

Retracing Eugene Ring's 1850 Experiences in the California Gold Rush

August 24/25, 2011

Bob Ring



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Foreword

This is the story of an adventure in 2011 to retrace my great-grandfather Eugene Ring's 1850 experiences in the California Gold Rush. I am writing this for the Ring family – current and future.

Eugene Ring - Early History: 1827-1848

Eugene Ring was born in Kingston, New York on the western shore of the Hudson River on April 2, 1827, the first son of Moses Ring and Anna Maria Shook. The Ring family has deep roots in Rhinebeck. Our forbearer, Christopher Ring, came there from the Langenlonsheim region of Germany in the 1730s. The “Rings” settled with other German Palatine immigrants in Dutchess County, in the fertile Hudson River valley, about a hundred miles north of New York City, becoming tanners, farmers and merchants.

After his eighteenth birthday in 1845, Eugene left his Dutchess County home and family to move to New York City “to seek his fortune.” In 1848 Eugene suffered an illness, compelling his family to suggest that he take a long sea voyage to regain his strength.

Eugene Ring - California Gold Rush: 1848-1850

Eugene Ring departed New York City on November 8, 1848 for the west coast of South America. While transiting the Strait of Magellan, he first heard the news of the great California Gold Rush from a passing ship.

Eugene went on to visit the South American ports of Valparaiso, Callao, Lima and Guayaquil. After a layover in Central America's Panama City, he sailed to San Francisco, arriving on August 20, 1849. He worked there initially as a bookkeeper among the gold-crazy, exploding population. Later he moved to Sacramento, worked as a storekeeper, and experienced the great Sacramento flood in January, 1850.

The lure of gold finally led Eugene to the Sierra Nevada Mountains, where he worked at several mining sites in the summer of 1850. Astoundingly, Eugene met and worked with his father Moses – who had crossed the Great Plains in a wagon train after Eugene left New York City.

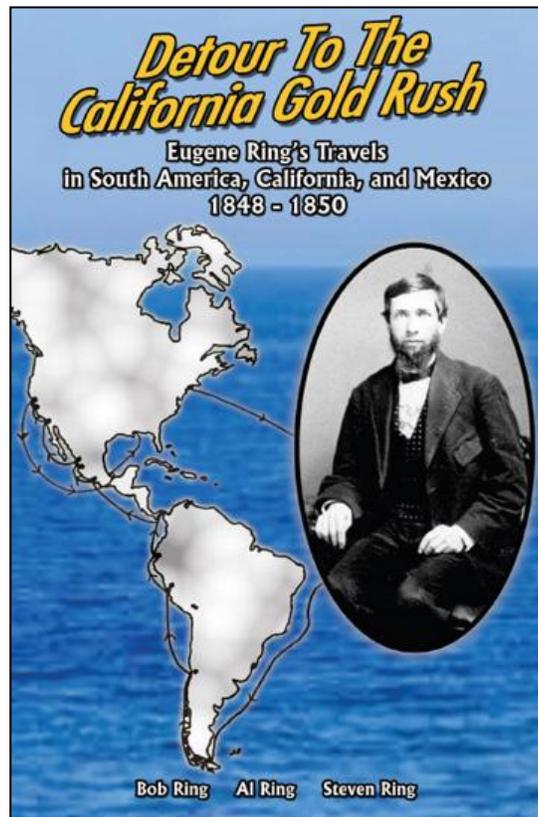
Eugene decided to spend the winter of 1850 in Panama, before returning to the gold fields the next spring. He left San Francisco aboard the barque Powhatan on October 9, 1850. Forty days out of San Francisco, the Powhatan was becalmed off southern Mexico's Isthmus of Tehuantepec and low on food and water.

Eugene was part a ten-man foraging party put ashore in a small boat to look for provisions. During the landing the wind came up and the Powhatan raised sails and abandoned the ten men.

Eugene's party was forced into an exhausting trek across the jungles and mountains of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. During this difficult trip three men died of cholera, an additional man was left to recover from cholera – with only Eugene and five others of the original foraging party reaching Veracruz on the Gulf Coast of Mexico to catch a salvation ship to New Orleans.

Fulfilling a Ring-Family Dream

Eugene wrote three handwritten versions of the story of his Gold Rush adventure. In 2008 the Ring family published an integrated memoir that provides an enthralling account of his activities, descriptions of what he saw, the places he went, the people he met, and how he felt about things – a truly remarkable record of a remarkable experience.



Details about this memoir are available at <http://www.ringbrothershistory.com>.

Ring family members have long wanted to retrace parts of Eugene's adventure to actually see the sites that Eugene so eloquently described.

In February, 2011 Pat Wood, my soul mate, and I spent five wonderful days retracing Eugene Ring's complete trek across the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. I wrote about that

adventure – complete with photographs – in *Retracing Eugene Ring's 1850 Trek across the Isthmus of Tehuantepec*, available on my Web site.

Then on August 24/25, 2011, Pat and I visited the California Gold Country.

Approach for this Book

This “book” is the story of Pat’s and my trip to El Dorado County California, where gold was first discovered in January, 1848 and where Eugene Ring spent the summer of 1850 trying his luck in the California Gold Rush. As for the Tehuantepec trip, I tell this story with a mixture of my words, Eugene words from his memoir, and sometimes my summary of Eugene’s words – integrated with the many photographs that Pat and I took of sites that we (and Eugene) visited. I identify Eugene’s words in “**bold type with quotes.**”

I have included appendices covering the History of the Central Sierra Gold Rush Trails and the History of Native Americans in El Dorado County.

The order of discussion of places and events in this book is going to follow the path that Pat and I took in exploring California gold country.

This book is also available on my Web site at <http://www.ringbrothershistory.com>.

Bob Ring
Tucson, Arizona
November, 2011

Chapter 1

Planning the Trip

Pat and I have long wanted to visit Lake Tahoe on the California-Nevada border. We booked a timeshare for the fourth week of August 2011 at Zephyr Cove just east of South Lake Tahoe in Nevada.

We decided to drive Pat's car from Tucson to Lake Tahoe and since we were to be within 60 miles of California's gold country, we decided to make a side trip to retrace Eugene Ring's 1850 experiences in the California Gold Rush.

The map below shows all the places that Eugene visited in California. Our first step in preparing for this trip was to reread Eugene Ring's memoir that describes in detail his experiences in the summer of 1850 - gold mining in El Dorado County.

Let's trace Eugene movements that summer: He left Sacramento in late April and went directly to Georgetown where he tried mining for gold in nearby Oregon and Illinois Canyons. Hearing that his father Moses **"was mining near Hangtown,"** he traveled there, going through Coloma on the way, plus he got temporarily lost in Indian country, before meeting his father in Hangtown. After a short visit, Eugene left Hangtown, **"journeyed homeward to Illinois Canyon"** and after a few days there, moved to Spanish Bar on the Middle Fork of the American River, where he and his companions worked for several weeks, using Georgetown as a base of operations for equipment and supplies. Eugene made a short trip back to Sacramento and then returned to Spanish Bar to work with his father who had moved north from Hangtown. A few weeks after that, Eugene and Moses moved downriver to Murderer's Bar. As the rainy season approached in late September, Eugene went back to Sacramento, then on to San Francisco, where on October 9, he caught a boat to Panama, planning to spend the winter there and return to the gold fields in the spring.

Before we started on this expedition, I read a lot of mining histories, studied old mining maps and detailed road atlases, and spent a lot of time staring at satellite and topographic maps. I was able to locate all of Eugene's old mining sites and found quite a bit of information about them on the internet. I figured that we needed two days to revisit Eugene's gold mining experiences.

We scheduled the excursion to California for August 24/25th to correspond to days/times that local museums and libraries were open. Since Eugene had been in and out of Georgetown so many times, we planned to stay overnight there.



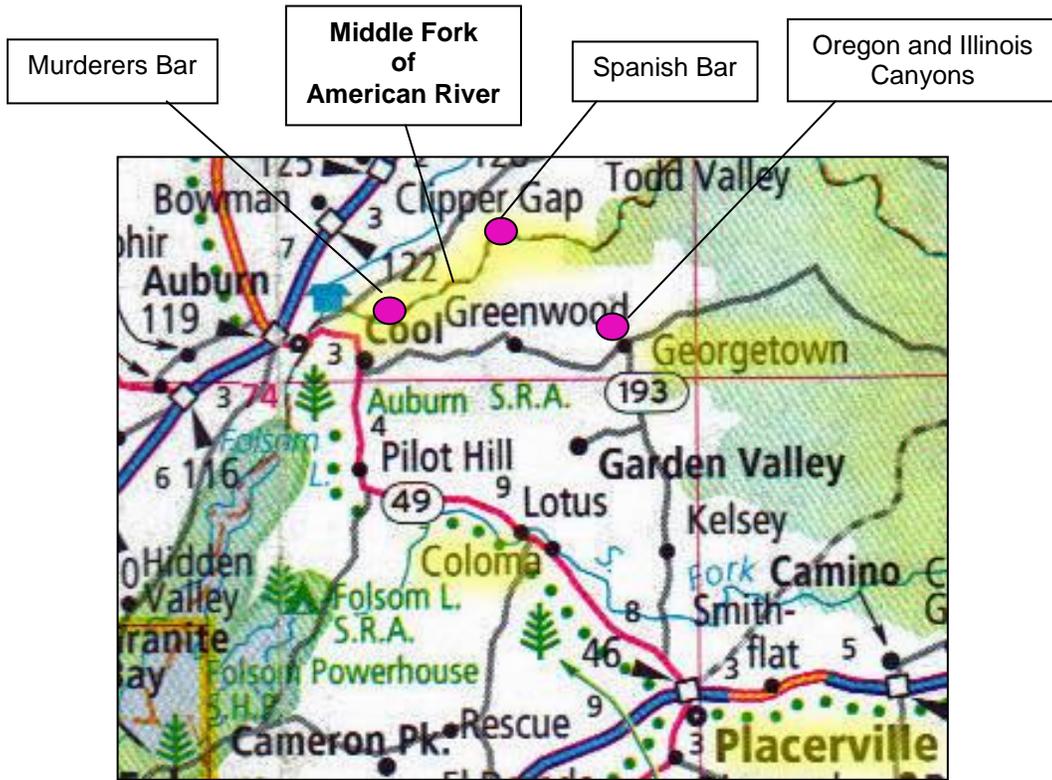
This map, which we published with Eugene Ring's memoir, was created from Eugene's descriptions of his experiences during the California Gold Rush.

Our overall roadmap is shown below – covering our planned route to/from Lake Tahoe to El Dorado County California and our “loop” through the gold country that Eugene visited. We planned to cross the Sierra Nevada Mountains into gold country on California Highway 88, along the path of the original Carson River Trail (sometimes called the Mormon Emigrant Trail), through 8,650-foot Carson Pass. That is the most likely wagon train route that Eugene’s father Moses traveled late in the summer of 1849 (more about this later). We planned stops in Placerville (Hangtown in Eugene’s day) and Coloma, before heading to Georgetown to start looking for Eugene’s mining sites. We planned to return to Lake Tahoe on U.S. Highway 50, along an improved cross-Sierras trail (Johnson Cutoff) that opened in 1852.



Our overall planned route is highlighted in “yellow” on this roadmap.

