South Fork of the American River

Michigan Flat

On the north side of the river below Uniontown, there was a cluster of mining camps, Red Hill, Coyote Diggings, and Rich Gulch, collectively known as Michigan Flat since 1854. The combined population peaked at five hundred. Charles Smith kept the first store on the South Fork in a canvas tent at the mouth of Greenwood Creek. In 1849 there was a butcher shop and hotel boarding house kept by a man named Tunbury. At that time, the price of a drink was fifty cents.
It was here on the South Fork that the Stanford brothers laid the foundation for their wealth. Thomas Stanford tended a store. A few oak tree stands nearby today to mark the spot.

Tunnel Point

SOUTH FORK AMERICAN MINING COMPANY TUNNEL - 1851-1852
Below Coloma, the river curved out and around a long spur of the mountain. Beneath this a finger of land, a half mile long tunnel had been cut beginning at one half mile below the sawmill site and coming into the river about one and a half miles around the bend. The South Fork was then diverted through the tunnel, leaving the river bed dry. The river bed was not as rich as anticipated and the company lost about forty thousand dollars in the enterprise. The tunnel was closed and the river allowed to resume it's natural course.

Coloma

Coloma was the most ideal location for a town because of it's widening valley and extensive flats on both sides of the river. It was also an important gateway to the Sierra, the end of the easy journey toward the mountains. Coloma grew out of it's one main street, the sawmill, which ran continuously to supply lumber for building and mining works.
Coloma supported forty nine different occupations in the 1850's and 60's, some legal, some not. There were some 60-70 merchants who set up shop in a tent, the back of a wagon or out of a trunk. There were black smiths and carpenters. There were sixteen hotels and and nine or ten places to get a meal. There were 70 women, most of them were married women or young daughters. There were a half dozen or so women over the age of sixteen who were not prostitutes. With the increase in population came an increase in the number of gardeners to feed the the burgeoning masses.
Coloma was the first county seat for El Dorado. Other firsts for Coloma included the first county bridge, ferry on the South Fork, newspaper, the first ditch in the region and the first use of the "rocker" for gold mining. As the county seat, Coloma was the site for such events as political rallies, celebrations and executions.
As gold was found throughout El Dorado County, Coloma's place of prominence shifted and Placerville became the county seat in 1857.

Miner's Life

The average miner arrived from points around the world after a journey was grueling and long. Some chose the treacherous overland route across the Louisiana Territory, which took months. The most majority arrived by sea around Cape Horn, down and up the coasts of two continents arriving in San Francisco weeks after they first waved farewell to family, friends and the comforts of home. Sutter's Fort in Sacramento was easily reached by boat from San Francisco and from there it was ten days ride to Coloma by stage coach. He left his family behind, if he had one and abandoned all reason to head for the empty promise of easy fortune.
Most miners, including the renowned James Marshall, died penniless. Any real fortune made during the Gold Rush was found in the pockets of the shop keepers and merchants who supplied the miners with the tools for their dream. What little a miner didn't spend on supplies and basic necessities was often lost to the hands of professional gamblers.
First light brings the miners awake and down to the river to drive buckets of water for the day. As soon as work commences the river will go muddy with the effort. They will spend the day shoveling gravel into sluice boxes or constructing diversions for the flow. Water was the most powerful tool the miners had. It washed the ore out of the hillside. Then it washed over the sluice box or sloshed around the pan. Nothing happened without the water from the river to move things along. Spring brought high waters and low spirits as the rage of the river blew out diversion dams. Camps needed to be moved up hill. It was tiring work, standing in the river for hours at a stretch. Washing pan after pan with little or no result.

Rock Bridge

A natural rock abutment a few miles down stream from Uniontown, known today as Gorilla Rock, was once a pier for a bridge built by William Gayford in the early mining days. This soon became the main connecting road between Sacramento and Georgetown. There were two stores established here and served as a polling place until 1875. To this day you can still see embedded in the island rock remnants of iron bolts that once secured the bridge

