

HISTORY OF DISCOVERY OF GREAT BLUE LEAD

After the first pass at the rich surface stream placers, the more enterprising of the gold-rush prospectors turned their attentions to the perplexing but highly productive "hill diggings." The shrewder miners, like Chips in the narrative below, figured out that these were the remnants of ancient fossil rivers. The author of "Early Annals of Downieville and Vicinity," chapters of which have appeared in these pages in recent months, participated in the hill diggings boom of the 1850's, up on the ridge south of town.

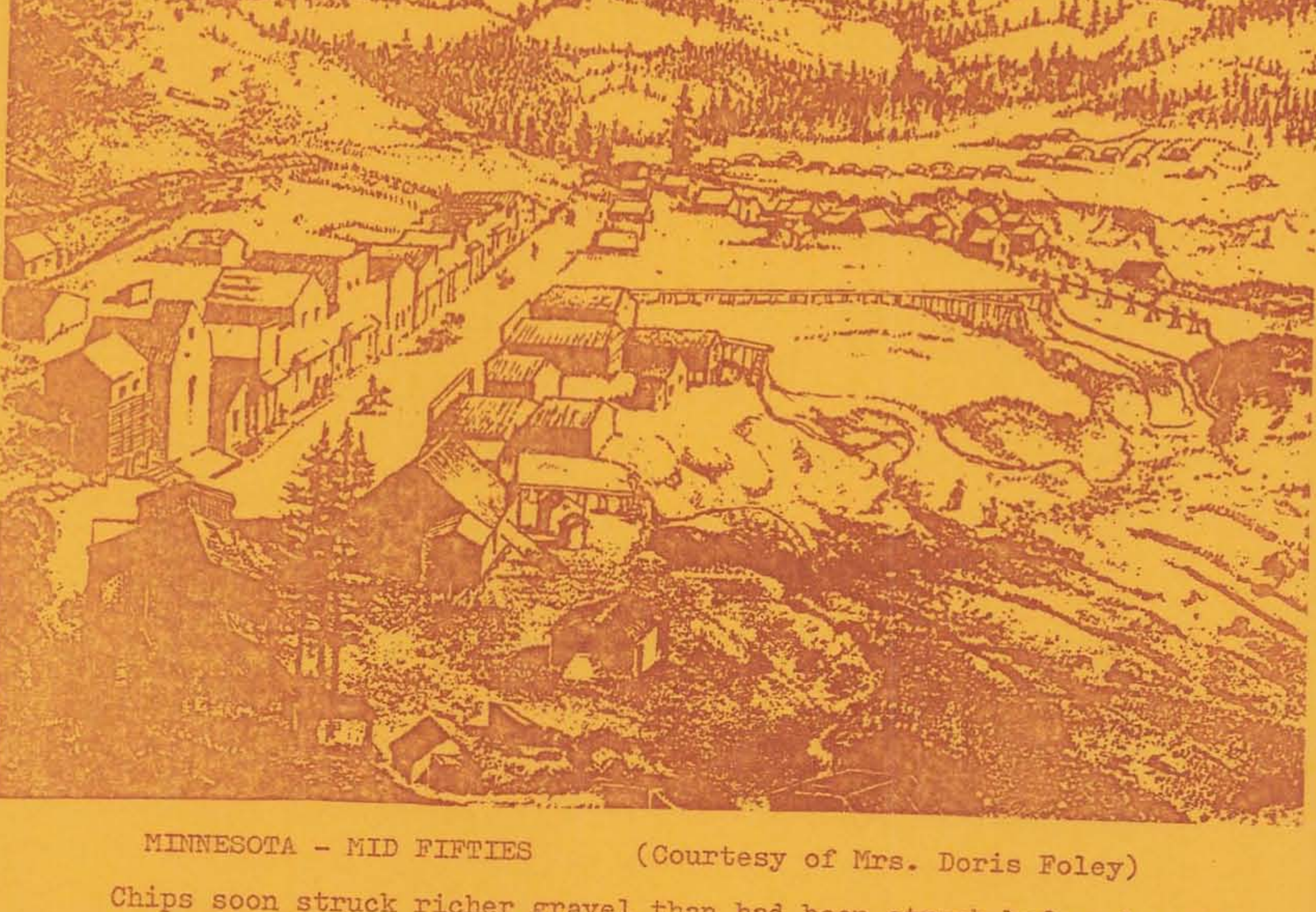
In Chapter Six of "Early Annals," reprinted from the Tuolumne Courier (1860), he expands on his favorite theme and records some of the events that took place in this boom. The discerning reader will recognize this chapter as the source of the oft-quoted tale of the short but illustrious mining career of "Chips," the English ship carpenter, Alleghanian M.A. Singleton wrote Bancroft the historian, in 1862, that Chips' real name was Wilson. But posterity undoubtedly will continue to think of him as just Chips, and the big hydraulic scar as "Chipses Flat" will long endure as a monument to the part he played in the goldrush in south Sierra. Likewise, the Smiths' name has been fittingly retained to designate the corresponding flat on the Alleghany side of Kanaka Creek. The narrator of "Early Annals" would have done far better to have joined the Smiths rather than try to find another Blue Lead on upper LaFayette Ridge. That strike turned out to be just a high bench remnant of a channel, whereas the Smiths had stumbled onto the breakout of the main Blue Lead. But we should let our chronicler tell the story in his own words.