The towns and mining sites that we planned to visit are highlighted below on a blowup of the previous map.



Placerville, Coloma, Georgetown, Oregon and Illinois Canyons, Spanish Bar, and Murderers Bar were the towns/mining sites we planned to visit.

Chapter 2

Getting to the California Gold Country

Moses Ring: early April – late September, 1849

Here are some facts and speculation about and when and how Moses Ring came to the California Gold Rush: We know from an article in the *Poughkeepsie Journal & Eagle* published on April 7, 1849 that Moses Ring and Daniel Kellogg from Rhinebeck (and two others from the area) “have taken their departure during the week for California.” In his memoir Eugene Ring mentions that soon after arriving in San Francisco in late August 1849, he received a letter from his Uncle Benjamin in Sacramento saying that **“my father was on his way here across the Plains.”** If Moses’ group was part of a wagon train leaving Independence or Saint Josephs Missouri by mid May of 1849, they could have arrived in California four and a half months later in late September. Eugene further reports in his memoir that after moving to Sacramento in November, 1849, he learned from his Uncle Benjamin that **“Mr. Kellogg, a gentleman from Rhinebeck who had come across the plains in company of my father was lying sick at the Southern Hotel, and I went at once to see him.”** Eugene then relates the death of Daniel Kellogg and helping to bury him in the Sacramento Cemetery. So we know that by the fall of 1849, Daniel Kellogg (and presumably Moses Ring) had reached California.

I believe that Moses Ring’s wagon train most likely finished it’s cross-country trek at Hangtown (now Placerville), near the western endpoint of the Carson River Trail (also known as the Mormon Emigrant Trail), forged over the Sierra Nevada Mountains in the summer of 1848 through 8,650-foot elevation Carson Pass and 9,550- foot elevation West Pass. It is estimated that during 1849 over 20,000 gold seekers traveled this famous trail to California. See Appendix 1 for a short history of the development of the central Sierra Gold Rush trails, including the Carson River Trail.

Gold was first discovered at Sutter’s Mill on the South Fork of the American River on January 24, 1848.

A few months later, gold was discovered on Weber Creek, about eight miles southeast of Sutter’s Mill. A mining camp soon formed there; in January 1849 the mining camp acquired the name of Hangtown when vigilantes hanged three criminals. By the fall of 1849 when Moses Ring probably arrived, thousands of men were mining for gold around Hangtown. See Part B of the Appendix for the early history of Hangtown.

Eugene’s memoir tells us that he first meets his father in California at Hangtown early in the summer of 1850. Whether or not Moses remained in Hangtown from his arrival the previous fall until that meeting, we don’t know.

Eugene Ring: November 8, 1848 – late April, 1850

Eugene Ring took the long way around to the California gold country - by ship from New York City, departing on November, 8, 1848 (five months **before** Moses left Rhinebeck), sailing through the Strait of Magellan on the southern tip of South America, with a layover of several weeks in Panama.

Arriving by boat in San Francisco on August 20, 1849, Eugene described the scene, **“Covering the waters of the bay, lay the thousand vessels from all parts of the world, and ... on the still air of early morning comes the chattering of the carpenters’ hammers ... from the many buildings springing up on every side, some almost in a night, as if the work of a genii. Indeed one could hardly realize the state of excitement, hurry, change from day to day, the plentitude of gold, the unnatural mode of living, and the apparent extravagantly fictitious value of everything.”**

Eugene spent three months in the gold-seeker-bustling city. He took a job in a large market as **“cashier, collector, salesman and semi-bookkeeper.”** In his spare time he visited local missions, experienced a bull fight spectacle and the raucous gambling houses, and waited for hours at the Post Office for news from home.

In November Eugene took a steamship inland to Sacramento to work for his Uncle Benjamin in his miners’ provisioning store at the corner of Third and K Streets (See the drawing of Sacramento below).

Eugene arrived in Sacramento just in time to find the dying Daniel Kellogg, who had recently arrived from Rhinebeck.

A couple of months later Eugene experienced the Great Sacramento Flood of January 1850. Eugene described the conditions, **“Over some parts of the city the water was ten to twelve feet deep, and this continued for nearly three weeks ... Our roost above the store was occupied by about a dozen of the water logged and weather bound citizens. ... One day while rowing through the streets ... all sorts of floatable baggage was swimming from side to side and end to end.”**

By spring Eugene had caught the gold fever. He described the situation, **“My naturally roving uneasy disposition urged me on to see such portions of California adventure as are comprised in a miner’s life. And very complacently too, I thought that some immense lump, or rich deposit of the ‘yellow,’ was waiting for me to come and pick out from its hiding place.”**

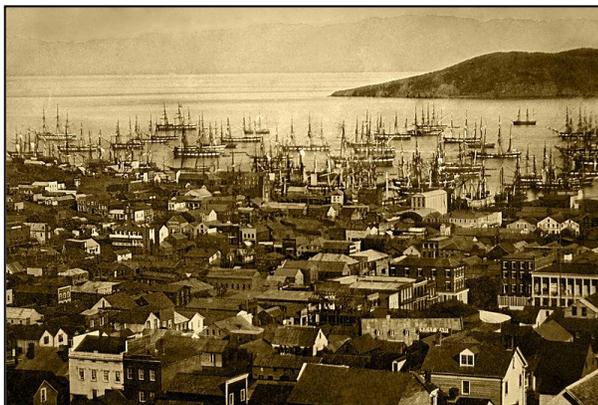
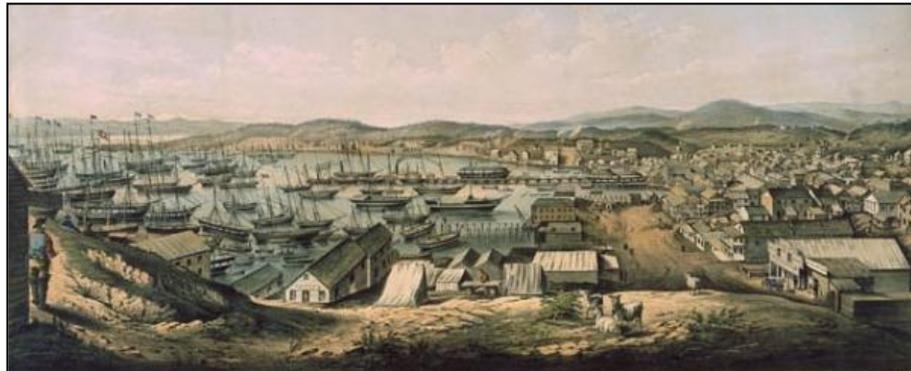
So **“about the latter part of April, 1850 I set out”** with three friends **“for the diggings near Georgetown, 60 miles above Sacramento.”**

Yerba Buena Cove
Winter of 1849-1850



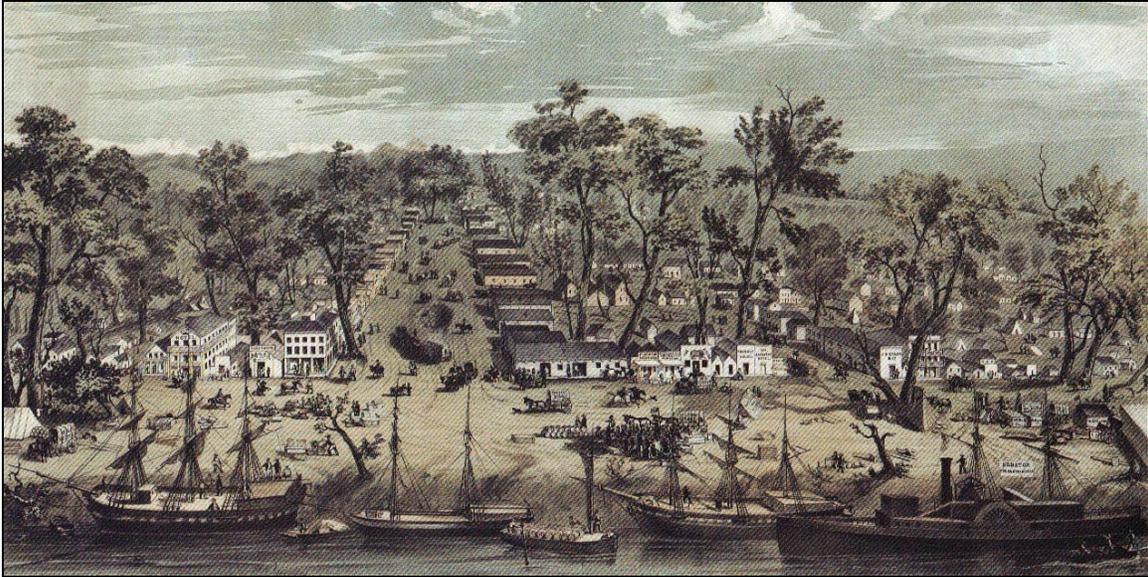
View towards
Telegraph Hill
1849

View from
Telegraph Hill
1850



Yerba Buena Cove
1851

San Francisco and Harbor – 1849-1851.



Sacramento in December 1849. View is from the foot of J Street, showing I, J, and K Streets. Cross streets from foreground are First, Second, and Third. (Drawing by G.V. Cooper)



Sacramento as it appeared during the great flood in January 1850. (Drawing by George W. Casilear and Henry Bainbridge)

Contemporary: August 18-24, 2011

To give us maximum flexibility, Pat and I decided to drive Pat's Toyota Venza on the trip. We left Tucson on Thursday August 18th, stopped for two nights in Las Vegas, and then resumed our drive to arrive in Zephyr Cove, Nevada, near South Lake Tahoe, on Saturday afternoon August 20th.

We selected our route to Lake Tahoe to minimize driving time and maximize scenery. The GPS nav system in Pat's car kept giving us trouble, not liking our choice of routes, especially over some of the mountain passes. But we persisted, in spite of repeated directions to "turn around."

We spent Sunday through Tuesday enjoying the Lake Tahoe area, including finding an isolated beach with a nice park, driving around the entire Lake, taking a paddle-wheel boat Lake cruise, and enjoying several fine restaurants.



*This is Emerald Bay on the southwestern side of Lake Tahoe
– with Fannette Island visible between the trees.*

On Wednesday morning August 24th, we started for the California Gold Country, heading for Placerville, planning to follow as closely as possible Moses Ring's wagon train route from the nearby Carson River, over Carson Pass, along the Mormon Emigrant Trail - on California highway 88. Much to our disappointment, electronic traveler signs in South Lake Tahoe told us that Carson Pass was closed due to ongoing road construction.



Bob and Pat pose for a photo with Lake Tahoe's Emerald Bay in the background.

So we changed our route and drove to Placerville on U.S. Highway 50, along the Johnson Cutoff Trail, that was available to gold rushers by the summer of 1852. The Johnson Cutoff Trail was both shorter and at lower elevation than the Carson River Trail and led directly to Placerville. We crossed the Sierra Nevada Mountains near Echo Lake at Echo Summit through Johnson's Pass at 7,400-foot elevation - on a very nice, heavily forested road, and arrived in Placerville in mid-morning.



U.S. Highway 50 winds down from Echo Summit. (Courtesy Wikipedia)

Chapter 3

Placerville

History of Placerville

Adapted from “History of & Geology of Placerville:”

In June 1848, five months after the original gold discovery at Sutter’s Mill on the South Fork of the American River, Indians brought word of rich placer deposits, just a few miles south on Weber Creek.

