

Jedediah Smith - Magnificent Mountain Man Was he the first to discover Ebbett's Pass?



Jedediah Strong Smith

JEDEDIAH STRONG SMITH was one of those magnificent mountain men that legends are made of. Stories of his feats still fascinate school children and students of all ages today. The mountain men of the unexplored west were a wild bunch. They often had no families, and no more possessions than that which they could carry on their backs. They slept on the ground and lived off of the land and they did or did not make their peace with the Native Americans. Smith's parties were often attacked by Indians and he survived at least two severe attacks. At one time he had to avoid the southwest for fear of being arrested by the Spanish governor of the Mexican Territory. He was so tough that he even once directed that his own scalp be sewn back on by another member of his party after an attack by an angry bear.

But Smith was not the average mountain man. He never drank, used tobacco, or boasted. He was also deeply religious. At a young age, after having read Biddle's account of Lewis and Clark's expedition he was prompted to discover the west for himself. "I wanted to be the first to view a country on which the eyes of a white man had never gazed and to follow the course of rivers that run through a new land" he said. And so at the age of 22 he answered an advertisement for strong young men. He signed on as a trapper and set out to explore

the west in hopes of discovering new, unexploited lands for fur trapping (see *Las Calaveras*, January 1996). When Smith explored the uncharted west in the 1820's, it is believed that he was the first white man to cross the Sierras. This of course was a fairly lofty claim in light of the fact that the Spanish missionaries had long since inhabited California. After partially circumnavigating California counter-clockwise from the southeastern side, his party had camped in the San Joaquin Valley enjoying the beaver trapping along the Stanislaus River. On May 20, 1827, he and two other trappers began an ascent over the Sierras from west to east with seven horses and two mules. The crossing took only eight days and the party lost only a few animals. But it was eight very difficult days of travel. It is now believed that where they crossed the mountains was at the point that is now known as Ebbett's Pass. This claim has been thoroughly explored by historian Francis P. Farquhar (see the Sierra Club Bulletin vol. XXVIII, June 1943). However some historians believe the crossing actually took place slightly north of Ebbett's Pass near the Blue Lakes area of the Border Ruffian Pass. This second claim seems far more plausible considering the gentler terrain that must have been attractive to the winter explorer of 1827.

Smith never received much credit for this "discovery" of the mountain pass over the Sierras. His greatest achievements have always been regarded as his expeditions to the Southwest and the "rediscovery" in 1825 of the South Pass through the Rockies. It was Smith who enlightened people of this strategic low elevation pass that had been misunderstood due to Pike's inaccurate label of the plains as the "Great American Desert". Accurate knowledge of the South Pass opened the way for the settlement of Oregon and California.

In 1833 Smith sold his interests in his fur trading company with the promise of procuring supplies for the new owners in the following Spring. He purchased a farm in St. Louis and intended to retire after this last expedition to fulfill his obligation. While scouting for water near the Santa Fe Trail he was killed by Comanche warriors. He died at the age of only 32, and his body was never recovered.

Smith had intended to edit and publish his journals, but never realized that dream. In 1836, Gallatin produced a map based upon Smith's records, but received little interest at the time for his efforts. When Charles Frémont's expeditions later provided the celebrated detailed accounts of the west, people began to listen. In 1845 the cartographer Preuss, who was a member of the Frémont expeditions, produced the famous map of the west. This map was subsequently amended to include Smith's records by an Oregonian named Griggs. This 1845 map changed forever the perception of the west. Regrettably it wasn't until Smith's works were full transcribed much later that the extent of his exploration of the west was fully appreciated. Once understood, his work dispelled the common erroneous belief that no one (white) important had seen the west prior to Fremont's expeditions of 1842 and 1844.

