Early Explorations of The San Joaquin Sierra

by Heyward Moore

The term "High Sierra" was used by the old California State Geological Survey to differentiate the highest regions of the Sierra Nevada from the mining and stock-running areas in the lower elevations. The High Sierra is a spectacular landscape of jagged peaks, thousands of lakes and meadows, ice-scoured gorges, and high, rocky, windswept basins which sprawl along the crest region of the Sierra from Sonora Pass south to the Mt. Whitney area and the peaks above Mineral King. About 150 miles long from 12 to 20 miles wide, this region contains some of the most magnificent scenery in the West and constitutes one of the largest roadless areas in the forty-eight states. The High Sierra lies mostly above 9,000 feet and reflects the extent of the great ice caps that blanketed the upper slopes of the range during the Pleistocene Epoch, which lasted from about three million years ago to ten thousand years ago.

It is extraordinary how little was known about the High Sierra until the late nineteenth century. On the whole, place naming in the area is recent. Although it is inappropriate to discuss here the full range of the history of the Southern Sierra, an overview of some highlights of local history, particularly of the San Joaquin Sierra, may help to provide a context for a review of the origins of High Sierra lake names.

Sadly, our heritage of names from the original Indian inhabitants seems never to have been very large in California, particularly within the High Sierra. There is ample evidence the Indians on both sides of the Sierra traveled in the High Sierra. Although the Indians lived along the lower reaches of the Sierra Nevada rivers and on the plains and foothills, they had summer camps in the high mountains. Escape from summer heat and trade with other Indians were two of the main reasons for high country travel. Well-defined trails were established for trans-range commerce, as between the linguistically related western Mono and the Owens Valley Plute. In the Southern Sierra Nevada, trails existed in the territory bounded by the northern streams of the San Joaquin and the southern branches of the Kings River, and included Sierra crossings at Mammoth, Mono Creek, Plute, Bishop, Taboose, and Kaweah Range passes. But as far as can be discovered, the Indians had few specific names for places in the High Sierra. Most of the Indian names outside of the lower canyons were bestowed by white men, and often with little sensitivity. One researcher, comparing High Sierra place names in Guddes's California Place Names and Farquhar's Place Names of the High Sierra, counted only 31 Indian names, including translations.

The Spanish had little influence over the precise naming of places in the Sierra Nevada. In November 1542, Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo, while at sea close to shore a little south of Monterey, saw mountains covered with snow and spoke of them as las sierras nevadas, the snowy range. However, Cabrillo never saw the mountains now known as the Sierra Nevada. Instead, he probably described the Santa Lucia Mountains in the Coast Ranges. In 1772, three years after Gaspar de Portola's discovery of San Francisco Bay, Captain Pedro Fages and Fray Juan Crespi sighted the true Sierra Nevada. Fray Crespi described in his journal the scene from a point near the junction of the Sacramento and San Joaquin Rivers rather simply as "some high mountains to the southeast, very far distant." Later in the same year, Fages again saw the Sierra Nevada, but this time from the southern end of the San Joaquin Valley, and described the peaks as "perpetually covered with snow." The effective discovery of the Sierra Nevada rests, however, with the Franciscan missionaries, Francisco Garces and Pedro Font. They not only saw the range, but they mentioned it specifically, and Font placed it for the first time upon a map. Font wrote in his diary on April 2, 1776: "Loking to the north-east we saw an immense treeless plain into which the water spreads widely, forming several low islets; at the opposite end of this extensive plain, about forty leagues off, we saw a great snow-covered range (una gran sierra nevada)." In this manner the Sierra Nevada was named, although at the time the name was merely descriptive and not specific.

The area of California occupied by the Spaniards was generally limited to the coastal region extending from San Francisco to San Diego. Soledad was the farthest inland settlement in the province, some thirty miles from the coast. The vast interior lying between the Coast Ranges and the Sierra Nevada was termed tierra incognito (unknown land) in early Spanish documents. Apart from several unsuccessful attempts to locate mission sites in the interior and a number of military expeditions against raiding Indians, Spanish exploration of the San Joaquin Valley was
limited. The Spanish might have left the Valley alone if it had not been for the Indians. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, a few of the more exposed settlements were occasionally threatened by warlike Indians. Gabriel Moraga, the son of Jose Joaquin Moraga, was an outstanding organizer of military expeditions into the interior and took part in as many as 46 campaigns against the Indians. In 1805, Moraga and his men discovered the Kings River. Camping along the river on January 6, the feast day of Epiphany, he named the River Rio de los Santos Reyes (River of the Holy Kings) in honor of the visit by the three magi to the infant Jesus. During expeditions from 1805 to 1810 Moraga penetrated an unknown, but limited, distance into the Sierra Nevada. He explored and named the Merced River, the Dolores (Tuolumne) and Guadalupe (Stanislaus) rivers, and renamed the San Francisco River the San Joaquin River in honor of his father.