At first gold was everywhere at the “New Diggins,” and a fortunate few struck it rich. But when the creek level dropped dramatically in July, there was hardly enough water to “wash” the gravel that the miners had dug, and the “New Diggins” soon became “Dry Diggins.” Later it was renamed “Old Dry Diggins” to distinguish it from another “Dry Diggins” camp to the northwest that later became Auburn. Despite low water, the riches still flowed, and tents gave way to cabins, clapboard buildings, saloons, and bawdy houses; and “Old Dry Diggins” became a rough and rowdy mining town overnight. When three criminals were hanged from an oak tree in the middle of town in January 1849, “Old Dry Diggins” became “Hangtown.”

By 1851 there were fewer and fewer bonanzas in Hangtown. The daily earnings of the average miner gradually decreased from about \$20 in 1848 to \$16 in 1849, to \$10 in 1850, and \$8 in 1851. However, it should be noted that the pay of even the most skilled miners in the eastern states did not exceed \$1.00 a day during the 1850s.

The population of Hangtown continued to grow, reaching several thousand people by the end of 1849. Merchants and entrepreneurs moved in, wives joined husbands, families started, justice was established and the rowdy element forced to move on. A Post Office was established in 1850. Placer mining remained the town’s livelihood, but Hangtown became more business and family oriented. Soon the residents began desiring an atmosphere of respectability, and to help achieve it they renamed their town in 1854 to Placerville, in honor of the gold-bearing gravels that were its economic mainstay.

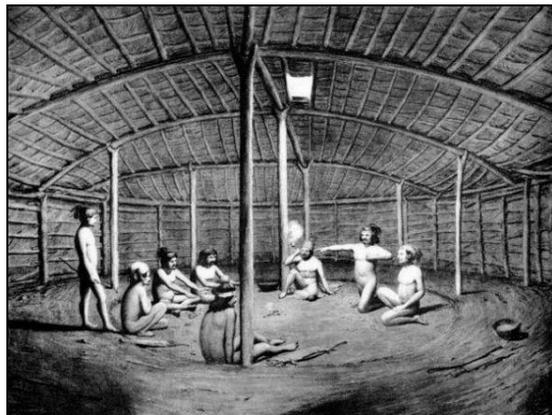
Overall, Placerville produced about \$25 million in placer gold alone. Eventually large, well-financed operations began mining directly into the bedrock, following gold-bearing quartz veins that had sourced the placers over the millennia. Hard rock (lode) mining began as early as 1852, but most of the hard rock mining was from the 1880s until about 1915. Some mining started up again in the 1930s, but there has been very little activity since.

Eugene Ring: Summer 1850

After several weeks working around Georgetown, Eugene reports in his memoir, “I heard that my father was mining near Hangtown, about 25 miles from us, so I set out one pleasant morning to go there. Mounted on old Grey [his mule], with my blankets and a little bread and meat strapped to the saddle behind me, with Bowie knife and pistols in my belt, and a bag of gold dust in my pocket, I was prepared for a journey of any length.”

Eugene proceeded, passing through Coloma, and on south where he got lost, met an Indian on horseback, and was led to a nearby Indian village. Eugene described the Indian, “a tall powerfully built man, the scantiness of his costume showing off his proportions to excellent advantage. Bareheaded except for the shock of short coarse black hair that stuck out around his head like a thatch. An old red flannel shirt that would have reached to the knees of a short man, carved reeds, some six to eight inches long, and half an inch thick, rudely carved and painted, passing through the lobe of each ear, and dangling against his neck, a bundle of arrows slung on his back, and a very long and powerful bow in his hand.”

Eugene also described the Indian village: “The village was a collection of miserable huts, some built of branches stuck in the ground and covered with leaves, others more substantial, were plastered over with mud and leaves, a hole being left in the top for the egress of the smoke and another at the side, large enough for them to crawl in. Some of the squaws were sitting around on the ground pounding acorns in a rude mortar, made by breaking out a stone hollow, and using another as pestle. The men seemed to be all away, and women and children flocked around admiring the trappings of my mule and blankets, but with unexpected and almost “unhoped” for consideration (for my revolver I think), they refrained from carrying them off.”



It was probably the Nisenan of the Maidu Tribe that Eugene ran into in the Sierra foothills of El Dorado County. This is a village ceremonial roundhouse used as a spiritual and social center. (From El Dorado County Foothills)

They were filthy and dirty and almost nude, the faces of the squaws daubed with a mixture that looked like tar, being in mourning for the loss of one of their tribe. I should have liked to examine their huts, implements, and manner of living, but did not think it an opportune time for investigation.”

See Appendix 2 for a short History of Native Americans in Eldorado County

Another half hours ride brought Eugene to Hangtown. He described his arrival, the town, and his reunion with his father, **“The trail now began to descend into the valley; and passing a miner or two, a log house, over a little piece of level ground to where the hills again fall sharply off, and Hangtown lies mapped at my feet. It is situated ... in the bottom of the valley with a fine stream winding through it.”**

The town is a queer compound of tents, log houses, and shanties scattered about promiscuously with gullies and piles of dirt between and about them, as left by the miners in following their leads. This was the principal terminus of the route across the country that lies between here and the States. To this rough looking spot had the eyes and the hopes of the weary travelers been turned on their long and toilsome tramp across the plains, and here was to be realized the wonderful romance, the almost fairy dream of digging lumps of yellow gold from out of the ground. Around here were extensive diggings, which had been worked ever since the first discovery of gold. They were the first evidence that greeted the sight of those who had traveled so many weary and dangerous miles to experience. There were other routes entering the country at other points, but this was the most beautiful and best known.”

Riding on towards the upper end of the town, picking my way between excavations and piles of earth and stones, across log bridges, and along ridges of earth which had been thrown out from contiguous claims, and along the bank of *Weaver* Creek, I at last saw a log house which I was told, was where my father camped.”

He saw me coming, but my make-up was so strangely different from that at home, that he thought it some stranger. When a little nearer, he joyfully recognized me. And much we had to say of present prospects and future movements.”

The cabin was a very good winter arrangement, the front part built of logs in which was a doorway, and beside it an oven had been built, much in the fashion of an old Dutch Kitchen. From this a canvass extended back far enough to allow a couple of bunks on one side, and on the other, a place to store provisions and sundries.”

I found out that claims here were paying from 12 to 20 dollars a day per man, but didn't think much of it, supposing that, as the season advanced and the waters in the rivers and creeks lowered, gold would be found in the abundance that had been represented to them before leaving home. There were some claims here paying very well, and claims were being opened and being worked right in the main street of the

town, some of them following their leads immediately under any building. But before this could be realized, much time and labor had to be invested as a general thing. Sometimes the stream had to be directed into a new channel, or a large quantity of earth and stones must be removed before reaching the auriferous [containing gold] earth.”

Father was working a claim which paid him about \$16 a day, but as it was nearly worked out, he concluded to join me as soon as it was exhausted, and was to meet our party at Spanish Bar.”



This is an old postcard of Hangtown. Though it is dated 1849, it is probably from 1851. Note the preponderance of wooden buildings and cabins.

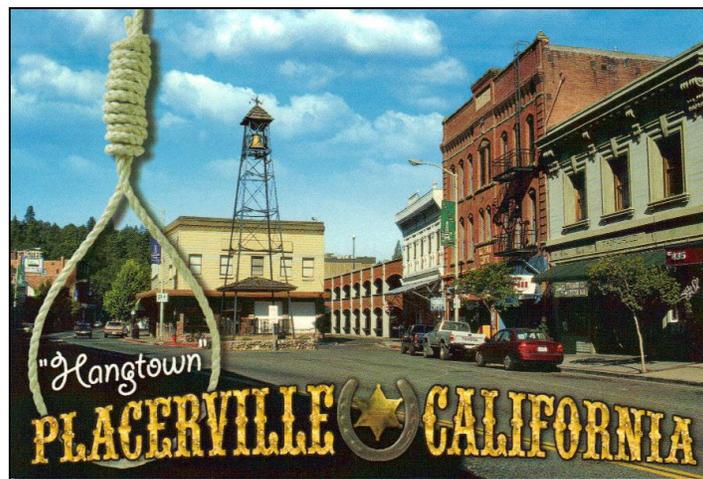


Miners are shown here working river gravels near Hangtown in 1849. (From History of & Geology of Placerville)

Contemporary: August 24/25, 2011

We drove into Placerville on U.S Route 50 from the west and noticed that the town was indeed in a valley as Eugene had described. Driving through and around the village, we were impressed that Placerville has managed to maintain its Gold Rush “personality” while evolving to a comfortable modern town of around 10,000 people.

Placerville’s treasured heritage is reflected in the historical, nineteenth century architecture of its downtown core. The town has several buildings listed on the National Register of Historic Places. In addition, Placerville is the County seat and the center of financial, commercial, civic, and Government activity.



Today’s Placerville retains the flavor of a Gold Rush town.

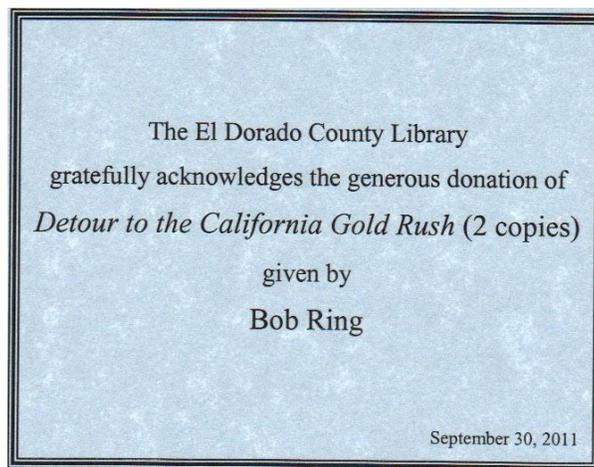
Our first stop was at the Eldorado County Historical Museum – a very interesting place. The museum had extensive gold-rush-era displays featuring typical equipment and tools, plus many old photographs. They also had a back room containing historic documents and photos that was staffed by very knowledgeable and helpful “seniors.”

While there we bought a book on the history of Georgetown and another book on the history of the Carson River Trail. From the back room, we received a copy of historical material on Spanish Bar, one of Eugene’s gold mining sites. We presented the museum with a copy of Eugene’s memoir.

Our next stop was at the main Eldorado County Library in Placerville. We perused gold-rusher journals in the stacks and made copies of maps from an extensive county road atlas that we planned to use in trying to drive to Eugene’s gold mining sites along the Middle Fork of the American River. We also gave the library a copy of Eugene’s memoir.



This exhibit at the Eldorado County Historical Museum shows a miners wheelbarrow built by future automobile maker John Studebaker in his shop in Placerville.



This is the donation “plate” that the library placed inside their copies of Eugene Ring’s memoir. We gave a second copy to the Georgetown branch of the library.

After lunch in Placerville, we headed northwest towards Coloma. But the next day, on our way back to Lake Tahoe, we stopped for a final visit in Placerville – this time at the Placerville Historical Museum.

This was another very impressive museum with interesting displays of old mining artifacts, a treasure trove of old photos, and a knowledgeable and helpful staff. We bought a very good, detailed book on the history of Placerville.



