



CHEE CHEE FLAT

by *Bonnie Miller*

North of the community of present day Mountain Ranch, in almost the geographical center of Calaveras County once lay a remote valley. It wasn't a dramatic valley in the sense of a bowl at the bottom of a canyon, but more like a gentle basin or shelf in the foothills. The flat was nestled in the pines and oaks that come together at the Sierra's two-thousand foot elevation, similar to the basin that cradles the community of Murphys. The flat shelf of land was affectionately called Chee Chee Flat.

It is believed that gold was mined from this locale before 1848, before the famous discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill. The residents were the Mexicans, or Californios, who lived here before Mexican Independence. A ravine one half mile to the northeast of the flat still bears the name Mexican Gulch. These first residents were likely the source of the name Chee Chee.

Mining waxed and waned over the years after the initial rush for gold yet the camp in the small flat persevered. Ultimately it became a major contributor to the development

of Calaveras County. It had the distinction of being strategically located to accommodate through travelers and became a significant crossroads. Mining was profitable during many phases, from placer to hydraulic. But the community of Chee Chee Flat remained viable for several decades even after the easy placer gold played out. Residents continued



This USGS benchmark, set in 1945, notes the elevation of Chee Chee Flat at 2199 feet.

Photo courtesy Wally Motloch.



The shelf of land that makes Chee Chee Flat can be seen where encroaching timber is kept at bay. Photo by Bonnie Miller, December 2012.

to farm and mine gold from the area for almost a hundred years more. And Chee Chee Flat contributed to the development of the county's water systems.

Where did the name come from?

There are many local legends as to the source of the name for Chee Chee Flat. It is generally thought to have come from the Mexican residents. The term *chichi* is Mexican slang for loose women or breasts. It is likely that the name referred to the ladies of the night who worked the early gold camp.

Another possible source for the name is Chinese rather than Mexican. It is believed that two Chinese men, possibly brothers grew extensive vegetable gardens in the flat. There were Chinese who lived there, unfounded estimates are as high as one thousand at a time, and gardening was a common occupation for Chinese during the gold rush. They sold their crops to the miners and surrounding camps. It is understandable that referring to the area as the Chee and Chee Brothers' Flat could create the name Chee Chee Flat. It has also been surmised that the names were Chee and Chi.

One historian believes the source for the name of the community can be found in early tax records that could not be definitively located for this account. Regardless of the origin of the name, Chee Chee, ChiChi or even Chee and Chi Flat has appeared on

claims and deeds in Calaveras County since before El Dorado became Mountain Ranch.

Geologic Importance

The flat that made up the area called Chee Chee included old stream gravels, soil deposits and a tertiary channel. These deposits were shallow but easily worked through simple placer mining techniques. For this reason it appears that Chee Chee Flat enjoyed a very early prosperity in the county's history.

Much of what we know of the early history of activity in the flat is from the county's first mining claims and tax records. Chee Chee Flat and the surrounding communities that

would make up the area of Mountain Ranch and the Mountain Ranch Mining District were bustling and prosperous mining camps in the 1850s and 1860s. Those records describe the extensive placer mining activity of several miners in the area. Numerous claims in the El Dorado Mining District were made either on the flat itself or nearby. Close landmarks such as Mexican Gulch, or Dutch Hill to the southeast and Negro (Nigger) Flat to the northwest were cited as locations for claims near the flat.

Like all mining communities, prosperity rose and fell over the years. The 1860 census indicated twenty miners lived there six of whom were Chinese. By 1870 and again in 1880 the number of miners had dwindled to only ten and none were noted as Chinese. Within twenty years only two men in the area listed their occupation as miner. Local lore claims that as many as five thousand miners, plus the one thousand rumored Chinese resided in or near the flat but these claims have never been substantiated.

As new strikes were found elsewhere, miners moved on and abandoned the flat. Some men filed only one claim, while others filed on three or more. By the 1860 and 1870 census none of the original names were repeated. This suggests that the first miners filed claims, worked them for a short term, then moved on to richer strikes as the shallow workings played out.