Throughout the Spanish period, however, the "vast forests, the deep canyons, the lofty peaks of the Sierra Nevada went unexplored." To the Spanish the mountains were an inhospitable land. They considered the range to be impenetrable and, mistakenly, as a barrier to invasion from the east. The Spanish had neither the numerical strength nor the economic necessity to explore far from their coastal missions. The Sierra Nevada presented no attraction to them because they were neither fur trappers nor hunters, and they suspected nothing of the gold in the Sierra foothills. Nonetheless, toward the end of the Spanish occupation of California, "the character of the Sierra Nevada had...begun to take definite shape in the records of civilization, even though no white man had attained its summits or had passed over its crests." In fact, it was not until the Fremont-Preuss map of 1845 that the name Sierra Nevada was applied to the range. The designation was not generally employed on maps until after 1850.

The first whites men recorded in the Southern Sierra Nevada were American trappers prospecting for new beaver lands to replace the overtrapped Rocky Mountains. During the Mexican period, Jedediah Strong Smith became the first known American to enter the San Joaquin Valley. The forerunner of other "mountain men," Smith and his men trapped beavers and otters around Kern and Tulare lakes, and for a time lived with the Wimilchi Indians along the north bank of the Kings River. Apparently unaware that the Kings River had already been named, he called it the Wimilchi. Smith failed in a midwinter crossing of the Sierra by way of the Kings River. In May 1827, Smith and two companions succeeded in crossing the Sierra crest through a route near the present-day Ebbetts Pass. Thus, "a High Sierra pass had been crossed for the first time by white men." In the fall and winter of 1832-1833, Ewing Young led a band of American "free trappers" who trapped the Kings and San Joaquin rivers "some distance into the mountains." Joseph Reddseford Walker discovered the northern rim of Yosemite Valley in 1833, though he did not descend into the valley because to his frozen and famished men the "grandeur proved appalling rather than inspiring; they needed soup, not scenery." Later Walker led a party of 52 men, 300 horses, and 30 dogs into the San Joaquin Valley and trapped various streams until the spring of 1834. Walker is also credited with the first mention of the Sequoia gigantea and with crossing of the Sierra crest by a low, semi-arid pass near the southern extremity of the range. This pass due east of Bakersfield became Walker's own personal pass and was later named for him.

In December 1844, Lieutenant John Charles Fremont, during the first of two major western expeditions, made a side trip into the Kings River Sierra. In his magnificent History of the Sierra Nevada, Francis P. Farquhar describes the event:

We now come to one of the most extraordinary episodes in High Sierra history — Fremont with sixteen men on horseback herding a number of cattle, venturing into an utterly unknown country up to eleven thousand feet, in midwinter. Fremont's narrative gives very few landmarks, but there are enough, together with the maps, to indicate fairly well the route he took. Apparently he started on the north bank of Kings River and followed bottomlands for a while until the narrowing canyon forced him to climb out. He found the general character of the country similar to that further north, but the timber more open and "some trees extremely large." These can hardly be other than the Big Trees (sequoias) of the North Fork of Kings River. He kept on into the upper basin to its extremities, Burnt Corral Meadow, or perhaps Blackcap Basin."

Fremont was probably the first true mountain climber to visit the Sierra Nevada. He also named the Kings River "the River of the Lake" and "Lake Fork," the latter a designation that appeared on a number of maps, including B. F. Butler's map of California in 1851 and J. H. Colton's 1852 map to illustrate Horn's Overland Guide.

Gold was discovered in the foothills northeast of present-day Fresno in the early 1850's. Following this discovery, people rushed to the area and a sizeable community of miners built the town of Millerton, and managed to survive the few seasons that the gold lasted. One of the chief obstacles to the development of the Southern Mines was the presence of warlike Indians. Suppression of the Indians in the Mariposa Indian War (1850-1851) was a violent solution to the problem. A peace treaty with the Indians was signed at Camp Barbour on April 29, 1851. Miners gradually began to explore the higher streams for gold, and the San Joaquin River and its many tributaries were worked for forty miles up into the mountains. However, the miners did not often venture into the alpine regions because they intuitively and correctly believed that there was no gold in the tremendous granite masses.

One of the great mysteries of the Sierra surrounds the placer mining along Kaiser Creek, northeast of Huntington Lake. Researchers are unsure of either the origin or the spelling of the name. According to Lilbourne ("Lil") Winchell, explorer and historian of Fresno County, the spellings of "Kaiser" and "Keyser" were both used locally. He says, "the name is very old, and its rightful spelling unknown. I remember hearing the old miners speak of Kaiser Gulch (a placer district)."
way back in 1862, the year of the big flood; but I know nothing as to the name.\(^4\) Kaiser Gulch appears on Hoffman’s map of 1873, but Kaiser Creek is shown on Bancroft's map of 1882. Guddo reports that it is possible that the gulch was named for Elijah Keyser, a Pennsylvania argonaut of 1849. He struck it rich somewhere in the mines but neither he nor any other person named Keyser has been identified with this particular location. Guddo also says that it is not impossible that the gulch was originally named for Richard Keyes, a successful miner of 1853, and that the present version is the result of a misunderstanding.\(^4\) Yet Guddo, in a later work, California Gold Camps, says that both Kaiser Creek and Kaiser Diggings were named for Fred Kaiser, who emigrated from Germany to San Francisco in 1851 and started to mine along the San Joaquin River in 1852.\(^2\) Myron Glenn, who recorded his 57-year residency in the High Sierra in Sierra Nevada Interlude, says the mine was discovered in 1862 by a Mr. Dunlap, who mined several thousand dollars worth of gold before selling his claim.\(^3\) Whatever the origin of the name, it has been applied to a number of features, including the Creek, Diggings, Pass, Peak, Meadow and Ridge. At the time of World War I, many places in the United States named Kaiser were changed because of the anti-German sentiment against Kaiser Wilhelm, but these features and three other Kaiser Creeks in California weathered the storm.

