

> "It is probable his indiscriminate hospitality was cause of his leaving California, for he was charged by the regulators with complicity in the doings of horse thieves. He shook the dust of the state off his feet...."

To New Mexico, Texas and Missouri went Jim, until news of the Pike's Peak gold discovery led him to that area. In the East Jim apparently was given some of the recognition he deserved. The Kansas City Journal of Commerce of September 28, 1859, states:

> "This morning one of the oldest, and perhaps the oldest mountaineer now living, leaves this city for the Rocky Mountains. We refer to Mr. James Beckwith, whose autobiography has already been written and published by the Messrs. Harper & Bros.
>
> James Beckwith, the mountaineer referred to, has been a mountain man for the last forty years, and is well known as the "great western" guide and interpreter, being familiar with nearly all the Indian dialects, and speaking the English, French and Spanish languages with equal fluency. In 1837 he held a Captains commission in a muleteer company, under Col. Zac. Taylor."

In Auraria, later known as Denver, he took up storekeeping and bought several pieces of land. In 1859 the Rocky Mountain News noted a visit by Jim.



James P.Beckwourth
This photo made from a Digerotype
Presented to Ordell O.Houk in
Loyalton 1855 .

> "We recently were honored by a visit from this justly celebrated mountaineer and adventurer, and enjoyed a long conversation, in which he fought his battles over again, and narated his thrilling adventures by flood and field.
>
> We had formed the opinion, as has, we presume almost everyone, that Capt. Beckwourth was a rough, illiterate back-woodsman, but were most agreeably surprised to find him a polished gentleman, possessing a fund of general information which few can boast. He is now sixty two years of age, but looks scarce fifty, hale, hearty, and straight as an arrow...."

Of his life in Denver, Mumey states;

> "Jim Beckworth became one of the early pioneers and citizens of Denver during the formative period, and helped serve the needs of the early settlers by selling them provisions and supplies."

In 1860 he married Elizabeth Leadbetter who is said to have been of Mexican descent; his will left all he possessed to her. Of the two known children born of this marriage, we know only that both died young.

Jim didn't seem to enjoy living with people around him, and he soon sold his store interests and moved to a ranch near Denver. There he lived with an Indian girl named Sue, ranching, hunting and trapping in the Indian manner.

He couldn't quite stay on good terms with the law, even in his old age, having been charged with theft (again) and manslaughter, but he seems to have cleared himself of the charges.

Along with freedom to live a quiet and peaceful life as in the old days, Jim wanted justice for the Indians. Knowing and respecting the Indians, Jim felt compelled to speak in their behalf, and in 1860 he wrote to the newspaper in Denver:

> "The Indians are as keenly sensible to acts of injustice, as they are tenacious of revenge, and it is more humiliating to them to be the recipients of such treatment upon their own lands, which they have been deprived of, their game driven off and they made to suffer by

> hunger, and when they pay us a visit, abused more than dogs. My advice is, that municipal regulations be made, preventing the sale of intoxicating drinks to them, with such penalities as would make the law respected. And all emigrants who are on their way here, ought to, most religiously, refrain from giving Indians whisky, or trading it to them for their horses, for if he sells his pony, he will steal one from the next white man that comes along. All our Indian troubles are produced by the imprudent acts of unprincipled white men."

Wise words these. Pity they were not heeded!

Jim hated the whiteman's encroachment on the wilderness he loved. Perhaps it was this that led him to sign as an army scout on what was to be his last journey into untamed Indian country. In 1866 he went with Colonel Henry B. Carrington to help build Fort C.F. Smith, in what is now north-eastern Wyoming. He never returned. A Lt. Templeton was stationed at Fort C.F. Smith at the time and recorded the most accurate account we have of Jim's death.

Lt. Templeton writes that on September 29, 1866, Jim and a man named Thompson left the fort for Crow country. On October 20, some Crows reported that two white men were in their village, and that on October 30, Thompson returned to the fort and related that Jim had become ill soon after he left the fort, and had later died in the Crow village. The Crows had buried him after their custom.

On February 8, 1867, the Sacramento Union, in an article taken from the Denver Gazette, informed Californians of Jim's death:

> "We learn with regret of the death of Jim Beckworth, on the Laramie Plains. We have known poor Jim for some years, and can testify to the fact that he was ever more sinned against that sinning. There are few men in the world who have passed through a more exciting or eventful history than he, and there are but a few men who had a heart bigger than he. Many of the exciting and startling stories he told of his comrades and contemporaneous pioneers and frontiersmen of the West, together with the romances told of his own personal adventurous history, to many seemed too startling to be true, but there are many men on the western frontier who can vouch for their truth. Poor Jim has gone to his happy hunting grounds and may he rest in peace after his eventful career is the warm wish of many a true friend in Colorado."

When Jim Beckworth died, his deeds were largely forgotten,

Denver people renamed the street and church that had borne his name. Beckwourth Valley became Sierra Valley, and the small town of Beckwourth became Beckwith; people thought it was named after a Lt. Beckwith of the Army Engineers.

