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CARSON HILL - CALAVERAS COUNTY

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by

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## CARSON HILL

Carson Hill in Calaveras County, rises 1,906 feet above the sea. It is one of four hills in a topographical setting of steep-walled canyons cut into the gentle rolling hills, that rise above the general level of the Stanislaus River on the south. They are the Chaparral, Columbia, Crooks and Carson hills.

Gold was first discovered in the creek just south of Carson Hill and the town of Melones, by James H. Carson in the year 1848. His name was given to the hill and the creek.

James H. Carson, a native of Virginia and a Mexican War veteran, led by Indian Chief Jesús María reached the southern part of Calaveras County in July 1848. The Carson-Robinson mining expedition, of which Carson was leader, left Monterey May 4, 1848. The company of ninety-two men were all well armed and equipped. Most of them were dragoons and discharged teamsters from Major Graham's command, who had arrived at Monterey from Mexico; a number of soldiers of Colonel Jonathan D. Stevenson's 7th Regiment, New York volunteers, made up the company. Among them were Daniel and John Murphy,<sup>1</sup>

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1. Edna Bryan Buckbee, Pioneer days of Angels Camp, 2.



Dr. I. C. Isabel, William K. Casement, Henry Angel and Edward Murphy, each a pioneer of Calaveras County.

Prior to 1849, Calaveras County was an almost unknown region, especially that portion lying along the foothills of the Sierra Nevada. Before it was defined in 1850, the county included Amador, Mono and Alpine counties, besides its present area.

The discovery of gold May 24, 1848 at Coloma was followed immediately by gold being found in Calaveras County. James Carson and his company left Henry Angel at a creek (Angels Creek) where the company made camp. Carson continued on southward, three miles distant to a slumbering wilderness and made camp at the bend of a creek (Carson Creek) south of the knob-domed hill (Carson Hill) and there found that the creek's colored sand glistened with specks of gold below its slow flowing stream of water.

Carson worked in the diluvial and the alluvial deposits of the creek and found the placer to be extraordinarily rich. It was midsummer and the creek had lost much of its vigor during the long dry season. But the wet digging yielded 180 troy ounces of gold dust for each man for two weeks' labor.<sup>2</sup>

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2. H. H. Bancroft, History of California, VI, 65.



As the news of this rich placer on Carson Creek spread, hundreds of prospectors from other sections of the Mother Lode arrived and mined in the creek. Gradually the camp grew into a small town called Slumgullion Camp (meaning a red muddy deposit in the sluice), and before the rainy season had commenced in December, miners were washing rich auriferous dirt all along Carson Creek and the Stanislaus River. Later the camp's name was changed to Robinson's Ferry, because the prospectors had to cross the turbulent Stanislaus River at that point to reach the diggings. It was a dangerous stream to ford; men and animals lost their lives in unsuccessful attempts to cross. James Robinson rigged up a ferry with rope and a barge. The trip was made precarious by the Slumgullion stampede. It seemed that everybody was bound for Carson Creek, and all wanted to ride the ferry barge at the same time. So great was the traffic, that in six weeks James Robinson collected \$10,000. When the Carson rush subsided, and the prospectors moved to other locations, Robinson's Ferry was renamed Melones, and the town still retains the name.

Angels Camp, three miles away, also became a settlement; the camp was one of the richest locations in the Mother Lode. For a time, between the exhaustion of its placer mines and the finding and establishing of the first quartz mines in California, Angels Camp was a way station where stages,



freight wagons, and hundreds of prospectors arrived daily. The floating population moved to the nearby Carson, Douglas Flat and Murphy placers, and when the pay dirt "pettered out" along the Carson and Angel Creeks, the miners moved back and out of Angels Camp.

Down Carson Creek way, James Carson and a small party crossed the Stanislaus River and camped on a flat where the interesting town of Sonora now stands. He prospected in Curtis Gulch and the rich diggings on the flats near Jamestown. Their stay was not of long duration for Carson became ill, and his party returned with him to Calaveras County.<sup>3</sup>

The miners at Carson's Camp had a ruling passion for honesty. Heavy bags of gold dust were carelessly left in their tents and shacks; mining tools, though scarce, were left in their places at work for days at a time, and not one theft or robbery was committed. The miners had not divided the ground into claims - they worked where the yield was the richest, and often four or five men could be seen at work in a circle six feet in diameter. Later they measured the ground off with tape measures, under the direction of an alcalde, to prevent disputes arising from unassigned divisions.<sup>4</sup> The first gold scales used in Carson

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3. Bancroft, History of California, VI, 65.

