# EARLY ANNALS OF DOWNIEVILLE AND VICINITY

## By One of the Earliest Settlers

## Number Three

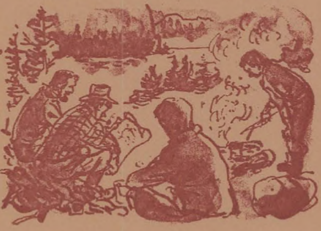
As our readers will recall, "Early Annals" originally appeared in the Tuolumne Courier in 1860, and are the first-hand reminiscences of one of the gold rush miners in this area. Although most of the chapters are concerned with Downieville, Forest City, and the Alleghany area, this, the third installment, describes the early development of some of the gold camps in the high country beyond the Feather River divide, north of Downieville.

The Onion Valley boom provided a lot of excitement in early days. It led to the extensive prospecting of the entire region and the large-scale mining of the Tertiary gravel channels exposed there. La Porte, Howland Flat, Scales and the other camps nearby became well-known as a result. In recent decades, however, this large area, partly in Sierra and partly over the divide in Plumas County, has once again become peopleless and relatively inaccessible and only occasionally frequented by the modern traveler. Thus, our "annalist's" account of the first prospecting expeditions in the area is most interesting and timely. So, without further ado, we turn to "one of the earliest settlers" for his recounting of those far away gold rush days.

--Wm. Pickiepoche

## Onion Valley, Poor Man's Creek, Etc.

In the latter part of June or beginning of July 1850, a party of prospectors returning from Nelson Creek encamped on this beautiful flat, and named it ONION VALLEY; from the immense quantity of a species of wild onion, or more properly leek, growing there. And as all vegetables, even in the settlements, were at that time rarities, that such an esculent should at once come into favor, was not to be wondered at. A beautiful creek passed through the valley, the surrounding hills being at the same time covered with broken quartz, known



at that time among the miners, technically, as the "Gold Blossom," gave the idea that rich diggings might be discovered there; especially as only a few miles further on, the rich diggings had been found at Nelson's Creek. They concluded, therefore, to stop some little time and make a thorough reconnoissance of the country. The party was a large one, and was headed by such men as Capt. Hardy, Ellif, of Mineral Point, Wisconsin--familiary known as Capt. Hardy,--One Eyed Prospecting Moore, Major Hueston, and other prospecting celebrities. Major Downie, the most celebrated at that time, was not present in the camp. The entire party numbered, probably, one hundred and thirty or forty men, well armed either for fight of prospecting. The next morning the party separated in squads, with orders from Capt. Hardy to rendevous at night in the valleys, and report the prospects. For the first few days the prospects were not so flattering; until on the evening of the 4th July, One-eyed Moore, who had been out two days, came in and reported having found a creek, which prospected extremely well; showing at the same time some large pieces of black gold, and stating that he found a white man and a negro at work--Moore asked the negro what his prospects were, but he gave him no satisfaction. Moore then went down the creek, and when he returned, he found the two had pulled up stakes and left. The place that Moore prospected in was at the falls, just above the forks, exactly where the Downie claim was located afterwards.

On Moore's return to the camp in Onion Valley, it was decided to locate a permanent camp in the Valley; for the reason that it was a good location, being surrounded by rich diggings, and the direct trail from Downieville to all of the richest diggings diverging in different directions from this point. Accordingly, some went to work to build log-cabins, some to prospect, whilst the most reliable men were