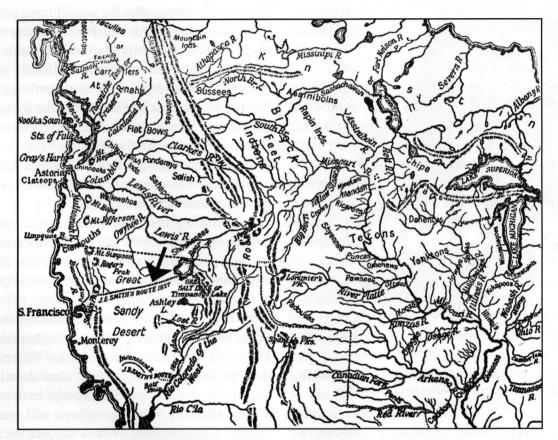
For further information, readers are encouraged to read *Jedediah Smith and the Opening of the West* by Dale L. Morgan, which provides the best overall view of this fascinating mountain man. School children interested in the facts and myths are encouraged to consult their libraries where there is an abundance of entertaining material on Smith and moutain men. Reproductions of the Fremont Expedition maps are available for viewing in the Calaveras County Library.

Las Calaveras is fortunate to present material developed by Richard Dyer of the Jedediah Smith Society. The Society is located in Stockton at the History Department of the University of the Pacific in the care of the John Muir Center for Regional Studies. Membership and other Jedediah Smith Society information can be obtained by contacting them at (209) 946-2169. They offer a quarterly newsletter "Castor Canadensis" to their members, from which the following article has been reprinted by permission. Over the years Las Calaveras has explored much material and printed many articles about Ebbett's Pass. We hope this issue further enlightens our readers about the early exploration of central California while learning about the complexities of early cartography. Mr. Dyer's research shows us how difficult it is to substantiate these legends while he provides reflections on what it was like for Smith to cross the snowy Sierras almost two hundred years ago. Mr. Dyer observes what has changed over time with the western expansion, and reminds us that it is also not all that different today.

California's Central Sierra: Mapping and Mountaineering by Dick Dyer

Jedediah Strong Smith's expectation in leading an expedition to Mexican California in 1826 was "to find parts of the country as well stocked with Beaver as some of the waters of the Missouri ..." True. As a matter of fact, it requires merely a little conjecture on our part to significantly extend this objective. Smith was anxious to settle the bickering over the existence of the long sought Rio Buenaventura (River of Good Fortune). Recall, some felt the river was an expedient route from the Rocky Mountains to the Great Salt Lake, then on through a gap in the Sierra Nevada Mountains into the central valley of California. Finally, it

emptied into San Francisco Bay and the Pacific Ocean. Another opinion by Hudsons Bay Company trappers labeled the Sacramento River as a portion of the mythical river. Smith's expedition demolished these myths. Nevertheless, early cartographers were not to be deterred by a mere geographical fact - they conveniently moved their geographical fantasy to other "open spaces" on their maps. At the time, mapping was more artistic than scientific; too many composed their maps as a painting by "balancing" the known characteristics with the imagined to complete the entire picture. An interesting reflection comes to mind. Did Smith actually seek the Rio Buenaventura as an expedient route from the Great Salt Lake to San Francisco Bay where he hoped to find streams teaming with beaver and a trade outpost for the Smith-Sublette-Jackson partnership? Another stated reason for the 1826 expedition was to improve the maps of his contemporaries by providing details for the areas leveled "unexplored". Then publish, after returning transpose what they saw into accurate maps. Many journals contained surprisingly accurate fragmentary depictions but most were seldom consolidated into definitive maps. Also, grave errors were common. Historian Samuel Eliot Morison wrote, "We must consider the habits of map-makers. They have always disliked open spaces." Even a casual perusal of early maps of the Far West, discloses insertions of mountains,



Map of Western America, 1836. Produced by Albert Gallatin based on information from the travels of Jedediah Smith. Arrow points to Smith's presumed route over the Sierras, later proven to be inaccurate

to St. Louis, "a new, large and beautiful map, in which are embodied all that is correct of proceeding maps ..." His premature death at thirty-two years of age and several devastating fires which destroyed some of his irreplaceable records, have deprived Smith advocates and scholars of information about the full extent of his valuable contribution to the emerging science of cartography.

