

## FORWARD

### **A Splash of Cherokee Watershed History. History of Butte County by Joseph F. McGie.**

Following is a brief summary of the cultures, special events and incidents, and their part in the history and shaping of the Cherokee Watershed.

**Indians:** Maidu Indians were the principal inhabitants of the Cherokee Watershed area for thousands of years. The Maidu Indian Nation occupied the Feather River Drainage, Dry Creek Drainage (Cherokee Watershed), Butte Creek Drainage, and lands north to Big Chico Creek Drainage. It extended into the valley floor as far west as the Sacramento River. Tribes spoke different languages and were suspicious of and sometimes hostile towards other tribes in the Maidu Nation. The 'Nation' was composed of several clans of tribes each with its own established territories. Their total population numbered, by most estimates, between 4,000 to 9,000 individuals.

In the Cherokee Watershed area foods and living materials were usually available in adequate amounts for a healthy population. Principle foods consisted of wild grasses, acorns, fish, and game. Plants consisted of roots, berries, and tubers. Salmon was an important part of their diet and ducks, geese, deer, antelope, rabbits and some elk were eaten and used for materials of life. Many of these plants and animals were seasonally dependent.

Various habitats prospered with periodic burning. Therefore, fires were set by the Maidu at different times of the year on an annual basis to promote habitat for game animals as well as plant growth for their subsistence and cultural needs.

**Spaniards:** In the 1770s Spaniards begin to settle in parts of what is now California. Not until 1808 did the Spanish do much exploring north of the San Francisco area. At that time the Feather River and the Sacramento River were named with titles that have endured time and changes as they explored Northern California.

**Eastern America's Explorers and Settlers:** Frontiersmen begin passing through the Dry Creek Drainage in the 1820s. In the 1840s John Bidwell entered, mapped and took notes on what is now Butte County. In that period he settled here and began ranching. Cattle ranching, the primary land use, expanded greatly due to several large Spanish land grants to settlers in the Butte County area.

The discovery of gold in 1848 caused the gold rush of 1849 that brought many miners and permanent settlers to the area. Mining towns sprang up all over parts of what was to become Butte County in 1850. In 1849 the town of Oroville, which lies adjacent to the southern boarder of Cherokee Watershed, had its beginning and continued to grow throughout the 1850s around mining activities.

In 1853 the name of the community/area of Cherokee was established. A schoolteacher moving to the area, who had previously taught in Oklahoma, brought along a group of Cherokee Indians. These Cherokee Indians settled and mined at the northern end of Table Mountain. The flatter location on top of Table Mountain was named the Cherokee Flats, and their community was named Cherokee.

In the 1850s a store and bar were established in Mesilla Valley, which lies in the foothill area of

Cherokee Watershed. Mr. Pence was one of the original owners and eventually the sole owner. With time the Pence name of the store, bar, and post office was adjusted to Pentz. In the 1850s Pence led and was involved with several incidents against some Indians of the area for various problems involving his cattle and miners. As a result of these and other incidents, 'troublesome' Indians were killed or removed from the region and sent to the Round Valley Reservation in the late 1850s and 1860s. The Maidu Indian population, as well as some other local tribes, quickly diminished in numbers.

In the 1860s besides cattle and some sheep, several agricultural crops were grown. Wheat, barley, oats, hay, apples, peaches, grapes, and a few oranges were the predominant crops.

Beginning in 1858 hydraulic mining for gold was used extensively in the Cherokee area. Spring Valley Hydraulic Gold Mine on the Cherokee Flat of the North Table Mountain was the main enterprise and was the largest hydraulic gold mine in the world. Also, diamonds were discovered in the Cherokee area in 1863 while miners searched for gold. Hundreds of miles of ditches and pipelines were constructed to supply adequate water volume and pressure for these hydraulic mines. The vast water system allowed the mine to operate year-round and with the installation of electric lights 24 hours per day. From 1870 to 1886 hydraulic mining was the primary technique in the Cherokee area. Eighteen monitors shot 400-foot streams of water against the bluffs and washed down tons of gold and quartz sand.

Sand and gravel washed down Dry Creek and quickly accumulated down stream for several miles. Dry Creek eventually empties into Butte Creek about 15 miles down stream to the southwest. The mining company purchased land along some stretches of Dry Creek to construct levees to prevent the spread of mining gravels into farmlands adjacent to Dry Creek. With these actions the locals started calling Dry Creek in the lower drainage Spring Valley Mining Company Canal, or Cherokee Canal. Cherokee Canal is presently designated the official title in the areas with levees down stream of present day Highway 99. These sediments quickly caused damage to farmers downstream especially in the Biggs and Gridley areas. Complaints were initiated against the hydraulic mining process locally and at the state level.

Gravels and sands eventually spread along Dry Creek's adjacent lands in such amounts that farming was threatened in some areas. Finally in 1883 the hydraulic mining operation was abandoned due to playing out of the mine and a new law preventing hydraulic mining.

The Cherokee Watershed drainage area changed dramatically as a result of the mining company's canal (levees) formation and continued expansion of converting wild lands to cultivated lands. Larger land areas in the lower sections were in the natural drainage and floodplain, but with land use changes by man, some drainages and flood regions have been permanently reduced and changed.

At the end of the major gold mining period of the 1800s, olives tree plantings and orange tree plantings were promoted as an alternative to cattle or other crops in some areas of the Cherokee Watershed. Remnants are still visible at present.