

**The Wealth of California —  
Today's Agriculture  
Yesterday's Gold.**

By Patricia Loomis

**Chico to Grass Valley  
OCTA Convention  
August 1999**

# THE WEALTH OF CALIFORNIA — TODAY'S AGRICULTURE YESTERDAY'S GOLD

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Welcome to a trip to Grass Valley and Nevada City, two of the richest and most picturesque of California's mines.

Tours of the North Star and Empire mines, a chance to browse in antique shops, view the Victorian mansions and cottages that date back to the days of the beautiful Lola Montez will be among the highlights of the trip.

We will learn some history, see spectacular scenery, get a close-up look at some of California's agricultural wealth. Ghost towns and landmarks will take us back 150 years, while the air-conditioned bus carries us along modern highways lined with riches the 49ers never dreamed about.

The miles of rice fields, vineyards and orchards stretch south along Highways 70 and 99 from Chico, once the home ranch of John Bidwell, pioneer agriculturist and father of the raisin industry. These lush acres we pass are living monuments to Bidwell.

As we pass the highway that runs east to Oroville we are reminded that it is near here that Ishi, last known member of the Yahi tribe was discovered in 1911. Ishi (which means "the man") was a great source of information for ethnologists prior to his death in 1916 — see *Ishi, In Two Worlds* by Theodora Kroeber.

Black walnuts line the highway south of Chico, descendants of the trees that the Indians knew and used along with the wild berries, plums and cherries.

Agriculture replaced the yellow ore in terms of wealth long ago, and the area we travel through is among the richest and most diversified in the world.

The green fields of rice were seeded by air in April and May on laser-level rice fields flooded to a depth of 4 to 5 inches. It is harvested in August and September.

The United States is the second largest exporter of rice in the world. Thailand is number 1. California is the nation's third largest producer of rice in the United States, with 95% of its rice grown in Butte, Colusa, Sutter, and Yuba counties in the Sacramento Valley.

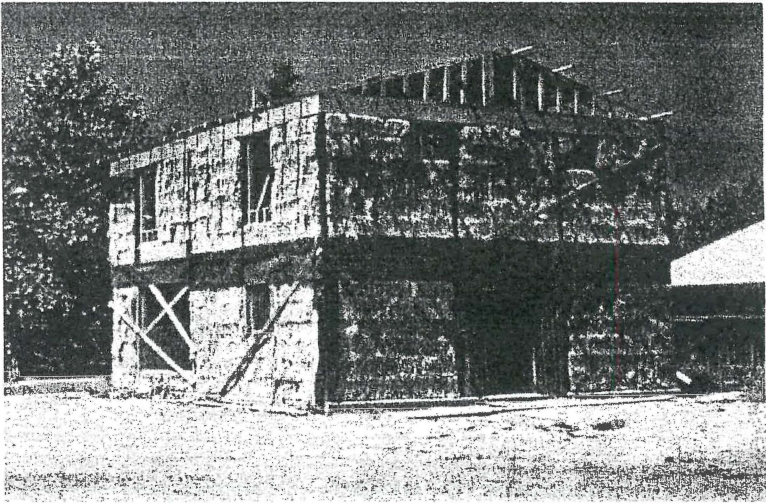
Rice growing is environmentally friendly as the fields provide food for migrating ducks and geese, as well as resident wild fowl and pheasants. About 60% of the wildfowl on the Pacific Fly-way spend the winter in the Sacramento Valley.

Rice strawbales used in building construction is catching on in California because rice straw is abundant and its use in building provides a needed alternative to pollution through burning.

Strawbale construction is not new. It dates back more than 100 years. Strawbale homes usually of wheat or rye, may be found in the mid-west and southwest, but rice-bales are new.

Rice-straw bales covered with plaster or stucco provide "incredible" insulation, enthusiastic promoters claim, pointing to reduced heating and cooling costs. Such buildings have a life-span of over 100 years and are fire resistant.

