



BLAZING THE TRAIL

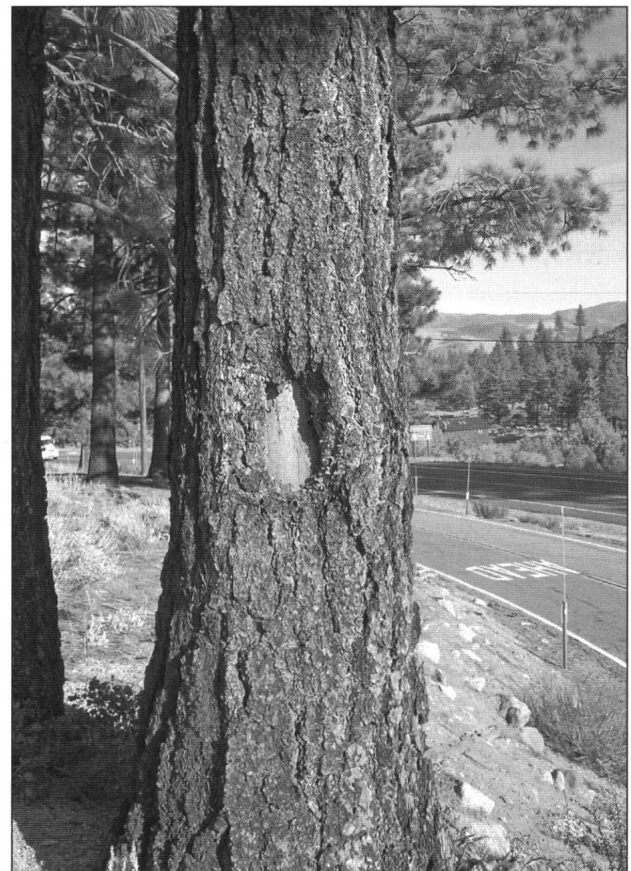
By Bonnie Miller

trail·blaz·ing (trāl-,blā-zīng) *Evolution of the Indian's small mark on a tree to a definitive cut; refined to an actual symbol. Suggestive of one that blazes a trail; setting out in a promising new direction; pioneering or innovative.*

In the early days of exploring and settling the west, finding the path was difficult. There were no signs or phones for asking directions, and certainly few accurate maps. Or maybe there were some signs, if one just knew where to look.

When a path became indistinct or a junction became confusing, it was necessary to mark the trail for future travelers. In the west, Native Americans marked preferred routes with an unnatural scar on a tree. To the trained eye, the mark was clearly a deliberate cut in the bark, in a location not likely to be scarred by nature. In an advanced system, the scars were in fact elaborate symbols to indicate direction or deliver a message, such as a warning should the wrong path be pursued.

The idea of marking a pathway has existed for thousands of years. Staying on the correct course could be critical, as evidenced by the forty-niners who perished at the misrepresented Hastings Cutoff route. Had they stayed with the more established



An old blaze marks the historic Emigrant Trail and route of the Pony Express.

<p>Deed C. A. Morse To J. R. Gardener</p>	<p>I know all persons by these presents, that I, Chauncey A. Morse in consideration of the sum of One Thousand Dollars, the receipt whereof is hereby acknowledged, has granted, bargained & sold and by these presents do freely and absolutely grant, bargain and sell, unto J. R. Gardener late of Boston, State of Mass. & now a resident of Calaveras County, State of California, all my right title & interest as well in law as in equity of one undivided half the Ranch, known as the Washington Ranch, being three hundred & twenty Acres, bounded as follows, commencing at a large Pine tree blazed, thence north west by Northwesterly direction, One hundred & fifty rods, to a small Pine tree blazed, thence on an East North Easterly direction, three hundred & twenty rods to the place of beginning - together with all the appurtenances &c thereto belonging and appertaining.</p>
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A description from an 1853 deed notes a blazed tree as a reference point. Courtesy of the Calaveras County Archives.

route, they would have had an easier path. Many pioneer diaries have stories of tragedies when their party lost their way in the great salt flats.

