

CALIFORNIA LEGENDS

Placerville - Hub of the Mother Lode

Placerville, California is but one more of the many settlements that got its start when James Marshall discovered gold in nearby Coloma, California in January, 1848. Marshall, who was working for John Sutter, building a sawmill, made the discovery in the tail race of the mill and soon reported his find to his employer, who swore Marshall, as well as all of his employees to secrecy. But, such "news" was just too big to be kept quiet, and in no time word of the find leaked and thousands of men were crawling the ravines and hills in search of their fortunes.

Some ten miles from Coloma, a new "camp" sprang up on the banks of what is today called Hangtown Creek in the summer of 1848. The camp was initially referred to as "Dry Diggins" because of the way miners moved cartloads of dry soil to running water to separate the gold from the dirt.

The camp, the first of some 30 small settlements to spring up in the Coloma area, was at first little more than a tent city. However, when California's Military Governor, Colonel Richard B. Mason reported to President Polk, that the camp hauling out thousands of dollars worth of gold, the camp boomed and soon became a central supply and transportation center for the area.

Placerville, California, 1866, Lawrence & Houseworth.

Like other mining camps and Old West towns filled with men, it soon took on a hell-raising reputation. Seeing opportunity, the camp not only filled with miner, but also with murderers and thieves, intent on making their wealth not in back-breaking labor, but by taking the gold at knife point and six-guns. In no time, the miners, having no legal resource, began to form vigilante groups, who meted out justice to these thieves at the end of a rope. Often hanged at a giant oak tree on the town's main street, the camp was renamed "Hangtown" in 1849.

However, though it was primarily populated by men, many brought along their families and by the next year the temperance league and a few local churches began to request that a friendlier name be bestowed upon the town. However, it would be several years later before an official name change would take place. By 1854, Hangtown had become the third largest town in California, surpassed only by San Francisco and Sacramento, and when it was incorporated that year, the name was changed to Placerville.

As millions of dollars in gold were taken from the many mines of the area, Placerville received its first railroad in 1856, providing a welcome relief to the miners who formerly were forced to haul the ore in wagons over muddy and dusty trails. However, that very same year, the

burgeoning city suffered its first major loss when it was nearly destroyed by fire on July 6th.

But, the thriving city recovered and by 1857, had grown to such importance that the county seat was moved from Coloma to Placerville, where it remains today.

Like other mining communities, the gold soon began to play out and many miners moved on to richer finds. However, the city regained new life as a transportation center when the silver was discovered at the Comstock Lode in Nevada in 1859. In fact, from 1859 to 1866, the Placerville-Carson Road witnessed the greatest era of freighting and staging by horse-drawn vehicles ever known.

But, that too, would not last. Once again, the population began to move on and in 1873, due to a dispute with the railroad; the City of Placerville was disbanded in 1873.

Dozens of other mining camps suffered the same fate, leaving nothing of places such as Bottle Hill, Georgia Slide, and Murderer's Bar. However, Placerville was destined to survive, turning to lumber, agriculture and light manufacturing. The town was re-incorporated in 1900.

Placerville, California, 1860's.

Today, this historic gold rush community, of some 10,000 people provides a wealth of history in its many old buildings and historical markers. Interesting places to visit include the Cary House Hotel, built in 1857, which continues to cater to travelers today.

The Placerville Hardware Store on downtown Main Street is the oldest hardware store west of the Mississippi, having continuously operated since 1852. Today's buyer can still purchase gold panning equipment, knives, cast iron and more at this historic establishment, much like those miners did a more than a century and a half ago.

The Combellack-Blair House, an 1895 Queen Anne Mansion, now serves as a bed and breakfast inn and is on the National Register of Historic Places.

The Fountain-Tallman Museum at 524 Main Street is located in the original soda works building dating back to 1852. The museum displays artifacts and exhibits about Placerville's history.

The Placerville News Building, built in 1856, is still home to the Placerville news Company. The 1857 City Hall, as well as the 1863 Courthouse continues to stand, serving their original purpose.

The Gold Bug Mine and Museum in Placerville.

A "must see" while visiting Placerville is Hangtown's Gold Bug Park & Mine, a 62 acre park that was once dotted with over 250 mines. Today, the park has been developed as an historical site, as well as a picnic and hiking area. The Gold Bug Mine still stands, including its stamp mill and can be toured.

These are but a few sites to see in this historic charming city, which provides a Historic Walking Tour with many of these sites as well as several others.