Size of bales or flakes can be varied and the home when finished may give the appearance of an adobe or a wood frame building with stucco exterior, according to officials of the California Rice Promotion Board.



Straw bale house

In April 1996, Yuba City decided to implement straw construction on standards approved by the state Jan 1. Today *Habitat For Humanity* has built two low-income half-plex residential units at the north end of Plumas Street.

Summertime fruit stands line county roads providing just-picked produce. Canneries have followed the orchards as they



Orchards line the highway.

were moved out of earlier areas, such as the Santa Clara Valley, by high-tech industries and population growth.

Durham in Butte county was an experimental state land colony established in 1918 and no longer a name on the land. The state reportedly bought 6,300 acres and subdivided them into farms. Settlers were carefully selected and were allowed to borrow \$4,500 to \$5,500 to get started. The project was liquidated in 1935.

Prunes and cling peaches became major crops in Butte county in the second decade of this century. Almonds were the #1 crop in the 1940s in the Durham-Chico area.

According to a chronological history of Butte County peach pits were used as a source of charcoal to filter soldier's gas masks in World War I. Children were admitted free to movie theaters if they brought a quantity of peach pits.

Yuba county, much of which was once owned by John A. Sutter, is one of northern California's richest agricultural counties. Recent figures indicate the prune crop valued at \$24 million, rice \$32 million, peaches and walnuts over \$19 million each.

Marysville became the head of navigation on the Feather River and the center of trade for the Northern Mines in 1850 shortly after its founding.

The present city was laid out the winter of 1849-50 on land bought from Theodor Cordua who called the settlement New Mecklenburg.

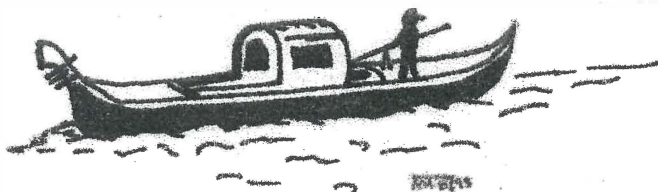
In those early times the landing adjoined the plaza, and the river banks were lined with cottonwoods and willows. Hydraulic mining changed the countryside, burying settlements and raising the bed of the river 70 or more feet. Today the river, encased in stone levees, flows above the city streets of Marysville.

## W. T. ELLIS

W. T. Ellis, resident of Marysville, was “the father” of the town’s levee system, and Ellis Lake in Marysville was named for him. Ellis took over the anti-debris cause after the turn of the century and was levee commissioner for Marysville in the 1930s. In his *Memories: Seventy Two Years In The Romantic County Of Yuba* (published in 1939) he recalled the lawsuits filed in the fight against hydraulic mining.

Ellis reportedly warned his city’s citizens to “*always be prepared, to be alert, and always watch the tricky Yuba.*”

### GONDOLAS



The late historian Clyde Arbuckle told this story concerning Marysville’s Ellis Lake.

*One night during the Depression of the 1930s, the city council was discussing beautification on the lake and ways to attract more citizens to its use.*

*Councilman Slatery was asleep and awoke to hear a motion to buy 10 gondolas for \$1,500.*

*“No! No!” Cried Slatery — “Buy two and let nature take its course.”*

## WORLD'S FIRST LONG DISTANCE TELEPHONE

The world's first long distance telephone line was built by the Ridge Telephone Co. in 1877 to connect mines from French Corral near Nevada City to Milton in Sierra County — 60 miles of wire hung on trees and poles with a booster station at the Malakoff Mine.



When hydraulic mining was banned in 1884, the phone line was used to warn of the approach of federal inspectors so illegal hydraulic activity could be halted.

## PACK TRAINS

Pack trains of 40 to 50 Mexican mules hauled supplies to the mines from Marysville.

The trade between Marysville and Downieville used 2500 mules and three to four hundred men according to Oscar O. Winther, Stanford University professor, who wrote his *"Express and Stagecoach Days in California"*, published 1936.