This Placerville Historical Museum display included a miner's pick, shovel, and washing pan plus a cradle box for sifting through sediment.

Eldorado Hotel
M. Elstner, Prop.
 Hangtown, California, January, 1850



BILL OF FARE

	SOUP	
Bean		\$1.00
Ox Tail		\$1.50
	ROAST	
Beef, Mexican (Prime cut)		\$1.50
Beef Up along		\$1.00
Beef Plain		\$1.00
Beef, with one Potato (fair size)		\$1.25
Beef, Tame, from the States		\$1.50
	VEGETABLES	
Baked Beans, Plain		\$.75
Baked Beans, Greased		\$1.00
Two Potatoes (medium size)		\$.50
Two Potatoes, peeled		\$.75
	ENTREES	
Sauer Kraut		\$1.00
Bacon, Fried		\$1.00
Bacon, Stuffed		\$1.50
Hash, Low Grade		\$.75
Hash, 18 Carets		\$1.00
	GAME	
Codfish Balls, per pair		\$.75
Grizzly Roast		\$1.00
Grizzly, Fried		\$.75
Jackass Rabbit (whole)		\$1.00
	PASTRY	
Rice Pudding, plain		\$.75
Rice Pudding with Molasses		\$1.00
Rice Pudding with Brandy peaches		\$2.00
Square Meal, with Dessert		\$3.00

Payable in Advance
 Gold Scales on the end of the bar.

Note the relatively high cost of food in this 1850 menu displayed in the Placerville Historical Museum.

Chapter 4

Coloma

History of Coloma

On January 24, 1848 James W. Marshall, a carpenter from New Jersey, picked up a few nuggets of gold from the millrace of a sawmill that he was building for John Sutter on the South Fork of the American River. Though it took a few months, the hills above the river were strewn with huts and tents as the first miners lured by the gold discovery scrambled to strike it rich. Coloma emerged there as the first town of the central mining region. The name comes from the original Native American (Nisenan) name for the valley Coloma is in: Cullumah, meaning “beautiful.”

By the summer of 1848, the town had a wood frame hotel, 300 buildings under construction, and a population approaching 2,000. A post office was established in 1849. By 1850 Coloma served a surrounding population of as many as 6,000 and tens of thousands more passed through. Coloma became the county seat of El Dorado County. Coloma’s boom era lasted until 1852; thereafter the town declined.

Eugene Ring: Summer 1850

Eugene Ring passed through Coloma on route from Georgetown to Hangtown to find his father Moses. He described his approach to the mining camp, **“About noon I reached the top of the high hill at the foot of which lies the town of Coloma, and from one spot a little off the trail, where the trees did not obstruct the view, was spread out far below me, a most beautiful picture.”**

In the centre of the valley through which runs the South Fork [of the American River] were clustered the various contrivances of buildings that made up the place, from a blanket hung across two poles, to a frame house. On the banks of the river and in the stream were the miners engaged in the different operations of gold washing. At the lower end of the town on a bend of the river, stood the "Mill", celebrated as the spot where gold was first discovered, and beyond, the waters of the river hurried on until its further course was lost in the distant forest.”

On the opposite side, the road to Sacramento could be traced, winding up the side of the mountain like a thread, amidst the rugged rocks and stunted trees that everywhere else met the eye.”

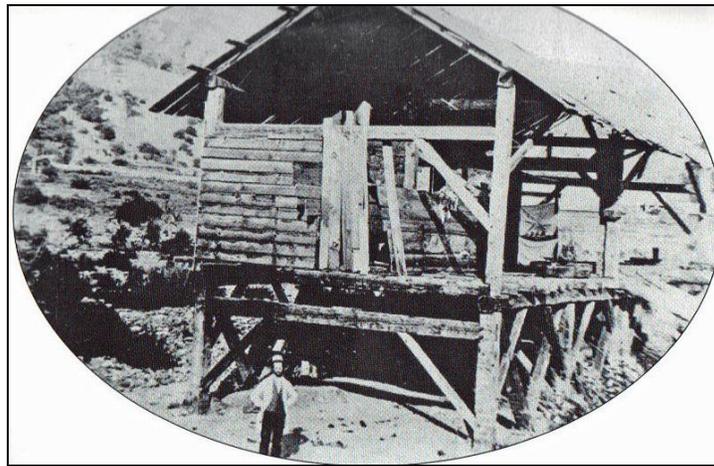
Descending the hill was no easy task. Sometimes it was so steep that old Grey would slip and slide until he could regain his foothold. The trail in some places running through the bed of what was in the rainy season a rapid brook, but now an almost impassible ravine. Sometimes twisting around abrupt high bluffs that seemed to

shut off all further progress, and at every few rods lay the remnants of a wagon, or the carcasses of mules or oxen.”

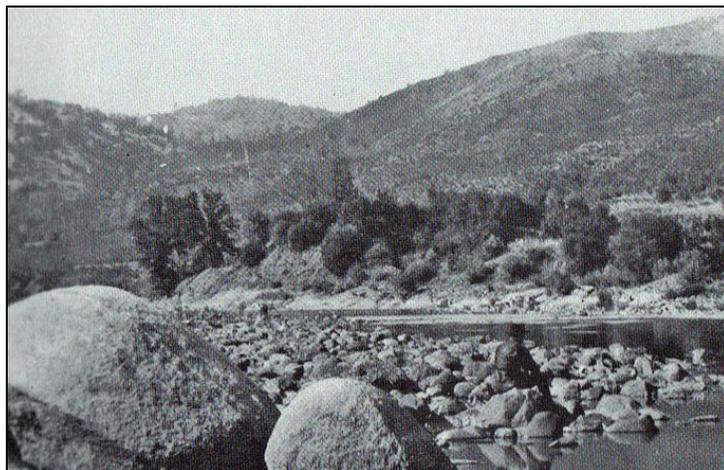
Crossing the river over a fine bridge that had been just completed, I again struck the trail for Hangtown.”

The bridge that Eugene mentions was constructed in the late spring of 1849, becoming the first bridge across a river in California, or west of the Mississippi River.

The photos below give the reader some idea of what Eugene might have seen on his quick pass through Coloma.



James W. Marshall is in the foreground of this photo of Sutter's mill from 1850. (Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)



Sutter's Mill was located just downriver (west) of this spot on the South Fork of the American River, circa 1850s. (Courtesy of Images of America – Georgetown)

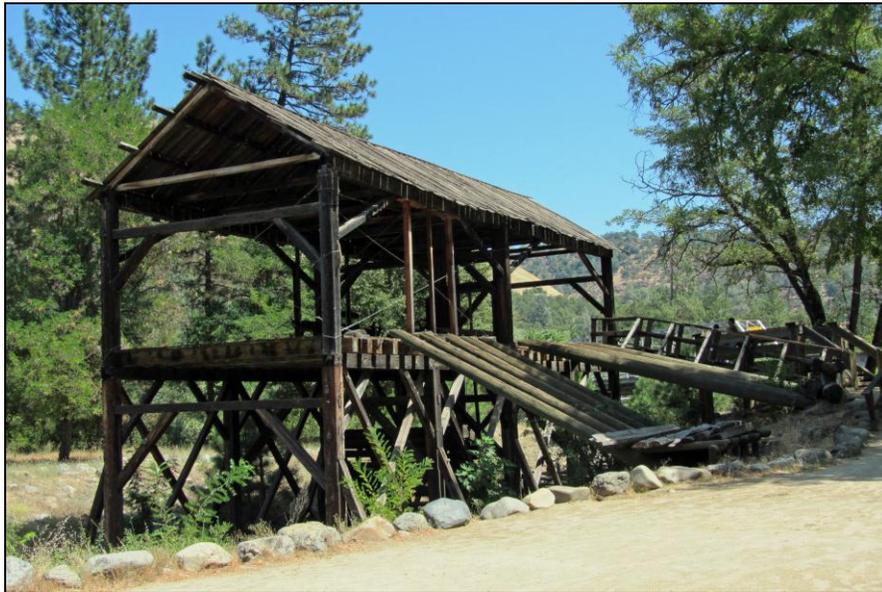
Contemporary: August 24, 2011

Pat and I drove through Coloma in the opposite direction from Eugene, heading northward from Placerville on California 49. Today Coloma is a tourist attraction, known for its ghost town and the Marshall Gold Discovery State Historic Park, where several gold-rush era buildings are preserved. Coloma was designated a National Historic Landmark District on July 4, 1961 and is now a quaint, peaceful town of about 200 year round residents.

We stopped at the Park Office and Museum to get an overview and picked up a good map of the cross-continental Oregon Trail that gold seekers followed while heading west to California's gold country.

We visited the replica of the famous Sutter's Mill (photo below) and the area where gold was first discovered. Near the Mill we saw another tourist scraping sand into a bag to "take back to his friends."

After a short stop, we resumed our trek northeastward to Georgetown on Marshall Road.



This full-sized replica of Sutter's Mill was completed in 1968 and is the feature attraction at Marshall Gold Discovery State Historic Park in Coloma, California.

Chapter 5

Georgetown

History of Georgetown

Adapted from *Georgetown and the Divide* and *Images of America – Georgetown*.

Soon after the discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill in January 1848, enterprising miners followed nearby streams uphill into the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. The first miners reached the Georgetown area in March 1848.

Georgetown is located on an arm of land called the Georgetown Divide that effectively splits the American River, sending the South Fork down along its southern side, and the Middle Fork, joined by the North Fork, plunging down its northern flank.

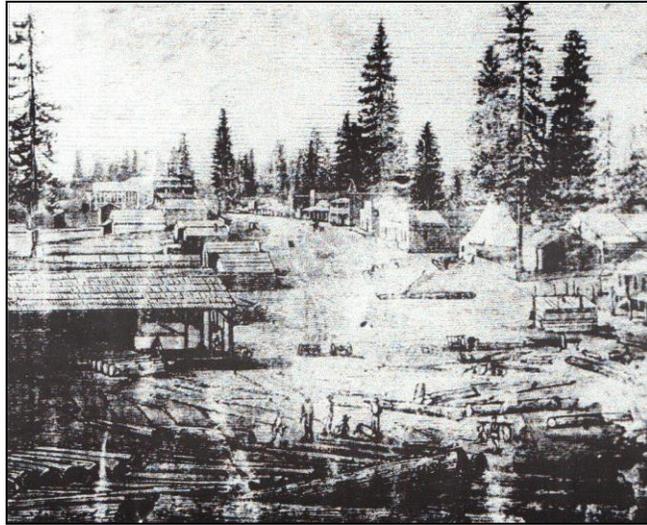
The most significant early gold find, just northwest Georgetown, was made by Oregonians in Hudson Gulch, which empties into Oregon Canyon. The miners soon focused in Oregon Canyon which eventually yielded an estimated two million dollars worth of placer gold along its three-quarters of a mile course.

In 1849 a party of New Yorkers, including George Phipps, arrived to seek their fortunes and established a base camp. Others joined Phipps's camp, and a thriving community of gold seekers formed at "George's Town."

The town rapidly expanded into a major supply center for the mushrooming number of mining sites that surrounded it. The first settlement included hotels, stores, and saloons with a dozen structures of logs, shakes, and canvas.

The village completely burned in 1852, but was quickly rebuilt. More families arrived and churches and schools began to appear. In 1854 Georgetown started the area's first newspaper. Georgetown had a population of about 3,000 people 1854-1856.