It is apparent that during the1820's, most explorers and surveyors lacked the specific knowledge and comprehension of physiography to deserts, lakes and rivers which have come from speculation rather than observation. Hence, we find exaggerated depictions of Rio Buenaventura as early Spanish conquistadors, Hudsons Bay Company brigades and American expedition leaders began to complete their maps by filling in the "unexplored" areas. Smith had an innate aptitude for accurate observation and recording of vital trail information. Furthermore, while in new territories, he sought specific details from reliable trappers who had visited the area to augment his



Drawing of Jedediah Smith as the mountain man, by José Cisneros. Drawing courtesy of the Jedediah Smith Society

records. Author Winfred Blevins believed that Smith had "the integrative understanding of a geographer." It is apparent that he was a "genius geographer" (a description used by historian Lee Davis at a Jedediah Smith Society meeting in 1991).

The first published map using Smith's 1826 expedition records was by Albert Gallatin in 1836. His map was a valuable "synopsis of the Indian-Tribes" located in the Far West, and included Smith's route into southern California. It unconvincingly traced Smith's crossing of the Sierra Nevada Mountains in 1827 to the Lake Tahoe region - far north of his actual route. He even named a peak in the area to honor the mountain man (that peak has been renamed).

Today we know that Smith's notes contributed to the 1839 map of David H. Burr. Geographer to the House of Representatives. The Burr Map included several "J.S. Smith's Route" notations. Author and cartographer Carl I. Wheat believed that the Burr Map was "... the nearest thing to Jedediah Smith's map that had been published ... " during the decade of his death. Had Smith lived a normal lifetime, historian Francis Farguhar believed that he would have advanced the knowledge about the Far West from ten to twenty years. The Burr Map traced Smith and his men's entrance into southern California in 1826, located Mount Joseph in the northern Sierra Nevada Mountains and identified the route across the Great Basin in 1827. Also, he affixes Buenaventura on the Sacramento River as well as the Sacramento and San Joaquin Valleys. Burr does not include the mountain men's route across the central Sierra Nevada Mountains.

During the 1840's, the American West enticed restless pioneers and reckless entrepreneurs to begin careers anew in the rich frontier environment. As settlements grew, an impressive accumulation of knowledge about previously unknown geographic features was recorded by explorers and writers. Also, a naval expedition in 1841, led by Commodore Charles Wilkes along the Pacific coast, apparently used details from Smith expeditions in order to assist in developing a map showing interior valleys and mountain ranges. Unfortunately, Wilkes was like the ancient cosmographers in that he always wanted to insert a feature into an "open space.". Once again the Rio Buenaventura in conveniently located in space that is now the Salinas River near Monterey (this mythical river appears and disappears on maps until the Civil War). Notwithstanding the map's historical importance, it included an entirely too narrow chain of mountains labeled the California Range (Sierra Nevada Mountains) and inaccurately located a "Smith Track" across the mountains in the Lake Tahoe region, just as Gallatin had done with his 1836 map.

During the 1840's, it was the Frémont Map of 1845 that fascinated geographers and historians (a Central Sierra segment of the Smith Party's 1827 route has been reproduced from the Fremont map). This precisely composed map, under the direction of cartographer-surveyor Charles Preuss, cost the government almost \$10,000 but established cartography as a recognized science. It was worth the price. Furthermore, penciled on one of the 1845 maps were Oregonian George Gibb's personal notations about Smith's travels in more detail than any surviving maps. These notations indicate that before he died Smith had started his "beautiful map" for publication. The Frémont Map was completed by explorers who struggled with weather and terrain conditions that challenged the most experienced to the greatest relocation of human-kind in history. It signaled the end of one era and the beginning of another. It led to the fulfillment of Thomas Jefferson's dream of one nation united from sea to sea. Today, diligent researchers have partially recreated this remarkable crossing of the Central Sierra during the winter of 1827

After unexpected delays and confrontations with Mexican authorities during the overland expedition to California, Smith decided to communicate with his partners about their activities in the central valley. An effort was made to cross the snow covered mountains by way of the American River and through the Lake Tahoe

watershed. The

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impassable for a party with pack

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mountaineers. On occasions these men simply did not know where they were nor if their endurance would last so they could find shelter and sustenance. Today students of the Sierra mountain men in studying the journals and maps are convinced that Fremont, traveling north and south in



Drawing of Frémont crossing the Sierras in 1844, from Frémont's report. The drawing shows us what it must have been like for Jedediah Smith when he crossed the Sierras 20 years earlier

1844, intersected Smith's trans-Sierra route as his smaller party struggled to the east in 1827 after leaving the Stanislaus River.