Nature could fool the eye or obscure the obvious trail. A trail could be covered with snow or obliterated by spring runoff. A falling tree might tumble a boulder against the tree, leaving a natural mark. It was necessary to leave a permanent mark that would be visible to the next traveler. Purposeful marks had to be different from a natural mark, but not so outrageous as to damage the tree or be offensive. Or the mark had to be clandestine, with the symbolization aimed at only a few people designated to follow. These elaborate

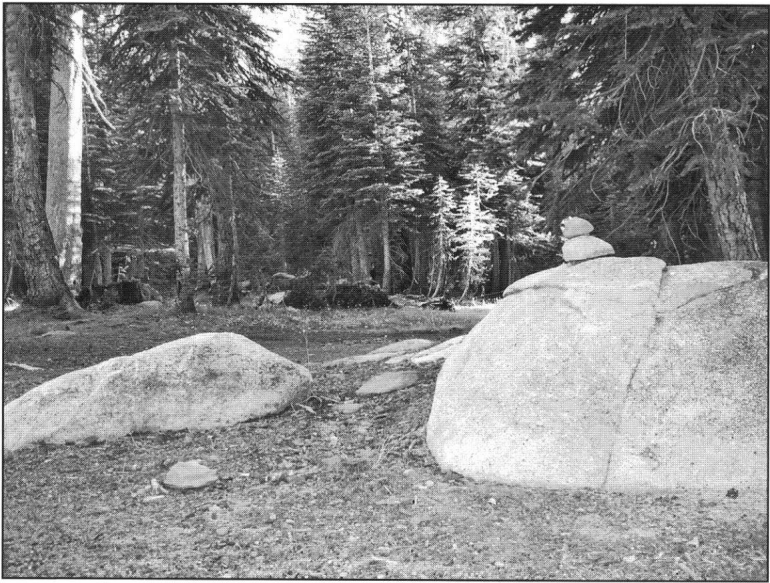
markings were called blazes. The ones who scouted the trails and left the message for those to follow on that route were called the trailblazers.

Many of our routes, either backcountry trails or modern roadways, evolved from earlier use by the trailblazers before us. Historic tree carvings have been recorded in the west from the Chumash Indians on the coast to the Basque shepherders in Idaho. Whether a Native American, a trapper, explorer or cattle rancher, the best routes were often marked for future travelers. Today backcountry hikers follow a graduated system of trail markings. To the purist, the most basic method is to follow the blazed trees. The next more obvious

delineation is the sign post. If a hiker missed that indicator, they could look for tags or more signs, or they could employ an accurate topographical map. In the modern world, hi-tech walkers resort to satellite GPS signals that accurately pinpoint their locations.

Trail Signs

Sometimes Native Americans mounted the skull of an animal in a tree to be grown over and assumed by the bark of the tree. These special monuments became revered medicine trees. The Native Americans also employed an elaborate sign language using broken branches or woven grass. These marks could become obliterated due to weather. The blazed tree has always been the most reliable.



A small unlikely pile of rocks, resembling a duck, denotes the side of the trail.

Trail markings vary considerably from one culture or region to another. Today there are many ways to mark a trail. Other semaphores include posting a sign, installing a short marker post, or painting the tree. Some cut blazes are even painted with colored paint, indicating individual trail systems. Sometimes a metal or plastic tag is nailed to a tree.

Intentionally marking or cutting trees is considered vandalism in most jurisdictions. Regrettably such graffiti is readily evident in many public areas. Others consider it an artistic expression. Regardless of the viewpoint, it can damage the tree, and it is not favored in most forests.

Conversely some wilderness areas discourage the use of synthetic signage, such as paint or a plastic sign hung in the tree. They find that the tree gently scarred with a blaze to be the most environmentally friendly method and as such tree blazing continues today. Usually trail maintenance personnel or volunteers blaze desired routes. The number of blazes depends on the complexity of the path that is being delineated. Blazes usually occur at or slightly above eye level, facing the traveler who should walk toward and beyond the blaze. If the trail is actively used in both directions, a tree may be blazed on both sides for two different directions of travel.

