



## RINGING IN THE SEASON DURING THE GOLD RUSH

*By Charity Maness*

The Christmas season could be harsh and lonely for many miners, filled with fond memories of days gone by and hardships ahead. Yet the very same tenacity and strength that brought them to the California Motherlode to make their fortune in gold also carried them through the season.

Only five years prior to the 1848 discovery of gold in Calaveras County along the Calaveras River and its tributaries, Charles Dickens wrote the famous story, 'A Christmas Carol' which brought Christmas into seemingly every home in America.

While Christmas celebrations had been gaining momentum since the early 19th century, the Christmas tree gained popularity in 1841 when one was erected in Windsor Castle. America followed suit in 1889 when the first Christmas tree was erected in the White House under direction of President Benjamin Harrison.

The evolution of the season mixed with the myriad of ethnicities within mining camps and the variety of cultural celebrations led to an interesting and eclectic holiday mix.

The first hurdle many mining camps had to navigate was the lack of a calendar. Being dependent on mail or news, which crept in at a snail's pace in the winter months, many miners were left to 'guestimate' the actual time to celebrate. While this may have been considered a hindrance to some, to others it created a much larger window with which one had 'permission' to celebrate; and celebrate they did.

Alfred Doten recalled his motherlode mining camp Christmas Eve celebration of 1852 in his journal:

*"...afternoon we had a heavy squall of big hail stones—evening Spicer and the rest of the boys were here and it being Christmas eve we had a grand jollification...we fired all the guns and pistols we could muster and blew up two or three old glass bottles...we played and danced and had a fine time... Smith (visiting from San Francisco) reports the roads as very bad and impassable for teams and nearly so for animals near Stockton...we kep up our*

*spree with the assistance of a bottle of  
Brandy until 1 o'clock when we all turned  
in for the night in a field bed on the floor."*

By Christmas 1854 Doten's ways hadn't changed much, though his location had. Now at Fort Grizzly in Amador County he looked forward to, "a 'kick up' at Indian Diggins and a ball at the Union House (with) a lot of women from Fiddletown—\$5 a ticket supper extra."

Others weren't quite as exhilarated as the holiday season neared.

A young miner from Canada, William Perkins, wrote in 1849, "My first Christmas in California I spent up to my knees in mud... walking from Stockton to Sonora in the rain."

The following holiday season left Perkins in no greater spirits. "Christmas Day! But why mention it in this country! It makes me sad to write the words, for they bring memories of home and civilization and household affections."

Some letters home held out hope for a Christmas celebration in the distant future with family, but with the stark realization that a miner's life expectancy is not a long one.

"I wish I could be home today," echoed Mud Springs miner Andrew Gilmore, native of Indiana, in an 1851 letter to his brother James. "We would have a Christmas party with turkey, hens and pound cakes. Best of all would be the pleasure of seeing you all. If we live, we may be with you next Christmas."

Over 100 mining claims were held by Jews. Morris Cohen, known as the 'Merchant Prince of Calaveras' in the 1850s, held large mining and business interests as well as stores in Angels Camp and San Andreas. The Strauss family also immigrated to Angels Camp and sold food and supplies to miners. Both families would have to travel over 20 miles to attend synagogue only open during High Celebrations.

The smattering of Scots found in the mines would find Christmas celebrations to be a new concept as the tradition of celebrating Christmas had been banned in Scotland from the 1580s as it was thought to be supporting Romanism. In 1958 Christmas Day was restored and made a public holiday.

While celebrations by the Chileans mirrored those of the Anglos, it left many confused as they would oft times refer to Christmas as Pascua, which translates to Easter.