Jedediah Smith's crossing of the Central Sierra was an example of superior mountaineering. It is hoped that eventually researchers might uncover records in Washington, D.C. and Mexico City to more fully describe Smith's trek in the late winter. But, for the present, cartographers and historians owe much to Carl I. Wheat, Dale L. Morgan, Herman R. Friis and a few others who published long ignored maps of the western American frontier. They were also pioneers during their careers.

It is evident that Smith's California expeditions were early examples of "manifest destiny" initiating a migration that eventually led winter camp was established near the confluence of the Appelamminy and Peticutry Rivers (Stanislaus and San Joaquin Rivers). To some, this was the western location of the Rio Buenaventura where it flowed from a gap in the Sierra Nevada Mountains.

On May 20, 1827, Jedediah Smith, Robert Evans and Silas Gobel began crossing the mountains with seven horses and two mules. Smith wrote, the plan "was to relieve my party on the Appelamminy (Stanislaus River) and then proceed further in examination of the country beyond Mt. St. Joseph ... " Researchers know that the dauntless trio started their journey at the brigades' encampment at about100 feet elevation; they had over 8,600 feet to ascend, most in deep



Portion of the 1845 Preuss Map of Oregon and Northern California. This map was developed by Preuss based on Frémont's expeditions from 1842 to 1844 and later amended to include information from Smith's travels of 1826/27. This map changed the perception of the West forever snow, before crossing the Sierra summit during their eight day ordeal. Their first camps were in the oak covered foothills below the winter snow line (about 2,000 feet). The river led them into rugged terrain where an accumulation of snow made it difficult for the mountaineers to open trail for the animals. The route (near Highway 4) took them into a region known for unusually severe snow storms where conifer forests were covered with snow and the Indian trails were buried beneath drifts of snow and ice. On the western slope, the average annual snowfall is 450 inches; the record is 884 inches (1906-7) - that is, almost 74 feet! (In January, 1911, 390 inches was recorded - a North American monthly record.) Humanely, Smith and his comrades were unaware of what awaited them. The recording of daily events and philosophical thoughts, common in Smith's family letters, were neglected; extraordinary effort was required as men and animals struggled with snow blindness, fatigue and hunger in the unforgiving environment. As their hardships increased, it required indomitable will to carry on. At the summit, the snow covering the serrated Sierra crest obscured the best route to follow. (The route is thought to be north of Ebbetts Pass.) One of Smith's observations referred to "four to eight feet" of snow and ice, which made conditions especially difficult for animals. The descent was, to some extent, even more stressful since the eastern Sierra is more precipitous than the western slope (about 20 degrees tilt). After eight days, the struggling mountaineers were free of the steep high country. They had lost only three animals.

To Smith admirers, many questions must come to mind. What were his thoughts as his very existence was jeopardezed? Was a "mental map" evolving? Had the party passed though the Big Trees (Sequoia Gigantea) almost twenty-five years before they were officially discovered? Were there moments during a sunny day when he enjoyed the beauty of the mountain landscape? We can only speculate about what impressed the explorer. Nevertheless, in 1827, Smith and his men were the first Americans to cross the lofty Sierra Nevada Mountains.

Today, conditions in California's Central

Sierra Nevada Mountain Range have changed very little during the winter. Evidence of man's presence is obliterated shortly after "snow flies" in November. All trans-Sierra activity stops. Inhabitants in the foothill communities hope the road over the pass will be cleared of snow and rock slides by Memorial Day, however, even after the road has been cleared, it can close again as late as June. It is for the most part a rugged wilderness, remote but magnificent. John Muir, the consumate mountaineer, wrote, it is "the most divinely beautiful of all the mountain chains I have ever seen."

Other pioneer mountaineers visited the area traversed by Jedediah Smith and his men during the winter. Their observations, although brief, certainly add to Smith's standing as a bold and brave mountain man.