When an area is devoid of trees, there are still ways to mark the path. This may occur in open grasslands, or more commonly when a trail is higher than the tree line. An unnatural pile or stack of rocks, a cairn, may be employed to signal the way. In high altitudes where the landscape is predominantly barren, a smaller stack of rocks is used. When viewed from a distance, these unnaturally stacked rocks very much appear as a duck sitting on the horizon. This appearance gave the rock pile the obvious name of "duck." A cairn is likely to exist at significant points in the landscape, such as a summit, intersection, or boundary line. By contrast ducks are employed in lines along barren landscape. One should always be able to see from one duck to the next so as to not lose the direction of the route. Perhaps this is the origin of the term "ducks in a row," as opposed to the shooting gallery image.



These aspen trees bear modern day graffiti unlike the eloquent messages left by Basque shepherders.

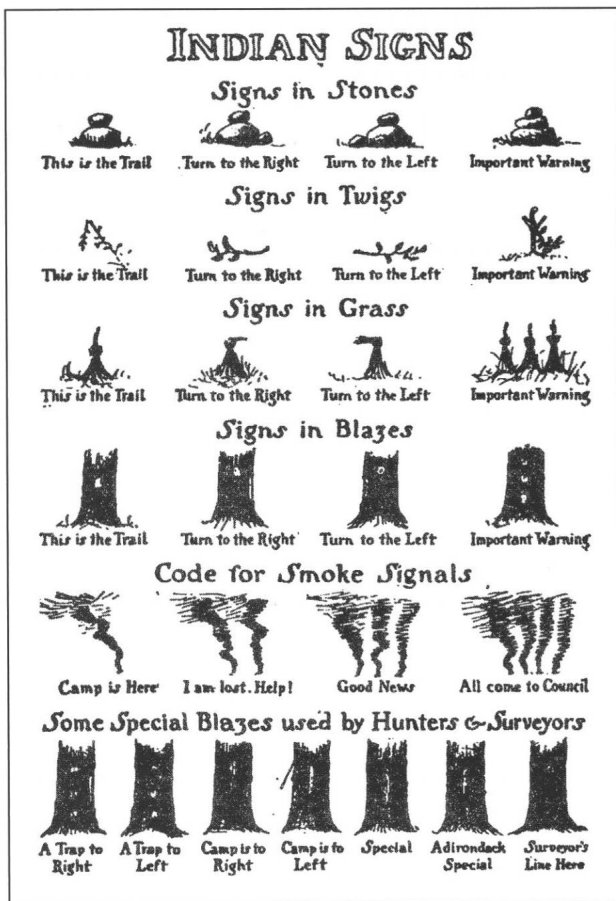
Surveyors' Marks

Surveying is the vehicle that European settlers used to divide up land. Individual parcels of land were created with invisible lines. The lines existed on maps, and could be described in deeds, but had to be tied physically to the ground. Terrain barriers such as mountain peaks or rivers provided natural boundaries. Early surveyors used landmarks, or created marks for reference. The simplest form of a surveyor's mark was a tree blaze or unnatural pile of rocks. Most of early Calaveras County was divided in this manner. A stack of rocks was often used to indicate a claim or property corner. Many of those early stacks may still be found somewhat intact, so long as cows or other passersby have not disturbed them.

Many early mining claims carried descriptions no more detailed than "a tree with a blaze on it," but the mark was valid and carried weight in court. Those marked trees were appropriately called "witness trees." The best description and marking was a stack of rocks with an offset measurement to a nearby tree with a blaze. Even today surveyors working in difficult terrain may still employ the tree blaze. The blazed tree indicates that a survey pin is close by.

The Arborglyph

Another aspect of carving images or messages into trees comes from the Basque culture. Basque immigrants came to the west between approximately 1860 and 1930, and many found work in the high country. The names of the carvers have been traced



Boy Scout pioneer Ernest Thompson Seton documented many trail marks and blazes in 1912.

in detail. It is estimated that as much as 95% of the Basque shepherds were never recorded in any census or even immigration records.