Many Chinese immigrants were poor peasants who had not only come to seek their fortune in gold but had fled their own country which was in the midst of a rebellion; the Taiping Rebellion, led by Hong Xiuquan a self-proclaimed second son of God and brother to Jesus Christ. The small communities comprised of Chinese would often have a mixture of Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, and Christianity weaving its way through their daily lives which only added to the confusion for the Anglo miners and caused criticism of the Chinese for their religion. While author Alan Peto explains that Buddhists recognize Jesus as a Bodhisattva, one that forgoes their own benefit to help others and has compassion, kindness and love for all beings, it is unclear if any celebrations were held in the mining camps during this season. However, author Dottie Smith wrote:

*(a reminder of the Chinese presence during the gold rush) "are the thousands of Chinese lilies that grow wild....the Chinese generously gave these bulbs as gifts on holidays to white people, especially at Christmas time."*

However bleak and dismal the season was, many miners, no matter their ethnicity, tried to add some Christmas sparkle to their lives, if even for a few hours, reminding them of better days, brighter futures and hope.

# TALES OF CHRISTMAS DURING THE GOLD RUSH LEAD TO FAMOUS SHORT STORY BY BRET HARTE

Though tales are few and far between with regards to a miner's Christmas during the Gold Rush, the season and the trials and tribulations that ensued had a profound effect on American author and poet Bret Harte (August 25, 1836–May 6, 1902). Profound enough for him to write a fictional short story titled 'How Santa Claus Came to Simpson's Bar'.

Published in 1872, the story told of the unforgiving nature of the winter season, the camaraderie of miners and the gentleness and strength of the human spirit in spite of seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

*"It had been raining in the valley of the Sacramento. The North Fork had overflowed its banks, and Rattlesnake Creek was impassable. The few boulders that had marked the summer ford at Crossing were obliterated by a vast sheet of water stretching to hills. The upstage was stopped at Granger's; the last mail had been abandoned in the tules, the rider swimming for his life. "An area," the Sierra Avalanche, with pensive local pride, "as large as the Massachusetts is now under water. "The mud lay deep on the mountain road; wagons that neither physical force nor moral obligation could move from the evil ways into which they had cumbered the track, and the way to Simpson's Bar was indicated by broken-down teams and hard swearing. And further on, cut off and inaccessible, rained upon and bedraggled, smitten by high winds and threatened by high water, Simpson's Bar, on the eve of Christmas Day, 1862 clung like a swallow's nest to the rocky entablature and splintered*



Bret Harte. Internet Image.

*capitals of Table Mountain, and shook in the blast."*

The story continued to tell of the bonds of friendship, the ties to kin and the love of a small child; bringing hope of a Santa Claus to a dismal little life.

*"Wot's Chrissmiss, anyway? Wot's it all about?"*

Asked little Johnny while his father rubbed his body with whiskey to calm the aches of illness.

*"Oh, it's a day."*

*This exhaustive definition was apparently satisfactory, for there was*

*a silent interval of rubbing.*

*Presently Johnny again:*

*"Mar sez that everywhere else but yer everybody gives things to everybody Chrissmiss, and then she jist waded inter you. She sez thar's a man they call Sandy Claws, not a white man, you know, but a kind o' Chine- min, comes down the chimbley night afore Chrissmiss and gives things to chillern-boys like me. Puts 'em in their butes! Thet's what she tried to play upon me."*

The miner's friends, upon hearing poor Johnny's pitiable questions, took it upon themselves to bring little Johnny some Christmas cheer. As the story unfolds it becomes quite clear the task at hand is not easily accomplished, yet one man proves that determination and love can conquer all.

*The Old Man started and woke. The fire on the hearth was dead, the candle in the outer room flickering in its socket, and*

*somebody was rapping at the door. He opened it, but fell back with a cry before the dripping, half-naked figure that reeled against the doorpost.*

*“Dick?”*

*“Hush! Is he awake yet?”*

*“No. but Dick—”*

*“Dry up, you old fool! Get me some whiskey, quick.” The Old Man flew and returned with n empty bottle! Dick would have sworn, but his strength was not equal to the occasion. He staggered, caught at the handle of the door, and motioned to the Old Man.*

*“Thar’s suthin’ in my pack yer for Johnny. Take it off. I can’t.”*

*The Old Man unstrapped the pack, and laid it before the exhausted man.*

*“Open it, quick.”*

*He did so with trembling fingers. It contained only a few poor toys—cheap and barbaric enough, goodness knows, but bright with paint and tinsel. One of them was broken; another, I fear, was irretrievably ruined by water, and on the third ah me! there was a cruel spot.*

