
CALIFORNIA HISTORICAL SURVEY SERIES
HISTORIC LANDMARKS, MONUMENTS AND STATE PARKS
Edited by Clark Wing

DOUGLAS FLAT - CALAVERAS COUNTY

Registered Landmark #272

by

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Written under auspices
of Work Projects Administration
Official Project #665-08-3-147

Sponsored by State of California, Department of Natural Resources

Division of Parks

Berkeley, 1940

DOUGLAS FLAT

Douglas Flat is situated on Coyote Creek, in Calaveras County, seven miles northeast of Angels Camp, on the Big Tree road via Vallecito. It was a famous gold camp in the days of the "long-tom and the rocker" in the early fifties.

The heavy emigration in 1849-50, following the discovery of gold in Calaveras County, so increased the population of Angels Camp, that by the end of 1850 nearly every auriferous gulch and stream of importance in the Mother Lode, had been discovered and partially worked. During this short interval the adventurous miner despite the want of trails, the hostility of Indians, and the many difficulties encountered, had pushed "outside" to regions far removed from the Mother Lode, or Veta Madre, meaning the predominating lode or ore channel of the country.

In 1852 John Nicoll, his brother William, and their two friends, J. R. Coe and a Mr. Pearce, came to this beautiful valley and camped on the south side of Coyote Creek and there they discovered gold, a placer digging as rich as the richest. Tales still told by the last of the early pioneers, bear witness to the fabulous yield of the wonderful surface placers of Calaveras.

The magic word "gold" brought Douglas Flat into being, and what had been a primeval wilderness, where grizzly

bears and scattered bands of Indians roamed, echoed to the clamor of feverish men searching for gold. They pushed up the Coyote Creek, from its inlet at Robinsons Ferry, where the Stanislaus feeds the twisting stream. Every foot to and past Douglas Flat was explored. Every dividing ridge was tramped. Every creek bar, became the scene of frenzied digging for the precious metal.

The trail leading out of Angels Camp to Murphys Camp, on the Coyote Creek, was used in the early fifties, by many of the prospectors, traveling northeast in the rush for new diggings. On this trail, several miles east of Valle-cito, the lone Nicoll camp of peaked tents, stood in bold relief upon the flat. The sound of crowbars and picks, mingled with the voices of men at work, behind the trees, first attracted the arrieros of the mule trains winding their way to and fro over the hill. With the news of gold on Coyote Creek, many tents soon dotted the location in picturesque confusion, and the flat became known as Douglas Flat.

Under the stimulus of gold, Douglas Flat increased its population to three and five hundred. Many of the miners worked profitably, in the diggings on surface claims, some of which became extremely rich, only to decrease in value to fair wage pay. Problems of deep placer mining retarded the success of the miners. The Nicoll brothers,

confronted with such problems, sold their claim on the south side, and the claim adjoining it on the north side of the Coyote Creek, to the Texas Company, in the same year of their discovery. Early in 1853, four or five groups worked with varied success, but there was not much profit made during that year, owing to the great quantity of water, which seeped through the main lead.

A local paper recorded:¹

In the spring of 1854, the Lone Star Company and Harper & Company joined together and cut a drain from their claims to Coyote Creek, a distance of about 700 feet in length and from thirteen to eighteen feet deep.... This drain proved to be of great benefit to the companies who cut it, but to the ones adjoining on the north it was a positive injury as there was a spring raised in their claims furnishing a large sluice stream which flooded them out.

After trying several methods, of getting the water out of their claims, the Towle, Gillett & Company combined with four or five other companies, who were faced with the same trouble, and gave a joint contract to Thomas W. Lewis, W. Abraham and Henry Morgan "to cut a tunnel into claims low enough to drain the bottom, commencing at a point on Coyote Creek, 1,600 feet from the claims, running an open

1. State Department of Natural Resources and the State Park Commission in Coöperation with the California State Chamber of Commerce, Report 18, October 6, 1937. Taken by them from San Andreas Independent, November 21, 1857.

cut about 300 feet and a tunnel 1,300 feet tapping the Lone Star Claim," through which the water was drained from the properties of all concerned. The total expenditure for this work by the combined companies was \$16,000. During the same year these companies and the Lone Star employed a large number of miners and produced thousands of dollars worth of gold.

