

Third Section

San Jose Mer

SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA, SUNDAY

GHOST TOWNS OF THE SA



HISTORY OF ALMA COLORFUL CHAPTER IN MOUNTAIN SAGA

Had Start With Erection Of
'Forest House' By Lysan-
der Collins In 1862.

CHAPTER XGIII

LYNCHING AND ALMA



DAY MORNING, JULY 8, 1934.

ANTA CRUZ MOUNTAINS



SODA SPRINGS OF ALMA INVOLVED IN LONG LITIGATION

Discovered By John Cavanaugh
Uncle Of Hal Chase, While
On Hunting Trip.

rocks while on a hunting trip in the
wild gulch.
A man named Meysenheimer filed

By John V. Young

While Lexington was in the midst of its vigorous, boisterous adolescence, a more quiet but none the less significant community growth was springing up a mile to the south.

Here was the Forest House, stage station and hostelry destined to become the post office of Alma a score of years later; a half-dozen mills, and a store. Here was the school house erected by Louis Hebard, where the mountain children from Lexington, the Howell family and others from as far away as an Lone summit eked out a few months of "readin', ritin' and 'rithmete'" each year.

Where the Jesuit order is now engaged in remodeling the old residence on the Tevis estate, near the site of a home built in the nineties by James Flood, son of the Bonanza King, James Howe had erected a mill in the middle fifties. He dammed a lagoon, piped water in from Webb creek, and operated an overshot water wheel which in turn powered an up-and-down "muley" saw.

SLOW, SLEEPY JOB.

The operator of the saw, incidentally, slept while the painfully slow sawing process went on, and awoke when the sawed board dropped to the floor and the log was ready for another run. The process was not much faster than the whip-sawing it had replaced, but it was a lot less work for the sawyers, and was much in vogue in those times, years before the advent of the circular power saw.

Webb creek, which supplied water for the wheel, was named after one Webb, whose early mill occupied almost the exact spot where the Flood home was later built, not far from the Howe mill and its lagoon.

Into the mountains in the early sixties to work for Howe came Lysander Collins, who had arrived the year before in Alviso from Pennsylvania with his wife, Elisa Taylor, and their small son, Joseph, aged 5. While Mrs. Collins and the boy lived in Calaveras valley with relatives, Collins, a former raftsmen on the Susquehanna, and a skilled lumberman, worked that first summer for his wages in the woods.

He acquired land on the old stage road by the simple process of occupying it, brought lumber from the Howe mill in lieu of wages, and in 1862 built a home for himself and his family, including a saloon, hotel and dining room for a stage station, all rolled into one.

ALMA'S FIRST BUILDING.

This home, the first Forest House, first important structure in the town of Alma-to-be, stood on the south side of Collins creek, at the junction of the present Santa Cruz highway with the Aldercroft road to Wrights. It was an imposing two-story structure for these days in the mountains, with its four upstairs bedrooms and saloon, dining room, kitchen and bedrooms on the ground floor.

Zachariah Jones and his early mill near by had even then been almost forgotten—the mill was operated as

Barrow's mill, and was the focal point for log hauling on the crude, wooden-wheeled trucks of the day.

To insure his precarious land titles in this stage, Collins purchased from Howe and Howe's son-in-law, William Weldon, two 160-acre tracts under school land warrants which later proved worthless.

Included in the deal was the old Howe farm house on a knoll nearby, into which the family moved a short while after a storm arose one night, in 1865, flooded Collins creek behind the log jam that arose where the highway now runs, and swept through the Forest house.

FLEE FROM FLOOD.

The Collins lived for a brief time in what was left of the saloon while the torrent raged through the kitchen and dining room which were thus provided with running water decades before piped plumbing reached the mountains. They then moved into the Howe home.

Meanwhile one E. Froment, French mill man who was engaged in logging in the Logan and Whitehurst gulch, was running his logs down a two-mile tramway to a mill located on the north side of Collins creek, on the very spot where the state division is now completing a fire ranger station. An old wooden wheel un-eathed by workmen at the station and, deposited in the museum at Montezuma school bears testimony to the mill activities at the spot. This was on land acquired by Collins.

Froment vacated after he had been cutting two years, and the property was promptly "jumped" by one G. K. White, moving at the instigation of a man named Younger, a Santa Cruz real estate operator.

NEW FOREST HOUSE.