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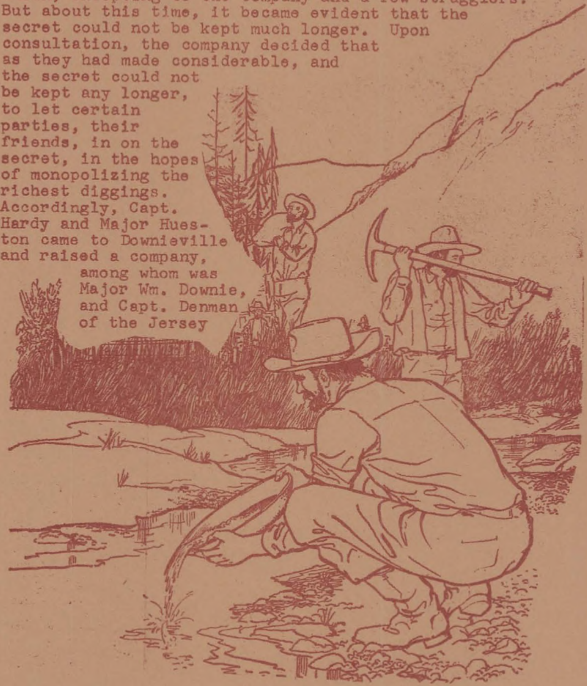
sent to Downieville to procure a stock of goods and provisions to open a store in the valley. Things went on this way for two or three months; during which time the company, under a man named Dixon, discovered Dixon's Creek, another rich gulch laying between the trail to Nelson's Creek and Poorman's. Up to this time Poorman's Creek was not known, excepting to the company and a few stragglers. But about this time, it became evident that the secret could not be kept much longer. Upon consultation, the company decided that as they had made considerable, and the secret could not be kept any longer, to let certain parties, their friends, in on the secret, in the hopes of monopolizing the richest diggings. Accordingly, Capt. Hardy and Major Hueston came to Downieville and raised a company, among whom was Major Wm. Downie, and Capt. Denman of the Jersey



claim. The advance guard of these prospectors left Downieville during the night and promised to send word to the others. We waited patiently too weeks, and no news returning, we began to think we were sold. Besides this, as Downie had been

gone so long, it began to be noised about that he had again struck richer diggings. Everyone was on the look out, watching the Downie Cabin night and day. On the night of the 11th October, 1850, about midnight, Mike Devermy came back, having left his animals on the upper bench of the hill above town, and told us to pack up. We instantly complied; Devermy showing us his gold, of which he had a large purse full, all in large slugs from six ounces to pieces weighing one bit--all coarse gold-- which he told us he had panned out himself. As secret as we thought ourselves, we were scarcely up the hill, and in the act of packing the animals with our blankets, etc., when we discovered three negro men and two whites coming up the hill. It was too late to try and hide; so our plan was made up instantly to compel them to swear not to divulge where we went to. This they readily agreed to. The white men were Wm. McKenzie and Jas. E. Dow, the negroes were named Leroy--a yellow man,--Wm. Taylor, and the last I never knew his name.

On the evening of the 14th October, we arrived at our camp, and the next morning began prospecting our claim. The writer panned out the first pan of dirt, which yielded an ounce and a half, after removing only three inches of dirt; only a few inches from where Moore had left off. Moore had taken out several thousand dollars in this claim, before we of Downie's party took up the ground. Downie's Party consisted originally of Wm. Downie,

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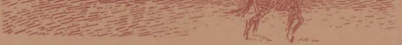
Charles Thompson, Michael Devermy, a Dutch boy named Henry Winters, Thomas Jamison, and the writer. The first day's work yielded $950. In the first three buckets of dirt rocked out in a small cradle, the yield was $240, and in the third riddle full there was 14 ounces which would not pass through it; consisting of four pieces; one of which weighed exactly eleven ounces troy. The proceeds of this day's work were paid out to a packer for provisions, and another load ordered in about two weeks. After our cabin was built, he returned

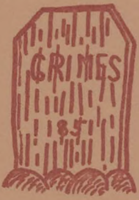


and we paid him $1,500 for his load. In going out of the creek he lost most of his train in a heavy snow storm.

Onion Valley, in the meantime, had been growing rapidly and a large town was laid out; but the grizzlies now began to trouble the settlers, and a supply of that kind of meat was obtained from two of those agreeable visitants about this time. Pilot Peak now was covered with snow, which continued to accumulate on the hills, and from this until late in the spring of 1851, continued to hide their heads. About Christmas, the town had increased to about 1000 or 1,500 inhabitants; mostly gamblers, storekeepers and miners, waiting the snow to disappear, in order to come into Poorman's Creek, Dixon, and Nelson Creeks. Another considerable settlement had sprung up on the Downieville trail, at Grass Valley, and on the opposite side of the ridge at Rabbit Creek, now Laporte, situate on the dividing ridge between the Yuba and Feather rivers, and on the trail from Bidwell's Bar to Poorman's Creek. Rabbit Creek was so named from the immense numbers of rabbits about, and named by the miner's, who who were

