

# Humboldt HISTORIAN



VOL. 50 NO. 1 SPRING 2002

# BIG RIVER

## a look at the South Fork of the Trinity

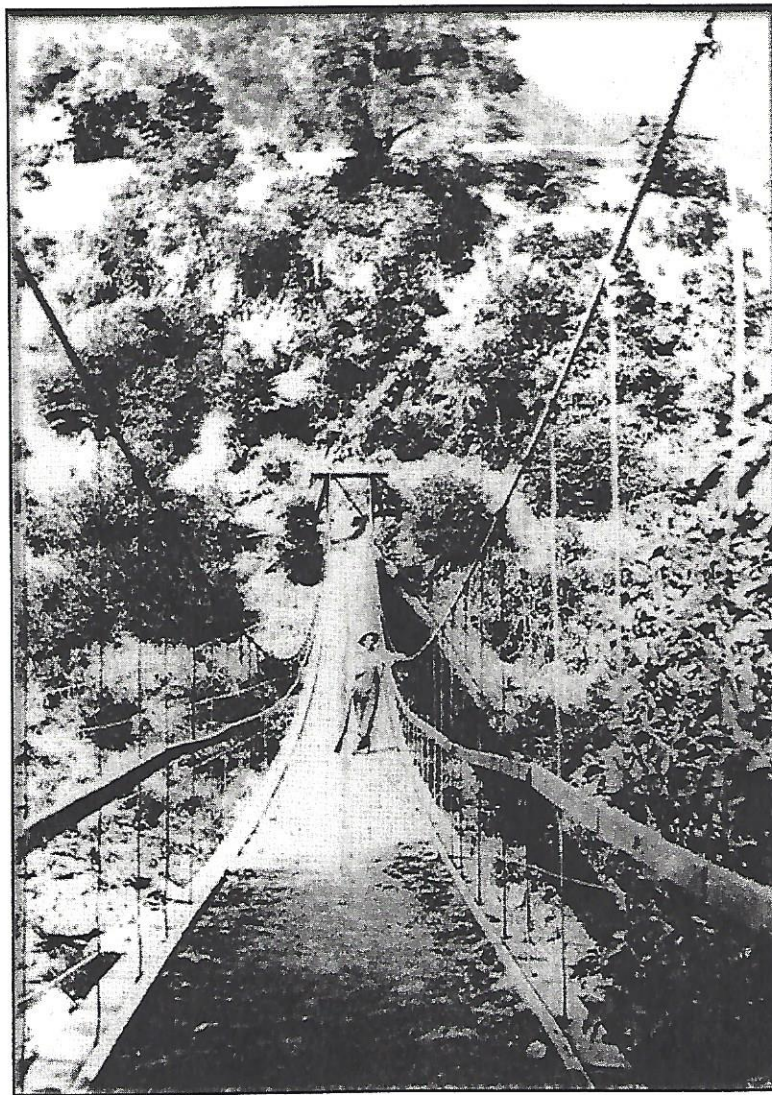
By Max Rowley and Margaret Wooden

### FORWARD

Whenever a study of history takes place on the Lower South Fork of the Trinity River it serves a two-fold function. For all practical purposes the meanders of the river constitutes the boundary between Humboldt and Trinity counties. Depending on what side of the river you are on, directly across is either Humboldt or Trinity County. Therefore any historical findings link the two counties as one. Perhaps the only difference is the county tax collector who determines which county you reside in. This investigation of the lower South Fork's past can be of interest to both Humboldt and Trinity County history buffs.

### FIRST RESIDENTS, NATIVE AMERICANS

To better understand the recent history of the lower regions of the South Fork River drainage we must go back in time many years past. The first known inhabitants to leave their mark along this pristine waterway were the Athabascan-speak-



*Circa 1910, this is a mule bridge across the mouth of the South Fork of Trinity River. Courtesy of Margaret Wooden*

ing Native Americans. Anthropologists and archaeologists estimate that the river villages and mountain camp sites had been occupied in the South Fork six to eight thousand years before the arrival of the Caucasians. Today's descendants are referred to as the Tsnungwe people.

Territorial boundaries of the Tsnungwe included the South Fork watershed, from the confluence of the South Fork and Trinity rivers upstream about ten miles to a landmark known today as Hell's Half Acre Creek. Other claimed lands took in the higher elevations adjacent to the South Fork, such as Friday Ridge, Oak Knob, Sugar Loaf Mountain, Hennessey Ridge, and Castle Rock. Ancient camping sites along the South Fork included the large

base camp of Hlel-Din, which was situated on a river bench at the junction of these two streams. This village also extended southerly to Sandy Bar and Campbell Creek. Scattered small villages were also situated along the South Fork all the way to Surprise and Coon creeks to the south. One other large encampment was located up river and referred to as Lichiwhding, but it fell short in size and did not equal the Hlel-Din site in population.

### EXPLORERS AND TRAPPERS

Many centuries had come and gone for these South Fork aboriginal residents before encountering a Caucasian. This happened in May 1828 when an exploring and trapping expedition under the command of Captain Jedediah Smith journeyed down the South Fork. Included in this party were seventeen mountain men with 150 head of horses and mules. They had come from the Sacramento River via Red Bluff, Hayfork, and Hyampom valleys in search of furs. Eventual passage was made through the village of Hlel-Din then down the Trinity River to make camp near Veteran's Park in Willow Creek. (Troop 97 of the Boy Scouts of America from Willow Creek erected a monument in 1998 to acknowledge this historical event for the famous western explorer Jedediah Smith. The

monument was constructed by Chad Paine as an Eagle Scout project. Some funds were donated by the Jedediah Smith Society of Stockton.)