As soon as roads could be built, wagons replaced pack mules except in the steep high mountains.

In 1853 a stage line was run from Marysville into the Northern mines and the following year the California Stage Co. began serving the mines.

The coming of the railroads in the 1860s cut out many of the old stage lines.





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LEAVES SACRAMENTO DAILY FOR  
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**AND SHASTA.**  
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Landing passengers at all intermediate points.

## FOR MARYSVILLE,

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For particulars of the times of departure, arrival, price of passage, &c., inquire of **JOHN SADLEIR GRAHAM**, Agent, office Crescent City Hotel, Sacramento, and at the respective offices along the line.



## STEPHEN J. FIELD

A man who helped lay out the town of Marysville and who represented the area in the new state of California, was Stephen J. Field.

Field arrived in San Francisco in December, 1849 with \$10. He tried lawyering, but clients were not exactly beating on his door.

January 13, 1850 found Field in Sacramento enroute to a new town at the confluence of the Yuba and Feather rivers. He had no money, but signed up for 65 lots to pay later. Five days later when the town was officially formed, Fields was elected alcalde, a job which combined the duties of mayor, counsel and judge. No doubt he made good on the lots he bought.

Next, he won a seat in the California legislature. In 1857 he was elected to the State Supreme court and six years later was appointed to the U.S. Supreme court where he served until resigning in 1897, two years before his death.

## WILLIAM BREWER

William Brewer, one of the party making the original geological survey of California in the 1860s, noted a miner who struck it rich in Grass Valley went to San Francisco and bought \$12,000 worth of jewelry which he presented to women in a house of ill fame. He drank himself to death.

Brewer also wrote in his book "*Up and Down California in 1860-1864*" of finding fossils in sandstone in the hills east of Chico in a place where Indians had recently murdered several people, including two young girls who had gone to the area to pick blackberries.



Grass Valley

## GRASS VALLEY AND NEVADA CITY.

Of all the Mother Lode towns that have survived along the west slope of the Sierra, Grass Valley and its neighbor, Nevada City are among the most interesting. They are in Nevada county, formed from the eastern part of Yuba county in 1851, and Nevada City is the county seat.

Grass Valley got its name from the grassy valley discovered by the half-starved cattle of an emigrant train coming over the Sierra in 1849. A man named George Knight stumbled over a chunk of gold-bearing quartz in 1850 while chasing a cow in Boston ravine, now part of Grass Valley

Dr. A. B. Caldwell, 49er from Kentucky, built a store on Deer Creek and in October 1849 moved his business 4 miles up the creek to what later became Nevada City. The place was known as Caldwell's Upper Store until the following year when the name became Nevada (changed to Nevada City in December, 1850, when the post office was established).

The 1880 Thompson and West History of Nevada county quotes a letter describing Caldwell's Upper Store "*a square canvas shanty, stocked with whiskey, pork, mouldy biscuit and gingerbread - the whisky four bits a drink, the biscuit a dollar a pound.*"

Nevada City was destroyed in at least seven fires, each time rebuilding with brick, and today it is one of the more elegant of the remaining old mining towns.

The National Hotel (formerly the National Exchange, hub of commerce for the northern mines) is an example of what the citizens of Nevada City have successfully retained to preserve memories and history for the thousands of tourists who pour into the area annually.

Today Trinity Episcopal Church occupies the site of Caldwell's Upper Store.



Fippen's blacksmith shop  
Lotta Crabtree performed atop the anvil.

Grass Valley, which nudges Nevada City to its north, was the home of Lola Montez and Lotta Crabtree who added glamour to the mining camps and still do.

Lola's house on Mill Street is still a tourist attraction, although in a rather rundown condition. Here in the early 1850s she entertained in the local society, kept bears as pets, and threw elaborate parties.

Tales are told of her famous spider dance and her encounters with a local editor and a minister (who objected to the scantily clad entertainer's performances).