Other gold discoveries were made later in the Southern Sierra, including those at Tailbolt (now known as White River) in southern Tulare County in 1853, and Buckeye and Clearinghouse in Mariposa County, and Hildreth in Madera County during the 1860’s and 1870’s. In 1873 gold-and-silver-bearing ore was found at Mineral King in the headwaters of the east fork of the Kaweah River, but by 1883 the mining era had ended there. In 1879 there was a “silver excitement” that engulfed the Mount Goddard amphitheatre. The boom town of Mammoth City, which was created by this rush, has been colorfully described by Winchell in his History of Fresno County: "In the trough of a low summit pass there existed at that time a throbbing mining town with big stores, bigger saloons and besides the cabins, institutions housing gamblers and female parasites. Mammoth City burst into flower as a mushroom pushes up overnight, and when the expected bonanza in the osom of a great mountain failed of its promise, the camp was quickly deserted.”\(^2\)

The output of the mines in the Fresno area, both placer and rock crushing, was fairly considerable, but they soon played out. There were placers in the Fresno River (Coarse Gold, Fine Gold, Texas Flats), an area lost by the creation of Madera County in 1893. Placers were also in the San Joaquin River, where it debouches from the Sierra Nevada, but there were none of importance in the Kings River. There was some development of quartz mining in the 1880’s, but only of little value.\(^6\) Perhaps the primary significance of the discovery of gold in Fresno County was that it attracted enough settlers to organize the county in 1856. However, by prospecting the higher elevations, the miners unwittingly discovered numerous lakes, waterfalls, streams, and helped to publicize the wonders of Yosemite Valley. Prospectors searching for gold and silver also penetrated into the San Joaquin Sierra. Altogether, however, there are few accounts to verify their place namings.

Similarly, the era of the stockman is virtually an unrecorded occupation. Sheep and cattle unquestionably were grazing the lower meadows of the Sierra Nevada as early as the first Mother Lode strikes were recorded. However, livestock in great herds did not invade the mountains until the withering drought year of 1863-1864.\(^3\) The exploration for new pastures eventually covered all readily accessible parts of the mountains in Fresno and Madera counties. Except for the few solitary gold prospectors, the local High Sierra was opened by the trails of the stockmen, principally by shepherders. In the late 1860’s the stock was taken into the higher elevations, and, as sheepowners multiplied on the plains, pastureage was extended to the alpine regions. In the drought year of 1877, 180,000 sheep were reportedly driven into the mountains of Fresno County.\(^6\) Prior to 1879, industrious shepherders had run sheep even in the Enchanted Gorge and Disappearing Creek area south of Mt. Goddard, one of the roughest regions in the whole range and therefore seldom visited.\(^6\) In 1891 alone, it was estimated that 500,000 sheep were occupying the Kings and Kern River drainages.\(^6\) Writing in 1896, Theodore S. Solomon bitterly reported that “the sheepherders have the whole western slope of the mountains divided off into ‘ranges’, which are subject to barter and sale as though they were personal possessions and not the property of the government. They know all the pasture grounds, have made rude trails thereto and built log bridges over all the larger streams.\(^2\) Yet, there is very little recorded history of the stockmen’s extensive place naming.

It would occupy more space than is appropriate here to give an account of the explorations, climbing expeditions, and hiking trips made in the Southern Sierra during the period from 1870 to 1907. A few, however, of special interest to the San Joaquin Sierra should be mentioned. The first authentic scientific survey of the southern High Sierra, including parts of Fresno County, was conducted by Professor William H. Brewer and his assistants of the California State Geological Survey in 1864-1865. Josiah D. Whitney, Director of the Survey, explained the purpose of the survey:

An expedition was planned for a reconnaissance of an entirely unknown region of the Sierra Nevada, namely, the higher portions of this great range lying between the Yosemite trail to Mono Valley and the headwaters of the Kaweah River, a distance of 100 miles, with a connecting journey of about 40 miles into the Inyo Range. The main object of the survey was to make a topographical map of the region. The map was to be based on the notes, observations, and records of the party, supported by data secured from the Indians and mining parties, and was to be the basis for all future survey work in the region.
Lake, on the north, and Walker’s Pass on the south. The glimpses of the high peaks of this portion of the Sierra, obtained during the clear winter weather, from Mount Bullion, on the Mariposa Estate, by Mr. (Clarence) King, had led him to the belief that here were the most elevated summits of the range; and this fact, coupled with the circumstances that, unless explored during this season by the Geological Survey, this region might long remain a blank on the map of California.  

