

Feather River Bulletin

6-30-1977

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Feather River Canyon--70 twisting miles of natural scenic beauty

by Jim Martin
(from Guidebook
to the Feather River Country)

August, 1937, marked a time for high celebration in the Feather River country. After 70 long years of dreaming and 9 years of arduous labor, builders had succeeded in pushing a highway through the Feather River Canyon.

A gala banquet and ball in Oroville on the night of Friday the 13th touched off the festivities. The official dedication rituals came on Saturday at Grizzly Dome, a giant granite monolith in the North Fork Canyon.

The three-day fete heralded completion of a 70 mile long stretch of highway linking Oroville with Keddie, seven miles north of Quincy. Constructed at a cost in excess of \$7 million, the \$100,000-a-mile highway gave local residents a direct, all-year road to the upper Sacramento valley. The new road was designated State sign route 24, and was praised as a miracle of highway construction. Now numbered as State Highway 70, the highway is still considered one of the most scenic roadways in California.

It's impossible to travel the entire original highway today. The portion of the road from Oroville Dam to Jarbo Pass has been replaced by an alternate route. Much of the former roadbed has been inundated by waters of Oroville Reservoir. So let's take the shorter, quicker new route.

From Oroville it's a fast freeway to Wicks Corner, about six miles north of the city limits. Then it's a gentle up hill climb through rolling

foothills to the reservoir. Enroute, you will pass sideroads leading to Paradise, Magalia, Pentz, Oregon City and the Lime Saddle Recreation Area on the West Branch Arm of the lake.

An interesting double decked bridge takes both the highway and the Western Pacific railroad tracks across Oroville Reservoir. Like the original road, the train tracks also had to be rerouted when the lake was created. A rest stop and view point are located at the east end of the bridge.

After leaving the rest stop, the highway climbs sharply towards its crest at Jarbo Gap (elevation 2,330 feet). Three miles beyond the bridge is an observation point from which visitors can obtain a panoramic view of the upper valley and the coastal range beyond.

A chain warning sign at the Jarbo Gap Summit reminds motorists that snows can be expected in the mountains which lie ahead at anytime during the winter months. Drivers are also cautioned to keep alert for rocks and deer on the highway.

After crossing the summit, the highway descends a long, gentle grade towards Pulga on the North Fork of the Feather. Several turn outs offer vantage points from which to view the deep gorge. Pulga means flea in Spanish, which gives credence to the thought that some early explorer may have been so plagued on the spot.

A pair of large suspension bridges remind visitors that railroads tracks also follow the Feather River Canyon through the mountains. Completed in 1909, the rails came first and naturally took the most advantageous route available. Because it was impractical to

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construct the highway on the same side of the river as the train tracks, the two routes play leap frog all the way up the canyon. Consequently where the train tracks bridge the canyon from south to north at the Pulga Crossing, the highway does exactly the opposite.

Past Pulga the highway runs close to the river for several miles, and soon passes the Poe Power Dam, one of several Pacific Gas and Electric Company hydro-electric installations found along the North Fork. Constructed without benefit of fish ladders. The power company dams have transformed the river from a one-time prime fishery to a series of sluggish reservoirs primarily populated by suckers, Sacramento Pike and other rough fish. Only a few old timers can still give first hand accountings of those glorious days when majestic steelhead, giant salmon and trophy trout swam in the North Fork.

The Cresta Power house comes next and about 3 miles beyond is a roadside rest area. Overnight camping is not allowed, but you are welcome to pause and picnic. Then it's through Arch Rock Tunnel, the first of three massive passages punched through solid granite walls when man was forced to turn mole in his efforts to conquer the canyon. Grizzly Dome Tunnel is next, after which comes Elephant Butte Tunnel, the longest of the trio.

Tobin, named after a Vice President of the Western Pacific Railroad, is one of several resorts which prospered in the canyon before the building of the highway, when sportsmen rode "Fishermen's Special" excursion trains



to enjoy the prime angling in the river. When the Cresta and Rock Creek powerhouses were built in the late 1940's, Tobin came to life as a

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headquarters for construction workers. The resort had a population of around 2,000 persons and had a reputation as being the largest liquor account in Northern California at the time.