While Collins went into court with his claims, White and Younger enterprisingly built a new and still more imposing Forest house on the old mill site, with six rooms below and ten above, the largest hostelry between Los Gatos and Santa Cruz.

The school land warrants were valueless, it developed in court, and it required an act of congress to repair the titles. Three years later congress permitted all who had settled in good faith under school warrant titles to assume homestead and pre-emption rights, dating back to the school warrant dates, thus re-

Alma as it appeared in the early nineties is pictured at the upper left, near the height of its prosperity; a typical mountain family, that of Louis Hebard is shown at the upper right, with an old archer named Wilson at the left of the group, Mr. and Mrs. Hebard at the right; Frank Hebard, Charles Murdock and a cousin are the three boys.

storing to Collins his land. Collins found himself in possession of a newer, larger and better Forest house for nothing more than his court costs.

Another less protracted land dispute was more quickly settled when Collins took the law into his own hands with good effect. In running his fence line along the creek, he discovered that a portion of the Webb home, later occupied by the James Newell family, projected over into his property.

FENCES THROUGH HOUSE.

An argument arose, and when Collins went armed with a rifle to run the fence, house or no house, he found the Webb tribe out with shot-guns to prevent it. But in the show of arms the Webbs backed down, and Collins pushed his line of pickets right through the rear of the house by dint of some vigorous axe work.

It was along about this time that the Forest House ceased to be as such, and became Alma as it is today, although the town has moved north a bit and is centered around George Osmer's store.

On the same trip that he named the post office at Fowler's summit "Patchen," an ubiquitous postal inspector dubbed the Forest House Alma, which is Spanish for "soul" and means nothing whatever in connection with the place, its history or its surroundings. It was just a name picked at random because the name Forest House sounded too much like Forest Grove, Oregon, to please the post office department. This was in 1872, when the post office was finally established, with Lysander Collins as its first postmaster.

LEXINGTON'S LOSS.

But as Alma benefited, Lexington suffered, for it was the Lexington postoffice that was re-established at the old Forest house, moved there from the older town for a variety of reasons. Not the least of these came from a flock of complaints by church people in the mountains who

complained that women and children who went for their mail to Lexington were forced to pass through the bar-room of the Lexington saloon to reach the "post-office" in the rear.

In addition to mail service, carried by stage coach along with a Wells Fargo contract, Alma was provided with a local express service daily to San Jose by Ben Fessenden, who lived just west of the grocery store which was operated by Stephen Chase.

The store was principally to supply the large Chase and Connolly mill in the gulch above Howell reservoir, on Chase road, but was also patronized by many mountain families.

Food supplies did not offer much of a problem to those whose wages would permit their purchase, for venison hunters, honey hunters and fishermen traveled the roads daily. Huge trout were to be had in most of the streams and were peddled by commercial Isaac Waltons on all sides.

ABOUT "TROUT GULCH"

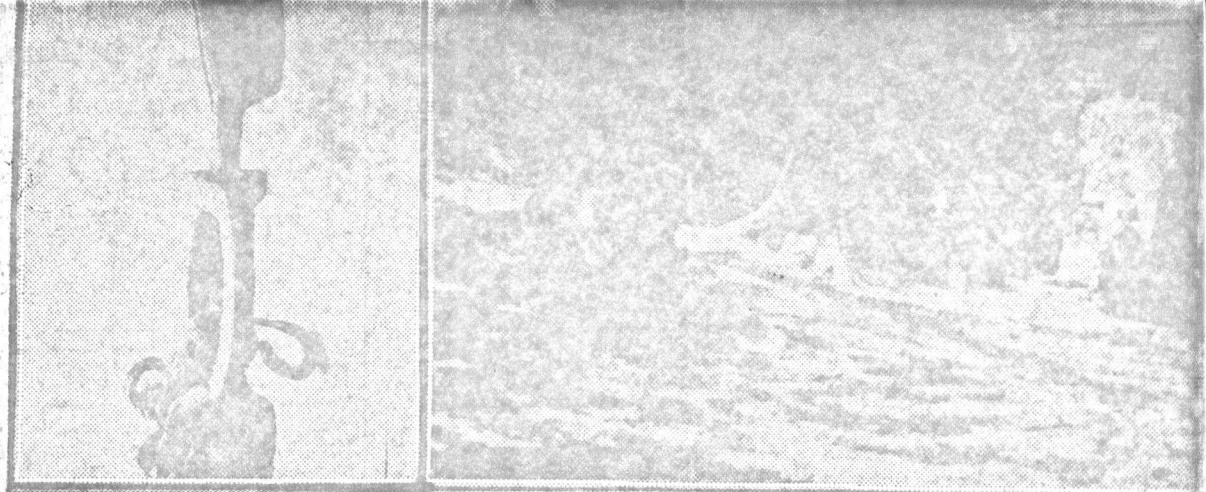
From this custom of peddling fish arose one of the most humorous of mountain legends—one whose effect is still felt by city visitors to the mountain streams who are unfortunate enough to encounter any of the jokesters who haunt the hills.

