



Quarterly Bulletin of the Calaveras County Historical Society
Volume XXVIII October, 1979 Number 1

MEXICAN MELONES

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As the site of the town of Melones disappears beneath the waters of New Melones Lake, it is most appropriate that we enquire into the derivation and history of this unusual name, and as to the actual site of the original town of Melones.

At last we have a thorough search into the matter and we are very pleased to be able to publish this scholarly study by Professor Jackson and Mr. Mikesell of U.C. Davis. We print this here with permission of the Sacramento District, U.S. Army Engineers and by courtesy of Science Applications, Inc., as the study was part of a much more comprehensive effort by the Corps of Engineers to document the historical resources of the New Melones Lake area.

Not only is the origin of the name and the location of the original or Mexican Melones fully explored, but the writers give us a vivid description of the exciting first few years on Carson Hill, as set down by a number of those who had actually been on the ground. They also dispel certain of the myths that have developed over the years about this fabulous mining district.

Editor

In August (?) 1848, James H. Carson, a Second Lieutenant in the regiment of New York Volunteers, commanded by Col. J.D. Stevenson, discovered gold on Carson's Creek, a tributary of the Stanislaus River. Carson described the event in his *Recollections*, a widely-read Gold Rush source:

Carson, who had been directed by an Indian, discovered what has since been known as Carson's Creek, in which himself and a small party took out, in ten days, an average of 180 ounces each. Angel also discovered Angel's Creek, at which he wintered in 1848. Ever first with the discoveries were Capt. Weber's trading stores - John and Daniel Murphy, and Dr. Isabell being with them. With many traders, in those days, weighing gold for Indians and white people was a different matter; honesty, generosity, and justice marked their every transaction with the Christian, but they had weights and prices for the Indians. And if this should meet the eyes of any of them, they will please

*receive the thanks of the writer for teaching him the art of 'throwing' the lead' for the benefit of the Digger Indians.**

The diggings at or near Carson's Creek was a mainstay of the Southern Mines. William Redmond Ryan, whose recollections were published in London in 1851, recalls the mines in 1849. His description places the diggings some distance up the "ravine" of Carson's Creek, away from the confluence of the Stanislaus River and the Creek. He indicates some sort of retail operation, selling food, as well as gambling booths and shanties.

I had resolved upon seeing a little of the neighboring country whilst I had the opportunity, and learning something further respecting the 'upper diggings,' namely 'Carson's Creek,' and the 'Mormon's diggings,' although both were by this time (1849) pretty well worn out. They are situated a good distance up the ravine, the latter being distant from the Stanislaus about a mile to the diggings....'Carson's Creek,' which derives its name from a soldier who discovered it during a furlough, has been tolerably productive.

*At the time I am now speaking of, however, the mineral wealth of both these camps, as well as of a thing, called Angel's Camp, had considerably diminished, and they were much upon the same footing as the Stanislaus in this respect. I was informed that during the previous winter a great quantity of rain and snow had fallen in these parts of the Stanislaus, in consequence of which, the miners had been exposed to great privations, and provisions had risen to an enormous price, flour reaching four dollars a pound; pork, five; biscuit, three, and rice two; whilst beef was not to be procured at any price. The general appearance and peculiarities of these placers did not present any characteristic differences from those other sections of the Stanislaus to which I have already alluded: there were numerous tents, good, bad, and indifferent; stores and gambling booths; shanties and open encampments; and miners busy everywhere.**

The "diggings" in and around Carson's Creek came to be known generally as "Carson's." One should be cautious in assuming that a town existed, although there is some indication that in 1849 and 1850, commercial enterprise settled about the area known as Carson's Flat, probably the area that is now designated State Historical Landmark No. 274, called Carson Hill.

It cannot be overemphasized, however, that locational names were not systemized in the early 1850s. One must refer location from the context in which a name is used. Before 1851, "Carson's" probably referred to the general area from Carson Flat to the confluence of the stream and the Stanislaus, and was generally synonymous with "Carson's Creek." "Carson's Flat" was probably more restrictive referring to the flat on the north side of Carson's Hill. "Carson's Creek" may have referred to the creek or to the diggings up and down it, or perhaps to the commercial establishments at the Flat. The hill rising east of Carson's Creek, later called Carson Hill, was apparently not yet named, and no town or settlement was yet called Carson Hill.

George Alfred Raymond operated a store at "Carson's Creek" from the winter of 1849-50 to the winter of 1851-52. The following selections from the letters written to his sister give a skeletal impression of the country and society in that mining district.

**Recollections of the Mines*, James H. Carson. [Oakland, 1950]

*William Redmond Ryan, *Personal Adventures in Upper and Lower California* in 1848-1849. [Two volumes, London, 1851] Volume 2: *Angel's Camp*, p.39.