The Texas Company installed a "steam engine, to raise the water from their claim to the level of the drain spoken of, and also raised the dirt in the same manner." They built a shaft 144 feet deep, on the south of the creek, and operated their mine successfully. On the north side were the Hitchcock Claim, the Ohio Tunnel and South Western Tunnel, all of which paid well.²

In 1851, the Union Water Company brought water from the North Fork of the Stanislaus River through a flume to their old ditch, from which they supplied the miners at Murphys Camp, Douglas Flat, Vallecito and Angels. Later, the system was extended across Murphys Creek by an extension flume to the placers south of the town.³

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2. State Department of Natural Resources.... Report 18, October 6, 1937. Taken from San Andreas Independent, November 21, 1857.
 3. Ibid., November 14, 1857. California Legislature, Appendix to the Journal of the Senate ... 7th Session... 1865.

The surface placers at Douglas Flat astonished the prospector. When the placers were apparently worked out there began an amazing development. With new mining processes, aided by ever improving technique, and extensive exploration, the pick and pan method passed. The system of hydraulic or drifting worked the Tertiary gravel and the yield was maintained and increased.⁴ Tunnel mining is employed where the auriferous gravel is deep, a thousand feet or more. The tunnel is intended to strike beneath the ancient river bed. The length of these tunnels range from 600 to 1,400 feet.⁵

One of the most interesting features in topography and geology is, that the Stanislaus River forms the boundary between Calaveras and Tuolumne counties, which are separated by the remarkable "Table Mountain." Table Mountain is a mass of basaltic lava, with perpendicular sides and a flat top, resembling a table top. It extends for a distance of nearly thirty miles - twenty-seven miles lie on Tuolumne County, and thirteen miles stretch northeast into Calaveras County, passing through Douglas Flat, near Grapevine Creek. This mountain has an elevation of 2,000 feet above the Stanislaus River. The river runs a good part of its length and frequently cuts through it. The mountain top varies from 1,200 to 1,800

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4. Titus Fey Cronise, The Natural Wealth of California, 541.
 5. James M. Hill, Mining Districts of the Western United States, 18.

feet in width; the basaltic mass forming the Table Mountain proper is about 150 feet thick. This portion, which has perpendicular sides, stands on a deep bed of detritus that slopes from its base down to the river and the adjacent county.

The rich deposits, in the subterranean bed, of Table Mountain, were first tapped at Douglas Flat, in 1865. This caused much excitement, and led to the building of a close line of tunnels under its bulky body, which explains in a measure, the source of the surrounding wealth. The flats and bars of the living streams also produced much gold.⁶ The population of Calaveras County was estimated at 14,000, fully one sixth of which were Chinamen. Nearly all of them, as well as two-thirds of the whites, were engaged in mining. A great number, of surface placer mines, were worked by Chinese, who had purchased claims.

In time, the deep gravel deposits were located, and quartz ledges were opened and developed. Methods, of mining, and the character, of the mining population, changed. It was no longer possible, to gather a hasty fortune with pick and pan, from a few yards of earth. With improved methods of production, mining became a business, demanding efficiency far beyond the average miner's ability. Gradually they

6. H. H. Bancroft, History of California, I, 374.

deserted their claims, in order to be employed, by the companies. The men became more settled in their habits, and the little mining camps took on an air of permanency.

Chinese reworked the claims thus abandoned by the white miners, or sought work with the mining companies. The employment of Chinese, however, became a serious problem and created bitter opposition among the miners. The situation assumed such proportions, that on December 30, 1857, the citizens of Douglas Flat, held a miners' meeting and adopted the following preamble and resolution by unanimous vote:⁷

At a meeting of the citizens of Douglas Flat, held on the evening of December 30th, the following preamble and resolution was unanimously adopted.