*“It don’t look like much, that’s a fact,” said Dick ruefully... “But it’s the best we could do. ...Take ‘em, Old Man, and put ‘em in his stocking, and tell him—tell him, you know—hold me, Old Man—” The Old Man caught at his sinking figure. “Tell him,” said Dick, with a weak little laugh—“tell him Sandy Claus has come.”*

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## HISTORICAL FLOOD PAINTS THE CANVAS FOR FICTION

**A**s with many fictional pieces, there often lay within some morsel of truth. In the previous excerpts of ‘How Santa Claus Came to Simpson’s Bar’—a work of fiction by author Bret Harte—the story mirrors some historical aspects of the great storm of 1862.

No matter how you traveled to the gold country of Calaveras in the late 1800s you were destined to cross a water source; a tributary, stream, or river. Most often in the summer months with its notably high heat the passage was easier as many of the waterways would be nothing more than a narrow band of mud and parched earth, yet in the winter it could be a torrential flood zone whipping with a fury savage enough to wash away a team of oxen and its coach of precious cargo—mining supplies and food.

The storm, that became known as the Great Flood of 1862, began November 8, 1861 and did not subside for months. Locals referred to it as the Noachian Deluge as it rained for more than forty days and forty nights.

At the time of the ‘Great Flood of 1862’ California, with a population of 500,000, had been a state for 12 years and the Gold Rush was in its thirteenth year. Dreams of connecting the nation via railroad were getting closer to a reality and the Civil War was in its first year of violent infancy. Just months prior to the great flood, the pony express had run its final run and the transcontinental telegraph had begun.

The crossing of the Stanislaus at what is now known as Parrotts Ferry—between Columbia and Vallecito/Murphys—originally



established as Bradburys Ferry, was swept away by high waters in 1862. Those same waters washed the nearest competitor's ferry, Abbey's Ferry, a ferry that operated a bit upstream, down to Walkers Bar, where it was quickly put into service.

The bridge crossing just downstream from Walkers Bar, known as O'Byrnes Ferry, was built by the Table Mountain Bridge Company in 1856 to cross the Stanislaus between Tuolumne and Calaveras Counties from Jamestown to Copperopolis. The bridge was described in the Calaveras County Book of Agreements as, "a strong abutment with a pyramid upon the same on each side of the river with two wire cables extending across the river over said pyramids from which cables the bridge floor shall be suspended by

iron ropes or wire." Yet, just six years after this bridge was built, the high flood waters of 1862 washed it downstream.

This historical storm took the valley and the foothills by surprise, plunging much of the land into a sea of mud and raging waters and taking an untold amount of lives. With bridges washed out, telegraph services down and mail service all but halted, the foothills suffered greatly.

By January 16, 1862, one month into the storm, news from the foothills was dire. According to the Sacramento Daily News a dispatch received from Mokelumne Hill stated: "*Hell has broken loose here, look out down below in Stockton. And then the telegraph went dead.*"

A January 18, 1862 article in the Union Democrat titled 'The Storm of 1862' sums up



**Thomas Hill painting of the O'Byrnes Ferry crossing prior to 1862. The Gorham Ranch buildings seen in the painting were destroyed by the 1862 flood. Calaveras Historical Society Photo.**



K. STREET, FROM THE LEVEE.

**INUNDATION OF THE STATE CAPITOL,  
City of Sacramento, 1862.**

Published by AROSENFIELD, San Francisco.