Next comes the Injun Jim Campground, one of numerous US Forest Service facilities which dot the Feather River region. Hookup facilities are not provided, however separate zones have been set aside for tent campers and recreational vehicle owners. Campsites are seldom filled to capacity. The campground, and the small school located nearby, take their names after Jim Lee, an Indian who reportedly had a garden near this site.

Memories of early gold rush areas are preserved at the Eby Stamp Mill, a feature attraction at the PG & E rest stop where Yellow Creek joins the North Fork. The heavy stamps were originally used in the White Lily mine near Seneca. Across the river lies the Belden resort and another USFS campground. The site is named after Susan Belden, a pioneer homesteader.

A mile past Belden, Highway 70 and the main North Fork of the Feather reach a parting. The side road to the left follows the North Fork up to Caribou. Our route continues up the East Branch of the North Fork to the Junction of Indian and Spanish creeks.

The highway climbs sharply along the north side of the East Branch, affording motorists an impressive view of the canyonlands around Rich Bar, a vintage gold

town so vividly described in Dame Shirley's "Letters from the California Mines", written in 1851 and 52. Now published as "The Shirley Letters", the book provides fascinating insight into the life in an early California gold mining community. The site has been designated as a California Historical Monument, however warning signs remind visitors that the town is privately owned.

Whistle tops and watering places are important names in the Canyon. And so we pass Virgilia, Jack's Place, and the hamlet of Twain. Just shy of the latter, a side road leads to another of Smokey Bear's campsite areas.

Beyond Twain lies Grays Flat, where a large scale lumber mill once operated. Some milling is still done here, but the operation is by no means as extensive as when the Flat was the terminus of a five-and-a-tenth-mile tram line across the mountains capable of delivering a bundle of logs every three minutes.

The Feather River Hot Springs and Paxton come next. The former is one of several natural spas in the region; Paxton was built as headquarters for the Indian Valley Railroad. Once called Soda Bar, the town was renamed in honor of Elmer Paxton who helped construct the IVRR

A well signed intersection marks the Greenville "Y" where Highway 70 joins with Highway 89. The latter route leads to the left and on to Greenville and points north. Continuing to the right, Highway 70 climbs across Spanish Creek, then proceeds to Keddie, the eastern terminus of the \$7 million highway. Quincy, is only seven miles ahead.

Fact, folklore tours gold mine ghost towns

A caravan of vehicles manned by members of the Paradise Fact and Folklore, Inc. assembled on the Highway 70 bridge over Lake Oroville to begin a tour of the Yankee Hill, Concow and Big Bend old mining areas, recently.

They traveled first to the old Clark family cemetery, where Ron Watts related history of Rich Gulch, a mining area in the ravine below the cemetery. Watts pointed out locations which had at one time contained buildings. He said Yankee Hill, situated higher up on the ridge, was so named because it was settled by miners from New England.

In 1856 there were three hotels, a store and about 300 people, he said, with several quartz mills operated in the area.

In 1858 M. H. Wells opened the first large store and a post office was established.

The tour route passed the site of Yankee Hill and the location of the school was designated.

The group stopped at Yankee Hill cemetery, located atop a knoll. Larry Richardson, local genealogist and historian, spoke on the history of the cemetery, pointing out graves of many of the early-day families and the unique headstones. He mentioned the diversity of nationalities represented. Graves of several Civil War veterans are in the Yankee Hill cemetery, he added.

The caravan left Highway 70 west on Lunt Road and stopped at the intersection of Lunt and Nelson Bar roads, near the site of the mining camp known as Frenchtown.

Mildred Forester noted that according to records she has researched, it was established at least as early as 1854. A post office was founded in 1857, but changed to Yankee Hill in 1858. In 1908 the post office was moved to the Lunt home and was still known as the Yankee Hill post office.

She said, in 1856 Mary C. Smith, grandmother of Larry Richardson, filed a declaratory notice that she was doing a business of farming, raising, selling and buying stock. The notice, filed in Mrs. Smith's own name, set the value of her business at not more than \$5,000. Mrs. Forester stated, at that time this was the legal limit of business which a woman could conduct.

Lyle Watson said the Nelson Bar Road was a long-established route from Paradise to the Yankee Hill and Concow area, until the Oroville dam was built.

The impounding of water in Lake Oroville forced the closure of that road, he said. There was a trading post at Nelson Bar in 1849, and the first crossings of the West Branch of the Feather River at Nelson Bar were by ferry and toll bridge.