Lotta as a child lived near Lola who taught her songs and dances and who took her to Rough and Ready where she danced on Fippen's anvil.

Lola died poor in New York about the time Lotta was achieving fame in San Francisco dance halls.

Grass Valley was the home also of the huge mining companies, and headframes and shafts remain as reminders.

The Nevada County Mining Museum, formerly the power station for the North Star Mine is the home of the largest Pelton wheel in the world. It and the historic Empire Mine are on the OCTA tour and will be visited along with the Bourn Cottage on the Empire grounds.

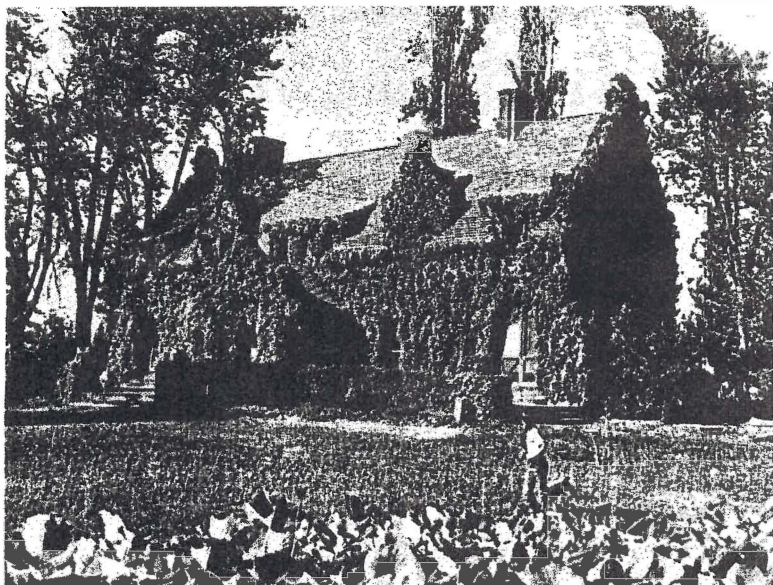
## **BOURN FAMILY**

The elegant Bourn cottage in Grass Valley was a summer residence for the William B. Bourn Jr. family of San Francisco. Bourn was owner of the nearby Empire Mine for 60 years, and his father before him.

William Bourn Sr. was a New Englander who came out to San Francisco in 1850. He amassed a fortune in shipping and mercantile enterprises before acquiring the rich Empire Mine. He died in 1969 and his son took over the mining property.



William B. Bourn Jr.



Bourn Cottage

The “cottage”, as it was called, was built in 1897. Willis Polk, famous San Francisco architect, designed the elegant structure. Waste rock from the mine was used in construction of the walls, and inside panelling was with heart redwood.

After the 1906 earthquake, Bourn moved down the San Francisco peninsula to Woodside where Polk designed a 47-room mansion known as Filoli. The name was derived from the first letters in Bourn’s motto: Fight, Love, Live (FI LO LI).

Bourn Jr., who sold the Empire Mine during the depression years, died in 1936.

Tours of the Bourn cottage, gardens and out-buildings are popular, especially on “living history” days.



## **- SOME HUMOR -**

### ***ROUGH AND READY***

One of the town's most famous incidents reflects the temper of the Gold Rush times. It seems an unlucky miner was being buried with a regular funeral and all the trimmings, when one of the "mourners" suddenly noticed some gold in the freshly-turned earth at the gravesite. Before the preacher could finish the service, claims had been staked around the coffin and the miners had started to work.

### ***SUTTER BUTTES***

Nobody today remembers the bonfire and fireworks display staged atop the Buttes in 1884 to announce the court ruling ending hydraulic mining in the Sierra Nevada.

More recently, in 1986, when a major map company placed Yuba City last on its cities' rating list, irate citizens burned the firm's maps in a huge bonfire. T-shirts were sold reading the name of the map firm with the suggestion "Kiss Our Buttes."