4. Ibid.



were made by taking a piece of pine wood for the beam, pieces of sardine boxes for scales and silver dollars for weights.

Shortly after James Carson's return to camp, he was stricken with inflammatory rheumatism contracted while mining in the cold water. The fortunes he had made were spent for medical treatments, during his disability over many months. He resumed mining in 1849, only to become ill again; he left camp in 1850. Later he returned to Robinson's Ferry and became popular with the miners, who elected him to the State legislature from Calaveras County in 1852. Before he could serve he was again stricken; this time the torments of rheumatism and his lowered morale, due to straitened circumstances proved fatal. Although the rich placer to which he had led men, was being mined successfully by six hundred miners, by a strange caprice of fortune, James Carson lay dying, alone, and away from the scene of the fabulously rich creek and hill which bore his name. He succumbed in April 1853, near Emorys Ferry, and was buried at Stockton.<sup>5</sup>

James H. Carson was an important factor to the growth of Carson Hill during the great gold excitement in 1849. Carson Flat, lying east of the hill, became famous for the rich wet diggings on Carson Creek. Carson Ravine and Squirrel Gulch were fed from the erosions of the ledges that yielded

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5. Bancroft, History of California, VI, 67.



rich gold. Because of his discovery, prospectors came to an almost unknown region lying in the shadow of Sierra Nevada.

Many of the present Calaveras towns were founded by members of his company. San Andreas, Angels Camp, Murphys Camp, Vallecito and Douglas Flat are a few of the many gold settlements. Camps nestled in every Calaveras gulch after Carson arrived and found gold.<sup>6</sup>

From the spring of 1848 until 1851, nearly all the mining was done in creek and river bars, and in small ravines. The former were called "wet diggings" and the latter "dry diggings." To the placer or "surface" miner at Carson Creek, mining was almost entirely mechanical and of a kind that required no accuracy of workmanship or scientific education to master it. The amalgamation process was so simple that after a few days experience, the rudest laborer could manage operations and secure pay dirt. Two-thirds of the gold of that day was obtained from placer mines. The miners of Carson Creek knew nothing of quartz or "rock" mining. They were contented with the precious sediment taken out of the colored gravel and sand with the simple pan, pick and cradle. Mining auriferous quartz was unknown.

When John Hanse found one of the richest gold

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6. California State Mines, Mining Resources of Calaveras County, 47. February 1898.



quartz veins in the eastern segment of the Mother Lode, on the northerly slope of Carson Hill, in 1850, his discovery aroused the miners to the fact, that prospecting for gold quartz was entirely different from prospecting for pay dirt in placer diggings. Their ignorance was not entirely gross, although many of the miners of 1849, supposed that the precious metal found in placers had been thrown out by a volcano or some mysterious source, and that the lucky prospector would find the "fountain head." The discovery of the rich auriferous gold quartz on Carson Hill, 1,900 feet above sea level, sent the miners out of the creek, high up the hill where they found reddish earth, numerous quartz pebbles and pieces of slate among the gravel. In 1851, the miners worked the gullies of the hills and flats, and found gold. Many of the rich quartz veins were found by accident or under unusual circumstances. Previous to 1852, it was rare to find any one mining more than ten feet below the surface of the earth; now, thousands are regularly employed in tunnels and shafts, thousands of feet below the surface of the earth.<sup>7</sup>

After John Hanse, James Finnegan, and Alf Morgan pooled their interest and staked off a field claim of 1,000

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7. John S. Hittell, Mining in the Pacific States of North America, 38.



feet on Carson Hill, Finnegan was commissioned to purchase equipment. During his absence, John Hanse sold their interest in the claim to Alf Morgan. The discovery of the mine was recorded by John Hanse, but the claim was made in the name of Alf Morgan, and became known as Morgan Mine.<sup>8</sup> This claim proved to be one of the richest quartz mines in the mining annals of the State of California. It was operated uninterruptedly from February 1850 to December 1851, and yielded \$2,800,000 in gold. The methods of production were primitive. Much of the gold was taken out by Mexican miners who pounded the quartz in mortars. At many locations in the mines, chisels were used to cut out the bands and strings of gold that ran through the hanging wall. On one occasion a single blast of giant powder dislodged gold rock worth \$110,000.

In mining such a vast quantity of pure gold, the Morgan owners suffered unpreventable theft. The Mexican miners stole lumps of gold from the mine and amalgam from the arrastra with little fear of detection. The amount of gold removed by this procedure can never be ascertained. The owners of the mines were concerned about the losses, but the services of the Mexican miners were indispensable.

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8. Louis J. Stellman, Mother Lode, 91.