The flat's fertile shelf of soil was conducive to agriculture. The flat eventually became the home of several gardens that supplied the miners. Early residents who did not mine the ground instead developed the productive land for agricultural purposes.

In 1868 a rich quartz vein on the East Belt of the Mother Lode at Sheep Ranch was discovered. Most of what little was left of the community of Chee Chee Flat picked up and moved on to that more prosperous mining camp, leaving behind only the farmers, ranchers, and a few miners. The heyday of mining the flat appears to have ceased by the mid-1870s.

Residents and Businesses

In New York 1855 Norwegian native Jonas Mauritson jumped ship in 1855 to head west and try his luck at finding gold. He changed his name to Charles Anderson to avoid being caught and sent back to Norway. When he came west he first settled in the community of West Point where he operated a brewery. In 1867 he established a saloon in Chee Chee Flat called Anderson's Saloon and Dance Hall. Tax records indicate it was valued at \$100. In November of that year Anderson sold one-half of his land at Chee Chee Flat, just 300 feet square, bounded by unclaimed land on all sides, to G. P. Landquin. Further west of Anderson's Saloon lay the Cleveland Quartz Mine, undoubtedly the primary source of his clientele.

The following year Anderson was assessed for the saloon and hall valued at only \$25. Mining had dwindled considerably with folks moving over to Sheep Ranch. By then he also had a house and lot

with another saloon there. He also called the Sheep Ranch business Anderson's Saloon. It was valued at \$50 with stock in trade valued at \$20 plus one horse.

Anderson moved the dance hall from Chee Chee Flat to Sheep Ranch for his new saloon. That establishment was the predecessor of what would become the renowned Pioneer Hotel in Sheep Ranch. Thirty years later the hall was jacked up and another story was built underneath it. Anderson operated the establishment there until his death in 1904. His widow then operated it until her own death in 1941. The Pioneer Hotel remains a famously recognizable landmark in the county with strong connections to Mountain Ranch.

Other early residents in Chee Chee Flat included Joseph Warren, Philip Foley and Dennis Burns. Foley and Burns remained prosperous and influential on the flat for more than thirty years. Early businesses included McGowan's Store, Martin Fisher's ranch and stable and John Francil's (Franzil's) garden. Of all of the businesses that operated, the most famous was the Red Light Saloon. Neighbor Luellen Del Papa described it as an establishment that catered to "all the needs of men." The only remaining evidence of this once thriving business is a hole in the ground at the intersection of West Murray Creek and Ponderosa Roads where the cellar was excavated years later. In the early 1950s a young Jerry Howard, who grew up north of Chee Chee Flat recalls walking by the hole by the intersection early one morning on his way to the school bus stop. In those days the roads were not paved that far from Mountain Ranch and the county road crew was grading the road. The road worker



Anderson's Dance Hall was moved from Chee Chee Flat to Sheep Ranch around 1869. Photo circa 1878.

was kicking the dirt along-side the road ditch prior to starting the day's work as the road grader warmed up. His toe kicked up a twenty dollar gold piece!

Joseph Warren was an English mariner who also left his life at sea. When he settled in Chee Chee Flat he became a farmer. He developed a sizable farm about a mile northeast of the flat on a stretch of land called Negro Flat. In 1860 his real estate was valued at \$1000, indicating considerably larger and more profitable holdings than that of Anderson. Warren and his wife Mary had a daughter who married Anderson/Mauritson in 1875. She settled with Anderson in Sheep Ranch where they raised their own family at his hotel and stable operation.

Dennis Burns and his wife Mary came to Calaveras County from England. By 1870 he was actively mining at Chee Chee flat and held real estate and property worth \$500. The couple raised seven children on their land that included a house, barn and orchard. By 1880 Burns had abandoned mining in favor of farming but remained at the flat with Mary well into the next century. All of their children moved away. Dennis Burns passed away at his Chee Chee Flat home in 1906.