No white visitors were seen on the South Fork again until twenty years later when, in November 1849, during the California Gold Rush, another exploring party under the leadership of Dr. Josiah Gregg entered the village of Hlel-Din. In this party were Gregg and seven gold miners who had traveled together from Rich Bar (on the East Fork of the North Fork of the Trinity River near Helena in Trinity County.) These white strangers were scouting out a feasible route to the coast, with the hopes of establishing a pack trail to supply miners on the Trinity River. The miners stayed a few days in the vicinity before moving on. After receiving good information and directions from the congenial villagers, they headed west via Friday Ridge and Horse Mountain. After much hardship, in December 1849, Gregg and the miners came upon the Pacific Ocean. Several months later, mule pack strings, carrying supplies, and miners from Warnersville (Trinidad) and Union (Arcata) were swarming into the Trinity River from the Humboldt Bay region.

### SETTLERS

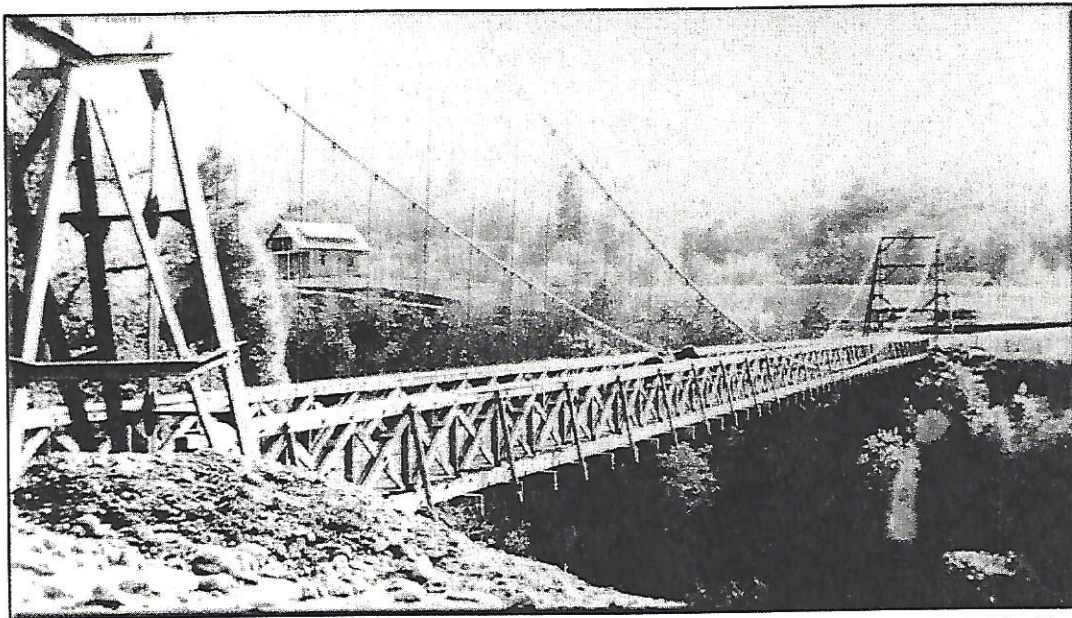
By 1852, this chain of events created the crowding out of the Tsnungwe on the South Fork drainage by miners and merchants. Gold miners scoured the South Fork River bed in search of the precious metal. Much to their disappointment, the Argonauts found gold values very scarce on this stream. Impatient miners then dropped back to the main Trinity where prospecting was much better. While the South Fork only produced small amounts of gold, the miners marveled over the hidden prairies, side creeks, and building sites of the blissful surroundings. Some of the miners vowed they would go back to the South Fork some day.

That someday began to happen in the mid-1860s. Former miners along with land squatters, homesteaders, discharged soldiers, and entrepreneurs began to settle the South Fork canyon after the close of the Indian wars. The land grabbers searched out the high benches along the river and when a location suited their situation and would support a few cattle and horses, a garden, a small family orchard, and a building site, they squatted.

Prior to 1864 the Tsnungwe, in ancient camps along the South Fork, did not take kindly to this intrusion upon their domain and in a short span of time most of the native people of the area disappeared from their land. What happened to these people? Many were rounded up by soldiers and taken to the Hoopa Reservation that was established in 1864. Others escaped the soldiers and went to remote areas and were there joined with other bands hidden out in the New River, Redwood Creek, Trinity Summit, and Grouse Mountain country. From these locations they resisted the soldiers until 1866 during which time many lost their lives. Some of the very first white settlers took Native American ladies as wives. In doing so they protected their mate and her immediate family from the soldiers. In time the South Fork region population became a mix of Caucasian and Indian.



*Junius Ammon, seen above with wife Mary in 1910, was the first U. S. Forest Service District Ranger of the Orleans District of the Klamath National Forest. Courtesy of Margaret Wooden*



*South Fork bridge, circa 1912. The Martin house and ranch can be seen on the Humboldt side.*

The truth of who were the first to claim land on the South Fork after the Tsnungwe is hard to substantiate.

Most probably the first were gold seekers who occupied the South Fork commencing around 1851. At that time we find historical documentation that James Madden, Mr. Hardin, Napoleon Hill, Mr. Drake, David Snyder, Mr. Baggott, Joseph B. Ellis, and John McCann had settled near the mouth of the river holed up under primitive conditions. Madden and Hardin, in partnership, owned several large strings of pack mules and hauled supplies to the miners from Trinidad Bay, pasturing their stock in a large field near by.

Today, we can identify this former pasture land as the site of the California Pacific Plywood Company, which occupied this land at the mouth of the river from 1954 to 1970. Drake and Baggott operated a cable ferry across the South Fork in 1854. In 1857, the ferry business was owned by Napoleon Hill and John McCann, who sold their property to Madden and Hardin. In 1854, Ellis, McCann, and Hill each owned one-third in the land adjacent to the junction of the South Fork and Trinity River to Sandy Bar and Martin's Bluff. Historians suspect that this land was just squatted on, the partners never had legal claim to the ground.

Later on, across the South Fork on the east side, lived Pole, first name unknown, and his wife, both Native Americans. Pole made a living ferrying people across the river long before the first of a series of bridges were built. Mr. Pole used to have a saying about how the traveling public treated him when he offered his ferry service to travelers wanting to cross the river in his dugout canoe: "When water is high they call me Captain Pole, when the water is medium they call me Mr. Pole, when the water is low and they can ford the river, they call me Damned Old Pole."