Unfortunately three additional devastating fires leveled the town over the next 20 years. Rebuilt each time, Georgetown outlasted many other Gold Rush towns because after the original placer deposits in nearby canyons were exhausted, other primary deposits were discovered underground on local hills. Gold production continued until after the turn of the 20th century.



*A woodcut shows the newly constructed Georgetown as it appeared in 1853, a year after the 1852 fire the destroyed the original town.
(Courtesy of Images of America – Georgetown)*

Eugene Ring: Summer 1850

Eugene described his first approach (from Sacramento) and arrival at Georgetown, “Nearly three days of toilsome tramping over hill and plain, through prairies of rich grass carpeted with the most beautiful wild flowers, studded with groves of trees, across brooks and rivers and over long steep hills, brought us to Georgetown, one of the oldest of the mining settlements. It was made up of about 40 log cabins, tents, canvas houses, and every conceivable combination of all these, occupied as stores, gambling places, and eating houses by perhaps a hundred and fifty men, two women and one child.”

Passing through the place and about a quarter mile farther, we turn off from the road and follow along the side of a ravine through a forest of noble pines until we reached a deserted log cabin, a couple of hundred yards above the bottom of the cañon [canyon]. Here we unloaded, intending to make this our headquarters for prospecting, but found it was too far from water for convenience. So we pitched our tent nearer the bottom of the ravine. All was wild and still around us. We were the only occupants of the cañon [later referred to as Illinois Canyon] and our situation was romantic in the extreme.”

We had been told of a rich spot somewhere in the neighborhood, which was described to us by one that had formerly worked here, and while some of us were trying to find it, others were off tramping around, prospecting for gold diggings.”

One day I started ... on a visit to the famous Oregon Cañon, the nearest diggings. We struck the head of the Cañon, which was dotted with tents, camps, and fallen trees. The sides as we descend grew steeper and closer, until through the bottom of the narrow pass, and almost under our feet, we see the miners at work, digging deep shafts under the bed of the stream whose water is carried over their heads through hollowed trees, or drifting into the sides of the hill, some passing up the rich earth from the bottom of the claim, some washing it, some building rough aqueducts, some pumping the continually encroaching water from their pits, all toiling and sweltering down there in the bottom of the deep dark Cañon. You hear no song, nor laugh, no jolly shout to be echoed back by the hills, but all are too soul absorbed in the one exciting idea and hope of - gold.”

Leaving the Oregon we go through other smaller ravines leading into it; occasionally dig a hole and wash out some of the dirt, sometimes finding a little gold, but not enough to warrant an attempt to work a claim. When night came we returned to our camp, tired, hungry, and a little less sanguine of at once picking up our pile.”

Later that summer, while mining at Spanish Bar to the north on the Middle Fork of the American River, Eugene returned to Georgetown to pick up a piece of equipment. He described his second visit, “... **John T. and I set out to bring it home. Arriving there about noon, we enjoyed the luxury of setting down to a table to dine.”**

Afterwards we strolled about the place and into a gambling tent. At one of the tables a young man was having a run of the cards in his favor, and for fear it might turn, he concluded to back out in time. So pocketing his gains he started. His opponent then accused him of cheating and demanded back his money, following the other out of the tent, drawing his pistol. The other showed symptoms of great fear and cowardice, begging in the most piteous manner not to be shot, the tears running down his face with as great profusion as from a schoolboy who was going to be whipped, yet refusing to give up the money. The gambler who stood in the door of the house, surrounded by a number of lookers on asked again for a return of the money, and being denied, fired two or three shots at the winner and then walked off, while the other seemed uncertain whether he was hurt or not, feeling up and down his legs and over his body to see where he was hit. Finding himself safe, he made tracks for some other locality, lest he might be made a target for more pistol practice.”

Georgetown continued to be a violent place to live. In the fall of 1850, just a few weeks after Eugene left the area, an Englishman working in Oregon Canyon shot his wife in a drunken frenzy and was hanged for the crime by vigilantes. In April 1851 a Missourian shot another man in Oregon Canyon on account of “personal affairs,” and fled the country.

Local roads got us close, but the only access to the canyons themselves is on very primitive dirt roads (allowing limited penetration), except for one passable dirt road that cuts across Oregon Canyon. Both canyons are now completely overgrown with thick plants and trees. You can get some idea of this from the snapshots below. Unfortunately, there did not appear to be any mining sites and/or equipment remaining to visit.



Illinois Canyon today is completely overgrown with trees, effectively hiding any evidence of habitation by Gold Rush miners.



Oregon Canyon is also totally overgrown with trees and plants. It's been 150 years since gold was mined here.

The next morning we had breakfast in Georgetown and then took a walk around town. “The Pride of the Mountains” certainly exhibited its small-town charm. Today Georgetown has a population of about 3,000 people and they are proud of their mining history. The town is registered as a California Historical Landmark.



This is today’s Georgetown – looking down 100-foot wide Main Street to the north.



The Shannon Knox House, built in 1852, is the oldest surviving building in Georgetown.

Chapter 6

Middle Fork of American River

Early Mining History

Immediately after the gold discovery at Sutter's Mill, miners started looking for gold both up and downstream on the South Fork of the American River. They also explored northward to the confluence of the North and Middle Forks of the American River, near the present day town of Auburn, and then upstream on both Forks.

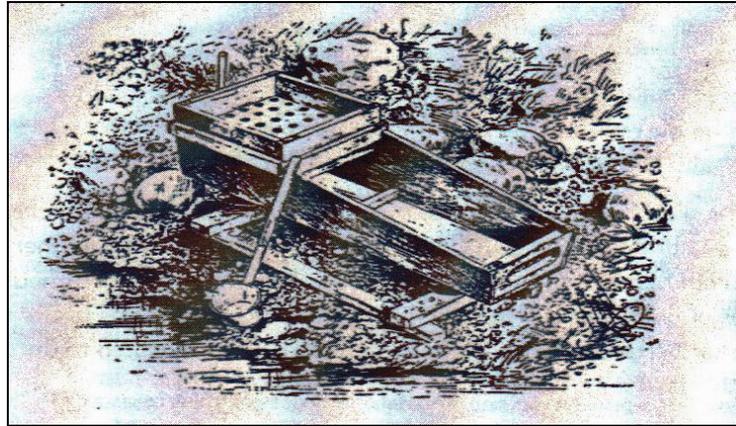
Along the Middle Fork of the American River (and similarly on other rivers), gold seekers quickly learned that gold was most likely to be found in gravel bars in the riverbed, towards the inside of bends of the River. The flood of gold seekers worked their way upriver and there were soon miners working on every gravel bar on the River. During the latter part of the summer and early part of autumn of 1849, it is estimated that there were at least 10,000 men at work on this Fork and that they extracted ten million dollars worth of gold.

Murderers Bar. Murderers Bar, about a mile upriver on the Middle Fork from the junction with the North Fork, was apparently first worked by a party of sailors who in the summer of 1848 chipped coarse gold out of rock crevices there with crude tools for a short time and then left. The sailors were followed by a party from Oregon in early 1849 that got into a fight with local Indians, with two of their group being killed in retaliation for earlier killings of Indians – hence Murderers Bar. In the fall of 1849, another group of sailors arrived to apply sediment sifting and washing methods at the Bar. Murderers Bar was among the most famous, and over the years, one of the most prosperous of the sites on South Fork of the American River.

Spanish Bar. It is said that a party of early gold-diggers reached what would become Spanish Bar, about eight miles upriver from the confluence with the North Fork, in August 1848. They pried coarse particles of gold from the crevices in the rocks with knives, iron spoons and steel bars, and then moved to other locations. The initial gold here was coarse and was exceedingly rich, much more so than at Coloma. Soon other gold seekers arrived to sift and wash the gravel. Over the years, with improvements in mining methods and appliances, Spanish Bar yielded over a million dollars.

Methods of extracting gold from the riverbeds evolved. Miners first used shallow metal pans to swirl gravel sediments, washing away lighter soils, leaving the gold. This evolved to 2-3 foot long wooden rockers or cradles through which watered sediments were sent, with small projections at the bottom catching the gold, during a manual rocking process. Quicksilver was used on the residue to amalgamate with the gold to separate it out. The long tom (introduced in the summer of 1850) was a 12-20 foot extension of the cradle that increased the amount of sediment that could be filtered. By

1851 miners were using flumes to raise the natural water flow above the riverbed for direct access. River fluming peaked in 1855 with multi-mile flumes commonplace.



The standard rocker or cradle operated with one man to load water and soil and a second to rock it. This gold washing machine could handle 200 bucketfuls per day.



The typical long tom was an 8 to 20 foot rocker. Miners would shovel dirt into it, pour water over it, and rock it like a cradle. Lighter dirt and gravel was washed away, leaving heavier gold. A two-man long tom could handle 400-500 bucketfuls per man per day. This one is shown in use in El Dorado County California in 1852.

By 1860 the gold was gone from California gold country riverbeds; subsequent mining continued in dry diggings away from the rivers. Over the years all the mining equipment disappeared from along the rivers – either relocated, collected for scrap or stolen. Also since the Gold Rush, there have been at least two horrendous floods on the American River that literally washed away much of what was left.

Today the Middle Fork of the American River is a scenic delight – with virtually no evidence remaining of past mining. There are several wilderness and recreational parks adjoining the River and rafting is a popular activity.

Eugene Ring: Summer 1850

Spanish Bar. A friend of Eugene's advised Eugene's party to relocate from Georgetown to Spanish Bar, a few miles northwest, on the Middle Fork of the American River. Eugene described the approach to the river:

“First adjusting the mules and our own loads, we descend nearly two thousand feet, sometimes half sliding down short steep pitches, now winding back and forth across the face of the hill, then a straight gradual descent, and we halt on Spanish Bar. It is about one hundred and fifty yards in length, extending back from the river from 25 to 75 feet to the foot of the hill.”

The washings and deposits from which, together with sand and earth thrown up by the river, when swollen from melting snows, have formed what is called the Bar. It was a rough looking place, deep holes and ditches near the margin of the river, flanked by piles of earth and stones; a few men squatted at intervals along the water rocking the washer while their comrades brought the earth to run through it. A log house in which the "store" is kept, a few tents pitched near. Across the river is the counterpart of the hill we have just descended, boldly facing its brother, and so, you are introduced to the Bar.”

“Next morning, after finishing our camp arrangements, we started for the Bar to pick out a location for our quicksilver machine. An unoccupied claim was selected, a few days spent in clearing off stone, getting out dirt which we intended to wash, and making a canvass hose to carry water from the river to the machine by means of a pump.”

This pump was still in Georgetown where we had bought it, and John T. and I set out to bring it home. ... The pump we were to carry home was a square box pump, 15 feet long. When we shouldered our awkward and clumsy load with a pleasing prospect of lugging it some 10 or 12 miles, up hill and down, and through the hot burning sun, we felt as though we would a little rather be at the other end of the route than this. But knowing it had to be done, we trudged on, occasionally stopping to rest under the shade of some of the immense pines, which were scattered

here and there along the route. Towards evening, wearied and sore, we reached the camp. Never were two poor gold hunters more glad to reach their pork and slap-jacks than we were that night.”

