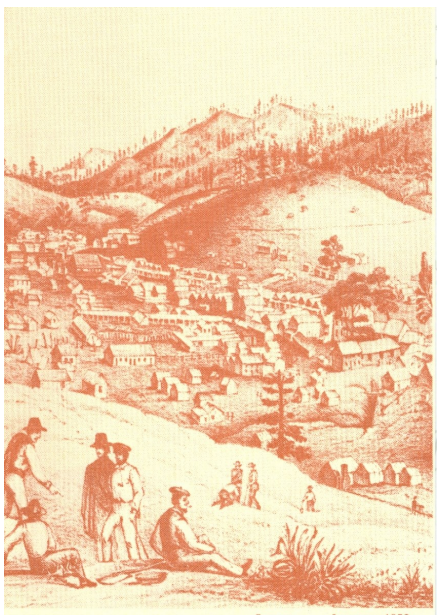
THE HISTORY OF DRAGOON GULCH



This region was occupied in historic and late prehistoric times by the Miwok Indians who appeared in the area ca. 800 years ago. The region also received seasonal visits by members of the Paiute from east of the Sierra Nevada and the Yokut from the San Joaquin Valley. They eventually moved their camps farther up into the mountains as the population of the area increased.

The discovery of gold in 1848 precipitated a world-wide rush to the Sierra Nevada foothills. Virtually overnight the land was populated with gold-seekers from all over the world. Although there was mining activity in the Sonora area in 1848, the first documented discovery was in Wood's Creek on March 17, 1849 (near the site of Sonora High School). Towns, such as Sonora, Columbia and Jamestown, quickly sprang up around the major strikes.

The City of Sonora, known as the "Queen of the Southern Mines", was established in 1848 by miners emigrating from the State of Sonora, Mexico. The early settlement was often referred to as the Sonoran Camp. As thousands of eager gold seekers made their way to the Camp so came merchants with a wide variety of tools and supplies, butchers, bakers, mule packers, teamsters, along with those aiming to open restaurants, lodging houses and saloons, thus a town was born. Sonora, incorporated on May 1, 1851, has served as Tuolumne County's seat of government and its commercial center since its inception.

Placer mining occurred on Dragoon Gulch as early as 1849, but not extensively until after 1852 due to the lack of water. Dragoon Gulch was named for a group of dragoons, or cavalry soldiers of the United States Army, who stayed in the area and mined for gold in the ravine. It is unknown if the soldiers were deserters from their units or on legal furlough to mine for gold. The date they began mining is unknown, but it was probably in early 1849.

Later, the whole of Dragoon Gulch, between its source in the rich gravel deposits of the Shaws Flat area to its confluence with Woods Creek, was heavily worked by placer miners. In the early days some of the rich gravel was carted (about two miles northeast) as far as the springs at Springfield to be washed. Other miners dug wells or used water impounded from a number of springs in the ravines at the head of Dragoon Gulch. The first outside water supply arrived from Sullivan's Creek in February 1851 when the Sullivan Creek Water Company completed its ditch. The Tuolumne County Water Company provided some water in late 1852.

Like other areas mined, the miners had varied luck. Some did very well and others made barely enough to survive. One success was reported in the San Francisco *Daily Herald* of November 23, 1852, when a company of French miners found a nugget which weighed 116 ounces and was sold to a Sonora banker for $1,600. In 1853, it was reported that at the extreme upper portion of Dragoon Gulch miners were only making from $5 to $8 per day.

At first there were no formalized rules governing the mining of gold. On August 11, 1854 a convention of miners formed the "Shaws Flat Mining District", which included the upper portion of Dragoon Gulch. They adopted laws governing mining within the district boundaries. Claimants were required to be rectangular in shape and were not to contain an area in excess of 100 feet square. Claimants were limited to one claim each unless by purchase, and the purchased claim could be held only as long as miners were kept at work upon it for one day out of each three.

Following the decline of the placer deposits in the Mother Lode after ca. 1860, ranching and the timber industry became more important to the foothill economy. It was not until the late 1880s that the technology and mining methods for hard rock (lode) mining were sufficiently advanced to warrant large-scale underground mining. Extensive areas of both placer and hard rock mining activity are still evident along the trail. Features include piles of randomly stacked and hand-stacked waste rock, open pits, and portions of the original ditch system.

The most infamous event that took place at Dragoon Gulch was the murder of Captain George W. Snow on Tuesday, June 10, 1851. Snow, a native of Maine, was thirty-one years old. Two Mexicans or Mexican Indians, who had worked for him, purchased a long tom from the Captain. They arranged for him to come the next morning to their encampment for payment. Apparently this was just a ruse to rob and murder him, as it was known that he carried a considerable amount of money.

A more positive story is that of Thomas Gilman, who mined in Dragoon Gulch and owned property close by. He was born a slave in Tennessee and came to California with his owner, Joseph B. Gilman of Green County, Tennessee, in 1849. After a short time, Tom realized that the opportunity for freedom was a possibility. His owner proposed that Tom work overtime and save the extra money which he could use to buy his freedom. The amount agreed upon was $1,000. When Tom was close to raising the $1,000 his owner told him that the can of gold dust had been stolen and Tom would have to start all over again. This, of course, was a blow to Tom but he began saving again. His neighbors, who thought a great deal of Tom, and not much of his owner, advised him to have everything in writing, and to protect his money. They were quite certain Tom's owner was the thief. On August 17, 1852 a Bill of Sale was drawn up giving Tom his freedom.

Shortly after this Joseph Gilman left the country, but Tom, taking the last name of Gilman, stayed. He mined along Dragoon Gulch and one day dug up a piece of gold which was worth $2,500. This took care of him for several years. As he grew older he continued to mine, but gradually turned to farming and lived quite comfortably upon the proceeds of his orchards, vineyard, garden and chickens. His small cabin was located on the Sonora-Shaws Flat Road.