The story concerns Trout gulch, one of the many intermittent mountain torrents that cut down the west side of the canyon near Lexington.

Countless fishermen have been directed solemnly to this stream by local sportsmen who have pointed out in all earnestness that as the stream was named "Trout creek," it was evident that it was the hang-out of innumerable, stupendous trout.

But Trout gulch was not named for any fish, directly, nor has it nor did it ever have anything larger than a minnow in its steep cascades.

The gulch was named for a Greek fish peddler, who lived with his Indian wife in a cabin somewhere in



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Middle left is the spur found by Charles Murdock at the site where Captain John C. Fremont and his party were believed to have camped in 1846—one of the oldest authentic relics of the region; center is a view of the Hebard home built in 1857, partly of hand-split lumber (rear) and partly of machined lumber; right center is Joseph Collins, son of the builder of the original Forest House at Alma.

its recesses in the fifties and sixties. This Greek, whose name could not be pronounced and was quickly forgotten spoke almost no English, but he was acquainted with the word "trout," which he took to be a synonym for fish. He was promptly dubbed "Trout," and his home place became Trout gulch.

ALL FISH "TROUT"

Trout and his mule made frequent trips over to Santa Cruz, where he purchased a quantity and variety of fish—bass, sole, cod and the run of sea food, which, augmented by an occasional mountain trout, he peddled through the hills, crying his wares as "Trout! Trout!" without the slightest regard for the species or gender of the unfortunate denizens of the deep which happened to be in his wicker basket at the time.

But he sold the fish, which was the main thing, and was just as happy as the members of succeeding generations who have made capital of the chagrin of visiting anglers.

Popular from the beginning as a stage stop and water place for men and horses (the one in the saloon and the other in the big wooden troughs that fronted the establishment), Forest House had been famous for its fare among the "city folks" that passed through.

A great desire to taste the meat of the almost fabulous grizzly bears that roamed the mountains possessed those early tourists, although the meat was tough, flavored with a particularly bear-like variety of fat, and almost unpalatable to most.

THE MIGHTY HUNTER.

To supply this novel demand, and inasmuch as bears were seldom seen in the region, the Forest House kitchen depended on a hunter of no mean accomplishments in that line—one Thomas Damon, who lived at White Rock, near the head of Bear creek over on the other side of the mountain.

In his frequent trips down to Lexington and Alma, following the trail from Brown's summit and down the

Dougherty Mill road, Damon always brought along a sizable chunk of the hearty red meat which none but the tourists would eat.

Dougherty mill, which gave its name to the road now known as Bear Creek road on the east side of the ridge as well as on the west, was located on the upper Zayante's smaller branches in two separate locations, and carries a story of its own which will be told in later issues. Its lumber, however, was "gulched" over the top to be snaked down to the mills at Lexington and Alma.

Across canyon, in the region still known as Hooker gulch, was the mill plant of John Y. McMillan, already mentioned at length, by whom was employed one Billy Hooker. Billy had nothing much to do with the gulch except that he lived in a cabin in it, and spent his days patching up the McMillan skid roads.

PLACE IN HISTORY.

However, Billy has been perpetuated in history, for government maps bear his name in the gulch, while the mill operator, McMillan, is without a nameplace in the entire section he so greatly aided in development.

Gulches, it seems, were always named for those who lived in them—first or last. What is now known as Soda Spring canyon was then (in the 'sixties) known as Conoyer gulch. Conoyer, who camped on the flat at the mouth of the gulch, manufactured excellent smoking pipes out of hard manzanita root and sold them all over the mountain.

The root he obtained from the head of the creek on long treks into the brush. On one occasion he disappeared over night, and the next day a searching party armed to the teeth against bears set out to hunt for him.