The Basque shepherds that dutifully watched livestock in remote grazing lands often carved heartfelt messages into trees, typically aspen trees. Basque tree carvings were not messages or sign posts. Their carvings were often intended to be private, often borne of the loneliness of working alone for long periods of time.

The Basque culture is relatively private, and few records exist of their impact in this country. There is no record of the Basque having carved trees in their own country, although their heritage can be traced directly to that area of Europe famous for Paleolithic cave paintings. This is why the tree carvings are so unusual, and a unique cultural gift. The carvings are a significant break from their cultural traditions, as most of their lore is oral rather than written. For the shepherds to have committed their thoughts to writing, albeit tree vandalism, was unusual. Almost all emigrant shepherds admitted to carving trees at

some time during their job. Many would be aghast to learn that people may have read their private musings.

Basque carvings did not gain attention as a form of western art until only recently. The Basque shepherd and his lore did not capture the same admiration as other western groups, such as the miners or cowboys. They were not popular culture. Today the carvings, and the contributions of the Basque, are recognized for their value.

The study of the tree carvings is likened to studying petroglyphs, and in fact the carvings are called arborglyphs. An arborglyph is the archeologists' term for a culturally modified tree. Such manmade affects on the trees include the Basque carvings, blazes, or trees where their bark or some wood is cut away for another purpose from kindling to bows.

Most shepherds merely carved their names but many others carved simple or complex poems lamenting the loneliness of their job. By far the most common Basque carving was a record of their name and date. The star was the most common symbol found. Next in importance was a record of shepherding information, such as good grazing or an unusual weather event. The most common emotion expressed was loneliness. Even erotic images were carved, probably a further expression of their memory or longing for female company.

The Basque's carvings were as much a description of their life as they were a piece of art. A carefully crafted message would heal over in time revealing the message. An overly aggressive carver, such as vandals, can irritate a tree. The tree's response is to aggressively fight back by healing over with excessive scar tissue, and the heavy scarring obliterates the picture. The artistic carvers were very careful about cutting sharply through the bark and just lightly touching the cambium layer. They found that this method produced the best image but rarely damaged the tree. A healthy aspen with careful carvings could last greater than seventy years. There are no known trees in our forests carved with such definitive arborglyphs prior to the Basque immigration.

Other ethnic groups also herded cattle or sheep for a living. Scottish, Irish or Chinese workers were not unusual, but they did not carve trees outside of an occasional directional blaze. Earlier trappers, explorers or scouts also merely left directional blazes, and rarely any further information as found in the Basque writings.

The Depression

Historically marking one's route has had many reasons. The Depression ushered in a whole new outlook on trail marking. Many of our national trails and roads were constructed during this time as the federal government created jobs for the unemployed. Trail blazing or laying boundary markers were such jobs. Many of our public trails still bear the marks from that effort.

Another form of symbolism surfaced during that time. Tree blazes are not to be confused with an elaborate alphabet, a hieroglyphics of symbols and semaphores employed by vagrants. These symbols advised their hobo friends of all kinds of information or situations. Their symbols advised the next traveler of things such as a good place to get a meal, a meal that could be had for work, beware of dog, or a man in the house was mean.

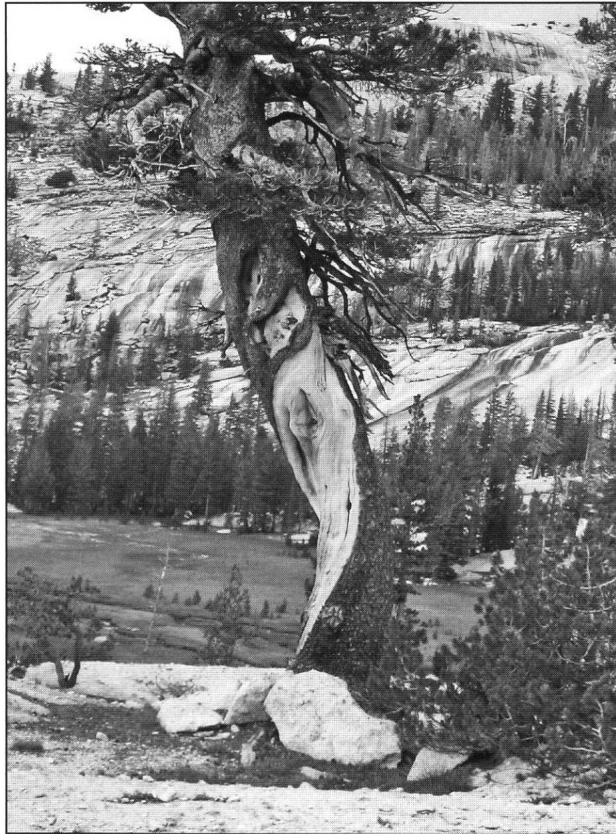
Tramp signs, as they are called, were in fact well documented not only decades but centuries before the Depression. They are believed to have originated with gypsies. Perhaps this background explains