GENERAL STORE
LIVERY
HARDWARE

weather bound there, and who found excellent diggings on that creek. About this time a Spanish train was snowed in, between Grass Valley and Onion Valley, and a party of three who had left Poorman's Creek, were lost in the snow whilst trying to find it, to procure provisions. One of the party was frozen to death, the other two reached Kelly & Osborne's store in Grass Valley, in a deplorable state, but neglected to make mention that they had left their partner behind, for two whole days; and it was not until the third day that news reached Poorman's Creek of the fact. A relief party volunteered to go out immediately; signals were agreed upon and the set out. After being out two whole days the party returned, leaving behind several on the hill, unable from cold to come in. Another party was started and packed them in, in blankets, to Downie's cabin, where Dr. Bacon of the Butte company attended to their sufferings, and saved them.

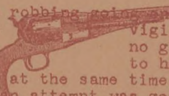


About the first day of January 1851 Mr. Grimes died, partly of dysentery and partly of scurvy; and was buried on the left hand bluff, below the New Jersey claim. This was the first death amongst the pioneer settlers of this creek. Dr. Bacon did all he could for him; but unfortunately had but a small stock of medicines. Our own medicine stock was mostly lost in the hurry of packing over.

About the eighth of Jan. 1851, the writer and a man named Black, butchered the first head of cattle ever butchered above Downieville. Beef readily sold at $1 per pound in pieces not less than 40 or 50 pounds each.

I forgot to mention that Major Wm. Downie, on Christmas morning, made and hoisted the first American Flag, under a statute to the stars and stripes from all the miners in the creek, with rifles and pistols.

About the middle of January, 1851, the miners in Poorman's Creek having increased to 76, a meeting was called to name the creek, and other purposes. Amongst us, as there

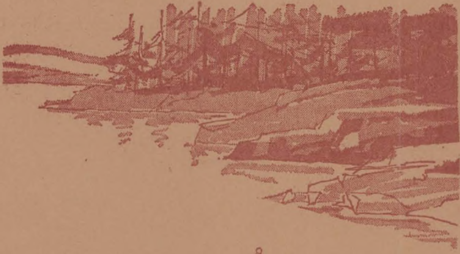


had been considerable robbing going on; as well as gambling, they passed stringent vigilance laws against highway robbery; and no gambler, who DEALT at any game, was allowed to hold a claim. Mining laws were also passed at the same time.

About this time an attempt was gotten up to create an excitement about the mines in Dixon Creek; but it did not amount to much.

Great falls of snow continued to fall in Onion Valley until the town could only be discovered at a distance from the numerous smoke holes in the snow; presenting a very curious appearance.

On New Year's morning 1851, our company struck a stratum of gold, and in an hour and a half took rising $6,000; one piece being $1800 in gold weight, besides two others, weighing the one, two pounds 12 dollars, and the other, two pounds; and numerous smaller slugs, besides the small gold. This was the largest strike made up to that time on the creek; but a few days, afterwards, the Butte company turned over a large quartz boulder, and took from under it, half a man's hat full. If we had known how to work sluices at this time, we could have made, at the least calculation, one hundred thousand dollars apiece. As it was, the writer went out of this creek with over two hundred pounds troy of gold. Charles Beard, of the New Jersey claim bought an $1,800 piece, for which he paid company $1,875.



Early in the spring of 1851, the great rush came; and the place was called, ironically, POOR-MAN'S CREEK NORTH, to distinguish it from Poorman's creek on the south fork of the Yuba, discovered by Richard Poorman. Poorman, however, laid claim to having discovered this creek also; and as this soon became the most celebrated, the name has ever remained unaltered. The name proposed for the first settlement was Jamestown; there being a majority of the miners named James on the creek; but the name never came much into use, and soon was dropped. During the big rush, another and larger settlement was located in the big bend above the Falls.

In April 1851, a man was murdered in his tent, and suspicion rested on his partner, who was arrested on a Sunday; but they could not prove anything against him, and he was eventually liberated, with a polite request that his room was more acceptable than his presence. He accordingly left. It was never known certainly, whether he committed the act or not; but public opinion was against him.