In 1843 John Charles Frémont, 2nd lieutenant in the US Topographical Engineers, let his second expedition to the Far West into the Sierra. Accompanying him was a professional topographer, Charles Preuss. After wandering for several weeks through through northwstern Nevada, the expedition entered eastern California to explore and map the Sierra Nevada Mountains between Lake Tahoe, in the north, and Bridgeport Lake, in the south. After completeing their survey, they planned to descend from the mountains to Captain John Sutter's New Helvetia (Sacramento) in the valley where they expected to "place themselves in the midst of plenty." While searching for the fabled Rio Buenaventura's route through the rugged mountains, Frémont and his men recoinnoitered the snow covered terrain (see drawing). Frémont observed "... the days are sunny and bright, and even warm in the noon hours ..." and if the men had been more favorably situated "... we would be delighted here." Despite his inspirational observation, it was early February, 1844, below zero at night and his men and animals, as Smith's party in 1827, were struggling and "restive." Also, Fremont was lost. An old Indian warned the Americans: "Rock upon rock -. rock upon rock - snow upon snow - snow upon snow. Even if you get over the snow you not be able to get down from the mountains". Nevertheless,

Fremont, in his "characteristically headlong way," persevered; eventually his scout, Kit Carson, found a pass and route (Carson Pass and Highway 88) to the warm Sacramento valley.

It is perplexing to read in Allan Nevins' excellent biography *Frémont; Pathmaker of the West,* numerous tributes to Frémont while he overlooked Jedediah Smith's more valuable contribution in pioneering western trails. Nevins does write briefly about Smith's travels across the Great Basin in 1827, yet maintains that "... no white man had ever crossed it [Sierra Nevada Mountains] in winter" (p. 152) until Frémont accomplished the feat. Smith's crossing in May was equally rigorous.

In January, 1856, "Snowshoe" Thompson (John A. Thompson or Thomson) began a remarkable twenty-year career of regularly crossing the Sierra on ten foot long skis while transporting mail, medicine and essential supplies to outposts along the eastern Sierra. Smith crossed the mountains in eight days; Thompson covered a similar route in a mere three days. Indeed, Thompson's crossing was a little shorter, he was without pack animals and his rest stops were always brief. He carried his precious supplies on his back, ate jerky and crackers and rested a few hours each night inside a hollowed tree. As Smith, this mountaineer wrote very little about his hardships. Today most of his adventures have been passed on from old timers.

There is a valuable description of the Stanislaus River gorge during the winter from handyman and writer, Prentice Mulford. As Thompson, Mulford traveled alone; unlike Thompson, his adventure during the winter of 1865 was his only trip into the winter wilderness. However, his reminiscence does provide yet another perspective about human survival during an inclement winter in the Central Sierra Mountains.

Mulford, as Smith, was born in New York and attracted to the Far West while a young man. At twenty-one years, he settled in various mining camps around Sonora, California, and remained in the area during the 1850's and 1860's. Initially he sought gold; later he collected human interest stories for newspaper articles. In late March, 1865, after visiting trapper friends in a remote high Sierra cabin, he decided to return to his mining companions by descending into the Stanislaus River canyon. Near the route taken by Smith in 1827, he describes his laborious effort to travel through hummocky snow on snowshoes discovering that as the day progressed, the freshness he started with in the morning gave way to an increasing need for rest. In his autobiography, Mulford described his difficulties:

Other troublesome obstacles were the little rivulets and brooks, which cutting through the snow, left banks on either side six or seven feet in height. To climb these was difficult. The snow gave-ways, and one could only flounder through and up to the top. Besides, it was necessary to wade the creeks, This wet my feet and caused more snow to bunch and freeze on them. Night came, and with it an increase of cold, which, causing the snow to freeze to a crust on top, iced and smoothed the track anew for me. (pp 109, 110)

Exhausted, he was unable to reach a remote mountain cabin. He spent the night in a roughly fashioned ice cave along the frigid Stanislaus River where he ate his meager rations. Mulford reflected on his predicament: He was isolated from society but surprisingly, felt no shortcoming. In this simple abode without all "the numberless articles [man] brings from all the ends of the earth for his subsistence and comfort ..." he actually felt relieved. He slept soundly. Was his situation a reflection of Smith and his men during an earlier encampment? The next day, Mulford continued his journey westward to join friends in the foothills near Sonora. Earlier, Smith also left a campsite near the river but to journey eastward to meet friends at the annual rendezvous near the Great Salt Lake. Presumably, some aspects of these mountaineers' adventures differed very little.