After recruiting Dick Cotter as packer and utility man, James T. Gardiner as surveyor, and the intrepid Clarence King as assistant geologist, Brewer and his experienced topographer, Charles Hoffman, began the survey of the Southern Sierra in 1864. The principal objectives of the Survey were to investigate the high mountains and to seek out the sources of the Kings, Kaweah, and Kern rivers. To investigate the local High Sierra, the Brewer party, accompanied by an escort of U.S. Army soldiers from Camp Babbitt near Visalia, entered the mountains along the Kings-Kaweah Divide. They crossed Roaring River, and named Mt. Brewer, Mt. Tyndall, Mt. Williamson and Mt. Whitney, among other peaks. Mount Abbot was named for Henry Abbot (1831-1927), a distinguished soldier and engineer, who in the 1850’s was a member of the Pacific Railroad Survey. They attempted to climb Mt. Whitney, which was not actually conquered until ten years later. They crossed the Kings River canyon, passed the Middle Fork of the Kings, named Mt. Goddard (for George H. Goddard, noted civil engineer and author of the 1860 Britton and Rey’s Map of California) and the Palisades, crossed to the eastern side of the range and followed northward to Mono Pass, and then across the San Joaquin River. One party continued on to what is now called Wawona; another descended into the Valley by way of Fort Miller.  

This endeavor resulted in the mapping, measurement, and naming of many landscape features from the San Joaquin River south to the upper Kern River Basin. The Whitney Survey had verified the presence of a great many higher peaks than had been thought to exist. Their findings were put into Hoffman’s map of Central California, published in 1873, which verified the locations of the high peaks for the first time. In a dispute over the primary objective of the Survey—scientific vs. mapping of mineral deposits—the California Legislature in 1865 refused to appropriate more than intermittent funds for the Survey. Hoffman and an assistant concluded their field work in 1870, and the Survey itself was dissolved in 1874. 

Although the surveyors crossed some of the highest parts of the range, including fourteen trips across the Sierra crest, the work of the Survey was largely a reconnaissance mission. The Whitney Survey provided valuable descriptions of the High Sierra, especially of the portions drained by the Merced, the South Fork of the Kings and the Kern rivers. However, the brief survey provided only a general description of the topography, and the surveyors spent little time in the San Joaquin Sierra. It is not surprising that the Brewer party was unable to penetrate the San Joaquin Sierra from the south and that the field work was limited in this region. J. N. LeConte, recounting an 1898 trip to the area, wrote: “That portion of the Sierra Nevada Range drained by the South Fork of the San Joaquin and the Middle Fork of King’s River may well be called the heart of the High Sierra. Although the summit peaks do not rise to quite such an elevation as do some at the source of the Kern, the canons are so much deeper and more numerous than in the southerly region, that the peculiarly savage type of High Sierra scenery seems to reach its culmination here.”

In 1868, John Muir came to California and immediately made his way into the Yosemite Valley, which by this time was renowned throughout the world. Muir made his first Sierra Nevada tour during 1869 as a sheepherder, practically the only paying job in the mountains at the time. Later he severely criticized the natural destruction caused by these “hoofed locusts” and their herders. His first contribution to the literature of the High Sierra was published in 1871. In a decade of extended travel, mostly alone, he developed an acute perception of the natural order and beauty of Sierran scenery and landforms that few have equalled, or even approached, in years since. His writings, more than any other activity, have directed the attention of the public to the wonders of the Sierra Nevada. However, Muir’s really valuable work was mostly concerned with the Yosemite region. His experiences in the region of the south fork of the San Joaquin were limited, but in retracing the steps of the Brewer party he did skirt the west side of the Mt. Abbot quadrangle in 1873.

Muir once wrote that “I have never left my name or
any mountain, rock, or tree in any wilderness I have explored or passed through, though I have spent ten years in the Sierra alone." 31 Although modest, this statement is not entirely complete. After exploring the Kings River Canyon in the summer of 1875, Muir noted, "we climbed into the noble forest on the Marble and Middle Fork divide. After a general exploration of the Kaweah basin, this part of the Sequoia belt seemed to me the finest, and I then named it 'the Giant Forest.'"32 Camping in the great grove he walked until a late hour "through the deep shadowy aisles, wholly dissolved in the strange beauty, as if new arrived from the other world."33 Muir's letter appears to contain the earliest mention of the name "Giant Forest."34

One of the most active government surveys during the decade of the 1870s was the Wheeler Survey (officially Geographical Surveys West of the One-Hundredth Meridian), conducted by Lieutenant George M. Wheeler. Although most of its work was east of California, a considerable amount of triangulation was done in the Sierra, and Wheeler was able to establish the position of the high peaks Hoffman had shown on his map. His Geographical Report (1889)35, contains valuable information about names in certain sections of the state, particularly for east-central and southern California. However, the work of the Wheeler Survey in the Sierra Nevada was of very little permanent importance. An exception was the map of Yosemite and its immediate surroundings, issued in 1883 and for many years the standard map of the region.36

Beginning about 1870, expeditions were formed by enthusiastic mountain-lovers simply for the purpose of exploring and enjoying the High Sierra. But they were also pioneers because there was practically no detailed information to be had about the High Sierra in published accounts. All descriptions of the mountains up to that time were of a general nature and lacked accuracy of detail. In earlier days High Sierra exploration involved considerable hardship. There were no well constructed trails such as those used by today's leisurely hikers. At best there were sheep trails, and at worst the path had to be hacked out. For trips lasting weeks or months, food caches had to be placed in advance along the route; real privation was encountered if the caches could not be found or were buried under snow or avalanche, or if progress were delayed. For over forty years Norman Clyde was one of the most adventurous climbers in America and probably had more first ascents to his credit than anyone else in the country. Clyde was a man of prodigious strength and energy, and he regularly carried an 85-pound pack, which included some rather large cooking equipment. Other explorers were often similarly burdened with heavy equipment for triangulation, photographing, and altitude measurement.

