

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Southern Mother Lode Towns

Blossoming fruit trees, blooming poppies and beautiful green hills made the motor trip to Mariposa from Monterey a delight. In the foothills the deer brush was in full white bloom and the red bud added color among the oaks and pines. Once we saw a huge buck bound across the road before the car.

The town of Mariposa marks the southern end of the Mother Lode. History tells us that in 1844 Micheltorena, the Mexican Governor of California, granted to Juan Bautista Alvarado the land which in 1847 was bought by John C. Fremont and later known as the Mariposa (Butterfly) Grant. The first quartz mine in the Mother Lode was worked on the Fremont grant in August, 1849, which was 18 months after Marshall had discovered gold at Coloma.

Mariposa still retains an abundance of evidence of its growth in the 1850s and the tourist may see many of the old buildings as progress is made down the main street—the old Fremont Company office built of brick; the Schlageter Hotel built of brick with wide wooden balconies; the Trabucco Warehouse of brick with great iron doors, now vacant; the present Bank of American buildings, and the I.O.O.F. Hall of which there is always one in each of the Mother Lode communities.

We satisfied our curiosity by entering the Butterfly Grocery in Mariposa. It seemed a desecration to have modernized this old stone building with a modern stucco front, and yet advertise that some of the original inner walls were built of soapstone set in mud mortar and bits had been left exposed. Source of the soapstone is the hillslopes immediately east of the town.

We passed the old jail which sits on the hill at the southern end of town and noted that the building had been constructed of dressed granite blocks from Mormon Bar, two miles south of Mariposa. This granite is significant, according to the "Geologic Guide Book along Highway 49," as it comes from the intrusion which terminates the Mother Lode on the south.

In Mariposa the courthouse, which still stands on the hill, might have been transported whole from some quiet New England village. Built of wood on classic lines, in 1854, it was put together in the solid Colonial fashion that the builders liked because they had been born and

brought up in such fashion, wrote Joseph Henry Jackson, in "Anybody's Gold."

Leaving Mariposa we took a winding narrow road to Mormon Bar, first settled in 1850, where we found little of interest except the County's fairgrounds and a small museum where a mixture of family heirlooms, Chinese objects, old china and pictures surrounded and ancient Washington Press and drawers of hand-set and wooden type probably once used to print Mariposa's weekly newspaper, although there was no label to inform the visitor of its history or origin.

From Mariposa to Bear Valley we passed through the most beautiful country imaginable. The County Historical Society has erected excellent markers at most of the historical spots along the route and we paused to take notes at each and every one. At Mt. Ophir we read the following; "Mt. Ophir Mint, built in 1850 by John L. Moffat, part owner of the adjoining mine and of an assay firm in San Francisco." Here he "coined" in February, 1851, the famous octagonal fifty dollar gold slugs, all in accordance with an act of Congress, Sept 30, 1850, and repealed July 3, 1852. It was the only congressional act authorizing private coinage in California and making it legal tender. Its purpose was to correct defects then in use, of using gold dust and authorized private coinage in business.

Mt. Ophir is now completely abandoned. The foundations of the Mt. Ophir mint, about 30 feet square, may still be seen. They are made of quarried slabs of schist set in mud mortar.

There is an interesting story told in connection with this mint. Early in the 1850s, Joseph Marre, tax collector of Mariposa County, was caught in a cloud burst one evening as he rode toward Mariposa with some 300 of the wight-sided 50-dollar coins to deposit. They found him next day, drowned. His horse was also found with the saddlebags still in place, but no trace was found of the \$15,000 in gold slugs which he was known to have had with him. Plainly, writes Joseph Henry Jackson, he had hidden the money somewhere for safe keeping, perhaps before he tackled the swollen stream that swept him to his death Hundreds have dreamed and dug, following as close as they could guess Marre's route – but the money has never been found.

(To be continued).