Uniontown Bridge

About a half a mile above Uniontown, the first bridge over the South Fork was erected in 1851.
The privately owned toll bridge, which was sold several times in it's time of use, operated in direct opposition to the established ferry service. Toll rates were set by and fees were paid to the county of El Dorado. To walk across the bridge, you would pay a quarter. Loose stock were charged the rate of 10¢ per head. A two horse team with a loaded wagon was a dollar. In the spring of 1852, the sawmill in Coloma was swept away and the bridge greatly damaged by high water. Soon rebuilt, the bridge was supported by 80 foot long wooden girders, and due the elevation of the north bank, the entire bridge was quite high above the river bed. A flood recorded in December 1852, which took out all the bridges on the South Fork, spared the Uniontown Bridge, likely because of it's high placement.
In 1880 the Uniontown Bridge was carried away in extremely high water. And once again it was rebuilt as soon as the river would allow. The county bought the bridge in 1887 and for the first time in it's illustrious history, the Uniontown Bridge allowed free passage back and forth across the South Fork.

Kanaka Bar

During the Gold Rush, Hawaiian natives, known as Kanaka, found a deep cavity beneath the water some fifty yards long and fifteen feet wide which showed promise of bringing great wealth. To bring the gravel up from the submerged cavity, the Kanakas would dive with buckets weighted with stone. They would dump the buckets and fill them with sand and gravel from the cavity and haul that back up to the banks where the contents would be be washed for gold. The Kanakas amassed a considerable fortune in gold and sold the claim. The new claim holders then dammed and flumed the river to mine the bed. However, the Kanakas has successfully removed the the richest dirt and the new mining effort hardly met expenses. Some years later a third party found another rich strike that paid it's owner well. The story goes that a single nugget valued at $1010.00 was found.
So goes the roller coaster of mining fortunes.

Uniontown

Originally named Marshall, the name of this 1850's mining camp became Uniontown and then Lotus, when the town's first postmaster observed that residents were "about as easy going as Homer's habited Lotus eaters." No not Homer Simpson, folks. We're talking mythology. As mining fortunes came and went, it was worth noting that James Marshall, credited with discovering gold at Sutter's Mill in 1849 to set off the famed Gold Rush of '49', died penniless.

Chili Bar

In the early history of the mines a company of Mexicans occupied a prairie-like slope about 3 miles from present day, Chili Bar. They were joined by some native Californians and Chileans, and, as they all spoke Spanish, the place was known as Spanish Flat. Westward about a mile through dense pines was a similar place, occupied by a company of American miners, and hence, called the American Flat.
About one hundred Chileans arrived in San Francisco, and coming out to the mines, very naturally came to those who spoke their own tongue; and so, in the latter part of June, 1852, Spanish Flat became quite populous. One Sunday, when the American company, only five or six in number, were away, some persons claiming ownership sold the Americas mine to the newly arrived Chileans, and receiving a price - a considerable sum - left before the fraud was identified. Having bought not only the mine, but the mining implements, the Chileans immediately began work, and when the real owners returned on Monday morning they found that their claim had been "jumped." Probably a hundred men were in possession, and ready to hold it by force of arms; and as they spoke different languages, explanation was impossible.
Messengers were sent to the nearest mining camps, asking the men to bring their rifles and other weapons, and to assemble on the ridge above the American Flat. At that time, June 7, 1852, most of the miners had left the cabinets for the rivers; and by three in the afternoon, rifle in hand, the men reached the rendezvous, where only some forty had assembled.
A man named Murphy explained the affair as he understood it. He knew nothing of the sale, but stated in effect that probably one hundred or more Chileans on Sunday had taken forcible possession of the claim and tools, and refusing to give them up, threatened to shoot whoever interfered. Of course such a force would soon work out the mine, and he proposed that the miners present drive away the Chileans robbers, shooting them down if necessary, take possession of the sluices before they were cleaned up and the gold panned out, and restore the property to the rightful owners. Fortunately not a shot was fired on either side. The Chileans left the claim. Thus came the name Chili Bar.

The River Today

The average recreational river user on the South Fork today drives up from the Bay Area with some friends from work or school. This river trip symbolizes an adventure that is planned for months and revered by peers forever. They might spend the night at one of the river campgrounds. They boat one or both weekend days. They spend both time and cash at local businesses for everything from their morning espresso and bagel, to t-shirts and priceless photographs of their turbulent ride through Sutter's Cesspool or the infamous Troublemaker. For most of these folks, this will be their only whitewater adventure and they will remember it for a lifetime.

