

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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### **Mother Lode Gold**

The little hamlet of Bear valley gave us the biggest thrill of the three-day outing, for it was here that John C. Fremont and his wife, Jessie Benton Fremont, lived for a number of years. Because of Fremont's connection with the early history of Monterey County, and because we had read "The Immortal Wife: by Irving Stone, it was interesting to see where Fremont and his Jessie had established their home in California.

Bear Valley was first named Simpsonville. There are several stone buildings there still in good condition and in use. All are made of schist slabs, set in lime mortar and plastered over with stucco. There is also a weathered corner of the Fremont company store still existing, with a large elm tree grown up inside the ruins. An obliging grocery man pointed out the hill upon which the Fremont home "The White House: stood. It had burned many years ago, as had his hotel, the Oso House, in 1938. The site of John Bigler's salon is also pointed out to the inquiring visitors. Bigler was an important man in Bear valley, and miners came from miles around to enjoy his hospitality and to see his wife, Margaret the first white woman to come to the town.

On the historic marker there was this information: "Bear Valley, headquarters of Col. John C. Fremont, world famous American, who in 1847 purchased a floating Mexican grant of 44,000 acres for \$3,000. After gold was discovered he floated his grant to include the Mother Lode gold, out from Mariposa to Merced River. After costly litigation his title was confirmed by the Supreme Court. He worked his placers by grubstaking experienced Mexican miners, before the influx of Americans. In 1851 he build a two story hotel, and later a large store and his home. Horace Greeley visited here in 1850, and wrote home: "The colonel is now operating two stamp mills and netting \$100,000 a year." In 1863 he sold it for \$6,000,000.

Bagby, at the foot of a long winding mountain road, is the site of Benton Mills, names by John C. Fremont for his father-in-law, Thomas Hart Benton. The foundations of the mills can still be seen on the south bank of the Merced River below the highway bridge and just above the mouth of Hell Hollow. Flat laid slabs of serpentine set in lime mortar had been used in construction. From here on we were outside the Fremont Grant.

Coulterville, another of the Southern Mother Lode towns, was once called Banderita, then Maxwellville. The present name was gotten from Alexander Coulter. We arrived late in the afternoon, in the rain, and for a short moment thought of spending the night there but one look at the hotel changed our minds and we drove on to Sonora.

Thank goodness the great highway by-passed Jamestown, a small interesting hamlet near Sonora, which has a large number of stone buildings surviving from the Gold Rush days. It is pleasant to drive off the fast traveled road and enter the quiet of Jamestown's main street. "Jimtown" was funded in 1848 by Col. George James, a San Francisco attorney who found the idea of hunting for gold more attractive than hunting for clients.

There are few architectural relics in Sonora, for it is now a bustling, prosperous county-seat, modern in details, a center for the mines still operating in a wide spread area.

St. James Episcopal Church is probably the oldest church of that denomination in California. It was built in 1859 and is still standing in its original triangular plot at the head of the main street.

Joseph Henry Jackson in "Anybody's Gold: tells that in Sonora there was published the Sonora Herald, one of the earliest newspapers of the Southern mines, found by Dr. Lewis Gunn. Dr. Gunn's old house and office may be seen at the other end of the street from St. James' Church.

The early residents of Sonora were also known to be persons of education and culture for the most part, for it is recorded that as early as 1850 Sonora had three book-stores doing good business—which does away with the once popular belief that all miners were rough-and-ready creatures with no manners, and less schooling.