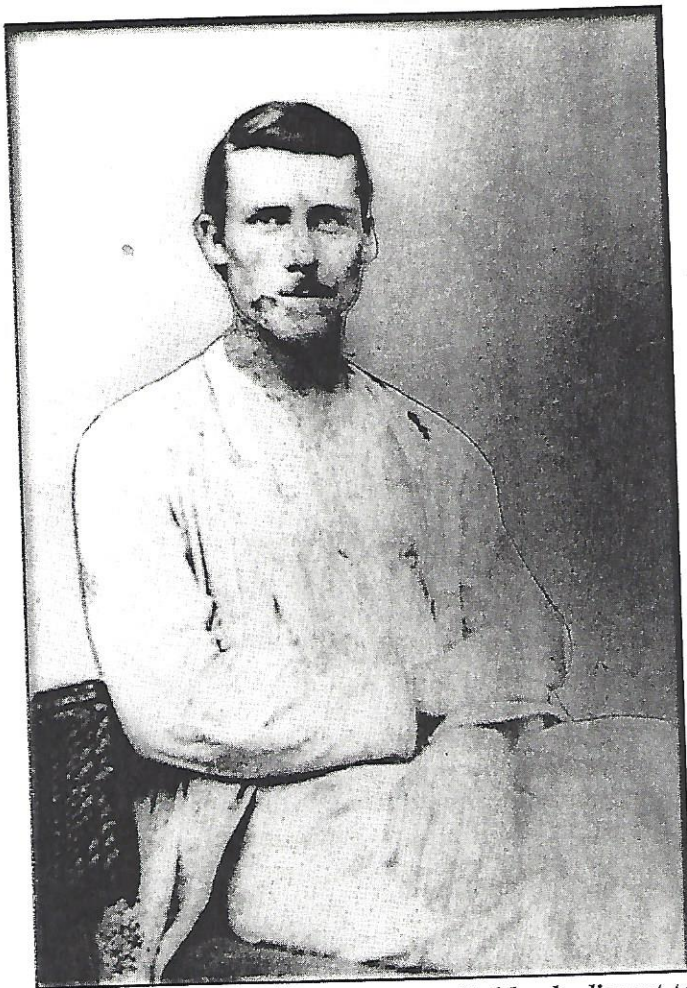
When 1868 rolled around, Thomas Gustave Campbell and his wife, Mary Ann, from Hoopa homesteaded 160 acres under the Homestead Act. Properties involved were the same as had been controlled by Ellis, McCann, and Hill in 1854. Soon after 1868, the Campbell family commenced raising wheat for

grinding into flour. Located near the junction of Highway 299 and Friday Ridge Road a flour mill was put into production. Near the flour mill a small sawmill was also set up which sawed lumber with a 40-inch circular saw. Construction of a large hand-dug ditch from Campbell Creek brought volumes of water to power the overshot water wheel at the two mills. Evidence of the old ditch line is still visible today in an area referred to as "the valley" by early day residents.

Frank Martin, a miner from New River, with wife Flomena went into partnership with Campbell in 1873 and supervised the ranch, grist, and lumber mills. The Martin family, in time, purchased the Campbell investments and resided there for many years with their thirteen children. After the Campbells sold to the Martins they established another ranch known today as the Fountain Ranch at Salyer.

Another progressive pioneer of the South Fork region in the early 1870s was Charles G. Ammon. Mr. Ammon, a soldier in the U. S. Army, on horseback in the mid-1860s passed through the South Fork country on several occasions while on duty during the Indian wars. On one of these detail excursions, Ammon, with a platoon of mounted soldiers, was proceeding along the Burnt Ranch Trail. This trail was established in 1858 by the U. S. Army out of Fort Humboldt. The primary purpose of the trail was to supply a garrison of soldiers camped at Burnt Ranch. This trail branched off the Humboldt Trail in Redwood Creek and progressed up slope to Buck Flat, down into the South Fork, over Hennessey Ridge and on to the Trinity River. While passing through these lush prairie and timbered lands, the trail passed close to a "Shangri-La" type hidden valley.

It is speculated that Charles Ammon paused here, then visualized and dreamed about what he could do with this place. Perhaps, he thought, he would just return to this little paradise at a later time. After discharge from the Army, in time, ex-soldier Ammon did return to this beautiful valley with wife Catherine and settled on the western slope of the South Fork. Steady hard work and determination by the Ammon folks resulted in the carving out of a ranch in the isolated wilderness. Industrious laboring from dawn to dusk generated a large two-story mountain home, several barns, corrals, fencing, a large apple orchard, prime livestock, vegetable gardens, grain and hay fields, and water ditches. A nephew of Charles Ammon from Nebraska, Junius Ammon, arrived sometime around the turn of the century. Junius became the first U. S. Forest Ser-



*Charles H. Carpenter (above) controlled land adjacent to the Kimsey Ranch. Courtesy of Margaret Wooden*

vice District Ranger of the Orleans District of the Klamath National Forest in 1908.

Napoleon Beebe and wife Elizabeth, close friends of the Ammons, took up land to the east of the Ammon Ranch near a small lake. Ammon family history tells the story of these two families coming west together—the Beebes from Arkansas and the Ammons from Nebraska. Some of the Beebe family settled in Fort Bragg in Mendocino County. In the 1930s, the Beebe property, known by then as the Cedar Grove Ranch, was purchased by Cal and Valeda Super. The Supers were instrumental in constructing several bridges spanning the South Fork River, making access easier to the Ammon country. The Beebe family moved to the Brannan Mountain area and established a new home site.

### MINGO CREEK

Now and then an interested person will ask, “How did Mingo Creek get its name?” Mingo Creek flows due east into the South Fork near Gaynor Flat and Sugar Loaf Mountain, cascading down a rugged, narrow steep canyon for approximately three miles. The naming of Mingo Creek had its beginnings at the Napoleon Beebe homestead one mile west of the South Fork in Humboldt County. In those early times, bear hunting was a normal chore for the pioneers who lived in the

back country. From Mr. Bruin, lard was rendered to be used in cooking and baking.