In the late 1870s, residents of Fresno and Visalia, among them Lil Winchell and Frank Dusy, began to talk bout the great canyon of the South Fork of the Kings River and to compare it with Yosemite. Winchell grew up in close association with pioneers of the San Joaquin Valley and the Sierra Nevada. In 1879, he spent five months in the Sierra, visiting and photographing the Tehapi Valley with Dusy, exploring the Palisades region, and making the first ascent of Mt. Goddard with Louis W. Davis. In 1896 the Sierra Club Bulletin praised Winchell for his "some twenty-five summers' exploration, photographing, and sketching in the Alpine portion of the Sierra, covering the entire stretch from Mt. Whitney northward to the Minarets east of the Sierra. His acquaintance with the King's River Basin in particular is probably unexampled."37 During his travels Winchell named a number of features in the High Sierra, including Agassiz Needle (Now Mt. Agassiz), Grouse Meadows (Mt. Goddard quadrangle), Pavilion Dome, "Dusy Peak" (now called the North Palisade), the Dusy Branch of the Middle Fork of the Kings River, the Gorge of Despair, and Mt. Winchell (for his father's cousin, Alexander Winchell (1824-1891), Professor of Geology at the University of Michigan). In addition, Theodore S. Solomons called the old trail out of Tehapi Valley "Lil Winchell's Path of the Righteous."

By 1890 "the main features of the Sierra Nevada had become fairly well known and a few of the more spectacular regions, such as Yosemite Valley and Mt. Whitney, had been intensively studied. A number of the high peaks had been climbed, and all the principal canyons had been visited."38 Yet the Southern Sierra Nevada was still largely unmapped.

With the organization of the Sierra Club in 1892, exploration of the High Sierra intensified. Theodore S. Solomons, a charter member, was the first who began a clearly organized attack upon this unmapped region with the single objective of finding a practical animal trail along the crest of the Sierra. Solomons was a man of many accomplishments: stenographer, photographer, journalist, lawyer, miner, fiction writer, and Alaskan pioneer. He made the first of his three major expeditions in the High Sierra, beginning at Tuolumne Meadows, in 1892. On this trip he worked his way down the rough east slope of the Sierra to Mono Lake, and picked his way southeast across a divide to the drainage of Rush Creek on the eastern slope, crossing what was later named Donohue Pass. Continuing south, he camped above a shallow island-dotted lake, now called Thousand Island Lake. He climbed Mt. Ritter, and pushed into the verdant canyon of the Middle Fork of the San Joaquin. He then traveled southeast along the river until he crossed the old Mammoth Pass Indian trail. He also explored the region near the confluence of the three forks of the San Joaquin and gradually worked southeast across Fish Creek. In 1894 he further explored the headwaters of the San Joaquin, visiting Mono and Bear creeks. He and Leight Bierce, son of Ambrose Bierce, named Vermilion Valley (now flooded by Lake Edison), and made the first ascent of a 13,075 foot peak with a slanting roof-like top which they called Seven Gables.

The following year, 1895, saw the climax of Solomons' efforts, and, together with Ernest Bonner, he climbed even more peaks and ridges to chart the topography of the Bear-Pluto divide. Pushing up the South Fork of the San Joaquin, he encountered a group of peaks at the head of one of its branches. He called them the Evolution Group, naming them for the writers in whose works he especially delighted: Darwin, Haeckel, Wallace, Fiske, Spencer, and Huxley. In the summer of 1896 Solomons again set out with the hope of perfecting his mountain route. He was accompanied by Walter A. Starr, Jr., who later wrote
The preparatory work — which fell to me as the arch-conspirator against the peace of the Sierra — included a search for every scrap of information, verbal and graphic, including, of course, the county maps. It all proved pitifully meager. In desperation I raided the Surveyor-General’s office, and almost swooned with delight when they handed out plat after plat of Fresno and Tulare counties. Apparently the southern High Sierra was not only explored but meticulously surveyed, with section corner stakes set into gorge depths and frowning cliff faces — pitons perhaps, driven by sledge-equipped eagles! And meticulously platted, with an artistry that rendered every sepia-wash canyon and ridge in bold relief. The genius was named Benson.

A large fly buzzed in the ointment of my bliss: if the southern Sierra was not unsurveyed and unknown, as the county maps with their blank spaces averred, but, instead, had delivered up its every alpine secret to that indefatigable wizard, Benson, what indeed was left for poor (Sidney) Peikotto and Solomons to explore?