The more seasoned river runner, if we could make a generalized profile simply for the sake of discussion, drives out from San Rafael in his Acura with a kayak strapped to the roof. Rain or shine, he's paddling, expanding his expertise of 'play moves' and 'rodeo tricks'. He is part of a sub-culture of kayakers who work in the high tech industries and get to know each through paddling clubs, river events and missed shuttles. They support the local purveyors of gear and clothing, buying fresh Patagonia's or replacing blown river sandals. And each of them owns at least a hand full of Crookies and several partially used tubes of sunscreen. You'll see most of these same faces year after year.

Today's river guides about equally male and female, on the other hand, live in conditions somewhat reminiscent of the miner's life. They reside in tents for the season. For some their existence is a step beyond camping in a back yard with amenities like electricity run off their car battery, or 'found' items like a broken down lawn furniture. Some even plant gardens around their spot. They *may* do a daily stint at the river's edge and then take the weekly or monthly run into Placerville for supplies and to toss some coins in the laundromat. *Most* evenings, you'll find them gathered in Lotus or Coloma with a cold brew in hand, unwinding from the day.
These gals and guys KNOW the river. They know how to rescue. They know how to safely run the river without draining the sun of excitement. They are an asset in an emergency. And more valuable than even that - they are great with people! They are experts at defusing a situation like a wet break down and turning it into just another part of the adventure. They are a wealth of stories and jokes on and off the river. And they do it for the experience. For the love of the river. For the pleasure of time spent outdoors. And the occasional tip.

Salmon Falls

The settlement of Salmon Falls sprang up in 1849 about one mile above the location in the photos. Students on their last day of school gathered for this photo in 1887. In the 1890's the falls were blasted by the American River Land and Lumber Company to facilitate the log drives down the river . It was here that some 500,000 feet of logs hung up during one of the company's first log drives from Camino to Folsom.
In the 1920's the State Department of Fish and Game blasted the falls to allow fish to pass over the log jam. This aided the annual salmon migration to reach the upper South Fork for spawning.

Weber Creek

Located halfway between Salmon Falls and Uniontown, on the south side of the river, about $30,000.00 worth of gold was taken out of Weber Creek in 12 days. A second group pulled another $17,000.00 in two days in 1848. By todays standards, that haul would be worth about half a million dollars. *Most* of the miners died penniless. The real fortunes were made by those who supplied the miners with food, tools and other supplies. Today, we know this rich spot as Bouncing Rock.

Missouri Bar

"On the South Fork of the American River, six miles above Salmon Falls, the Missouri Company, consisting of five men only, have realized the enormous amount of 40 pounds of gold in two days. It is very coarse gold - one lump taken out Friday last, was estimated to be worth $1,000.00."
reported by the Sacramento Union newspaper on October 11, 1852

The Hangtown Story

"Placerville is known as Hangtown, from the fact that at that place five men had been hung on the same day to the same tree. As related to me by someone who professed to have been an eye-witness, there was in the village a saloon and gambling den known as the headquarters of a notorious gang of thugs. Men supposed to have gold were killed and robbed on the streets at night; others were murdered in their cabins. No one felt safe, either on the street or at his work; and yet no one doubted as to who were the criminals. Finally, at the funeral of a man whose murder and robbery had been traced to certain gamblers, the citizens resolved that every professional gambler, that is, every one who followed no other occupation, must leave town within twenty-four hours.
At this the thugs became more bitter and defiant than ever. A leading citizen, who had obtained evidence involving four of them in the murder, was shot and killed while passing their headquarters.
The enraged miners immediately gathered, surrounded the saloon, and finding the four against whom the charges of murder had been made, and who were suspected of firing the recent fatal shots, seized and bound them hands and feet and without further ceremony hung them to a tree.
The proprietor of the saloon became very angry, charged the crowd with murder, and threatened to avenge the death of his patrons. The mob was in no mood to listen to such talk. There were those present whose friends had been shot down and robbed, as they believed by these men; and suspecting that he was an accomplice in their crimes, a rope was quietly obtained and suddenly the noose was slipped over his head, and he was dragged to the tree and hung up with the rest. Although the twenty-four hours were not yet expired, the mob concluded to finish the business and get rid of the professional gamblers. But upon making search not one could be found, they had taken the hint and gone."

John Steele