### ***HOT SUMMER DAYS***

*You think it's warm? It's nothing new ...*

Chico can get hot in the summer. In 1931 when the temperature climbed to 111, the wife of the mayor baked a caramel custard on the sidewalk in front of her house.

Another hot weather item from the long ago notes a Marysville woman living in a house with zinc walls put her bread dough up against the wall in the kitchen to bake.



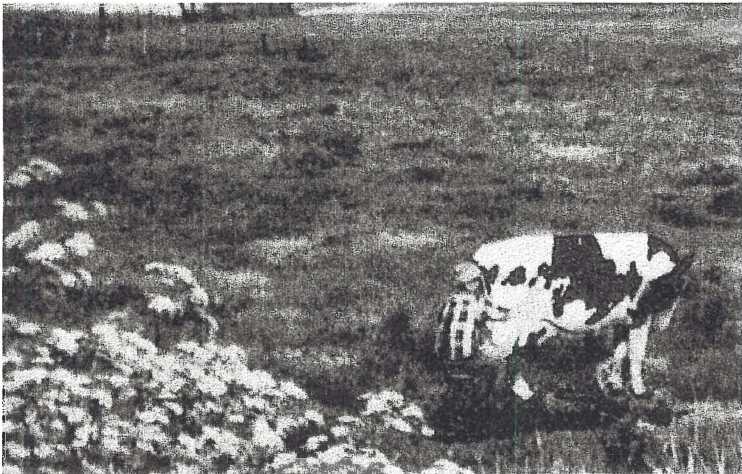
## *NATIVE SONS*

Gen. A. M. Winn, Grand Marshal for the 1869 4th of July celebration in San Francisco, conceived the idea of a society of native sons. He issued a call for young Californians to form a company in the planned parade.

On a June day prior to the celebration, he stepped out on the stage to address the large group that answered the call, and was astonished at what he saw.

*"What are all these kids doing here?"* He whispered to an aide.

Realizing most of his audience was under 18 years of age, the organization of Native Sons was postponed until a June day in 1875 when the Native Sons of the Golden West had grown up a bit and a large contingent met to march in San Francisco's July 4th parade. [Note: Paraphrased from *Hunting for Gold* by Major Wm. Downie, published in 1893.]



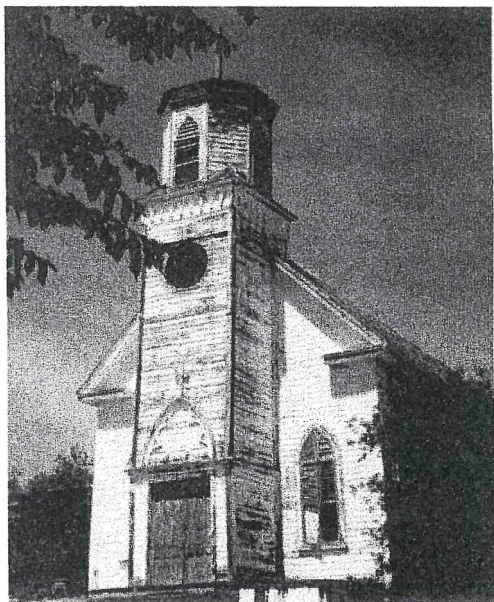
Plywood cow gets painted.

## - BITS AND PIECES OF HISTORY -

- Among the first miners in Butte Co. — on the Feather River were John Bidwell and Peter Burnett (who was to become first governor of the new state of California).

- The Yuba County Fairgrounds in Marysville was an assembly center for the Japanese forced to leave California in the spring of 1942.

- Thompson seedless grapes were developed in Sutter County in the 1870s by William Thompson. A monument marks the Thompson farm along highway 20, eight miles west of Yuba city.



Not much of old Smartsville remains today except for the Catholic church. Smartsville folks are hoping to save the 1870s building which still has its bell in the tower and an old organ inside.