And now dawns the first day of our gold washing. The machine and pump properly set, Hattersley at the brake, Henry rocking, John feeding the machine, and I tailing off the washed dirt.”

Having accumulated quite a pile of earth, we pumped and rocked, and shoveled away until near sundown. The drawers containing the quicksilver were then emptied into a pan from which the dirt was washed by a half circular swinging motion of the pan in running water.”

We then started for our camp, and while the rest brought water, built a fire and prepared our meal. I took the quicksilver which we fondly imagined rich with "oro" to the river and proceeded to strain it through a chamois skin; a process to get rid of all the quicksilver, but such as adhering to the particles of gold, formed the amalgam.”

I squeezed and strained, the lively metal trickling through the pores of the chamois, the bulk growing smaller, smaller. I began to feel a faintness about the stomach; certain misgivings entered my mind that it was all going through, and, after giving the skin a last wrench I gently opened it, and discovered - amalgam - a little roll about the size of a duck shot and worth perhaps half a dollar.”

I marched dignifiedly back to the camp and gratified the curiosity of my fellow gold diggers with a sight of the prize.”

We tried not to be discouraged, and attributed our ill success to various semi-satisfactory circumstances; and next day went to work again with a will, but were not quite as sanguine as we had been.”

This day turned out but little better than the first; still we persevered for ten days, digging farther back, and sinking holes to the bedrock, which on the these bars contain many round smooth holes which are called pockets, and in our case they all proved empty ones. Sometimes these pockets contain rich deposits of gold. But the sum of our labors amounted, when weighed, to about 12 dollars.”

At this time all the men on the Bar were making from 6 to 12 dollars per day searching the loose dirt. But we could not descend to any such picayune business; we were determined to do things on a grand scale, monopolizing ideas. We were to absorb, swallow up everything else on the Bar, but alas for our ambitious calculations, we could not make one [claim] pay. We dug a great hole in our claim, determined to try the bed rock, and see if we could not find a rib pocket, and, after a well and pumping out the water, we reached the rock and found plenty of very fine pockets, some of them as regular and smooth, as though hewn out, and some of

them just large enough to contain one or two thousand dollars, but they were all empty, undefiled by the 'root of all evil'."

After a short trip to Sacramento to check his mail, Eugene returned to Spanish Bar to find that his father had arrived from Hangtown:

"Since I had left, Father had come over from Georgetown, not finding any diggings there, and we at once made an arrangement to mine together. Father and I made our camp farther down the river in a pleasant grove of small oaks. Some rocks by the side of the tent formed an excellent fire place, and the branches by the river were just the thing on which to hang our washed out shirts to dry. Father did the cooking and I made a fire and brought water."

We worked for some time in different places along the river with moderate success, varying from twenty to thirty dollars a day, using the ordinary cradle washer."

Murderers Bar. At the suggestion of some miner friends, Eugene and some of his party moved downriver to work two shares of a claim at Murderer's Bar. Eugene's father Moses and his partner continued working at Spanish Bar. Eugene described the move and the people they met there: **"So one fine morning we started down the river for the Bar, distant about seven miles. We passed many miners and two places that were being canalled. Where the river makes a sharp bend, a trench or canal is dug from the head of the Bar, straight across to meet the river at the lower end of the Bar, into which the water is turned by building a dam at the upper bend, thus leaving the bed of the river to be worked. In some cases these river beds proved rich, but the majority were failures."**

We reached Murderers Bar about noon and enquiring for The Sailors Damming Co., were directed to a large round tent standing on a rise of ground about thirty yards from the river, and a little distance below the Bar proper. The claim comprised about 130 feet in length of the bed of rocks past the tent."

We introduced ourselves and I now introduce the Sailors Damming Co. to you. Late in the previous fall of 1849, four sailors prospected this claim, and finding it likely to be a good one, they commenced to build a wing-dam so as to work part of the river bed. When it was finished, they went to washing the dirt, and in three days took out six thousand dollars worth of gold. But the rains had set in and the swollen river washed away their dam and prevented further work for the season. They staked out their claim and took possession according to mining law, then left to spend the winter in San Francisco. The next summer, each found his way back, and brought three or four chums along, whom they had picked up during their wintering, to share in the expected prize."

A more reckless, good natured, devil-may-care set of men were never brought together than were the specimens who made up this precious sailor company."

Eugene went on to describe the accommodations and life on Murderers Bar:

“The tent was quite a large one, with a long table built of boards standing on one side and on the other was arranged a rough bar which one of the company had fitted up and stocked with bad liquor and cigars. The company at once recognizing the necessity of having refreshments convenient to the work.

The sleeping arrangements were quite simple. I looked about for the cleanest and driest spot that I could find, and where I would be least likely to be trampled on, wrapped my blankets around me and lay down to sleep as I could, in the midst of the drinking, smoking, fighting crowd.”

The order of the day is "a horn" all around to commence with, breakfast, and then to work. Eleven o'clock an adjournment to the tent to "liquor." Sometimes we would go to work again before dinner, oftener not. Shortly after dinner a general parade to the tent again for grog. Then work again and later in the afternoon a rush for another drink before supper.”

As a general thing, most of them spent the evening at the "bar" a quarter of a mile higher up the river. This was made up of half a dozen stores and as many gambling tents, frequented by miners after supplies and a collection of hard characters from 'all round'.

Sometimes a number of kindred spirits would come in our tent for a carouse. The first thing in order was for all hands to get drunk, then a great deal of noise, singing, hooting, an occasional fight, some gambling, and finally a general laying around in various positions and places of restless, snoring, kicking rum-smelling bodies.”

This was not a particularly agreeable state of things for the Doc and myself, being both sober and rather particular men. Sometimes they would stumble over me where I had crawled to get out of the way to sleep and sometimes I would wake with one or more of these delightful companions sprawled across me. Such was the Sailors Damming Co and life on Murderers Bar.”

[Earlier] they had commenced building a wing-dam and we turned in with them, lugging stones and earth and laying wall. Nearly a month elapsed before the dam was completed and the two Quicksilver machines set and ready for working.

Work went on, but slowly; the tent and grog were too near the dam, the boys being too weak to resist the attraction. So it was determined that the tent and grog should be removed to the vicinity of its kindred further up the river, where it was used as a gambling and drinking place. We put up small tents for shelter near the work, which was certainly a change for the better.”

Eugene wrote about justice at Murderers Bar:

“On one occasion, a gambler who kept a table in the tent, gave George his funds when they quit playing at night for safe keeping until wanted again next day to open the game with. In the morning the money had vanished, taken from the place where it had been deposited as George averred, by someone crawling under the tent. He was suspected however of being himself the thief, and the loser of the gold accused him of it and demanded that he should be tried. During the day a jury of miners was agreed upon, and George found someone to plead his case. At night when work was over, all met together; with a goodly number of rough, stern looking men interested in seeing justice done. One man was installed as judge to regulate the proceedings, and the trial began.”

Witnesses were examined as to the accused’s antecedents [actions] and as to his whereabouts on the night of the robbery. The prosecution urged what they could against him, but he was acquitted. After the verdict things looked ugly for awhile. The gambler walked up to George and swore he believed he was the thief, and was very much inclined to cut off his ears. While poor George trembled and begged and swore to his innocence. He was finally allowed to go with his head ornamented as usual. But there was a crowd of serious, determined looking men surrounding them, and had the attempt been made to trim him after the verdict had cleared him, a general fight would have been the result.”

Fighting with pistol and knife was of frequent occurrence, but while I was here only one case terminated fatally. A man by the name of Rhodes held a claim, to which a Kentuckian named Wilber disputed his right. When the river had lowered so as to allow the claim to be worked, Rhodes went on to open it.”

Wilber, who was near us hearing of it, left the machine with which he was working and started for the disputed territory, followed by a crowd, as a fight was anticipated. On reaching the ground, Wilber ordered Rhodes to leave the claim, and then sprang at him and a struggle for life ensued, part of the time on the bank, and at time in the river, where Rhodes having the advantage, some of the crowd told him to drown Wilber. A pistol was also offered to him, which he refused, saying he was not fighting for the man’s life.”

Wilber now gave up the contest, and crossing the river a little above where a tree had been felled across it, went to his tent, which was nearly opposite the scene of disturbance, and came out with his rifle.”

He then ordered Rhodes off the claim, who refused to go, saying he would defend it with his life, while the miners scattered out of range. Wilber deliberately raised the rifle to his shoulder, fired, and Rhodes dropped - a dead man.”

Wilber gave himself up to the miners, some of them crying out to hang him at once, but as Wilber had a number of friends about him, it was finally concluded to deliver him up to the authorities at Coloma.”

What became of him I never heard, but presume his case was like all others at that time, when the benefit of a legal trial was given them. The population being entirely migratory, feeling that their only protection was in themselves, and used to murderous quarrels; fatal results they looked upon as matter of course, and in which they were not enough interested to lose their time journeying to court as witnesses. So that where justice was not meted out at once by a self constituted court, the rascal was almost sure to escape.”

Eugene described the progress of their work and a water rights dispute with other miners:

“Some time has now elapsed; our dam is completed, we have two quicksilver machines in position, and have run them for a couple of days with dirt from the claim which proves rich in gold.”

... one day I took a pail and case knife and scratched about until I found a place on the bed rock that was literally yellow with scales of gold. In a couple of hours I had filled the pail with dirt scraped from the rock and from the crevices that must have yielded several hundred dollars.”

On the Bar opposite our claim, which only covered the bed of the river to low water mark, a party of Missourians were working, from whose machine the water ran down upon us, thus causing a great deal of annoyance. Melville went to them and asked them to dig a trench to carry their waste water around the head of our dam. They gave no satisfactory answer, but continued their work as usual, the little streams from their machines coming trustingly down upon us.”

Satisfied that they were not disposed to take any action in the matter, we adjourned to our camp, loaded up with all the artillery and weapons we had, arranged our plan of attack, and sent a message to them to stop their work within one hour.”

In the meantime they went on pumping and shoveling as though they had never heard of a Sailors Damming Co. When the hour was nearly gone, we moved down to the bar, and stood by the "Great Westerners"³¹ waiting for their time. The minute hand of my watch seemed to move with remarkable clarity; and I thought what an infernal donkey I am to risk my life in such a crowd as this, while I limped around on a leg and a half and looked as fierce as I knew how, but my heart quaked within me.”

Almost at the last moment they stopped, and agreed to negotiate; the disputed matter was argued, a basis of peace finally agreed upon, and so the embargo was happily disposed of.”

Shortly after this Father bought a share in the company and came down himself to work, bringing his house and furniture on his back. The boys now worked along quite steadily, only getting drunk nights, and I began to hope that we should be paid for the long time wasted and expense.”

By the end of the summer, apparently fed up with mining for the moment, Eugene, **“determined to leave the mines.**

“Bidding Father goodbye, I turned my back on Murderers Bar and my steps towards Sacramento, where I arrived without any notable incident.”

I found business almost stagnant, men begging for work at barely living prices. ... I was entirely loose upon the world, and there being no inducement for me to remain here, I concluded to spend the rainy season in Panama and return to California in the spring.”