I carefully copied on crackling tracing paper every township plat as far south as the Kern River. A singular fact was common to all of them — a paucity of place names, the plats abounding in such vague legends as “High Rocky Ridge,” “Deep Valley,” “Confluents of San Joaquin River.” My spirits rose. At least there were still trails to be made, scenery to be described, peaks and streams and lakes to be named.

It seems incredible that no one told us, not even the Surveyor-General’s staff, who must have been humiliatedly aware of it, that these gorgeous specimens of the draughtman’s art were pure fabrications, the products of an imagination unsullied by the slightest acquaintance with the Sierra Nevada. We discovered it in the field — bitterly. Months later we learned that the Benson survey frauds had been in their day notorious, a cause celebre.”

Writing in 1899, Professor Joseph N. LeConte praised the importance of Solomons’ expeditions: “Our information bearing on the San Joaquin Sierra is almost entirely due to Mr. Theo. S. Solomons, who visited the region during three summers, and explored nearly two-thirds of the great basin of the South Fork. His work, which is incorporated in the last edition of the Sierra Club map, is remarkably accurate, considering the extent of the country covered and the few instruments at his disposal.”

Solomons’ own writing constantly stressed the unexplored nature of the Southern Sierra. For example, in 1882-1883 an intensive study was made by the U.S. Geological Survey of the eastern slope adjacent to Mono Lake and of the region embracing Mount Dana, Lyell, and Ritter. It was carried out by Israel C. Russell, assisted by Willard D. Johnson, under the general supervision of Grove Karl Gilbert. However, the Geological Survey did not enter the area to the south until much later. Solomons remarked, both in 1892 and 1895, that in the area south of Mt. Ritter no systematic survey had been made, even though the region includes the southeastern portion of the Yosemite National Park and is the birthplace of one of the two principal rivers of California. The area was, in fact, virtually unknown to all but a few explorers and the shepherders.

About the local Sierra, Solomons wrote:

Almost all of the High Sierra of Madera and Fresno Counties, and area of about twenty-five thousand square miles, drained by the San Joaquin and the northern branches of the King’s, has remained terra incognita to the outside world... On the published State and county maps this territory has been represented partly by blank spaces and partly by a system of streams. Of the two, the non-committal policy is much to be preferred, for the filled-in portions, or the surveyed townships are very triumphs of diagrammatical mendacity... Of the whole area of the High Sierra lying between the Yosemite Valley and the South Fork of the King’s River... not a dozen square miles were found accurately laid down.

Indeed, Thomas H. Thompson’s 1891 Historical Atlas of Fresno County and William Harvey’s 1907 Atlas of Fresno County, left blank most of the highest mountainous area of the county. It was not until W. C. Guard’s Atlas of Fresno County in 1909 that the blank spaces began to be filled with a substantial number of names.

Both Joseph LeConte (1823-1901), a native of Georgia and Professor of Geology at the University of California from 1869 to 1901, and his son Joseph N. (“Little Joe”) LeConte, Professor of Engineering at the same university from 1895 to 1937, were intimately connected with pioneer exploration and place naming in the High Sierra. J. N. LeConte began regular trips into the Sierra in 1887 and soon realized that in addition to sketches and explorations, scientific observations were needed. He began a series of triangulations of major peaks from Mt. Ritter to Mt. Whitney to facilitate accurate map-making. With his
engineer's mind, he collated notes from his own explorations as well as from the works of others, notably those of Professor Bolton Coit Brown of Stanford University relating to the Kings River Sierra. This effort resulted in a series of Sierra Club maps, the first of which was published in 1893, followed by an enlarged and improved map in 1896. He kept the map up-to-date by a series of blueprints until the work of the Geological Survey was made generally available. In 1908, LeConte, Duncan McDuffie, and James Hutchinson decided to traverse the entire route of a mountain trail from Mt. Whitney to Yosemite. His map of 1909 outlined most of what became the 212-mile John Muir Trail. Among the many features named by LeConte are Amphitheater Lake, Bear Creek Spire, Bench Lake, Cataract Creek, Desolation Lake, Dumbbell Lake, Hell-for-Sure Pass and Junction Peak. LeConte was also the first to apply the full name to the Great Western Divide.

Nonetheless, there were limitations to LeConte's extraordinary mapping. Lincoln Hutchinson, describing a 1902 trip to the headwaters of Fish Creek, commented:

In traveling in such a region it is not safe to rely, except in the most general way, upon the maps at present available. Mr. LeConte has done a most valuable piece of work in publishing his maps of the Southern Sierra. He has done more than any other one member of the Sierra Club to blaze the way into these southern mountains; but he himself has never claimed accuracy of detail for his maps, and it is a mistake to expect to find it in them. They are of the nature of pioneer work, gotten up under peculiarly difficult circumstances, and for remote sections are necessarily inaccurate." 47