the origin of many tree blazes used in the past few centuries. Regardless of the origin of tramp signs, it was revived and widely practiced by hobos and vagrants, or just plain unemployed homeless people during the Depression.

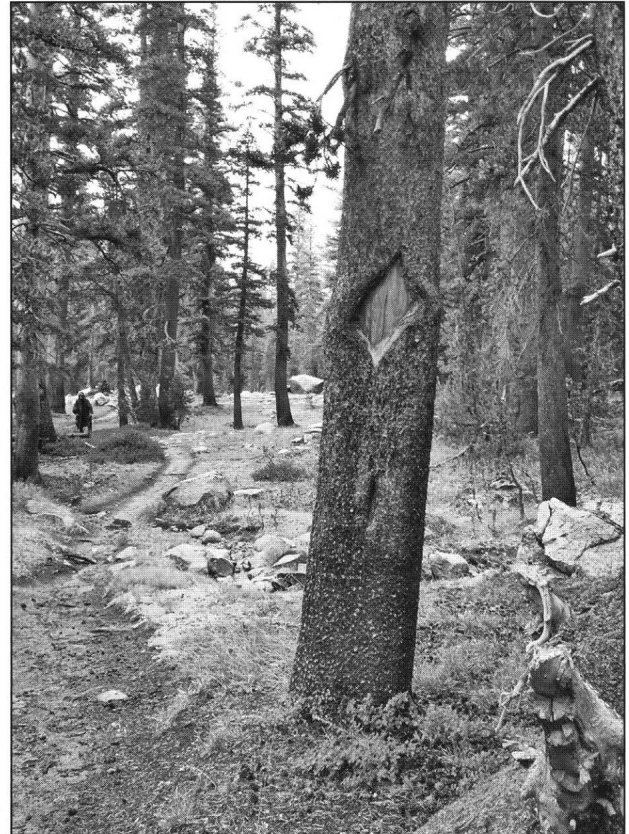
The blazes that we see

Different jurisdictions employ varying blazes today. A blaze can be a simple rectangle, a triangle, or even a circle with a dot in it, although those are difficult to cut. Or it can be a complicated group of shapes.

The most commonly found blaze in the west resembles the lower case letter **i**. The lore is that this blaze is not an **i** for information, but the symbol of a lit candle. The lower portion of the blaze is approximately four inches wide by eight inches high, with a second higher mark up to four inches wide by two inches high. As the scar heals and the tree grows, the dimensions may adjust over time revealing the image of a candle with a flame. "Blaze" means a bright light, so following the lighted path is the derived meaning. Whether this origin is true or not, it makes