TREED BY GRIZZLY.

A shout caught their attention. "Look O-o-o-o-o-u-t!" Conoyer yelled, "It's a ba-a-a-r!" And there was Conoyer, treed in the crotch of

a large oak where he had parked all night waiting for the large she-grizzly beneath to go home and behave herself. At the approach of the armed party the bear fled.

A man named Boyd followed Conoyer, and finally one John Cavanaugh, grandfather of Hal Chase, the noted ball player. Cavanaugh, a Santa Barbara man, was a venison-and-honey hunter who sold deer meat and the loot from bee trees to hungry mountaineers. Cavanaugh gulch is the name still borne by some maps of the region, a curious misspelling of Cavanaugh.

Bear fights in the region were by no means as frequent as the various decorated legends of the mountains would indicate, according to Joseph Collins, son of Lysander Collins, who is now living in San Jose. Active despite his 70-odd years, Collins is possessed of a phenomenal memory to which much of this account is indebted.

NEVER SAW GRIZZLY.

Collins, as mentioned, lived from the time he was six years old until he was a grown man at the Forest House, prowled the woods and streams—and never saw a grizzly bear! Tracks a-plenty there were in the early days, but nary a "bar," for Joe Collins. They kept to the hills pretty well, and were ruthlessly hunted down and destroyed whenever their depredations into stock aroused the mountain men, so that within a short space after the arrival of permanent settlers in any particular region, bears became scarce.

Lysander Collins operated the Forest House until about 1878, when he and his wife went back east to visit relatives. Part of his property he sold to Wilcox, superintendent of the San Jose Water Works, who permitted the water rights established for irrigation by Collins, to lapse, when they fell into the hands of the water company.

Collins died a few years later, when the balance of the property was left to his two sons, Joseph and Hugh.

DISPUTED AREA.

Included in the estate was the much-disputed land at the soda springs above Alma, where years before E. Cavanaugh, an uncle of Hal Chase, had discovered the soda-bearing waters bubbling out of the

rocks while on a hunting trip in the wild gulch.

A man named Meysenheimer filed pre-emption rights on what he thought was the spring-bearing property, claiming 360 acres.

Meysenheimer sought to develop the springs for their medicinal properties, built trails to the scene, and was promptly laughed off the mountain.

Collins finally bought him out and had the property surveyed. The survey revealed that the property line ran just about ten feet short of including the mineral springs, but in the meantime Jacob Rich, a San Jose speculator of note, had purchased a half-interest with an eye toward future development.

Then a couple of Italians filed on the adjoining government land and claimed the spring, and the case was popped into the courts, where it remained for decades in suit after suit.

Mentioned several times in this and previous installments was Louis Hebard, one of the earliest settlers in the Alma region who took up 160 acres near the present Idlewild property in 1857.

BUILT MANY HOMES.

A New York carpenter, Hebard built many of the homes in the region as well as the Lexington school house when it stood near Forest House. Coming here with the gold rush, he entered the mountains to work in several of the mills in the vicinity of Lexington, including Howe & McMillin, Froment, Whitehurst, Ricketts and others.

His first house was built of split lumber, with a puncheon floor, but he added sawed-lumber additions to transform the little square shack to make it into a respectable sized home that stood until two years ago.

In 1875 he married Lodiska Anne Girard, widow of Artemus Wallace Murdock, who had died three years previously at Patchen. Mrs. Murdock was the mother of Charles W. C. Murdock, who is now living near the old home-place where he returned recently after an absence of more than 30 years.

FINDS ANCIENT RELIC.

A small boy when he first came here with his mother, Murdock well remembers many of the early day incidents recounted by his stepfather, including reminiscences of Zachariah "Buffalo" Jones, who pointed out to Hebard where Captain John C. Fremont camped in 1846.

It was on this spot, near the Hebard homestead, that Murdock (not Hebard, as previously mentioned), found the remains of an army saddle and a rusty cavalry spur believed to have been left by Fremont's party. An open, grassy flat now more or less grown over with brush, was the scene of the encampment (now on the Idlewild property), then in the midst of huge redwoods whose blackened stumps tell the story of the lumbering activity in the region in the '50's. Hebard died June 1, 1894.

(Next week: Alma reaches its peak after the arrival of the railroad in 1877-78-79; shipping and commerce and summer resorts spring up, then declines with the coming of the automobile. The story of the Flood estate.)