The Burns' neighbors were Philip and Bridget Foley, emigrants from Ireland. In 1868 the Foleys bought John Franzil's claim and cabin valued at \$460. Burns and Foley patented adjacent mining claims and partnered in business ventures over the years. The Burns and Foley claims and ditch, or the Chee Chee Flat Gulch as it came to be known, appeared on maps for many years. Philip Foley also died in 1906. The two friends had both emigrated to this country in 1849 and passed away fifty-seven years later within months of each other.

Of the families that remained in the flat after the 1870s, most pursued ranching and farming. Later

FATAL ACCIDENT.—On Saturday night last, a resident of Chee Chee Flat, named Cary, fell into a shaft while going from El Dorado to his cabin, and was killed. The circumstances of the sad occurrence, as near as we have been able to learn are as follows: The evening was very dark, the trail narrow, and shafts on either side. Mr. Cary was on horseback. In the utter darkness the horse wandered from the trail. It is supposed that the first admonition Mr. Cary had of his dangerous position was the sight of a yawning abyss directly in his path, and that by suddenly checking his horse he backed into another shaft close by. The shaft in which both rider and horse fell, was sixteen feet in depth, with four feet of water at the bottom. Not making his appearance as usual, search was instituted for him on Monday, and his body recovered. Mr. Cary was repeatedly urged to remain in El Dorado by his friends, on the night of his death, but would not yield to their entreaties.

This newspaper article describes the untimely death of a Chee Chee Flat miner. When one reads between the lines it can be surmised that the miner had likely been a hearty but unlucky client of a nearby saloon on a cold night.

Calaveras Chronicle, 25 January 1868.

residents of the flat included the Butterfield family and the ancestors of the Doster family. The Butterfields and Dosters both lived and successfully mined the area well into the 1920s. Other later residents included Zwinges, Cuslidges, Canaveros, Howards and Sherwoods. Descendents of some of these families continue to live in the area today.

One later resident, considered a reliable source, recalled a story to a young boy who grew up in the area during the 1940s. The old timer told the boy about a cave that existed near the flat. It was definitely a cave and not one of the many mine tunnels or shafts like those in the nearby Salamander

Mine. Miners had found eleven skeletons in the cave, some with bullet holes in their skulls. Many of the skeletons had large buttons indicating fancy clothing, assumed to belong to women. The old timer had always assumed that the cave held the disposed bodies of the prostitutes from the saloons. Although the boy, now grown, clearly recalls peering into the cave, he never saw the skeletons. The location of that cave has been forgotten.

The exact locations of the businesses and dwellings of early Chee Chee Flat are also unknown. As recently as fifty years ago at least one small board and batten cabin, understood to have been owned by a miner, was still standing at the center of the flat. Danny Elzig, another lifelong resident of Calaveras County, recalls the house to have been made of slabs. He remembers that the house had been old in 1946. He knew that several generations of the Frye family as well as Ed Pickett had lived there. A "slab house" it was called. The walls were made from the outside rounded slabs cut from timber at the nearby sawmills. The slabs were considered waste so proved to be an inexpensive building material. Nothing remains of any board and bat buildings or the slab house as they have been absorbed by time.