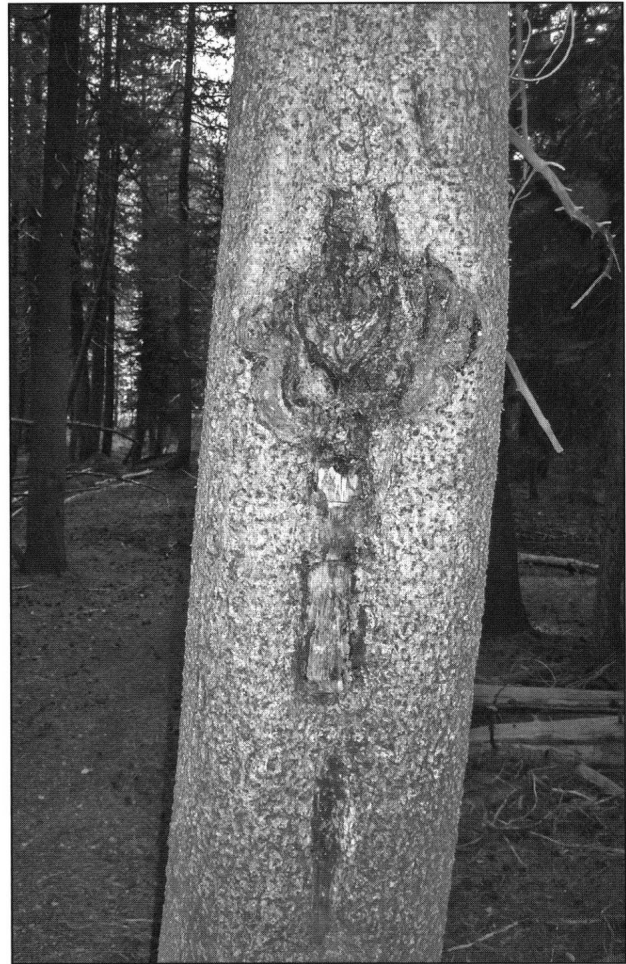
This tree bears first (top) an old diamond blaze, in the middle a later poorly cut blaze, and down the bottom of the trunk natural scarring likely from lightning.



The diamond blaze is used extensively throughout Yosemite National Park. This one has recently been carved above an earlier slash blaze.



This older, healed candlelight blaze marks the trail to summer grazing grounds used by generations of Calaveras County ranching families.



A supernatural image carved above a candlelight blaze, above an older slash blaze.

for a romantic story. Today the US Forest Service has widely adopted the blaze resembling the letter **I**. They follow elaborate instructions for dimensions and preparation of the blaze.

The **T** is used by many agencies to mark trails. It has been used extensively in Yosemite. The joke was that many of the early inhabitants or cavalry in Yosemite were Irish, and they needed the simplicity of the **T** for trail, to find their way home. Most historic blazes in Yosemite are found along historic Indian routes that were adopted later by shepherders. After the herders came the cavalry. Cavalry were charged with the responsibility of keeping trespassers out of the park, especially stock herders. They often followed stock trails and marked the routes again for themselves. Today much of the extensive trail system within the park follows those routes, as they were best suited for travel. In some cases one, two and even three blazes may be found on a particularly ideally located tree.

In addition to the **T**, Yosemite also employs a diamond shaped blaze. Some believe that this blaze

can trace its origin to the days when the US Cavalry ran horses in the valleys of Yosemite. When seen from afar, the diamond blaze resembles a chevron. It is believed that this diamond blaze, possibly a military chevron, is a vestige of that former military presence.

The Appalachian Trail, the eastern equivalent to our Pacific Coast Trail, is actively marked with a painted white rectangular blaze. Their blaze may be painted on carefully selected trees, or in the absence of trees, painted directly on to prominent rocks. Their trail maintenance guidelines contain detailed instructions as to how to paint the blazes, using a template, and advising not going outside of the lines. The blazes are repainted every two to three years. Apparently the efforts are appreciated, as one Appalachian Trail enthusiast waxed about the white blaze: "... *in some locations they are the only clue to the thru-hiker's life and it commands an idol-like presence, a beacon towards Mecca, a divine guidepost.*" Such adulation for a trail

marker seems a bit extreme. The reader is left to wonder if perhaps that hiker had once been lost. Maybe he lost track of the precious blazes, and found himself asking "Just where in the blazes am I?"

Fifty percent of the land area of Calaveras County is public or forest land. It is highly likely that a cattle herder or hiker in these forests will at some point come across a blazed tree. Foresters for Sierra Pacific confirm that blazing of trees still continues in logging operations today. The **i** blaze is primarily used. Others who have used tree blazing in our forests, especially the **i**, were the Native Americans, Basque shepherds, cattlemen, and the California Conservation Corps. Many of these groups continue to use the blaze today.