--William Pickiepoche

In July 1852, the hill diggings of Minnesota were discovered by Old Joe Taylor, Chips, and Mike Savage, as they were prospecting in Taylor's Ravine, near its head. Chips, whose right name, as far as I am able to tell, was never rightly known, was supposed to be an old English sailor, a ship carpenter by trade. He was an original sort of a character, living alone in an old dirty cabin, and hardly ever sober; but one of the luckiest prospectors of this vicinity. Chips, then, whilst prospecting on the Ravine, observed an outcrop of blue gravel, and informed his partners, Taylor and Savage. Starting a tunnel here, they soon found it to pay extremely rich; and as such men could not long keep their secrets, it was not a great while before others got scent of the wealthy claims in this vicinity. This was the starting of the Blue Tunnel, the Irish claim, the Wisconsin Tunnel, and the Minnesota Drift.

At first, it was thought that the rich hill claims were only peculiar to this ravine; nor did they look further than the outcrops, for diggings, for some months. But, as ground became scarce, the miners tried other localities, even commencing in the solid rock. Chips, who could never sit down to regular hard work, but who was, perhaps, the best prospector of the whole district, now began to prospect on the opposite side of the ridge; rightly arguing that as both the creeks were rich, the lead must be in the center of the hill. Accordingly, selling out to his partner, Taylor, he commenced at, or near to, what is now known as Chips' Flat, nearly opposite to his old claim, the Blue Tunnel, with the avowed intention of running a tunnel so as to meet the other and make an opening from Minnesota

Flat to Chips' Flat; the understanding being that each company should own to the center of the hill.



MINNESOTA - MID FIFTIES (Courtesy of Mrs. Doris Foley)

Chips soon struck richer gravel than had been struck before by any company, and his fame spread accordingly. He sold shares in his tunnel to anyone disposed to buy, bought others in different parts of the hill, and was in a fair way of becoming a millionaire; but this ruined him, as will be seen hereafter.

Fred O. Smith and Henry Smith, taking the hint from old Chips, now commenced on the flat on the top of the hill opposite to Chips' Flat and directly above the Forks of Kanaka Creek, and finding the soil and rock similar, commenced tunneling with good prospects. The Smiths, finding that the surface dirt would pay expenses, determined to run a bedrock tunnel until they struck gravel. Most persons at this time, thought them insane, and the movement more than doubtful; but nothing daunted, these enterprising men determined to invest their all in this speculation, which everyone deemed to be chimerical. The writer himself, who was personally acquainted with the Smiths, went seven miles expressly to try and induce them to abandon the project. Fred Smith, in reply said, that he might possibly never personally derive any benefit, but he was sure someone would, and offered me an interest in his claim, if I would only lend my countenance to the project, so as to induce others to do the same. I deemed him crazy, and left him with feelings of compassionate