The owners of the Morgan Mine started a civil war along the Stanislaus River because of their rich strike. Gold-crazed miners swarmed up Carson Hill to protest the legality and the exorbitance of the Morgan claim, after watching for nine months without any thought of demonstrating their disapproval. It is believed that James Finnegan influenced the miners against his former partners, pointing out to the envious miners their rights and the illegal 1,000 foot claim of the Morgan group. The miners held their own court and decided that the Morgan outfit had had sufficient gold, and that it was their turn now. Alf Morgan and his men were given one hour to vacate the property. Morgan resisted and was forced off by the miners. The courts had confirmed Morgan's title to the claim<sup>9</sup> and the property was lawfully his. He left Carson Hill and went to Sonora. Nearly a hundred ruffians under the leadership of one Billy Mulligan, took possession of the mine.

In Sonora, Morgan recruited fifty men to recapture Carson Hill, but before they reached their objective many of his men disappeared to other parts, though Morgan and his loyal band, undaunted, reached Carson Creek after dark and camped on the flat. During the night a rifle shot was discharged to alarm the claim-jumpers on Carson Hill. The sound

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9. Stellman, Mother Lode, 92.



of the shot alarmed the intruders at the Morgan Mine and they made tracks for the lowland on the other side of the hill. At daybreak, Morgan and his men repossessed the mine for several hours, during which time the claim-jumpers found out that Morgan had only a few men, so they boldly marched back up the hill, where they found printed notices warning against trespassing. Morgan departed, but left his agent in charge. The intruding ruffians kicked him off the claim and resumed operation under the supervision of their leader Billy Mulligan. This band was then known as the "Mulligan Guards" and was composed of British ex-convicts, "Sidney Birds," Negroes, Irishmen, Mexicans and Chileans.

Billy Mulligan operated fearlessly in the Mother Lode in the fighting fifties. Before coming to California he had been a member of Colonel Jack Hayes' troop of Texas Rangers, and after reaching San Francisco he became a member of Boom Helm's "Hounds." The vandalism of this organized band of outlaws in 1851, caused the Vigilance Committee to drive them out of San Francisco - Billy Mulligan among them. He came to the Mother Lode country and later made his headquarters at Robinson's Ferry; here he organized his gang of claim-jumpers who employed violence to accomplish their purpose. He worked the Morgan Mine for nine months and secured a large amount of gold. In the spring of 1853, his illegal holdings were seized by an injunction in favor of Alf Morgan



and his associates. In 1854, with gold stolen from the Melones-Morgan Mines, Billy Mulligan returned to San Francisco, where the reorganized Vigilance Committee of 1856 hanged him and his pals, James Casey and Yankee Sullivan.<sup>10</sup>

Robinson's Ferry became known as Melones in 1851. It was then a gold town teeming with prospectors. It had three merchandise stores, several gambling saloons, two churches, a school and a town hall. Slumgullion, the once peaceful and honest mining camp of James Carson's day, had given way to Robinson's Ferry which saw a period of claim-jumping. No sooner had the dust settled on the departure of Billy Mulligan, than Joaquin Murrieta and his band of outlaws, after a series of raids in other gold camps along the creeks and rivers of Calaveras County, rode into Melones and became so terrifying during April and May of 1853, that five hundred miners left Carson Hill district for fear of being robbed and murdered by the Murrieta desperadoes.<sup>11</sup>

After Alf Morgan had repossessed the Morgan Mine, he went to England to sell it, but more litigation, which questioned his title to the mine, left him without a disposition of the case. The mine laid idle until 1867, when James G. Fair acquired control after sixteen years in

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10. Buckbee, Pioneer days of Angels Camp, 72.

11. Ibid., 67.



litigation and idleness.<sup>12</sup> Mr. Fair operated the mine a short time, and again it returned to idleness. In 1898, William C. Ralston, son of the founder of the Bank of California, organized the Melones Consolidated Gold Mining Company which reopened the Morgan Mine, and produced immense quantities of gold. The company's stamp mills produced in excess of \$20,000,000 in gold and was one of the largest among the southern mines.

The Melones Consolidated Gold Mining Company's holdings, besides the Morgan Mine on the northerly slope of Carson Hill, consisted of the Reserve Mine, the Enterprise, Melones, Keystone, Mineral Mountain and the Stanislaus mines, all located on the south side of Carson Hill. These claims traversed through the Morgan-Melones vein, the eastern segment of the Mother Lode.