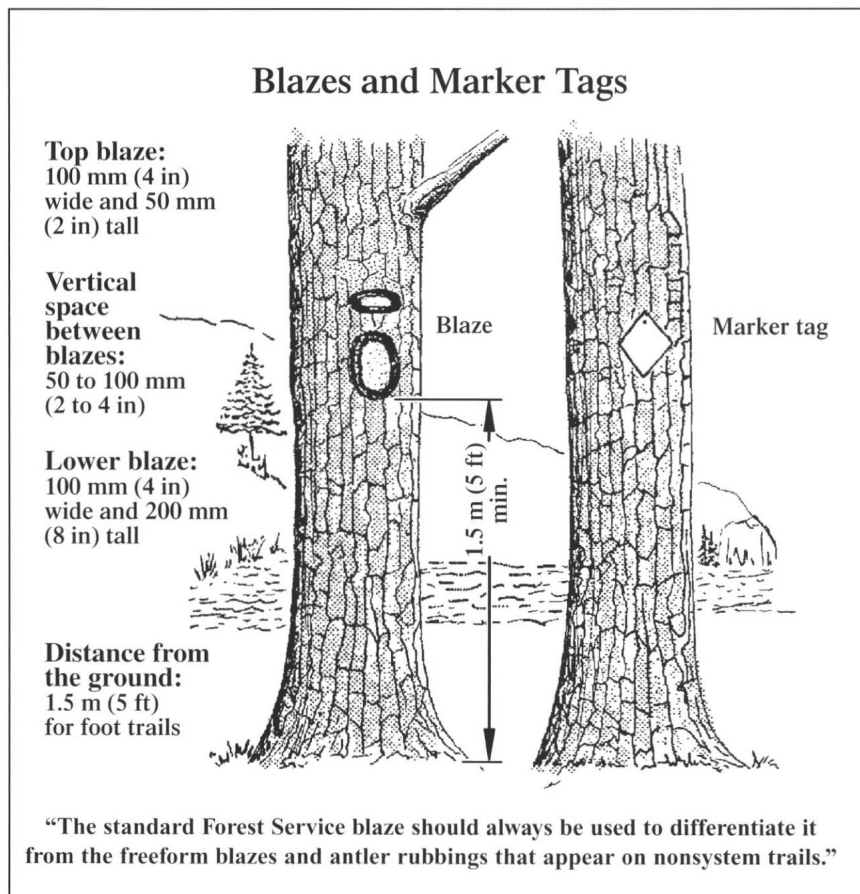
After decades of tree growth and weatherization, cut blazes may have grown (healed) over to an indistinct impression. In areas where blazes are actively used, trail maintenance personnel may recut or freshen old blazes. If done properly, the blaze will not harm the tree. In areas where there

"The Indian in making it may nick off an infinitesimal speck of bark with his knife, the trapper with his hatchet may make it as big as a dollar, or the settler with his heavy axe may slab off half the tree-side; but the sign is the same in principle and in meaning, on trunk, log or branch from Atlantic to Pacific... 'This is your trail,' it clearly says in the universal language of the woods. The signs... are used in the whole country from Maine to California."

—Ernest Thompson Seton,
Boy Scouts of America pioneer

is a complex system of primary and secondary trails, there is a correspondingly graduated system of blazes with varying meanings. When the blazed tree dies, or trails are relocated, new blazes are cut on neighboring trees. Today many jurisdictions have abandoned the practice of blazing trees over concern for the trees' health. Those agencies have adopted high-maintenance sign systems over the inconspicuous blaze.

The blazed tree stands as a living witness to those who passed by. Whether a Native American's notch, the herder or trapper's knife mark, or the deep cut of a settler's hatchet or axe, the meaning is the same. With a little assist from nature, the marked tree, the blaze continues to stand as the beacon marking the correct path.



Detail from the USFS *Trail Construction and Maintenance Notebook*
on how to properly blaze a tree.

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All photos taken by Bonnie Miller.

Calaveras County Historical Society

30 No. Main Street P.O. Box 721 San Andreas, CA 95249

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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–November 2011

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