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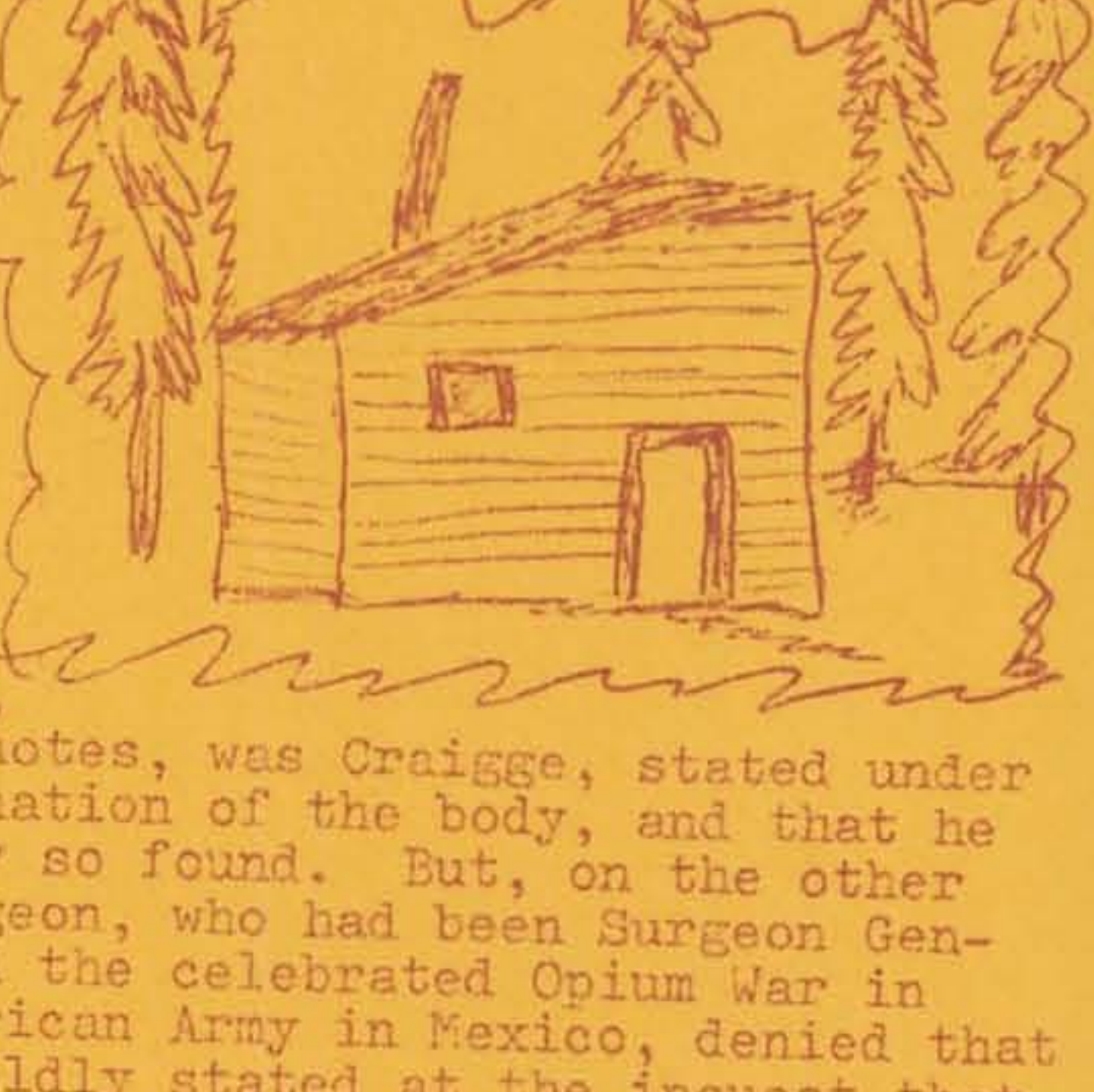
VIEW OF CHIPS' FLAT