Late in the fall, and just before hibernation, was when these animals were in their prime for fat, and bear hunting commenced. Napoleon Beebe was a noted bear hunter of the South Fork region and owned a pack of specially trained dogs to run and tree bears. In one hound running episode, a fine specimen was treed in a deep canyon near a small creek, some two miles south of the Beebe home. To get to the location took Napoleon and his boys, Charles, Floyd, Wallace, and Clifford, several hours because of the rough terrain. Meantime the dogs were baying at the tree, letting their master know of their whereabouts. In time, the Beebe menfolk arrived at the scene and what they saw did not please them.

Near the base of the tree two of the best hound dogs lay dead, another one was seriously wounded. What happened was that one of the dogs wanted the fame and praise for treeing the beast, so he eliminated his competition in jealousy. Napoleon had had problems with this particular dog before concerning overzealous actions at treeing sites. “Nap” had his belly full of this dog, so he unceremoniously dispatched the hound on the spot. You guessed it, the villain dog’s name was Mingo. His remains laid at the base of a large fir tree for many years. Macho Mingo’s hunting days were over in the late 1890s and the creek has carried his name ever since.

Today’s maps identify landmarks carrying the Ammon name beginning in the 1870s. These are Ammon Prairie, Ammon Ranch, Ammon Creek, Ammon Guard Station, and Ammonville, which is close to the river. Junius and wife settled on the Ammon Ranch after his tour of duty with the United States Forest Service was over, and his sons moved down the mountain so their children would be closer to school.

Another neighbor was Walter Shore, who lived down the slope one-quarter of a mile from the Beebe homestead. One of Charles Ammon’s children, Laura, homesteaded a small side-hill spot known as Bear Trap Prairie near her father’s ranch. She lived there for many years with her husband, Webster Bussell.

When local historians discuss the earliest groups of people who worked the land on the South Fork, they always include the Kimsey and Carpenter families. Closely related, these two clans can be researched back to the mid 1880s.

James E. Kimsey married Sarah Campbell in July 1890 and they soon after established themselves on the South Fork. Eight years later, in April of 1898, Sarah Campbell Kimsey married Charles H. Carpenter. Carpenter controlled land adjacent to the Kimsey Ranch, which was hidden away on the banks of the South Fork River. The Burnt Ranch Trail ford was located opposite Carpenter Flat near the old homestead buildings.

### INCIDENT AT BURNT RANCH TRAIL RIVER FORD

This trail-ford across the South Fork of the Trinity River has significant historical importance. Sometime during the summer of 1864, Captain Abraham Miller, in command of a detachment of sixteen soldiers from Company C, California

Mountain Volunteers, was returning from Weaverville to Fort Gaston in Hoopa. While passing through a field near the present day Kimsey-Carpenter Ranch, a skirmish was had and two Indians were killed. The others retreated and were seen no more until the mounted soldiers were crossing the South Fork.

From out of nowhere the warriors made an attack from the hillside commanding the stream crossing. Two soldiers were wounded seriously while in midstream. Several mules, loaded down with camp equipment, provisions, and the U. S. Mail, were killed. The attack was so sudden and well-planned and the captain's position so exposed to the enemy that Miller was well satisfied to escape with his troops at the expense of his losses. Captain Abraham Miller, a leading officer of the Indian wars, died in May 1881 and is buried at Trinidad.

The Kimsey and Carpenter land claims extended from the South Fork due east up slope towards Hennessey Ridge, bordering the Kate Hennessey property boundary. Most all of this Kimsey-Carpenter ranch was in oak grass lands. Cattle, horses, and hogs roamed freely on these lush mountain acres. In earlier times, hogs could be seen under the many white and black oak trees foraging for acorns in competition with herds of deer. The nearby South Fork ran heavy with salmon and steelhead. After all these years, 1885 to 2002, the land remains in the ownership of Carpenter descendants.

Another point of interest that the South Fork country experienced happened in 1928. It all started when Oregon transients Peter Stroff, Bill Herder, and John Bishop made off with the safe in a hurried getaway from Brizard's Store in Willow Creek. The time of the robbery was three o'clock in the morning of July 13, 1928. Storekeeper Frank Graham was awakened by the break-in and immediately phoned local law enforcement agencies.

The outlaws made a daring escape out of the Willow Creek area in their automobile traveling east on Highway 299. At a chosen place near Burnt Ranch "Bud" Carpenter, Trinity County Deputy Sheriff, and U. S. Forest Service Ranger Oscar Hayward set up a roadblock. Soon, the desperadoes encountered the lawmen and were stopped. Almost immediately a shoot-out followed and when the melee was over, Deputy Charles "Bud" Carpenter and John Bishop lay on the highway dead. Ranger Oscar Hayward was down with a serious wound in the torso. Bill Herder escaped in the getaway car speeding east from the conflict and disappeared out of Trinity County completely eluding the law. Pete Stroff bolted from the crime scene and headed down the hill, hiding out in the rugged Trinity River canyon.

On July 18, George Gaynor observed from his cabin near Surprise Creek on the South Fork a man picking and eating blackberries. Gaynor confronted the stranger and learned that this "fisherman" had been lost for several days and was very hungry. Gaynor smelled a rat and encouraged the angler to continue eating berries. Cooking up a hearty breakfast, he then invited the lost man in to share the food with him. Unbeknownst to the guest, Gaynor had phoned the Trinity County Sheriff alerting them to his unexpected company.

In time, the cabin was surrounded by the law and local armed citizens. Vengeance was high because "Bud" Carpenter was a native of the South Fork. Pete Stroff surrendered

without incident. This "fisherman" had hiked out of his Trinity River hideout, proceeded over Hennessey Ridge and down into the South Fork drainage a distance of five miles following the gun battle at Burnt Ranch. Later on Stroff was sentenced to life in prison.

What about Bill Herder who vanished from the murder scene in the car, never to be located again in Trinity County, California or Oregon? Crime does not pay. Herder was arrested in New York state four years later for the murder of "Bud" Carpenter. He was brought back to Trinity County, convicted, and sent to prison for life. A bridge spanning the Trinity River near Hawkins Bar on Highway 299 is dedicated to the memory of Charles "Bud" Carpenter who died in the line of duty.

A number of years back, the late Walter Carpenter and wife Mary purchased the Kimsey holdings from Ben and Ollie Kimsey. Today the property is controlled by Gary and Joey Carpenter, Walter's son and daughter-in-law. John Jurin, a grandson of Charles and Sarah Carpenter, now owns the historical Carpenter place. When spring arrives and is in full swing at the Kimsey-Carpenter property, it presents a spectacular view of green prairies and showy, fragrant wildflowers. For the fortunate descendants, who like the pioneer way, living here has not changed.

Still other first-time families on the South Fork must be remembered and placed into historical sequence. John



*Webster and Laura Ammon Bussell, circa 1900.*

Alexander Koon, a native of New York, married Cora O'Donnell from the Mattole River country in July 1895. It is presumed that sometime soon after their marriage, John and Cora started to develop land and build improvements at a rapid pace. The Koons' ranch encompassed present day Ammonville and the Henderson-Bussell location south to Hennessey Road.

In years past, a lot of farming went on at the Koon-Henderson Ranch. Extensive hay fields, orchards, gardens, livestock, and a gold mine kept this family very busy through the years. To store the grain and corn harvested here, a rodent-proof granary was erected on the property. This remarkable building still stands today. Remains of the one hundred year old picket and wire fencing can be observed along the South Fork Road bordering this old homestead.

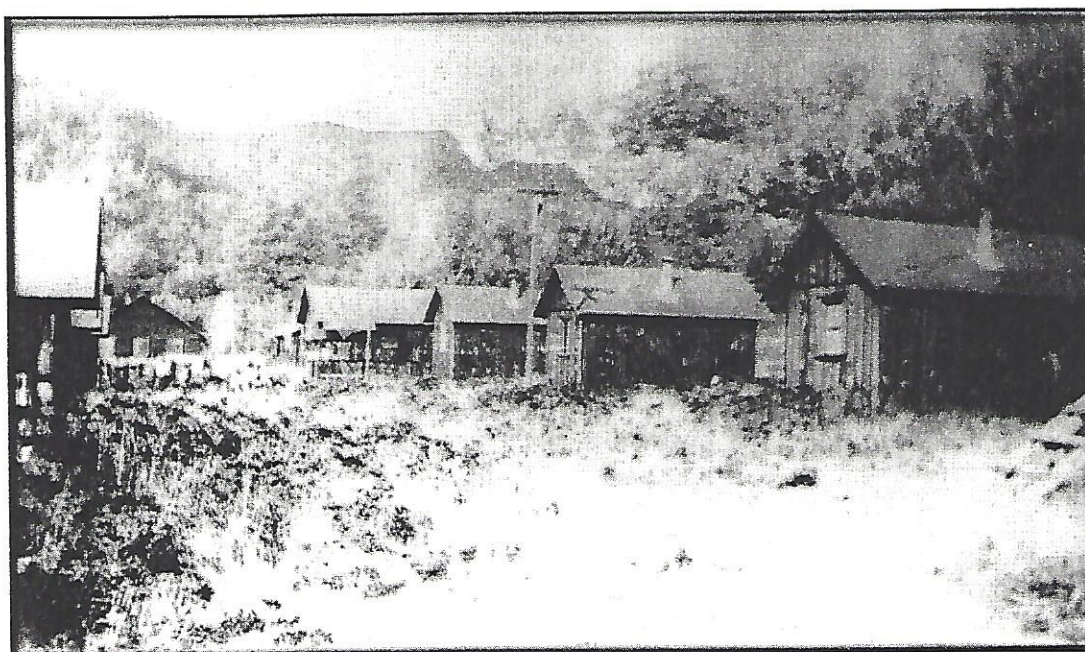
John Koon died in 1932 at age eighty-seven; his wife Cora died in 1916, age fifty-four. A daughter, Caroline Koon, spent many years in the mountain country teaching at several grammar schools. She married Leonard Henderson. Caroline also homesteaded land adjacent to her parents' farm to the southeast and called it Deer Glen.

One of Caroline's daughters, Teresa, has lived on this pioneer land for many years. Two of Caroline and Leonard Henderson's children, Taylor and Leland, lost their lives in World War II.

At the turn of the century, 1900, and beyond to 1925, the South Fork region experienced an increased growth in settlement and population. In April 1915, Merton Shore with wife Ina and children, Claire, Edward and Walter, left Arcata. Their destination was the South Fork of Trinity River. The Shore family's plan was to settle in at a landmark known as Limestairs. Loaded down with their worldly possessions in a large stake side truck, they struck out east for the Trinity River back country. All went well for the Shores until the road passed under a low railroad trestle near Essex. Because the sideboards were so high above the truck bed, they could not clear the bottom timbers of the trestle. Some time was spent by Mr. Shore and his sons sawing off the numerous boards so the truck could pass under the railroad bridge. Eventually the pioneer family made it down into Redwood Creek via Blue Lake, Korbel, Angels Ranch, Bald Mountain, and Lupton's ranch. They laid over at Berry's Redwood House on Redwood Creek where accommodations and food were always appreciated by the traveling public.

After an early breakfast, the journey continued heading for Indian Field Ridge, Three Creeks Basin, Brannan Mountain, and Willow Creek. Recent spring rains had made the steep switch-back dirt road very muddy and slick with deep ruts up out of Redwood Creek. Several attempts were made to conquer the road condition. The heavily loaded truck became mired down each time. Discouraged, the Shore family gave up. A decision was made and, with heavy hearts and disappointment, they returned to Arcata. Later, in the early summer, another attempt was made to gain Limestairs in Trinity County. Roads were now dry and dusty and no problems were encountered on the trip. Limestairs was a welcome sight and became the Shore family's mountain home and a well-earned one, too.

So great was the influx of people that a U. S. Post Office was established. It was the first and only post office on the South Fork and was called Limestairs. In 1916, Merton Shore, owner of the Limestairs property, became the postmaster.



*Salyer Consolidated Mine housing, circa 1935. Courtesy of Margaret Wooden*

Limestairs Post Office was put into operation on October 27, 1916, then discontinued to the community of Salyer on May 31, 1928. The Limestairs Post Office was housed in a log cabin, built by Shore, which also included a small general merchandise store. This old landmark stood for many years before being destroyed by fire in the early 1980s.

Another interesting aspect of the Shore family at Limestairs involved a large apple orchard. At harvest time, in the fall, the apples were picked and then packed in large wooden boxes. Mr. Shore with son Claire would transport the apples to Arcata by truck—a three-day journey to market. Limestairs apples became a premium commodity anticipated each year by Arcata merchants and citizens hungry for mountain-grown fruit. Limestairs derives its name from the limestone rock formations common to the upper South Fork. For several years, the McCready and Nelson families lived at this homestead, after the Shore family departed.

Just up the hill one quarter of a mile from the junction of the South Fork Road and Highway 299, north of the abandoned airport, was the Donahue Ranch. The original owner of this ranch was a Mr. Raymond who can be traced to the area back to the early 1870s. Sometime around the turn of the century, John William Donahue can be found on the Raymond ground. Donahue's was a very popular stopover destination. It was here that the wagon road ended. By trail was the only

see the Donahue settlement today from the South Fork Road is impossible. Mother Nature has completely covered the historic site with a thick stand of Douglas fir trees.

### THE DITCH LINE THAT FAILED

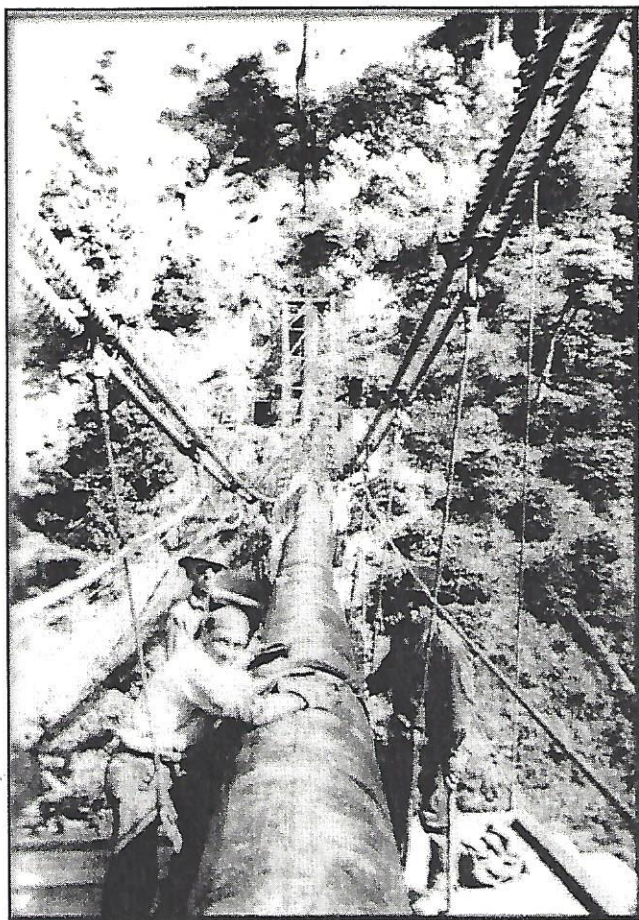
Research cannot determine the exact date, but in the mid-1920s another mining scheme appeared on the South Fork of the Trinity. Promoters, unknown today, undertook the large project of constructing a water ditch commencing from Carpenter Creek, which flows between the old Kimsey homestead and the Hennessey land holdings. When completed, the plan was to supply water for the hydraulic gold mining operations, which were later known as the Salyer Consolidated Mines. An engineering firm from Eureka was hired to survey and lay out the project, traversing high along the hillside from south to north along the South Fork drainage. Every little unnamed side stream along the four mile route was to be tapped into the ditch. Much hard labor went into digging the waterway, including pick and shovel, wheelbarrow, plus horse-drawn Fresno scrapers. A segment of the ditch was dug by a small steam shovel as related by the late Clarence Carr of Gray's Flat.

Clarence worked as a fireman on the boiler-powered steam engine. In time, the aqueduct was completed and as the winter rains began Carpenter Creek started to flow and miners waited anxiously at the north end of the trench where the gold mine was located, but very little water arrived at the mine. Unforeseen mistakes in the system had caused it to fail. Evidently the engineer's design was on such a level grade that the water would not flow and instead spilled over at its origin at Carpenter Creek. Attempts were made to correct the problem with negative results and finally the project was abandoned with much disappointment and financial loss. The ditch line that never worked is visible today as one travels the old Hennessey Road up-slope to the pioneer Hennessey Ranch location.

Gold mining on the South Fork waterway as stated previously was very limited because of low pay dirt values. The largest mining activity took place at the Salyer Consolidated Mine Company, which was later to become the Swanson Mining Corporation. The location of this mine was on a large flat one-quarter mile east of the Donahue settlement. First time claim holders of this mine were Peter Hammer and Jacob Kalke who pioneered and prospected the property starting in 1899.

The size of the placer claim was one hundred and sixty acres. Trinity County at that time assessed the property at \$160 and taxed the owners \$4.96. Hammer and Kalke worked the mine sporadically with small profits. Lack of water was a great obstacle to their operation to ground sluice and operate their gold recovery wooden riffle flume. Nevertheless, these two determined miners hung on stubbornly for many years. Back breaking work began in the rainy season when water was available in Dutchman's Gulch Creek. Peter Hammer died in 1938 and is buried somewhere in an unmarked grave on his claim near the Donahue place.

An exact date is uncertain, but sometime in the 1929 to '30 years, the Salyer Consolidated Mines Company took over ownership of the Hammer-Kalke mine. At the same time, this



*In 1935, the Swanson Mine pipeline brought water from Campbell Creek crossing South Fork of Trinity River.*

was to proceed up the South Fork and Trinity rivers. At Donahue's, travelers could get a bite to eat, spend the night, partake in "snake bite medicine," and cut a rug on Saturday nights. Yarns passed down tell of many rip-roaring good times held here by miners and homesteader couples at the Donahue Dance Hall. Music was supplied by talented musicians from up and down the river.

John Donahue passed away in 1932. Research cannot determine his wife's name or death date. Children Ethel and Jay Donahue spent their lives on the Trinity River. As a young man, Jay Donahue's life was visited by tragic circumstances. Employed by the Corona Mine across the river from Hawkins Bar, he was blinded by a dynamite blast. Several years later, he drowned in the Trinity River by stepping into a deep pool and being swept away in the current. Ethel Donahue Merritt Henderson lived at Salyer Heights for a number of years. To

enterprise purchased the Donahue Ranch, which bordered the Hammer-Kalke property. Charles Marshall Salyer, a longtime resident on the Trinity River, with W. D. McIntosh, organized the Salyer Consolidated Mines. Mr. Salyer became the chief executive officer of this gold mining undertaking. Needed financing was supplied by eastern stock holders who reasoned that the gold mine would bring high profits in a short period of time.

The Salyer Consolidated Mines instigated a strategy to recover gold from an ancient high Trinity River channel. Situated at the extreme west end of Hennessey Ridge and Dutchman's Gulch, the red dirt mountain had prospected quite well. Also included in the plan was to mine off the Donahue Ranch and the company's property near Lily Point.

Marshall Salyer went into this venture big time. Soon a design evolved to supply water in large amounts to sustain an extensive placer operation. To accomplish this feat, a large wood-braced, earth-filled dam was constructed high on Campbell Creek. By a system of water gates Campbell Creek could be diverted into a wooden flume which carried it to Four Mile Creek Ravine. At this point the water entered a siphon pipe thirty-six inches in diameter. The water was then transported over the ravine by a 750-foot suspension bridge. Locals dubbed this bridge the "Little Golden Gate."

After the water made the trip across the span it was diverted into a large, deep ditch which became known as the Saxey Kidd Ditch Line. Water flowed through this canal and emptied into a large reservoir. Evidence of the one-acre storage hollow can still be seen today on the Friday Ridge Road about two miles from Highway 299. A date on the cement penstock visible today states 1930. From the man-made lake, the Campbell Creek water was siphoned off into a thirty-six inch diameter steel pipe.

Headed straight down Friday Ridge the filled pipe's water cascaded downward to the South Fork of the Trinity at a tremendous drop in elevation and velocity. On the South Fork another steel suspension bridge was erected to support the heavy pipe as it crossed the river. This sturdy, well-engineered bridge was located on the extreme south end of the old Campbell-Martin Ranch, more recently known as the Carolina-Pacific Plywood Mill site. The demise of this bridge came when the 1964-65 flood collapsed the structure, tumbling it into the river far below.

Across and at the south end of the bridge was a steep lift up to the Salyer Consolidated Mine, perhaps one-half mile in distance. Here, the inverted siphon method took over and the water was forced up the pipe all the way to the Donahue Ranch and several other mine locations under the control of the Salyer Consolidated Mines in the vicinity. This complex water system was known as the Humboldt Water Project and was engineered and constructed by R. L. Oakley Company at a cost of \$218,700.

Soon after all the expensive construction was completed and laborers hired, mining activity commenced in the late fall of 1931, but each succeeding mining season the Salyer Consolidated Mines profits were nil. The payroll consisted of around twenty-five miners.

Mine operations continued until 1932 when gold recovery

began to dwindle drastically. What was happening was that the gold bearing gravels were producing very fine flour-light gold. Day after day there was no change in the mining pits. Most of the very fine gold could not be trapped and recovered in the sluice boxes. The water rushing over the riffles just floated most of the light gold away and into the tailing dump which eventually entered the Trinity River via Dutchman's Gulch Creek. Water, mine tailings, and lost gold were also carried away to the Trinity River by a large overhead wooden flume that crossed Highway 299 near the Redbud Theater Building. Motorists on the highway can remember the water dripping down from the flume onto vehicles while passing underneath the structure.

In time, expenses and the initial cost of the extensive water supply system overpowered what little profits there were. The Salyer Consolidated Mining Company gave up and shut down in the late spring of 1933. Closed down for two years, the mine lay idle except for a caretaker and minor maintenance. In 1935, Salyer Consolidated Mining Company was reorganized as the Swanson Mining Company. A group of entrepreneurs from Jamestown, New York, sent Alvin J. Swanson and James G. Blair west to the defunct Salyer Consolidated Mines to get the mine into production again. Both Swanson and Blair knew absolutely nothing about gold mining, this also included their financial backers. Swanson assumed the title of president and Blair became secretary and treasurer. Marshall Salyer was hired as advisor. Even though Salyer Consolidated Mines could not make a profit on the South Fork mine, Swanson and Blair decided to give it a go anyway.

Under the new ownership the mine operated from 1936 to 1937 with no profits and went into the hole \$28,000. To remedy this situation, a new plan was devised to install a hydro-electric plant tapping into the existing Humboldt Water Project near the pipe crossing bridge over the South Fork River. By installing a hydro-plant and three pumping stations, more volumes of water could be pumped up higher on Hennessey Ridge to operate the giants (monitors).

A new prospect showed promise high above where the regular mining pits were located. This site became known as the High Bank. Alvin Swanson, an electrical engineer, supervised the project which included the hydro-plant, three pumping stations, power lines, plus two gold recovery stations. The 23-kilowatt power plant was put into operation on May 8, 1938, at a cost of \$100,000. Hired to operate the plant were John Hodgson, Douglas Dinsmore, and Verne Hammer, who was the son of the original prospector.

With the new hydro-plant, pumping stations and transmission lines functioning to perfection, the "pipers" or giant operators commenced sluicing down the High Bank into the new rubber riffle sluice boxes. Expectations were high through the mining season of 1938 and '39 when the mine reached its best output since operations began in 1935. After a long, wet winter, the cleanup totaled \$15,800 in gold bullion. Capital loss for this same period was recorded at \$4,723.25. Sad, but true, no profits were gained.

Very frustrating were the results even when the new hydro-pumping system had run so smoothly with dedicated hard working employees. Virgil "Pop" Hughes and Leonard

Henderson Sr. were the foremen in charge of the pits and gold recovery systems. Vera Benson Wright became the lead cook at the camp, preparing meals for the miners and boarders who lived in the company's cabins. Vera's cook crew included Jeanette Eberspecher, Louise Hodgson, Hazel Howard, Stella Russell, and Ethel Spencer. Figures for the fiscal year of 1940 to '41 revealed that the corporation experienced another repeat in failure. Gold recovered raised to \$29,000, the best year ever, but expenses were tallied at almost \$40,000. Each proceeding year, operating and maintenance costs kept mounting, making profits impossible.

Two main factors could not be overcome. The High Bank overburden was now close to 300-feet high. Tons of dirt and gravel had to be blasted down by the giants' water power and washed away to bedrock on which the gold had settled millions of years before. The expense to reach bedrock was very time consuming and expensive.

Something very interesting took place while working on the High Bank. Much to the astonishment of the miners, parts of a woolly-mammoth's remains were washed down into the pit. Gold dust was found lodged in the tooth sockets of the prehistoric, elephant-like animal.

Another major problem was at the gold recovery plants. These new facilities did a great job of recovering the flour gold. However, when the gold was melted down into ingots then shipped to the U. S. Mint at San Francisco, it was docked heavily for purity because of faulty retorting.

Continued production into 1941 and 1942 was the beginning of a complete collapse for the Swanson Mining Corporation. Alvin Swanson resigned as president on December 1, 1941. James Blair then took over his duties. Disappointment continued. The season's production had gone into the hole again. By June 1942, most of the employees had received notices of termination. Mr. Blair and a small remaining crew left the mine to the care of Floyd Glover in August 1942. James Blair left in the company's 1935 Ford sedan for his home in New York state. This ended the saga of the Swanson Mining Corporation.

Sadness and depression fell upon the communities of Salyer, Hawkins Bar, and Willow Creek. The company's character was excellent. It was a good outfit to work for and employees were treated well. Paychecks were always on time, regardless of the company's financial woes. While the Swanson Mining Corporation operated, the Great Depression was in full swing on the Trinity and South Fork of Trinity rivers. This corporation provided much needed employment for 160 workers in the seven years of its operation.

Circumstances were to change for the miners. World War II was now eight months old. Many of the terminated employees were being drafted into the armed services or they joined up. Others with their families moved away to work in the war effort and another chapter of history began in the lives of the former employees of the Swanson Mining Corporation.

Local historians are indebted to Dal Senter, a longtime South Fork resident, who has shared his information and input into the Swanson Mining Corporation story. A historian in his own right, Dal has contributed his appreciated research for historical purposes.

Only two other gold mines on the South Fork are worth mentioning. West of the Koon Ranch, overlooking the river, the Koon family drift mined an ancient river channel starting in 1896. The mine's gold yield was marginal, but it supplied the family with a supplemental income for many years in tough times.

Benjamin Kimsey operated a placer gold and platinum mine around 1947. Location of the diggings was down river from Butcher Flat a quarter of a mile on the west side of the river in Humboldt County. Winter water was brought down from Ammon or Mahata Creek to operate a small giant. Like all mines on the South Fork, the Kimsey Mine certainly was no bonanza for it shut down after several seasons. Albert Hodgson and Frank Jurin were Kimsey employees. Perhaps ten to fifteen scattered gold claims were filed on the South Fork from 1860-1965. No records indicate that any honest attempts were made to work these claims. Reasons were simple: poor pay-dirt values.

Still another enterprise that attracts one's attention was the Salyer Cannery. It was established on the South Fork and was located one-quarter mile south of the Swanson Mine near Lily Point on the bank of the river. Marshall Salyer, the gold mine promoter, was always active in other avenues of making a living. An avid orchardist, Marshall and his wife, Tessie, had nearly one thousand bearing peach and pear trees on their property at Lily Point. All through the late 1920s and up to World War II, the cannery operated at full production during the harvest season.

Canned fruit was sold to the Del Monte Company, who in turn put its label on the cans. When World War II commenced in 1941, tin cans and sugar could not be obtained. The war effort rationed sugar and tin was much needed by the armed services. After the war ended, the Salyer Cannery was never started up again. By 1948, the ever diverse Marshall Salyer was working in a new industry—a local saw mill.

The preceding South Fork history account has included only a few of the original families on the lower South Fork drainage. Many other pioneers had their part in settling and occupying the land on this beautiful pristine stream from 1870 to 1940. Any residents after the 1940 period are considered newcomers to the South Fork natives and they are not included in this inventory.

Listed are clan names now being entered into history research. Maybe you are a descendant of these hearty and rugged people of the Lower South Fork country. The following old-time names are listed in succession starting at the mouth of the South Fork River and proceeding south and up river to Coon Creek: Original Native Americans, Campbell, Martin, Pole, Pete, Dartt, Saxey, Jurin, Graham, Hotelling, Raymond, Henderson, Donahue, Hammer, Salyer, Kahlke, Koon, White, Ammon, Detrault, Bond, Westerberg, Cook, Shocker, Pike, Shore, McCready, Nelson, Gould, Macin, Roos, Williams, Butcher, Weldon, Trigg, Peal, Ness, Whiteside, W. Shore, Beebe, C. Ammon, Bussell, Super, Carpenter, Kimsey, Hennessey, Jones, Gaynor, Sudheimer, Merritt, and Ruckert.

---

**About the Authors:** *Max Rowley and Margaret Wooden, both of Willow Creek, often collaborate on projects for the Historian. Their last article (Summer 2001) was titled "California City: Bluff Creek and Vicinity."*