Charles Curtis went to Nelson Bar in the early 1850's, where he built a two-story home on the west bank of the river near a spring. Curtis built the first road from Pentz Road to Nelson Bar and put in a ferry.

In 1858 he built a toll bridge near by, but high waters of 1862-63 washed away the bridge and the ferry, Watson said.

Mr. Curtis replaced both but two years later another flood took them out again, he added.

At this time Curtis built a bridge at a higher elevation and ceased operation of a ferry as told in "Tales of the Paradise Ridge," Vol. 8, No. 1.

Another speaker at this location was Dr. David DeSpain, a resident of the area. Dr. DeSpain was formerly a ranger at Cuyamaca State Park and later at Bodie.

Dr. DeSpain gave a background history of the Lunt family, whose forebears have been in the area since 1852. He described the Lunt house, which he said was built originally for use as a sanitarium, by an uncle of the present occupants, Mr. and Mrs. Oliver Lunt. Lunt, who is now 91, cares for his ranch, and was in the field repairing his tractor when the caravan passed.

The next stop for the tour was at the Concow School. Ruby Swartzlow outlined the history of the Concow school, stating that according to court house records, Concow District schoolhouse was the first school north of Feather River, and was located two miles north of Yankee Hill on Concow Road.

School opened May 2, 1875, she said, and the first teacher was Edwin R. Lunt (father of Oliver), who received \$75 a month. Other teachers named were Ellie B. Curtis, Professor T. D. M. Slaven, Miss E. B. Potter and the Lynch girls, Maggie and Mary.

Mrs. Swartzlow said the school burned in 1907 and again in 1939. It was reported that 400 volumes from the school library were burned in the first fire.

Two miles north of Concow, the reservoir school was established in 1880, near the Mullens Hotel, she said. In 1922 Reservoir school was annexed to Yankee Hill, which was established in 1886, and in 1943 Yankee Hill school annexed to Concow.

above Nelson Bar and entered into the Miocene Canal.

The tour continued on Concow Road past the site of the Deadwood Sanitarium, which flourished under the direction of the Chinese Dr. Ah Sang about 1880, as related in "Tales of the Paradise Ridge," Vol. 13, No. 2.

Lunch was served at Crain Park.

After lunch, Ted Gobin and Mrs. Forester told some of the history of the Mullens place, which possibly was located near the picnic spot.

The caravan returned to Concow past the site of old Spanishtown, and crossed Highway 70 to follow Big Bend Road to an overlook where Gobin pointed out the location of the Big Bend Tunnel.

At this point the North Fork of the

Feather River makes an oxbow bend about 12 miles in length. It was here that a mining company, headed by Major Frank McLaughlin and Dr. R. V. Pierce, undertook to drive a tunnel in 1880 to divert the water from the bed of the river for easier mining.

A tunnel 12,000 feet in length would bare about 12 miles of the river's bed to mining. However, the venture was not successful because earlier miners had taken the easier mining ground, they said, and what was left was too expensive to mine because of the huge boulders.

In later years the tunnel was utilized by the power company for operation of the Las Plumas powerhouse.

The field tour ended at this spot.

Note: Mary C. Smith is great grandmother of Larry Richardson

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Board Roundup

Concow Station Site Ok'd

County supervisors have agreed to let the Concow Volunteer Fire Station be built on the former garbage transfer station by permit, rather than by lease.

The board Tuesday authorized a permit be brought back, rather than approve a lease agreement that had been prepared.

The board will also provide \$1 million in liability insurance because volunteer groups are technically county employes.

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DEE DEE — Dee Ann Michelle Gramps is one year old today, Oct. 5, 1977. She is the daughter of Carol and Alvin (Bo) Gramps, of 2016 Fogg Ave., and the little sister of Ron, 9, and Billy, 8. Her nickname is Dee Dee. Proud grandparents are Mr. and Mrs. Bert Edwards of Forest Ranch, and Maxine Gramps of Yankee Hill. Dee Dee is the great-granddaughter of Mr. and Mrs. Don McKeen of Yankee Hill, and Mr. and Mrs. Ira Compton Sr. of Chico. She has a great-great-grandfather, Homer Anderson of Paradise.