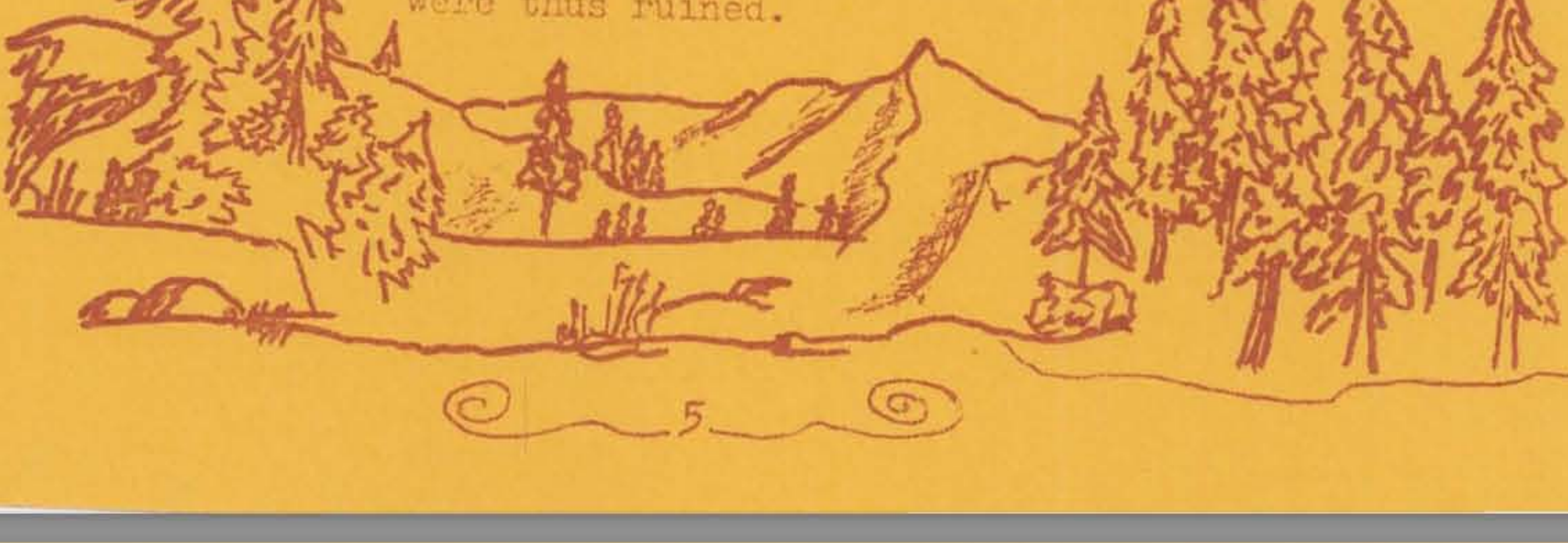
1856 Sierra Union

sorrow for his crazy hobby. This was in 1853.

Meanwhile, Chips had struck it extremely rich, at Chips' Flat, and was almost constantly drunk; his partners wished to buy him out, but he refused steadily to sell. They now went about on the other tack; and as they could not buy him out, determined to let him kill himself with strychnine whiskey. Accordingly, they procured a barrel and made him a present of it. He soon died, and at the coronor's inquest it was stated that he killed himself by drinking. A certain quack doctor from Downieville, whose name, if I read it right in my notes, was Craige, stated under oath that he made a post mortem examination of the body, and that he died of Delerium Tremens, and the jury so found. But, on the other hand, Dr. Wm. Randall, an English surgeon, who had been Surgeon General to the British Naval Squadron, in the celebrated Opium War in China, and later a Surgeon to the American Army in Mexico, denied that Chips had died of Delerium Tremens, boldly stated at the inquest that he distinctly found opium, both in the stomach and brain. Randall, in fact, was the one who had opened the body; as Craige was so incompetent as not to know how to commence the operation. And what makes it the more probable that this was the truth of the case, is, that Chips' share of the tunnel, after deducting the expenses of the funeral, was escheated to the other partners, by the general vote of the company. Thus ended the like of poor Chips, a man who had done more than most men to develop the resources of Sierra County.