The first federal government survey of the area now covered by the Mt. Abbot quadrangle was conducted by the Geological Survey in 1907-1909. The work was performed by the topographer George R. Davis under the supervision of Robert B. Marshall, Chief Geographer. Robert Bradford Marshall joined the Survey in 1889. He surveyed in California during the period 1891 to 1902, was the geographer in administrative charge of California, Oregon and Nevada from 1905 to 1907, and served as Chief Geographer from 1908 to 1919. He also was Superintendent of National Parks in 1916. In 1917 he was commissioned a major in the Engineer Officer Reserve Corps. His principal topographic work in the High Sierra was on the Dardanelles, Yosemite, Mt. Lyell, Kaiser, and Tehipite (northern half) quadrangles. In 1919 he originated a program to dam the upper Sacramento River and divert its water through canals into the Central Valley. This so-called Marshall Plan was the forerunner of the Central Valley Project. He also helped plan and develop the state's highway system in the years 1928-1937. 48 Marshall named a large number of physical features in the High Sierra, a list which is too extensive to cite here. A few of his more familiar names in this region include Lake Italy, Marie Lake, McKinley Grove, Pioneer Basin, Rae Lake, four mountains for the founders of the Central Pacific Railroad, and at least three Helen lakes.

George Robert Davis joined the Survey at the age of 20 and later served as topographic engineer in charge of the Pacific Division from 1912 to 1922. Included in his work of topographic surveying was the mapping of the Mt. Whitney, Mt. Goddard, Bakersfield, and McKittrick quadrangles, as well as mapping in Yosemite National Park, Kings River Canyon, in Mt. Rainier National Park in Washington, and in the territory of Hawaii. Altogether he was involved in producing about thirty government maps. 49 Davis did not apply so many place names as R. B. Marshall, but he is nevertheless well represented in this area. Some of his names are the Black Divide, Cardinal Mountain and Lake, Cascade Valley, Devils Bathtub, Martha Lake, and Thunder Mountain. He climbed extensively during the 1907-1909 survey and was the first to ascend LeConte's Black Giant. Davis Lake (Kings Canyon National Park) was named in 1925 in his memory.

The USGS survey in 1907-09 resulted in the publication of the Mt. Goddard quadrangle in 1912. This was a 30-minute quadrangle, which was reprinted a number of times with some revisions. It was replaced by two 15-minute quadrangles, Mt. Goddard (1948) and Mt. Abbot (1953). The original Mt. Goddard quadrangle covered a large area and was understandably rather sketchy. In the approximately 900 square miles covered by this map, only 20 lakes were named. On the Mt. Abbot map, which covers approximately 270 square miles, about 122 lakes are named.

This is a further illustration of the previous point that many of the physical features in this region have been named only relatively recently. Another example is given by Myron Glenn, who tells the story of a trip taken by a friend in the winter of 1928-1929: "Nate (Bostick) was gone a month. He saw Mono Hot Springs; Florence Lake, and Blaney Meadow. He didn't have a map, but it is doubtful that many of the places had been named." 50 Writing in 1940, T. S. Solomons commented that "between Yosemite and the Kern only about 350 peaks, pinnacles and crested ridges have received names, while of peaks alone, approximately 400, distinctly contoured, their altitudes stated or shown, of which nearly one hundred are between 13,000 and 14,000 feet high, remain without names today." 51 The names of many topographical features have been applied or sometimes changed since the original Geological Survey field work.

Dr. Moore is Professor of Political Science at California State University, Fresno. The above article is taken from a larger work Professor Moore is now completing, High Sierra Lakes in Fresno County, on the origins of lake names in this area.

FOOTNOTES ON PAGE 8
This of magnificently written, but geography. Publishing Place Fresno, Calif.: California History Books, 1960), as a after whole Kingstonl Kings Cawston, 1933), Cofunles: Narrative and Biographical (Fresno, Calif.: A. H. Cawston, 1933), p. 1. Hereafter cited as History of Fresno County. Winchell's work is a condensation of a larger work compiled during a period of several years with the assistance of a Fresno County Historical Society committee composed of Judge George Cosgrave and Emory Ratcliffe, then chairman of the Fresno State College History Department. See Fresno (Calif.) Bee Centennial Edition, 18 April 1956.

2Ben R. Walker, Fresno County Blue Book (Fresno, Calif.: A. H. Cawston, 1941), pp. 94.


5See Sierra Club Bulletin XII (1924): 20 for a statement by lil Winchell, and Francis P. Farquhar, SCB XXVI (1941): 38-39. Hereafter the abbreviation SCB will be used to cite references from this periodical.


8Josiah D. Whitney, Geology, I (Philadelphia: Published under the authority of the California Legislature, 1865), p. 365. The "circumstances" were that when the survey was under attack by the California Legislature and others for conducting too much scientific work and not enough practical work in locating exploitable minerals.

9Winchell, History of Fresno County, p. 164.


14Farquhar, History, p. 172.