WHEREAS, the inhabitants of the Chinese Empire, a people of almost countless numbers, and living within a few days sail of our shores - are coming in vast hordes to the mining regions of California; and whereas, the presence of so numerous a class of such persons is of great detriment to the State, and if allowed will - when the placer mines become exhausted, which will soon be the case, and mining claims shall have passed into the hands of capitalists, cause coolie labor to take the place of the present hardy, intelligent, independent miners and useful citizens, and oblige them

7. State Department of Natural Resources . . . Report 18, October 6, 1937. Taken from San Andreas Independent, January 2, 1858.

to seek homes elsewhere, and whereas, the only way seems to be to cause at least, some of those who are now here to return to their own country, and to prevent others from coming, is for the miners throughout the mining region to refuse them permission to work, therefore, we the miners of Douglas Flat, do assent and adopt the following resolution:

RESOLVED: That no Chinaman shall be permitted to hold or work upon any claim in this district, after ten days from this date (Dec. 29th, 1857) except such as have bought claims who shall be allowed thirty days to work out their claims, or otherwise dispose of their interests.

RESOLVED: That any person who shall hereafter sell a claim to a Chinaman or employ him upon a claim shall forfeit his own right to hold a claim in this District for the space of one year.

RESOLVED: That a Committee be appointed to call upon any Chinaman now mining in this District, and notify them of the above resolution.

With the elimination, of Chinese labor, mining conditions were again improved.

With time, came the wagon road from Carson Valley, via Angels Camp, to the Big Trees, and in 1863 the stage ran from Angels via Murphys to the grove. The Sierra Railroad linked Douglas Flat with other towns, in the county.

Years have now passed, since those Douglas Flat gold days. Time, and the exhaustion, of the easily gathered golden grains, have swept away the teeming life of the

community, where in the height of the gold rush men toiled and bargained with pick, shovel and "Lady Luck." Today, it stands a defunct mining town, with but few of the old landmarks still standing. The Gilleado Building was once a store and a bank. "A little iron shuttered opening, at the left of the rear door opened into a lean-to cabin, the quarters of the guard, whose shotgun was kept continually trained at the safe inside the banking building."⁸ In the shadow of the hills stands the Avalanche Mine, the Bachelor, Black Hawk, Cataract, Golden West, Pennsylvania and on Coyote Creek, the Reid and Shannon Mine, the Texas and the Wide West, mute evidence of the days when Douglas Flat was a prosperous mining camp.

Peacefully and silently, Douglas Flat continues to produce gold, but only in sufficient quantity to retain its memories. The picturesque little village, may have lost its riches in gold, but it retains and shares many of nature's surrounding wonders. On the highway, near Douglas, is Vallecito, the home of the Vallecito Western Mines, and the "Moaning Cave" so called because of the moaning sound which issues from it at times. It is said to be of a most wonderful formation.⁹

8. State Department of Natural Resources....Report 18, October 6, 1937. Taken from San Andreas Independent, November 21, 1857.
9. Mrs. Robert Thom, Pioneers of the West, 12.

Off the highway, half way between Vallecito and Parrot's Ferry, is located a most remarkable natural tunnel. The waters of the Coyote Creek runs beneath it. The entrance presents the appearance of a massive stone Gothic arch, thirty-two feet in height and twenty-five feet in width. The rocks and earth above are thirty feet in thickness, and partly overgrown with trees and shrubs.¹⁰ There is also the townsite of Murphys Camp, interesting for its yesterdays, and from afar shadows are cast by the great forest region of the famous Calaveras Big Trees.

Douglas Flat, full of cherished memories of the past, has no winding line of miners by the river marge, with their rattling rockers or long toms; no smoke from campfire or chimney arises from the depths of gorges; cabins are gone; no laughter comes up from the canyons; no ounce a day is dried by the supper fire. Gone are most of the oaks and pines from the mountainsides. The beds of the creeks are covered deep with the accumulated debris of years, over which the water once clear and cold from the melting snows of the Sierra winds sluggishly on, laden with mud. On the flat, in the chasms made by hydraulic power in the Pliocene drift, the hollow iron columns that once compressed the water, stand rusting away. All is silence and desolation where once was

10. Thom, Pioneers of the West, 12.

a roar of water and the noise of mining activities. The same red and brown soil fills the ridges and the gorges; the same skies unflecked by clouds from May to November are overhead; the same pure air is left to breathe. A considerable part of Douglas Flat is now cultivated; scattered here and there over the slopes and on the highway are homes surrounded with flowers and fruits - but as a mining town, the glory of its day is but a memory.

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6. Thom, Mrs. Robert. Pioneers of the West. Tuolumne-Calaveras Bi-county Federation of Women's Clubs. Alameda, California. (n.d.)