In 1854, a perfect rage for starting bed-rock tunnels commenced all along the different divides. The Red Star, Blue Star, Typhoon, Hook and Bull, Maidhead, and various other tunnels were now started; all of which, at first, were started too high up on the mountain. Every hill was now covered by bands of prospectors, starting tunnels and shafts in all sorts of places, both practical and impractical. As a consequence, many companies were ruined; although many had nothing to lose but their time and were not hurt much after all. The usual practice was to go to the merchants and offer them a share, on the condition of their furnishing necessaries. Almost all agreed to this, but it was the most ruinous policy that could have been pursued, as the sequel showed; for no sooner had these companies come to pay gravel, or was supposed to be near it, then the accounts would be presented, and if not instantly paid, the tunnels would be seized and sold on execution, and generally brought in for a trifle by the merchants themselves. Thousands were thus ruined.



By 1855, the celebrated Blue Lead had been traced as far as Mariposa County; and now the rage for hill diggings had increased, it was extended northerly. Forest City had been struck before, as I mentioned in a previous number; Star Hill; opposite or west of it (this was the hill between Alleghany and Wet Ravine); American Hill, on the east; Mount Vernon, south (actually east); and Monte Cristo, on the north. Besides these discoveries, others were continually making for miles north of these hills until, in the winter of 1859, the same lead had been traced to Quincy, in Plumas County. (The author of these lines didn't realize that there were several separate Tertiary river systems, not just one "Blue Lead." - W.P.) In 1855, Chapparral Hill, one and one half miles north of Monte Cristo, was struck.

South of Minnesota, on the opposite ridge dividing the Middle Yuba, the miners were not idle in the meantime. Successively, Snow Tent, Moore's Flat, and the New Orleans Flat had been struck, both as to hill and hydraulic diggings; and in 1855, the amount of gold taken out on this ridge fell but little short of the other rich ridges north of it. But in the fall of 1855, quite a disaster occurred, between Moore's and Wolsey's Flat, by the breaking of a dam, which swept away nearly a quarter of a mile wide of the soil. Yet it is doubtful whether the injury was greater than the benefit, because it developed the rich Blue Lead, extending southerly.



In the spring of 1854, LaFayette Hill was struck by the writer; but it has been only for a few months that it could be worked, on account of the scarcity of water. No less than five different companies had attempted to bring water to the hill, but owing to a very deep gap, it was found so difficult to accomplish, that they successively abandoned the project. At last a company was formed, who have, at very extraordinary expense, succeeded in carrying the water two thirds of the way up the slope, from the bottom of the gap, onto the hillside, and by winding around the hill, have accomplished the bringing of water upon the top of the ridge, one mile below the gap. This is as high as water can be brought, and other companies are obliged to use other expedients to get their dirt to water. Large "shoots" are formed, below the level of the ditch, and thus they succeeded tolerably well in washing the dirt. LaFayette Hill promises to be one of the richest - if not the richest - ridge that has hitherto been struck. The next richest, is probably the Mount Vernon divide, which passes through Plum Valley, and extends past, and parallel to, the gravel range of Camptonville. New discoveries in this extremely rich section are still, in 1860, being made. At Plum Valley, on the ranch of Mr. Bope, a stratum of some kind of clay, having no grit, has lately been found, richer than anything reached before.



Editor's Note: At the March, 1971, meeting of the Sierra County Historical Society, Mr. A. Strang of Sierraville gave an interesting address on the early modes of transportation in and out of Sierra Valley. We felt that his remarks were of special interest and so are presenting his address as an article in your Bulletin. Notes concerning the author, Mr. Strang, may be found in Vol. I, #2.

EARLY TRAILS AND TRANSPORTATION

Apparently the first white men to set eyes on Sierra Valley was a group of deer hunters from the mining camps around Downieville. Led by A. P. Chapman, they were hunting on Haskell Peak and from there sighted Sierra Valley. This was in 1850. They returned to Downieville and reported their find. In 1851, Mr. Chapman and another party came back via Mohawk Valley to the "Great Valley" he had sighted the year before. This time he, Joseph Kirby, John Gardner, and I. K. McClannin posted claims for a ranch apiece. From the description of the Chapman site, it would appear to be the old Devine ranch.

As winter came on they returned to Downieville, and in the spring of 1852 brought men with them and proceeded to build log cabins on their claims. This same spring Jim Beckworth built his place at the north end of the valley. Other claims were taken up at the Randolph area. The first permanent home built in Sierraville was by John Inscob, who built on the