The Melones Consolidated Gold Mining Company ceased operations in 1918 as their mine was thought to be exhausted. Soon after, careful sampling was made showing an excellent body of high grade ore in the 3,000 winze, which had been sunk by the Melones Company. W. J. Loring and associates of Boston acquired the Morgan Mine, the Calaveras Mine and mill in 1918, and formed the Carson Hill Gold Mining Company.

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12. Hittell, The resources of California, 8.



Mining operations commenced immediately and the ore was sent by the Sierra Railroad to the Calaveras Mills at Melones for treatment. Explorations in 1923 opened up only a small amount of low grade ore. Mr. O. Wenstrom of Boston operated the mine until 1926, when for lack of capital to continue the development work, he had to close down.

The Morgan-Melones Hanging Walls ore-body produced \$4,000,000 worth of gold and the four Flat veins, \$750,000, during the period 1918 to 1923. The Hang-Wall ore-body is a carbonated and mineralized body of sheared chloride rock, in the trough of a curve in the hanging wall of a steeply dipping barren quartz vein. The Flat veins are low dipping thrust faults, containing barren quartz veins and quartz-pyrite ore, chalcopyrite vein - Pink Vein- in the Morgan Footwall Glory Hole.

In the Mother Lode Folio<sup>13</sup> the sedimentary rocks of the districts are placed in the Calaveras Formation and divided into an Eastern Area, Melones Slate and a Western belt, Carson Creek Formation which are separated by the Central belt of amphibolite schist.

Carson Hill produced other great gold mines. There was the South Carolina Mine which in 1867, produced \$400,000

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13. F. E. Ransome, U.S. Geological Survey, No. 36, 2. 1900.



in gold; it was renamed Madame Martinez Mine in honor of Madame Elisa Martinez, a French Basque, who came to Robinson's Ferry from Sonora, Mexico, with fifty peons in 1850. Within a year, after leasing the South Carolina Mine, she took out \$250,000. The ore from the mine was carried down the mountain in rawhide sacks by peons to the arrastra operated by mule power.<sup>14</sup>

The Union Mine, the Santa Clara, the Iron Mountain, and the Irvine group were also large producers. The Finnegan Mine now the property of the Carson Hill Gold Mining Corporation, located near the Morgan Mine on Carson Hill, was once owned by James Finnegan, who created the Hanse-Morgan-Finnegan feud. James Finnegan, during the hectic Civil War days in Calaveras County joined the Angels' Guard, a military organization, of which he was Captain. He died in Angels Camp, August 13, 1862, aged forty years, and is buried in the cemetery at Altaville.<sup>15</sup>

The Comstock Mine on Carson Hill was discovered by George Comstock, the erstwhile hunter who found the rich vein by accident while chasing a rabbit; he shot the animal and while searching for it, he found the hanging walls containing heavy bands of gold running through them. He became

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14. Buckbee, Pioneer days of Angels Camp, 74.

15. Ibid., 68.



a millionaire. His mine again became famous on November 22, 1854 when his partner, John Perkins, and four miners found what was destined to become the renowned "Calaveras Nugget," a mass of gold weighing 195 pounds, troy weight, or 2,340 ounces of gold, valued at \$43,000.<sup>16</sup> Among other "glory holes" on Carson Hill are the Iron Rock, the Carson, and the Adelaide mines situated on the middle and east vein of the Mother Lode. On the west vein, the Calaveras Gold mining Company, Ltd., operates the Hill, the Cherokee, and the Bovee mines, all producers of precious gold during the early 50's.

Carson Hill, once teeming with mining activities, is in many instances now a mass of ruins, and in silent tunnels where congregated the gold washers of the Mother Lode, the owl and the lizard make their homes. At Carson Hill may be seen the ruins of some of the stone and brick buildings erected in the early mining days. At Albany Flat between Carson Hill and Hanselman's Hill, is the Romaggi adobe, built in 1852. It was located on the old road of Los Muertos, that wild mining camp on Arroyo de los Muertos (Creek of the dead) where the battle of Six Mile Creek was waged between Americans and Mexican miners in the autumn of

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16. California State Mines, Mining Resources of Calaveras County, 49. February 1898.



1852. Los Muertos was the favorite haunt of Joaquin Murrieta and his outlaws.

The first American to settle permanently at Robinson's Ferry was Harvey Wood. In 1849, Robinson and a man named Mead opened a trading post, a short distance down the Stanislaus River from the present concrete bridge. Robinson and Mead vanished from the pages of Slumgullion history. Harvey Wood purchased an interest in Robinson's Ferry in May 1856. In the early sixties he married Adelaide G. Gee, of Marbowe, New Hampshire. Three children were born to this union, Carlton Wood of Angels Camp, Percy Wood of Robinson's Ferry and Allie Wood of San Francisco. Harvey Wood died at the old homestead in Robinson's Ferry in 1895. He was buried in the Altaville cemetery.<sup>17</sup>

Almost within the shadow of Carson Hill stands the Mark Twain Cabin on Jackass Hill, where America's greatest humorist passed the winter of 1864-1865. The old cabin was a rendezvous for the inhabitants of the village, and many an evening was spent in telling stories.

In Bret Harte's time Melones was known as Robinson's Ferry, also Slumgullion. It was a favorite spot with him, and his Luck of Roaring Camp, The Idol of Red Gulch,

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17. Buckbee, Pioneer days of Angels Camp, 80.



Two Men of Sandy Bar, have their settings at this location. The Slumgullion Road referred to in The Idol of Red Gulch is the road leading from Robinson's Ferry to Sonora.<sup>18</sup>

James Graham Fair, who purchased the Morgan Mine in 1867, married Theresa Rooney, daughter of Thomas and Alice Rooney, owners of Rooney's "Cow ranch" as their boarding-house was called. The marriage was the outstanding social event of 1861.<sup>19</sup>

Pioneers who lived on Carson Hill were George and Matilda Cordes, John and Catherine Riedel, Robert and Mary Allison, William Bickle, William and Caroline Irvine, Thomas and Mary Lindsay, Augustus and Louisa A. Auiola, Joseph and Mary Whittle. Melones' first permanent settler was G. K. Stevenot, a native of France, an able pioneer who claimed to have had an interest in the famous Morgan Mine and who mined successfully on Carson Creek for many years. He later turned his attention to farming. The G. K. and Sarah Stevenot homestead and ranch delighted the eyes of travelers, between Sonora and Angels Camp.<sup>20</sup>

William and Frederick Leman mined at Carson Creek until the Civil War; they left to join Company E, 7th

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18. Mrs. Robert Thom, Pioneers of the West, 5.

19. Buckbee, Pioneer days of Angels Camp, 69.

20. Ibid. 74.



Infantry, California Volunteers. When the war was over, they returned to Carson Hill, where they passed their remaining years.

These and many other pioneers of Carson Hill have passed on. They built the town of Melones from a miner's camp situated in a country covered with dense evergreen forest, with roads so rough that the camps were inaccessible with wagons. Pack mules were the only means of conveying freight to Slungullion. They developed with the country in spite of the primitive obstructions of nature and the fathomless secrets of the Mother Lode. Some of their mines are now "ghost mines," whose hillsides are whitened by marks of tailings from the numerous tunnels that had been run. There is scarcely one of the numerous ravines and gulches in the vicinity, the bed of which has not been overturned year after year since 1849. With each attempt by some ambitious prospector to find new gold on the abandoned slopes of Carson Hill, sounds and echoes broke the silence, the Chinamen with their rockers, and the Digger Indian women with their little crowbars, horn scrapers and tin pans - all part of the hill of gold.

In 1934, Carson Hill, though there were many shut-downs and resumptions, changes of ownerships and production methods, employed about 150 men. It is still one of the best veins in the Mother Lode. Nor is it by any means



exhausted, for only recently one of the richest types of quartz was uncovered by the Carson Hill Gold Mining Corporation.<sup>21</sup> The company's camp teems with activities. A large machine shop, engine room, stamp mill and sawmill operate day and night. Across the hill past the noisy stamp mill are numerous warehouses, tramways and ore bins.<sup>22</sup>

The Carson Hill Mine at Melones has been milling around 1,100 tons per day, and at one time reached 1,400 tons per day, but the ore is low grade. Carson Hill's gross ran a little less than a \$1,000,000 in 1939.<sup>23</sup>

The historic canyon, through which winds the Stanislaus on its way to join the San Joaquin is again astir, for the reopening of California's battle scarred mines is afloat. It is to be hoped that before the Mexican fire-bush again scatters crimson petals along the hillsides surrounding Melones, that the steam whistles of the mines will be heard calling men to dig for gold, the treasure that James Carson, when dying, said, "would be found a hundred years hence."

Because this mining area helped to make early California history, the town of Carson Hill has been registered as an Historic Landmark. The State does not own the 366 Registered Landmarks. These sites and buildings are privately

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21. Stellman, Mother Lode, 94.

22. Ibid., 81.

23. California Mining Journal, 24, May, 1940.



owned. They have been registered because they have historical significance worthy of record and preservation.

This plan of registration was started by the California State Chamber of Commerce in 1930, which drafted and put through the Legislation. The Chamber has since acted as a coördinating medium for such registrations, coöperating to this end with the Department of Natural Resources.



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