Beckwourth himself understood "civilized" ways of remembering those gone when he wrote telling us of his capture by the Crows:

> "My death was communicated to the rendezvous when the fall hunt was over, and there was a general time of mourning in mountain style. I say "mountain style" in contradistinction to the manner of civilized circles, because with them, when the death of a comrade is deplored, his good deeds alone are celebrated, his evil ones are interred with his bones. Modern politics have introduced the custom of perpetuating all that is derogatory to a man's fair name, and burying in deep oblivion all that was honorable and praisworthy. Hence I say, Give me the mountaineer, despite all the opprobrium that is cast upon his name, for in him you have a man of chivalrous feeling, ready to divide his last morsel with his distressed fellow--ay, and to yield the last drop of his blood to defend the life of his friend."

How accurately Jim presaged the manner of our "civilized" remembering. Now that is changing; a reevaluation of this man and his deeds is taking place. It is being noted that his contemporaries in the fur trade gave credence to Jim's book. These mountain men were a rough bunch with the courage to explore the unknown territory and meet the challanges of a new and many times hostile land. Their methods and motives would be highly questioned in a more civilized area, but they did open up the West for expansion---for you and for me.

It is time that Jim Beckwourth received the aclaim he deserves for his many contributions to the West.

Sources:

Bonner, T.D., The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth.

Mumey, Nolie James Pierson Beckwourth, An Enigmatic Figure of the West 1856-1866 (All quotes not otherwise noted are from this book.)

Note: In a letter to Imogen Parlor #134, member Elizabeth Dearwater Brown tells this story:

> "James Beckwourth and my grandfather Perry were old friends in the Rocky Mountains long before either came to Sierra Valley. James Beckwourth came first, and when Grandpa started for California, word got to Beckwourth that his friend, Perry, was on his way. He rode east to meet him. This meeting took place at what is now Vinton, and Beckwourth took one of the two Perry babies on his saddle with him, and it was in this way the Perry family reached the beautiful Valley we all love so much. Grandpa wanted to find the shortest route to the Sacramento Valley. This, as Beckwourth pointed out, was the old Emigrant Trail, and it took my grandparents to Marysville. The train separated at what is now Vinton and the 19 other wagons went by way of Quincy, Chico to Red Bluff where they had friends mining."

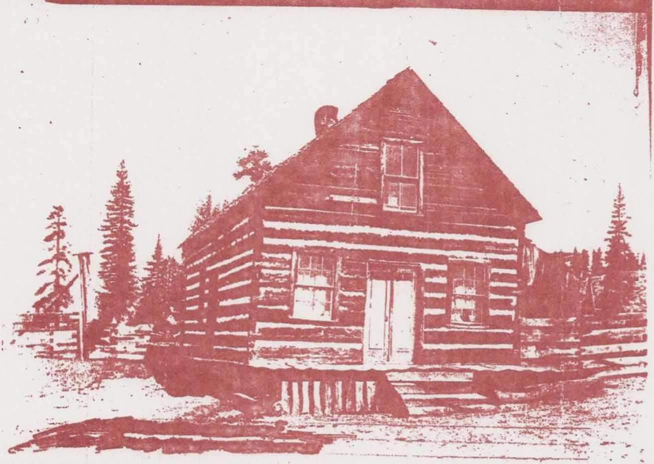
Mrs. Brown is a member of a valley pioneer family. The Perry's returned to the Valley and settled on what is now the Weber place, just outside Sierraville. Mrs. Brown's mother, Noni Perry Dearwater, passed away two years ago at the age of 97. Noni had many marvelous tales to tell of the "old days".

Note: Mrs. Jane Ramelli, who now owns the original Beckwourth ranch, and the cabin that was Beckwourth's trading post, has done some research into her property records. The first legal owner of this land was a Harriat Kirby, et. al., who filed homestead papers in 1862, and purchased the land and cabin from the government.

Note: The Plumas County records also show two agreements between Beckwourth and Bonner for the writing of Beckwourth's book. The first is dated the 25th of October, and is between Beckwourth and Bonner, and the second dated the 2nd of November, 1854, is between Bonner, Beckwourth and a Joseph S. Davis of Yuba County, who was to pay $200.00 and a share of the publishing expense to become a full partner in the endeavor. The Plumas Museum in Quincy has the original of one of these.

An interesting article on T.D. Bonner, as Justice of Quartz Township, can be read in the Plumas County Historical Society publication, #15.

Notes on the Author: Mrs. Arlene Amodei, Secretary of the Sierra County Historical Society, submits the article on Jim Beckwourth. Arlene is an elementary school teacher, but is "retired" at the present time while she takes up the duties of a "professional" house wife and mother. She lives in Sierraville with her husband and her 15 month old son. She studied at the University of California at Davis and at Sacramento State.



The Jim Beckwourth "cabin" has it appeared in 1868 and roughly as it appears today.

On September 13, 1970, Imogen Parlor, N.D.G.W. will erect a marker in honor of James Pierson Beckwourth. Today's "tourist" will be able to drive off Interstate 70, just east of Beckwourth's trading post on an adjoining hill, and there, in the quiet shade of the pines, and viewing the same peaceful valley upon which Jim looked, learn a little more about our valley's most famous "tourist".

1970 MEMBERSHIP IN THE SIERRA COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY