

NUGGETS FROM THE PAST
by Norman McCleod
THE SAGA OF JESSIE FERGUSON

Back in 1979 under then president Mildred DeMaria, our historical society members participated in an outdoor monthly meeting in the old gold producing townsite of Deadwood. Our guest for the occasion was Stella Bowman, born and raised in the settlement who at the time was approaching 100 years of age. It was a fun time enjoyed by all. (That year we also journeyed to the sites of Damascus and Last Chance for outdoor meetings).

The name of the town is derived from an old California provincialism signifying a sure thing - "deadwood". It is located on a high narrow ridge between El Dorado Canyon and the North Fork of the Middle Fork of the American River. The elevation here is about 4,000 feet. Its population perhaps never exceeded 175. Its summers were pleasant but its winters were severe.

Deadwood was founded shortly prior to 1852 when prospectors uncovered certain indications of gold quantities in the area. At first there was no wagon road into the town. Supplies were carried on mulebacks over a miners' trail from Michigan Bluff seven miles distant. This same trail extended beyond Deadwood to Last Chance, another seven miles. Today this same pathway is part of the popular 100-mile, Western States Trail.

During the town's busiest era there were about 30 working mining claims that gradually subsided until about the late 1920s when the town was almost deserted. Today there are no buildings standing in Deadwood. The only clue to its identity as an historic site is its small cemetery.

But enough about Deadwood. Our story is primarily about Jessie Ferguson who, with her husband Duncan, operated a 10-room hotel and bar in the town. It was named the Half-way House due to its location half way between Michigan Bluff and Last Chance. A large outdoor wood platform next to the hotel was used mainly for the unloading of pack mules but on the Fourth of July it was used for dancing.

For the annual celebration people came from miles around mostly by mule or horseback over narrow trails. The patriotic festivity usually lasted an entire week. There were foods to be eaten and drinks to be drunken. Hi-ho!

Jessie Ferguson at 13 came to this country from Scotland. Her parents first settled in Pennsylvania where almost immediately she became a rural school teacher. On many occasions she accepted her pay in pigs and chickens.

In Deadwood she was seen as a colorful character and the center of the miners' lives for many years. When the school closed she taught other children along with her own. She owned a large old-fashioned doctor's book and with its help she accepted the responsibility of administering medical remedies to the community.

She delivered most of the babies in town. She had six children of her own. People came to her for treatment any time, day or night. In winter she would put on heavy rubber boots and her raincoat and with her trusty doctor's book under her arm go out in the middle of the night in every kind of weather to aid the sick. In all the years of her ministries she never accepted a cent in payment. She was one of the unsung heroines of her time.

Jessie Ferguson also preached at funeral services when residents passed away. The small cemetery was located on a hill-top on the edge of town. An Indian woman who knew and liked Jessie requested that when she died she be buried like the white folks. Under the Indian custom at death her body would have been burned. Duncan Ferguson talked with the woman's tribal members and when she died they shot her dog and horse and cremated them, then buried their ashes with the woman's body.

It is not known by the writer what happened to the Fergusons following the town's demise. They probably moved to the largest settlement on the divide, Foresthill. Can anyone help?

I have made a few solo trips to the site of Deadwood and its "missing" cemetery. I say "missing" because of its background passed on to me by the late Lutie Dorer. Prior to 1960 the Deadwood Cemetery was not unlike other cemeteries in that it was identified by gravestones. However, during the great 1960 forest fire its markers were all bulldozed into the deep canyon behind it by the Forestry Dept. that wanted its elevated flatness to be utilized as a helicopter pad. The gravestones were never replaced; however, a single marker today lists the names of the deceased buried there.