Contemporary: August 24/25, 2011

Spanish Bar. Pat and I drove northwest out of Georgetown in mid afternoon of August 24 on a quest to reach Spanish Bar on the Middle Fork of the American River. I had previously studied a lot of mining histories and old newspaper articles to pinpoint the location of Spanish Bar. A complication was that sometime since the Gold Rush, Spanish Bar had been renamed Cherokee Bar. Current topographic maps use that designation. However, the most up-to-date, detailed roadmaps of the area don't name that section of the River at all, while identifying many other “bars” of historical significance.

The first satellite map below gave us the “big picture” terrain and distance relationships between Georgetown and Spanish Bar. The second satellite map is a blow-up of our target area. We used “Mapquest” on the internet to identify Sliger Mine Road that looked like it provided access to Spanish Bar from Georgetown.

A month later, I described our adventure in my newspaper column (*Arizona Daily Star*, September 22, 2011):

“We started out on a two-lane paved road, which soon became a narrower paved road, and then a relatively smooth dirt road that led us into a wilderness park, then a pretty bumpy dirt road, and finally as we came down a steep hill to the river, a very rough winding rocky road.”

Pat and I had adopted a brilliant exploration strategy – we thought. Since I had done the pre-trip map and site studies, it made sense for me to ride “shotgun” and direct Pat as the driver on where to go. On our approach to the river, Pat was yelling, “I'm not going any further!” My helpful response was, ‘But, we're almost there!’”

Well, we (she) made it. We found ourselves at Spanish Bar, where Eugene and Moses had mined together for several weeks. ... There was no evidence of old mining remaining, but it was eerie to stand on the spot where 162 years ago, my ancestors had worked so hard.”

Needless to say, I did the driving back to Georgetown. By then Pat's car was completely covered in thick brown dust."



We used this satellite map of the area containing Eugene Ring's 1850 mining sites to get an overview of the terrain. Georgetown is pinpointed in the lower right. The Middle Fork of the American River flows downstream from upper right to its confluence with the North Fork in the lower left. The mountainous Georgetown Divide stretches along the bottom of the map. Spanish Bar is located in the top-center circle, with Murderers Bar located in the lower-left circle.



This is a close-up satellite view of Spanish Bar, running top to bottom at center left.



Just before reaching Spanish Bar on our drive from Georgetown we got this view of the Middle Fork of the American River.



Spanish Bar – looking downstream (south) along the river.



Spanish Bar – looking upstream (north) along the river.

Murderers Bar. The next morning on August 25th, we set out for Murderer's Bar, the last of Eugene's 1850 mining sites, also on the Middle Fork of the American River. From Georgetown we drove west along the Georgetown Divide on California 193 and then turned north on California 49 towards the town of Auburn. Just before entering Auburn, we reached the North Fork of the American River and then its confluence with the Middle Fork.



Looking east, upstream on the North Fork of the American River, the Middle Fork joins the North Fork at the center of the photo.

We crossed into Placer County and turned east on Old Forest Hill Road, just north of and following the Middle Fork. The only road access to the Murderers Bar area was Mammoth Bar Road, a narrow paved road that led down to the Middle Fork and Mammoth Bar, just upriver from Murderers Bar, both identified on current topographic and road maps.

The satellite map below is a blow-up of the terrain and features of interest.



*Murderers Bar is located in the center of this close-up satellite map.
Mammoth Bar is at center right with the access road winding across the top.*

At Mammoth Bar we found a riverside motorcycle recreation area. From a nearby bluff, we looked downriver at close-by Murderers Bar. Again, as with Spanish Bar, there was absolutely no evidence remaining of previous mining.



*This is part of the Middle Fork of the American River,
looking downriver to the west at Murderers Bar*

.Chapter 7

Returning Home

Moses Ring

The last we know of Moses Ring's Gold Rush experience is from Eugene Ring's memoir, telling of the two working together in the late summer of 1850 at Murderers Bar on the Middle Fork of the American River. We do not know when Moses left California, how he traveled (overland or ship or a combination), or when he arrived at his home in New York. We do know from city records that in 1854, Moses was working in Rhinebeck, New York as a justice of the peace.

Eugene Ring: October – December 1850

Eugene Ring left San Francisco on the ship Powhatan on October 9, 1850 bound for Panama where he planned to spend the winter before returning to the gold fields the next spring.

Forty days out of San Francisco, the Powhatan was becalmed off southern Mexico's Isthmus of Tehuantepec and low on food and water.

Eugene was part a ten-man foraging party put ashore in a small boat to look for provisions. During the landing the wind came up and the Powhatan raised sails and abandoned the ten men.

Eugene's party was forced into an exhausting trek across the jungles and mountains of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. During this difficult trip three men died of cholera, an additional man was left to recover from cholera – with only Eugene and five others of the original foraging party reaching Veracruz on the Gulf Coast of Mexico to catch a salvation ship to New Orleans.

Eugene's Mexican trials are fully documented in his memoir. The story of Pat's and my adventure to follow Eugene's path across the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in February 2011 is documented in *Retracing Eugene Ring's 1850 Trek across the Isthmus of Tehuantepec*, available on my Web site.

We find newspaper records of Eugene having reached New Orleans in December 1850. But we have yet to discover how and when Eugene returned to New York City. Eugene is listed in New York City's Street Directory in 1851 as a local druggist.

Contemporary: August 25 – 28, 2011

On August 25, after leaving the Middle Fork of the American River and making a short stop in Placerville, Pat and I started back to South Lake Tahoe.

We had been disappointed the previous day in not being able to travel westward on the old Carson River Trail (Moses' most likely wagon train route) because of road construction in Carson Pass. Since we had ample time left that day, we decided to take the Carson River route anyway and take our chances at Carson Pass.

So we drove eastward from Placerville to Pollack Pines on US 50, then south to Sly Park to pick up the Mormon Emigrant Trail. That route was like traveling through a park - nice road through lush forests for miles and miles. The Mormon Emigrant Trail then intersected with California 88 a few miles west of Carson Pass. When we reached the Pass there was road construction, but we were only delayed a few minutes. We're so glad we decided to take the chance!

The country on both sides of Carson Pass is very beautiful! I include a few photos below.

We continued east to California 89 through Luther Pass and back to US 50 to South Lake Tahoe – unexpectedly encountering several significant road-work traffic delays.

We spent August 26th at Lake Tahoe and then drove back to Tucson with an overnight stay on August 27 in Banning, California to complete our fabulous adventure.



The original Carson River Emigrant Trail passed through this valley, now dammed and filled with water, and known as Caples Lake – just west of Carson Pass.



This panoramic view is from Carson Pass looking east.



This is Red Lake – just east of Carson Pass.

Epilogue

Pat and I feel fortunate to have had (and taken) the opportunity to “retrace” my great-grandfather Eugene Ring’s California Gold Rush adventure. The before-trip historical and family research was both illuminating and fun. And the beautiful scenery, old maps and photos, historical museums, local libraries, and mining site visits made the trip very enjoyable and satisfying.

There are always things left to do, or undone, on any trip like this because of limitations of time or pre-trip knowledge. My wish list includes:

- a. Spending more time in Georgetown, California trying to penetrate deeper into Illinois and Oregon Canyons, perhaps with a local guide.
- b. Trying a northern access to Spanish Bar on the Middle Fork of the American River. After the trip, I found out that there is a paved road (used to deploy and pickup river rafts) that accesses the River just upstream and “around the corner” from Spanish Bar.
- c. Hiking (or perhaps rafting) along the Middle Fork of the American River from Spanish Bar downstream to Murderer’s Bar. This seven-mile trek would include much of the old mining sites along the River.

We still have family history issues to resolve. Among these are:

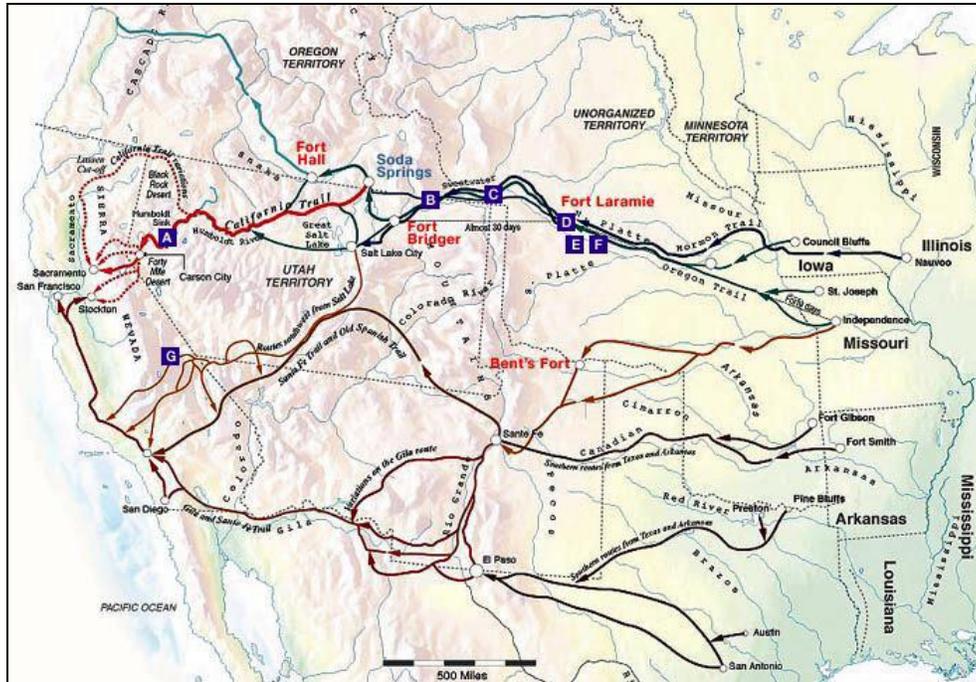
- a. When and how Moses Ring got back to Rhinebeck, New York from California.
- b. When and how Eugene Ring got back to New York City from New Orleans.

My son Steven, brother Al, and I will continue exploring these questions!

Appendix 1

History of the Central Sierra Gold Rush Trails

For reference, maps of the many trails from the United States to California and the principal central Sierra routes to the California Gold Rush are shown below.



The California Trail was the favored way to cross the Great Plains on the way to California.

Truckee River Route

The first route used by wagons over the Sierra Nevada Mountains was opened in 1844 by the Stephens-Townshend-Murphy party of ten families looking for grand adventure and opportunity in California. They started from Council Bluffs, Iowa and followed the California Trail to the Humboldt River in Nevada. Using Indian guides they found a wagon route up the Truckee River north of Lake Tahoe and through a pass at 7,056 feet elevation that was later named Donner Pass after the famous Donner party was trapped in the snow just below the pass in 1846. This trail became known as the Truckee River Route and was a very difficult trail over the Sierra Nevada Mountains.

Carson River Trail

The Carson River (or Mormon Emigrant) Trail was developed in July and August of 1848 by 45 discharged members of the Mormon Battalion driving 17 wagons **east** from Pleasant Valley, California (near Hangtown) to Salt Lake City. The Mormon Battalion was a volunteer military unit that served in California during the Mexican-American War from mid 1846 to mid 1847. After discharge some of the men worked in the Sacramento area for John Sutter over the winter to obtain needed supplies. In fact, a few Mormons were working at Sutter's Mill when gold was discovered in January 1848. When the Mormons' work was completed in California, they turned their backs on the newly-discovered gold fields and headed for Salt Lake City.