These three characteristics – the transitory “Camp” atmosphere, the predominantly Mexican populace, and the violence – are remarked on by many observers. J. Ross Browne, who did not personally visit the town, repeats the assessment of others, perhaps Thomas Deare, whom he cites as having “lived at the mine longer than other person.”

...The town of Melones, on the southern side of the hill, became the largest mining camp in the State, with a population variously estimated from 3,000 to 5,000.

People came in crowds to see the mine. Robinson's ferry, on the Stanislaus river, two miles south of the place, took in \$10,000 for ferriage in six weeks. From February, 1850, til December, 1851, the production continued uninterrupted and with very little decline. In that time, according to Thomas Deare, who has lived at the mine longer than any other person, \$2,800,000 were extracted and immense sums were stolen. It is reported of one Mexican miner that he stole \$1,500 in one day from the arrastra which he had in charge, and paid it the next day for a horse. All the rock too poor for the hand mortar was ground in arrastras, and it is said that 50 of them were running at one time. The facilities for stealing were great and the temptation strong. Gambling was carried to a great extent and gold seemed to have lost its value. The miners were mostly Mexicans, who, as a class, were not looked upon with much favor by American miners; but they had had some experience in this kind of mining and their services were indispensable. They could pick up the lumps of gold in the mine, or they could take hand-fuls of amalgam from the arrastra with little fear of detection. As for the amount taken in this way, it could never be ascertained, but that it was great was assumed in the common conversation of the miners themselves.

Noyes offers some clue as to its social character, referring to Melones as one of the most “wicked” and seemingly one of the most violent camps in California. He also indicates that its population was chiefly composed of Mexican day-laborers, working at the Morgan Claim. He refers to it as a “brush” town, with houses made of brush in a manner common to Mexican adobes in the gold country.

Throughout most of 1850, miners continued to engage in placer operations along Carson's Creek. A few adventurers however, did venture up the adjoining hill, now called Carson Hill, to pick away at the quartz. In October, 1850, the big find of gold-bearing quartz was made near the summit of that hill. The nature of mining during 1850 can be pieced together from occasional newspaper references. The *Stockton Times* of March 23, 1850, reported rumor of a lump of gold dug out of Carson's Creek weighing 93 pounds. The editor doubted the reliability of this story.

Stockton Times, March 23, 1850
News of a 93 lb. lump of gold dug up at Carson's Creek—humbug.

Riley Senter wrote from Angels Camp, June 23, 1850:

At the new diggings on Carsons Creek 3 miles from us a few did well. We were over several days working but did not make anything of a 'strike,' doing no better on the whole than on our own bar.

Several weeks later, Senter wrote again:

July 7, 1850
At Carsons new diggings 4 miles from us several large pieces have been taken out within a few weeks past — some weighing several pounds each. Some young men [two] tented near us bought a hole that was already sunk and some few hundred dollars taken out at Carsons about a week since, paid for it \$150... There has been several robberies committed here and at Carsons lately — last week.

Carson Creek, March 13, 1850

...I wrote you in my last letter that we had been digging during the winter, and had bought a store. We have been here a little more than a month and have made \$600 clear of expenses...

Carson Creek, June 3, 1850.

I have just received your letter dated April 10th. I had a hearty laugh, to think of your sending paper for me to write on, as I have two or three reams and plenty of pens, ink and envelopes in the Store and could have bought it at any time during the winter for twenty five cents per sheet. I do not know where you got the idea that such things were scarce here. As to the time of my returning home it is uncertain. It may be in one year and perhaps two. I am doing better now than I could digging, and as to my trade, I could not earn three dollars per day at it. I like the country much better than formerly and were it not for the want of society (I mean ladies) the Sabbath and the faces of my friends at home, should be content to stay here. There are no women except a few Spanish and many of the men are mere desperadoes and would as soon shoot a man as look at him. The pistol and knives are used on every occasion and yet it is seldom a man is killed. There was one man who went all over camp trying to borrow a rifle or pistol to shoot me with, because I would not let him have goods on credit, but I did not feel much alarmed, for the cowardly scamp would not have dared to shoot if he had obtained a pistol...

...To-day is Sunday and all is quiet. No Americans work Sunday and but few Foreigners. We have no unpleasant weather during the summer. Every day the Sun rises clear and sets without a cloud to obscure it. The valley and hill sides are covered with flowers of every variety, in fact Cal is a perfect flower bed in the Spring and a scorched and barren waste in the fall. During the winter the grass grows and the country presents a better appearance. There is some of the most wild and picturesque scenery in this country to be found in the world. Within a few miles of us are two natural bridges across a stream 100 feet or more in width, that of Virginia cannot compare with



MINERS OF THE GOLD RUSH

The unknown miner is the real hero of the rush to Carson Hill in 1850-51. Hundreds, even thousands, of miners jostled, helped each other, and fought over the gold on this fabulous hill during those tumultuous years. Many of these miners were Mexicans who made their headquarters at the original town of Melones.