Crossroads

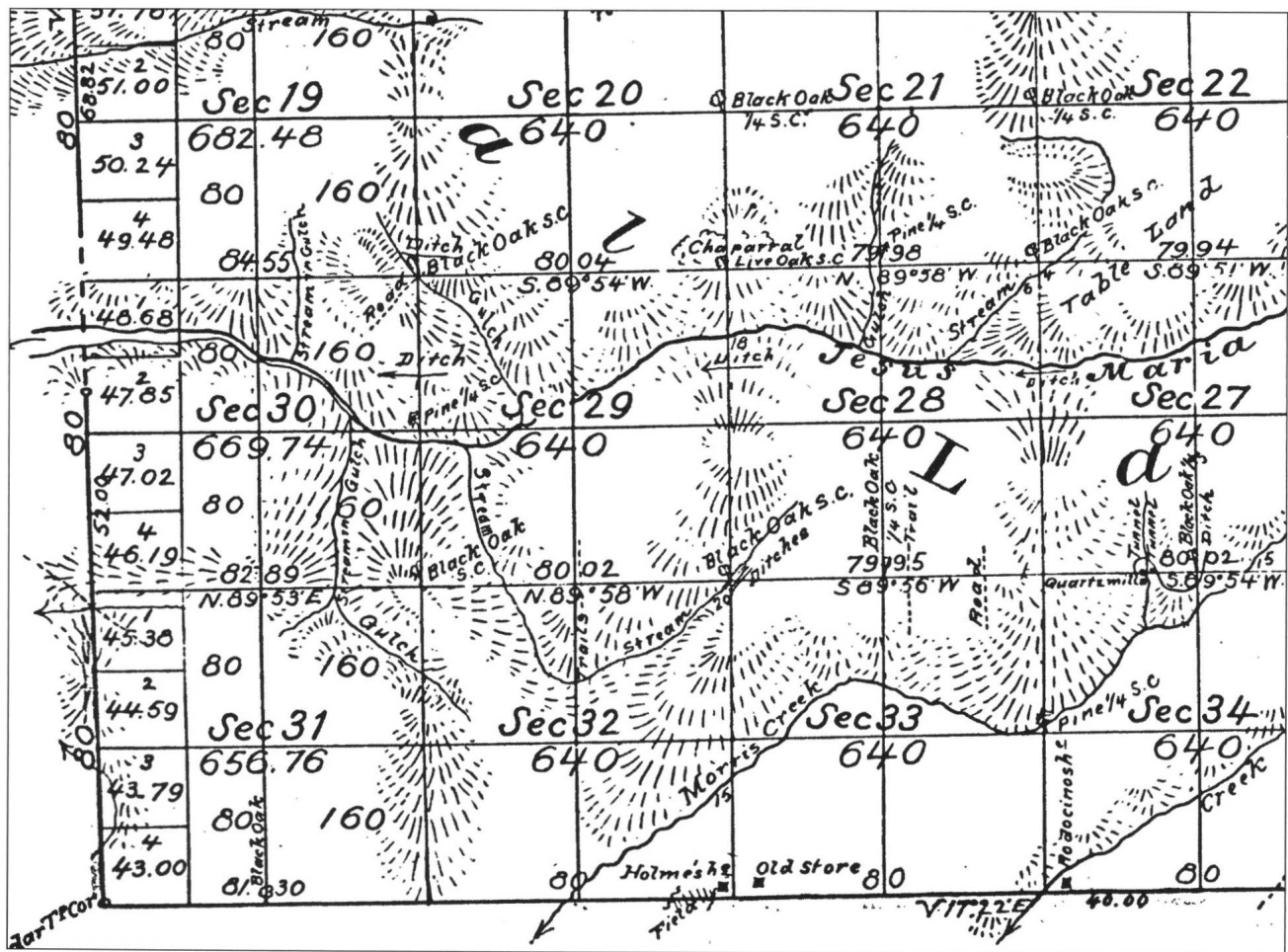
Like Double Springs to the west, Chee Chee Flat enjoyed the geographic distinction of being located at a prominent cross roads to the economy and life blood of the young county. In the early days of the state there was no Highway 49 or Golden Chain Highway linking the gold camps. Rather, transportation between the camps was via crude trails and wagon roads. When express service reached San Andreas, the mail and goods had to be carried from there on to the camps. The route worked its way north out of San Andreas to Jesus Maria then south to the camps along the foothills including El Dorado, Cave City and Calaveritas.

During its heyday the flat served as a major juncture on this prosperous express route. In the late 1850s and early 1860s William "Pony" Denig's Express, located in San Andreas, ran to Chee Chee Flat and other nearby locations. Mail was delivered to McGowan's Store in Chee Chee Flat every

Wednesday, Friday and Sunday where it was retrieved by the residents. Pony Denig was a pioneer who had the smarts to capitalize on the needs of the miners by providing the express service. Pony Denig began his express company before the national pony express service existed and his lasted long after the national express had terminated.