There are only a few written accounts of the forbidden terrain crossed by Smith in the southeastern segment of his journey before reaching the Great Basin. However, one revealing observation was by John Bidwell. In October, 1841, the Bidwell-Bartleson Party of emigrants to central California followed many of the river canyons visited by the Smith and Fremont parties. Bidwell's diary described the pioneer's route as they followed the Oregon-California Trail - along the Platte River, across the Rocky Mountains at South Pass and on to California. (Portions of this route had been explored by Smith in the1820's.) However, the rugged eastern Sierra was not the gentle sloping northern Rockies.

The snow covered California mountains must have been an awesome spectacle for a traveler in 1827, 1841, or 1844; perhaps a terrestrial paradise for some, but not for the mountaineers in the midst of winter. There are four peaks above 11,000 feet and eleven above 10,000 feet in the regions. In the winter, with a shortage of supplies, this terrain must have been a frightful prospect for the three parties. Bidwell wrote, the "naked mountains whose summits still retained the snows perhaps of a thousand years ..." were a barricade to travel across the range. "The winds roared - but in the deep dark gulfs which yawned on every side, profound solitude seemed to reign." The Bidwell-Bartleson Party struggled to the southwest with the vast arid San Joaquin Valley to cross; the Fremont Party struggled to the northwest with a mountain pass to cross; and the Smith Party struggled to the southeast with Great Basin to cross.

On July 3, 1827, Jedediah Smith, Robert Evans and Silas Gobel rendezvoused with their comrades at Bear Lake. A salute from the company cannon announced the end of one of the most remarkable mountain expeditions in the annals of western history.

AUTHORS NOTE: For over forty years, I have studied Jedediah Strong Smith and the mountain men. Through the decades, I have become increasingly more convinced that these intrepid explorers personified the courage and character that emerges in American society when extraordinary achievements are needed from ordinary persons. During such moments, Smith was one who accepted each challenge. While preparing this article during the 1998 winter, the following occurred in the region Smith crossed: A man and his wife died after crashing their vehicle in to the rocky canyon; several hunters, hikers, snowboarders were lost; a missing man report was announced on television; and bones from a previously missing man were located. In March, snowflakes were falling on the lower Stanislaus River (at 1400 feet), furnishing distinguishing winter characteristics for the rugged Central Sierra Nevada foothills. And, the mountain passes crossed by Smith were impassable as late as June. The winter adventure of Smith party in 1827 was truly an extraordinary example of the indomitable perseverance of men matching the mountains.

Correction

Our last issue on the Hendsch family contained an error. The photo of the Hendsch Bros. Blacksmithery and Saloon in Murphys stated that is was located "next to the Big Trees Hotel on Main St. Murphys, circa 1903". Main Street is often confused with Highway 4 and Big Trees Road. The road we know today as Big Trees Road has always been known as that, as it was the road leading out of town to the "Big Tree(s)". For a period Highway 4 followed a route from its present intersection with Jones Street to the four way intersection at Big Trees Road (the section also called Main Street today), and on up Big Trees Road to the Utica Grade. This former highway alignment only adds to the confusion as it has been re-aligned to its present location. The Hendsch Bros. Business in 1903 was located near the four way intersection of Main/Hwy 4 and Big Trees Road, fronting the Big Trees Road. The business was adjacent to a lodging house called the Big Trees Hotel. This hotel was not the Mitchler Hotel, which we know today as the historic Murphys Hotel, which is located further west up Main Street at Algiers Street. The Big Trees Hotel has long since burned down. That hotel was located approximately where the restaurant The Nugget is located today.

Las Calaveras appreciates the input of several people who caught this error, and we thank life-long Calaveras County resident Wilma Pechinino for bringing it to our attention. Las Calaveras regrets the error and apologises for any confusion it may have caused.

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.

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 museum 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.

Museum Donations

The Calaveras County Historical Society wishes to thank the following persons who recently made donations to the Calaveras County Museum:

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Theodore R. & Alice Shannon, Mokelumne Hill, CA

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Photograph of the Mitchell Hotel in Murphys, circa 1908

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April 27, 2000: Civil War Re-enactment in Utica Park in Angels Camp. Call the CCHS office for details, 754-1058

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