The Mormon emigrants traveled east, until reaching Tragedy Spring where they found three of their scouts murdered, apparently by Indians. From there, clearing trees and moving rocks as went, they ascended to West Pass at 9,550 feet elevation and then dropped down to Caples Lake; a few miles north was Carson Pass at 8,650-foot elevation.

Tragedy Springs was named later to memorialize the murdered scouts.

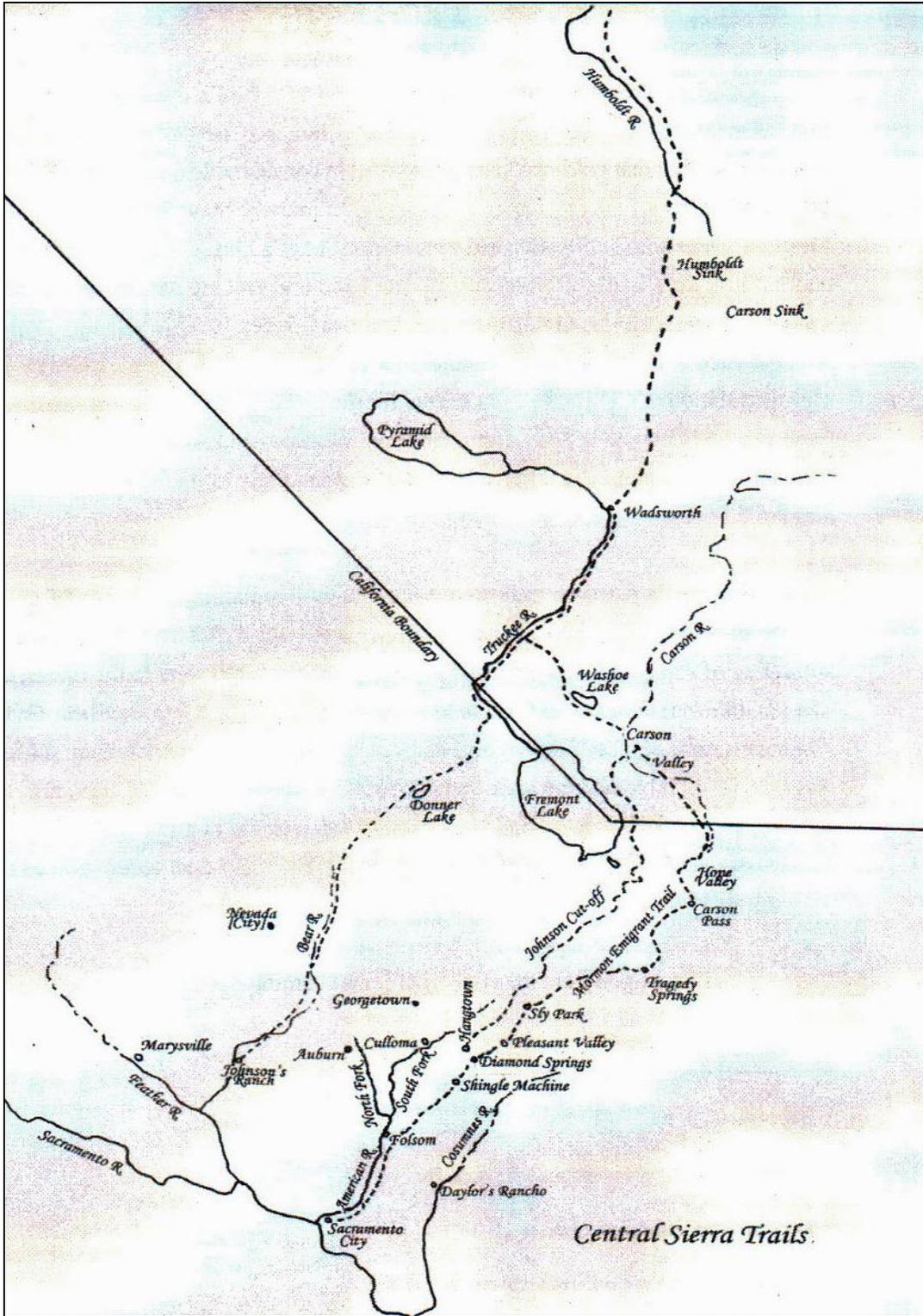
Carson Pass was known to the Mormons (although not as Carson Pass) because they were aware that it had already been crossed east-to-west in 1844 by John Frémont - well known military officer, explorer, and politician. Frémont crossed the Sierras on an expedition mapping the area between the Rockies and the Pacific Ocean. The pass was later named "Carson Pass" by gold seekers following the Carson River route, in honor of Frémont's famous western scout and guide Kit Carson.

From Carson Pass the Mormon emigrants had to descend a very steep ridge requiring many changes of direction with ropes and chains before they reached Hope Valley. To get across the Carson Range of mountains the trail followed the Carson River, through a very rough stretch of canyon, filled with boulders and rocks. In some places the canyon had to be widened enough for wagons to pass and impassable boulders broken up (aided by alternated applications of fire and water) and removed.

The Mormon emigrants then left the Carson River and traveled northwest to strike the Truckee Road on the east side of the Truckee River and then northward along the Truckee Road before joining the established California Trail (that crossed the Great Basin from Missouri) at the Humboldt Sink and heading east along the Humboldt River.

In 40 days the Mormon emigrants had blazed 170 miles of wagon road over and across a trackless wilderness.

By mid August of 1848, the Mormon emigrants began meeting wagon trains headed west to California. Hearing about the Mormon's newly fashioned easier path through the Sierras, some of these wagon trains decided to try the new route and became the first groups to take wagons over Carson Pass heading west.



*This drawing shows the principal central Sierra trails to the California Gold Rush.
 (Courtesy of Hangtown: A History of Placerville California From 1848 through 1856)*

It is speculated that more than 125 wagons with approximately 500 to 700 people traveled the Carson River Route to California in 1848.

The Carson River Route gained instant popularity. Although it forced higher elevations than the Truckee River Route, the travel was incredibly easier on people and animals.

For example, the Carson River Canyon required only three river crossings compared to the Truckee River Canyon which could require 27 river crossings or more.

The California Gold Rush really started in 1849 with over 20,000 people (including Moses Ring) coming to California using the Carson River Trail. As many as 50,000 people per year came west over the Carson River Trail in the peak gold rush years from 1850-1852.

*Note: These figures for the number of people coming to California on the Carson River Trail are quoted by many supposedly authoritative historical sources. If you assume that on average there were 50 wagons per wagon train and five people per wagon (high estimates), then the average wagon train carried 250 people. It would have taken 80 wagon trains to transport 20,000 people in 1849. Wagon trains couldn't reliably cross the Sierras after September because of snow, meaning that they had to leave Missouri in April or May to complete the four-month (low estimate) trip that year. To make the numbers work, an average of one-and-a-third wagon trains a day would have had to depart the Missouri starting point **every day** in April and May. To transport 50,000 people, three-and-a-third wagon trains per day would be required. Getting a little crowded in Carson Pass, eh? Something is wrong with the historical figures!*

Johnson Cut-off Trail

John Calhoun Johnson of Hangtown surveyed and cleared a shorter, lower elevation (and thus less snow-covered) cross-Sierras trail in 1852, completing the work by summer. The Johnson Cut-off Trail headed east from Hangtown to the South Fork of the American River. Following the river upstream, the trail crested near Echo Lake at Echo Summit through Johnson Pass at 7,400-foot elevation. From Johnson Pass the trail descended a steep slope to the southern end of Lake Tahoe. The route then generally followed the eastern side of Lake Tahoe to mid-lake where it turned inland and crossed the Carson Range at Spooner Summit (7,150-foot elevation) into the Carson Valley near present day Carson City.

Over a period of years, Johnson's route became a serious competitor as the main route over the Sierras. This route, with considerable upgrades and modifications, eventually became one of the main all season routes over the Sierras since it could be kept open at least intermittently in the winter.

Appendix 2

History of Native Americans in El Dorado County

The Maidu

From “Native Legacy: The Nisenan of the Maidu Tribe,” by Jenn Lesley:

“The earliest recorded resident [of the Sierra foothills] are the Nisenan people of the Maidu tribe. Their influence spanned from modern day Placerville to Sacramento. Vibrant and friendly, they identified themselves by village and spoke a Maidu recognized dialect. They adapted to the varying conditions in the foothills by designing dwelling that changed with elevation. Earthen-roofed structures cooled in the summer and warmed in the winter in the valley, and in the higher foothills, homes were reinforced with bark-covered poles to withstand snowy winters. Ceremonial roundhouses in each village were both spiritual and social centers for gathering. Ceremonies celebrating seasons were held within, and the roundhouses were also safe havens during inclement weather.

“The Nisenan people utilized willows, redbud, hazel, ponderosa pine, and various other grasses and brush, in combination with bone needles that were used to craft intricate baskets and textiles. Baskets were used for storage, gathering, food processing and cooking, and also for traps, mats, hats and infant cradles and carriers.

“The diet of the Nisenan varied by location, but included their staple of acorns, seeds, berries, local fruits, deer, elk, black bear and even mountain lions. Small game such as rabbits was hunted with the use of traps, nets, handcrafted hooks, bow and arrow, and even fire. Salmon harvested by harpoon and nets were a staple of the indigenous people [of the foothills].

“With sustenance complete with salmon, acorns, and wild game, the Nisenan made creative provisions for their members. Throughout the area can still be found hollows called grinding stones on which acorns would be pounded into flour. Acorn flour was used for Indian breads that would sustain the village through the winter season.

“Euro-Americans and the foothill Niseman first made contact in the 1820s, and many Native Americans were employed under John Sutter performing agricultural and construction work. The discovery of gold in 1848 brought droves of Euro-Americans to the area, and much of the Nisenan territory became occupied by these settlers and miners in search of fortune. By 1880, the estimated Maidu population in the area had diminished from 7,000 to a mere 1,000 due to disease, violence, and general loss.”

Overall

From “Detour to the California Gold Rush: Eugene Ring’s Travels in South America, California, and Mexico, 1848-1850:

“The Maidu, Miwok, Yalesumni, and other Native Americans of northern California ultimately suffered horribly in the upheaval caused by the California Gold Rush. Cultures that had existed for thousands of years were lost and destroyed. The huge number of gold-seeking newcomers drove Native American out of their traditional hunting, fishing and food gathering areas. Early on, Indians were exploited as low cost workers for mining and construction jobs. Later, as they appreciated the potential benefits of gold to their own lives, they joined mining groups organized by other Indians. They exchanged their gold for blankets, food, and jewelry. Indians were cheated at first, but learned to bargain effectively with merchants for a reasonable rate of exchange or pay for their labor.

“However, the situation for Native Americans worsened. During the first year of working the mines, there was relative peace with the immigrant gold-diggers. But with increasing numbers of gold-seekers, crowded conditions and competition for mining space and gold, plus strong opinions against “non Americans,” Native Americans were increasingly charged high fees, and then banished from mining claims. They were literally chased out by vigilante violence.

“To protect their livelihood, some Native Americans responded by attacking the miners. This provoked counterattacks by miners on native villages. The Native Americans were often slaughtered by miners with superior weapons. Those who escaped the massacres found it difficult to survive without access to their food-gathering areas. Many starved to death.

“By 1870 the Native American population in California had been reduced from 100,000 at the start of the Gold Rush in 1848 to about 30,000.”

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