Chee Chee Flat was located at the intersection of three early-day transportation routes: the route from Jesus Maria to El Dorado; the Mokelumne Hill to El Dorado Trail; and the road to Salamander Gulch and San Andreas. Today these roads are called, from east to west, Whiskey Slide, Ponderosa or 44-Ranch, and West Murray Creek Roads. The intersection of these important roads provided a waystation for travelers, and, for a few brief years, was the trading center for the nearby mines.

Although the roads continue to be used to this day Chee Chee Flat abandoned all of its commercial activities by the 1870s. Rather, folks



This map created in 1874 by the Surveyor General's Office in San Francisco shows the complexity of the disturbed ground surrounding Chee Chee Flat, Section 32, labeling it as 'Mineral Land'. Calaveras County Archives, T5NR13EMDBM.

Confluences and Hydraulics

just traveled a bit farther, just under two miles to Mountain Ranch and El Dorado for their supplies. Sadly the Chinese were not welcome to bring their business to town. Jerry Howard recalled one story told by old timers about the time a Chinese man walked to Mountain Ranch to visit a saloon. The other patrons made it clear that he should have stayed at Chee Chee Flat with his own kind. They tormented and tortured the man who eventually died because of their actions.

The significance of the intersection of those three roads at Chee Chee remained important for generations. During the Great Depression the flat housed a satellite California Conservation Corps camp. The purpose of the crews staged there was to construct the vital Ponderosa Road which crossed directly through the flat. They also likely constructed the Sierra Vista Lookout nearby at that time.

Hydraulic mining was first introduced in California to Nevada County in 1853. By the time the easy placer gold had played out around 1860, hydraulic mining was booming. The idea was to shoot blasts of pressurized water at the hillsides. Enormous amounts of gravel could be washed away inexpensively to reveal hidden gold. Chee Chee Flat employed the technique, but to do so meant they had to have water.

The flat was not only the intersection of many crossroads, but also the near-confluence of two sources of water. One of Chee Chee's greatest contributions to the development of Calaveras County was its construction and promotion of ditches and water sources. Developers of the water systems that served the El Dorado and Mountain Ranch Mining Districts proved that the transportation and impoundment of water could be profitable indeed.

tion and impoundment of water could be profitable indeed.

Ditches from the northeast brought water from the Jesus Maria Creek to the flat. Jerry Howard's family believed that the extensive dirt ditches and flumes along the northern perimeter of the flat had been built by Chinese laborers.

Burns and Foley conducted some of the first hydraulic operations in the flat. Water for their mining was brought to the area via a system of ditches and flumes from the San Antonio Creek to the southeast. On 3 September 1853 the Table Mountain Flat Company was formed to hold water east of El Dorado. On 15 September 1853 the Table Mountain Water Company, a joint stock company, was formed. Their purpose was to bring water to El Dorado and Cave City and eventually on to San Andreas by 1856.

The water company cut a ditch from below San Antonio Falls into O'Neil Creek, thence from O'Neil Creek at Table Mountain Flat (what is now the M24 Ranch) to El Dorado, McKinney's Diggings, and on to San Andreas. Water was impounded in a reservoir near the present Emery Reservoir at M24. Ditches proceeded westerly to a reservoir on the

Mining Notice } *Notice!*
Philip Foley } *Notice is hereby given*
signed claims to
gulch as a right of easement for the
mining off the tailings from his parcel
known as the Foley Mine. Said easement
as soon as water can be had to the
mine and the right to the use of this water is
granted back by use and occupation
signed and his grantee to the year
1879 in the use of the mine is not
but the use will be resumed when water
is had for mining the said claims.
Dated July 18th 1879
Chee Chee Flat
Philip Foley
Recorded at request of Philip Foley & Co.
1879 at 4 o'clock P.M. in Book 4th of
Records of Calaveras County.
R.M. Ke...

Portion of mining claim of Philip Foley in Chee Chee Flat, 2 August 1879; Mining Claim Book F Page 193, Calaveras County records.

present Mobley Ranch (3M Ranch) just east of Mountain Ranch. From there the water could be taken from its eastern end for Cave City, Washington Ranch, and Old Gulch. From its western end the water was conveyed to Chee Chee Flat and beyond to San Andreas.

