

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Old California Sawmills

"California Heritage," a history of Northern California lumbering by W. H. Hutchinson, has just reached our desk. The paper-bound book gotten out by the Diamond Match Company and published by Hurst and Yount of Chico, may be procured by those interested merely for the asking.

Mr. Hutchinson began his history of lumbering in the state with a review of the history of lumbering on the East Coast. When the first settlers landed in the New World, it has been truly said that "America was trees." The first lumber was produced at Jamestown, Va., in 1608 and the first commercial sawmill soon followed at Berwick, Maine, Hutchinson tells us.

Lumbering became the first home industry in the infant colonies. The axe and the saw were indispensable companions of the long rifle in the western thrust of the American frontier, he relates.

Skipping from the East Coast to California, the author writes that lumbering played no small part in the history of this state where adobes were easier to make than planks and both axe and saw were as rare as white wheaten flour.

In 1814, the year that Benjamin Cummings perfected the first circular saw at Bentonville, N. Y., John Cameron deserted the English ship Isaac Todd to settle down ashore as Scot's "paisano", Juan Gilroy. The place of his settlement is still known as Gilroy in Santa Clara County. Gilroy is known to have left a graphic record of life as he then found it: "Not a sawmill, whip saw or spoked wheel in California. Chairs, tables and wood floors were not to be found except in the governor's house."

The Russian-American Fur Company built Fort Ross high on a headland above Bodega Bay whence they sent lumber to their settlements in Alaska. By 1827, they were exporting lumber to the rest of California and to the Sandwich Islands and were selling houses, which they first erected and then dismantled for shipment in a crude version of pre-fabrication, Mr. Hutchinson says.

Another bit of interesting history relative to firsts in California is the fact that George Yount, a free-trapper from North Carolina who had followed the fur streams west to hunt sea-otter, made the first shingles at Santa Barbara in 1833. By tradition, California Heritage relates

that Yount's prowess as a shingle-maker gained him a princely grant of land from Gen. Mariano Vallejo where Yountville keeps his name alive today.

The first powered sawmill in was that of Juan Bautista Rogers Cooper, erected in 1834 on his El Molino Rancho in Sonoma County.

Next came John Sutter who bought Fort Ross from the withdrawing Russians and its planks and beams were sent by ship to Sutter's Fort. John Bidwell was supervising this task in September 1834, when Capt. Stephen Smith from Baltimore sailed his ship into Bodega Bay with the first steam sawmill to reach California and erected it on nearby Salmon Creek.

Sutter's ' need sent Samuel Hensley up the Sacramento in 1844 to cut and raft down logs for New Helvetia. This was the first attempt to tap the northern Sierra Nevada for timber and Hensley's Indian fight on this logging chance gave its name to Bloody Island.

Again, Hutchinson relates early California history with this paragraph: "Sutter's need sparked Peter Lassen's deal in 1845 with William Brown Ide, newly arrived from 'the States' with a circular saw and a set of mill-irons. Had they not come to sudden disagreement, the first sawmill in interior California would have been at Vina and the only president of the Bear Flag Republic would have been a lumberman."

The first pine lumber from the Sierra was whipsawed by two of Sutter's men, Sicard and Dupas, in the early months of 1845. As John Bidwell noted, "Two men would saw of good lumber about 100 or 125 feet a day," and this was not enough for Sutter's needs.

"He kept men seeking sawmill sites - from Butte Creek and Cherokee Flat above Feather River to the Cosumnes and all the streams between - until a place was found in a little valley the Indians called "Coloma," here a Yankee millwright, James Wilson Marshall, contracted to erect a water-powered sawmill, the first in the Sierra Nevada. In the tailrace of this uncompleted mill on Jan. 24, 1848, a Mormon millhand found the flakes that raised the cry of 'Gold.'"

Thus ends the first chapter, "A Quest for Lumber - Then the Rush for Gold," in California Heritage.