

Nuggets from the Past

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The Yankee Jim's Road

Back in the 1850s, a wagon road ran originally to Yankee Jim's from Auburn via Todd's Valley, then crossed Owl Creek. From there it ascended Georgia Hill, spanned Devil's Canyon below the old Indian camp, then east up Main Street into the heart of town.

This road became a main thoroughfare for every type of traveler, from heavy wagons carrying mining equipment and supplies to solitary characters on horseback or plodding afoot.

Old-timers recalled seeing an endless cavalcade of covered wagons creating an interminable mountain of dust, covering everything on both sides of the road as far as the eye could see. This accompanied by a chorus of shouts from harried teamsters and the percussive sound from hundreds of equine hoofs.

At the time Yankee Jim's was the main supply center for The Divide's mines and camps within a radius of 10 miles. Fire devastated the town on at least three instances. It was rebuilt substantially each time.

With the completion of the Central Pacific Railroad in 1869, the new railroad town of Colfax replaced old Illinoistown as a major settlement. The town fathers of Yankee Jim's quickly envisioned the need for a primary second road extending across North Fork Canyon to the railway. Planning began almost immediately.

Town meetings created universal enthusiasm; every physically-able townsman willing to donate his time and labor. The town's wealthiest citizens agreed to finance the purchase of tools and equipment for the project.

But, as in everything connected to the human psyche, minority opinions arose to create dissension - enough to delay the undertaking another 10 years. Finally, the actual work began. Workmen followed the surveyor's line through pine-covered hills and into deep, rocky canyons - perspiring, felling, digging, drilling and blasting. All this time, pointed north.

During the initial stages of the working crews' enthusiasm, a seven-mile link of the highway from Colfax to the North Fork was completed. Here the construction crews of the Central Pacific erected a substantial wooden bridge spanning the river. This bridge exacted tolls from the public for another 40 years, eventually paying for it.

Meanwhile, volunteer crews working from the south end were facing major problems. A majority of them admitted defeat when unforeseen complications arose and most of them returned to their mining claims. The several minor heroes left on the job struggled hopelessly for awhile. Then they too succumbed to exhaustion and discouragement.

As it was, the crews advanced the roadway stalwartly as far north as a two-mile stretch of hard rock located on the vertical walls of Shirttail Canyon, lying between the North Fork and Slickens Flat.

This two-mile section presented an almost insurmountable obstacle, calling for hand-drilling and black powder blasting - a stumbling block that would have disheartened even stronger men. As a result, the entire project was halted as the few remaining boys gave up. They too returned to their claims.

The subject of the Yankee Jim's-Colfax Road became one of sheer disgust with its implication of abject failure. If there was a single certainty in town, it was the resignation that the road would never be completed. No one even wanted to discuss it.

But, unsolicited assistance came from an entirely unexpected and ironic source: a Chinaman! Throughout the diggings he was generally known as Chinese Tom. An employer of about 200 Orientals in mining operations in Indian Canyon below Iowa Hill, he was reputedly a tough-minded, shrewd manipulator of men.

His camp was the county's largest Chinatown at the time, one in which his rules were absolute. Tom paid his workers' wages and all other bills necessary for the successful operation of his settlement. The gold produced was weighed by Tom himself, much of which was smuggled to China inside the bones of dead Chinese being returned to their homeland for final burial.

Tom was considered to be an intellectual by those who knew him best. He exhibited an insatiable curiosity about the world outside his camp. Through his affable interrogations of travelers, he learned of the new road being built between Yankee Jim's and Colfax. He revealed an intense interest in its progress, month after month.

One day, a visitor informed him of the project's suspension due to what was considered impossible conditions working the two miles of hard rock. Tom and his guest enjoyed a few drinks together, and the latter never understood why his host grew so agitated over an incomplete road.

The following morning had barely opened to the sun when things began to happen. Calling a meeting of his foremen, Chinese Tom outlined his steps required for early remedial action. Daybreak next day saw the beginning of an impressive expedition consisting of 200 Chinese plodding in tandem, much like an Apache guerrilla force. Over six miles of narrow canyon trail, each man was equipped with

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tools and equipment looking surprisingly like road-building material. All this, plus a week's supply of tea and rice.

The uninvited - and certainly unexpected - Chinese laborers bored and blasted those intimidating two miles of hard rock, cleared and smoothed the surface and finished a road on hardrock base fit for vehicular traffic within a week's time. They were black powder experts.

Then, carrying their tools on their shoulders while grinning like a victorious army, they returned to their base in Indian Canyon.

It is said they never asked for - nor did they ever receive - any compensation. Not even a word of thanks.

These were the same Chinese ilk of whom the sand-lot orator of San Francisco, Dennis Kearny, preached "must go."

Completed in 1884, the Yankee Jim's Road quickly became a busy turnpike connecting the railroad with towns and mines of the Foresthill Divide. High-spirited celebrations were held on both ends commemorating its completion. No record exists certifying that any Chinese were invited.

One spin-off from the new highway was the construction of the Glenbrook Hotel in Yankee Jim's by Adam and Mary Duncan. It served the wayfaring traffic for the next 40-odd years.

But, that's another story!

(Suggested further reading: "Yankee Jim's, Memories of a Boyhood," by Harold E. Henderson.)