The inundation of K Street, Sacramento during the 1862 flood. Internet Image.

the totality of the dire situation the residents of Motherlode endured:

*"...cities and towns flooded or swept away: stores, goods, merchandise of every description, ranches, stock, grain, flour, lumber, and quartz mills, either totally destroyed or greatly injured. Bridges innumerable and ferries without number have been carried off, roads broken up and washed away, and all communication stopped between one town and another, of only a few miles distant. The mining interest has suffered*

*heavily. On the rivers, the miners have been drawn out, and wheels, sluice, etc. have suddenly disappeared. In the various creeks, gulches and ravines, deep claims, which had cost years of labor to open, are filled up, flumes and derricks blown down and washed off... general destruction marks the tracks of the storm. Large numbers of miners and others have been thrown out of employment, nearly all business has ceased, and very many have been left in a destitute condition in consequence. There is scarcely any chance to*

*make money, and yet everything in the fuel and provision line has gone up to a high price. Much suffering must result, and it behooves everybody to husband their resources."*

According to Dr. Snell of Sonora, "...from November 10, 1861 to January 23, 1862... there were 69 rainy days." This was, to date, the greatest flood California had seen, but certainly not its last catastrophe, as this was followed on its heels by a drought which began in 1862 and continued to 1864.

With the Civil War raging, the storm of 1862 saw little coverage beyond local news. However, as the news of the widespread destruction slowly made its way across the nation the hardships the storm brought to the state's chosen capitol city of Sacramento did make for a splash in the headlines of the New York Times on January 21, 1862:

*THE GREAT FLOOD IN CALIFORNIA;  
Great Destruction of Property  
Damage \$10,000,000.*

*The Pacific slope has been visited by the most disastrous flood that has occurred since its settlement by white men. From Sacramento northward to the Columbia River, in California, Nevada Territory, and Oregon, all the streams have risen to a great height, flooded the valleys, [inundated towns, swept away mills, dams, flumes, houses, fences, domestic animals, ruined fields and effected damage, estimated at \$10,000,000. All Sacramento City, save a small part of one street, part of Marysville, part of Santa Rosa, part of Auburn, part of Sonora, part of Nevada, and part of Napa, not to speak of less important towns, were under water.*

January 31, 1862 from the journal of William Brewer, researcher and author, from his location in San Francisco he wrote, "*in this city 37 inches of water has fallen, and at Sonora, in Tuolumne, 102 inches, or 8 ½ feet, at the last dates...all the roads in the middle of the state are impassable, so all mails are cut off...the telegraph also does not work clear through...in Sacramento Valley for some distance the tops of the poles are under water.*"

The effects of the flood which ultimately created an inland sea in California's Central

valley at least 300 miles long and 20 miles wide were felt for years after as communities rebuilt, farmland began to regenerate and mines were dug out.

According to early estimates of the time, the damage cost was approximately \$10,000,000.00, however, according to the World Heritage Encyclopedia "*later it was estimated that approximately one-quarter of the taxable real estate in the state of California was destroyed in the flood. Dependent on property taxes, the State of California went bankrupt. The governor, state legislature, and state employees were not paid for a year and a half. 200,000 cattle drowned, and the state's economy shifted from ranching to farming.*"

Editor's note: Author Bret Harte oft used the reference of the 1862 flood in his work, most notably his work of fiction titled 'The Luck of the Roaring Camp'; a tale of a group of rag tag miners who adopt a bastard child of a prostitute who passed away just after giving birth, naming him Tommy Luck. Though following this good deed the camp seems to prosper all good luck comes to an end when the camp is washed away during a great storm and the child's main charge, 'Kentuck' is found drowned with the child clutched in his arms.

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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.

## July–September 2015

### New Members:

Calaveras Visitors Bureau—Angels Camp  
James & Jo Ellen Tiscornia—Abingdon, Virginia  
George & Judy Hurley—Mountain Ranch  
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Willard & Laura Jean Tower—Cash donation  
Gary Gorham—Gold scale made by his grandfather, Jack Ross  
Caitlin Johnson—Scrapbooks, photos, memorabilia from the Black Bart Players  
Museum of Local History, Fremont—Postcard of the Gold Strike Resort in San Andreas  
Don Powlesland—"The Works of Shakespeare", leather bound collection, various classic books  
Michael E. Taylor—Baseball Uniforms from Rail Road Flat 1938, Photo of Railroad Flat 1938  
Baseball team, Murphys baseball uniform  
Wally Motloch—Cash donation in honor of Don Cuneo & Rosemary Faulkner