Much washing and hydraulicking was done from this water system. During the early 1860s, several “fluming” claims were filed on Chee Chee Flat and Gulch, obtaining water from both the Jesus Maria Creek to the north and the abundant Table Mountain ditch from the south. The result of these activities was a significant gulch bisecting the flat that is still evident today.

Both Burns and Foley continued to purchase surrounding ground and file claims in the Chee Chee Flat area for thirty more years. By the early 1900s the Table Mountain Ditch no longer extended to Chee Chee Flat, bypassed the area, and just proceeded on into San Andreas.

The hydraulic operators in Chee Chee Flat employed a technique called “spot hydraulicking.” This method used slightly smaller water nozzles than the bigger operations and worked the existing channels. When a small area was exhausted, the operation was picked up and moved to a new spot. This technique, while devastating, did not wash away entire hillsides. Rather it created numerous pockets and gulches in its wake, still evident today.

The heavy hydraulic activity permanently changed the landscape. Numerous land surveys over the years lay testimony to the fact that property corners and boundaries are ambiguous in the highly disturbed grounds.

Evidence of the former hydraulic activity is still visible today though camouflaged by extensive overgrowth. At one time the rolling hills around El Dorado and Chee Chee Flat were covered with mighty stands of excellent pine and oak timber. Several sawmills in the area saw to the removal of those trees. The trees that we see today are second growth replacements to those once huge forests. Logging in the 1980s confirmed all tree growth exactly 100 years old at that time. From this data we can speculate that the present vegetation covers an area once devoid of growth.



The effect of hydraulic mining and the deep gulch that crosses Chee Chee Flat can still be seen through the trees. The gulch and former reservoirs still impound rainwater. Photo by Bonnie Miller, December 2012.

Chee Chee Flat is too far east of the Golden Chain Highway to see much vehicle traffic anymore. Modern roads have bypassed the former routes between the isolated communities. All of the businesses of the past have disappeared and now the area is home to unchecked second-growth timber and ranchland. The flat remains only as a quiet remote home to a few fortunate residents. No historic monument adorns the location, not even a sign declares the name. The early crossroads with the funny name has passed into history.

Las Calaveras is grateful to the following individuals who took time to discuss and share their research and recollections of Chee Chee Flat: Danny Elzig, Mike Falvey, Jerry Howard, Judith Marvin, and Wally Motloch.

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Danny Elzig, Mike Falvey, Jerry Howard, Judith Marvin and Wally Motloch, personal interviews.

Calaveras County Historical Society

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The Calaveras County Historical Society is a non-profit corporation. It meets on the fourth Thursday of each month in various communities throughout the County. Locations and scheduled programs are announced in advance. Some meetings include a dinner program, and visitors are always welcome.

The Society operates the Calaveras County Museum which is open daily from 10:00 to 4:00 in the historic County courthouse located at 30 Main Street in San Andreas; and the historic Red Barn Museum at 891 Mountain Ranch Road, also in San Andreas, which is open Thursday to Sunday, 10:00 to 4:00.

The Society's office is located in historic San Andreas, the Calaveras County seat. Visitors are always welcome to stop by the office for assistance with research, and are encouraged to visit the museums while in the area. The office is open Monday through Friday from 8:30 to 4:00, and the telephone number is (209) 754-1058, or contact us at: CCHS@goldrush.com; Red Barn Museum (209) 754-0800.

October–December 2012

Donations

The Historical Society appreciates the following generous donations:

Charles Larson—donation of materials for Red Barn Annex North Wall project

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Dan & Jennifer Brock—Vintage Royal typewriter used by Jack Lodato until he passed away in 2012

Lauren & Kathleen Crespi—Cash donation in memory of Lloyd Darby

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Phil D. Alberts—cockfighting spurs, shaving kit owned by Bendito Gusto, WWII ration tokens from the Domenghini General Store, books, program from Rededication of Historical Landmark Plaque No. 254 at Camanche dated May 5, 1968

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Robert Gilbert—Certificate for shares in Gilbert-Tryon Company, incorporated in 1922 with warehouse in Angels Camp

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