15George M. Wheeler, Report upon United States Geographical Surveys West of the One-Hundredth Meridian, In Charge of First Lieut. Geo. M. Wheeler, Corps of Engineers, U.S. Army, Under the Direction of Gen. A. A. Humphreys, U.S. Army (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1889).lendor, in History of Fresno County (p. 481) reported that in November 1878 a geographical survey party in charge of Lieut. H. H. Ludlow, Second U. S. Artillery, appeared in Fresno to establish a base or starting point for extensive topographical work in this part of the state. This party "to proceed to the mountains, erect monuments upon prominent points for the further prosecution of the work in the higher regions, also place bench marks of altitudes and levels in a thorough mapping of the county with base line for the continuance of the survey to Los Angeles to tie in on." The Wheeler Report contains a description of the topographical work in Yosemite, but not in Fresno County, and certainly the work of the survey did not result in the thorough mapping of the county. In the Report (p. 687) — and in Francis B. Heitman's Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army, Vol. 1 (Washington, Government Printing Office, 1903), p. 646 — Ludlow is listed as assistant executive officer and triangulation observer for the 1878 survey. Second Lieut. Henry Hunt Ludlow was a graduate of the U.S. Military Academy and commissioned in June 1876 in the Third U.S. Artillery. Vandalor also wrote that "It is no violent stretch of the imagination to suppose that this was the party that erected the local monument that Fresno has accepted as marking the geographical center of the state." The present geographical center of California is located near Northfork, which was a part of Fresno County before the creation of Madera County in 1893.

16Farquhar, History, p. 192.


18Farquhar, History, pp. 196-197.
FOOTNOTES

44Florence Lake is 962 acres in size, 135 feet deep, and lies at the 7,327 foot elevation. The original lake was a small body of water, more like a duck pond, near the boat landing at the upper end of the present lake. The lake, enlarged by a multiple-arch dam built in 1925-26, is now a reservoir of the Southern California Edison Company hydroelectric system. For many years Ted and Lila Lobweg were damkeepers at Florence Lake. In Sienna Oupost (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1941), pp. 116-117, Lila Lobweg tells a story about the original conception of the lake and what was later named Tunnell Lake. I found her on the porch at the stopover cabin on the way to Big Creek. The sun scraped past a still higher near-by peak. On that peak had stood John Samuel Eastwood in 1896, when he looked toward the Florence Lake bowl and said to his brother, "Down there lies the place for the highest of the reservoir there; How could water be brought up over the ridge and to the other lake? The 'other lake' did not exist yet, either - it was later to be called Huntington. Then it was but a dream of this timber cruiser. 'A tunnel!' he said. 'Through these mountains.' He was, of course. Here I sat on the company's porch rail, his tunnel half a mile below me."


47Ibid., pp. 25-32. The Benson surveys are thoroughly discussed in Francisco D. Uzes, Chasing the Land: A History of Surveying in California (Sacramento: Landmark Enterprises, 1977), pp. 155, 157-159, and 173-179. The following is a summary of that discussion. Surveys in California were made until 1910 under the Contract System in which each U.S. Surveyor General contracted for work within his district with private surveyors found by him to be qualified. After that date, the surveying of public lands was performed by government employees. Surveys began in the early 1850s were completed at a rate of up to 5-million acres annually. While some years only a fraction of that quantity were completed, approximately 72 million acres were surveyed in the year significant disclosures were made of fraudulent returns. Government estimates indicate that nearly a thousand townships might have been involved in fraudulent surveys, comprising an area of approximately 20 million acres, or about 20 percent of all land in California. The major portion of the defective work was allegedly done under the leadership of Deputy Surveyor John Adelbert Benson during the period 1873 to 1885. His organization, commonly referred to as the Benson Syndicate, reportedly not only engaged in fraudulent surveying but also involved in schemes which resulted in the illegal acquisition of state and federal public lands. A large man, awesome in appearance, and described as possessing hypnotic power, John Benson was born in New York, graduated from Warren College in Illinois, and later was elected County Surveyor in Keokuk County, Iowa, in which capacity he served for 5 years. In 1873, at the age of 26, he moved to California, where he initially taught school. In September of that year, however, he began his infamous career by obtaining a contract to survey public lands. The Benson Syndicate, headquartered in San Francisco, operated throughout the 10 western states, although their greatest efforts were probably in California, Oregon, and Washington. When the fraudulent surveys were discovered, 41 indictments for conspiracy and perjury were returned by a grand jury against members of the syndicate in April, 1887. The best lawyers and heavy political support afforded Benson in his defense, financed by banks which probably feared an eventual cancellation of the fraudulently acquired land purchases. The first government setback was the dismissal of the 41 indictments by Justice Field because of technical defects and errors. New indictments were secured, but Benson fled to Denmark. After arrest and extradition, he was returned to San Francisco in January, 1888. Benson was thereafter found not guilty on some of the charges against him and eventually not prosecuted on the remainder. By 1895 he was completely a free man. His surveying empire was permanently destroyed, but he believed that money could still be made in devious land dealings, and he entered into the State School Land fraud. Benson was convicted by a federal jury for these activities. He was sentenced to jail in 1909, released in 1910, and died a few months later. Once worth millions, his estate totaled only $431.

48Le Conte, SCB II:5 (January 1899): 249.


50Official Historical Atlas of Fresno County (Tulare, Calif.: Thomas H. Thompson, 1891). Atlas of Fresno County, California (Fresno, Calif.: William Harvey, Sr., 1907), and Atlas of Fresno County, California (Fresno, Calif.: W. C. Guard, 1909).

51Lincoln Hutchinson, "Red-and-White Peak and the Headwaters of Fish Creek," SCB IV:3 (February 1903): 205.


54Glenn, Interlude, p. 81.


Information For Contributors

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