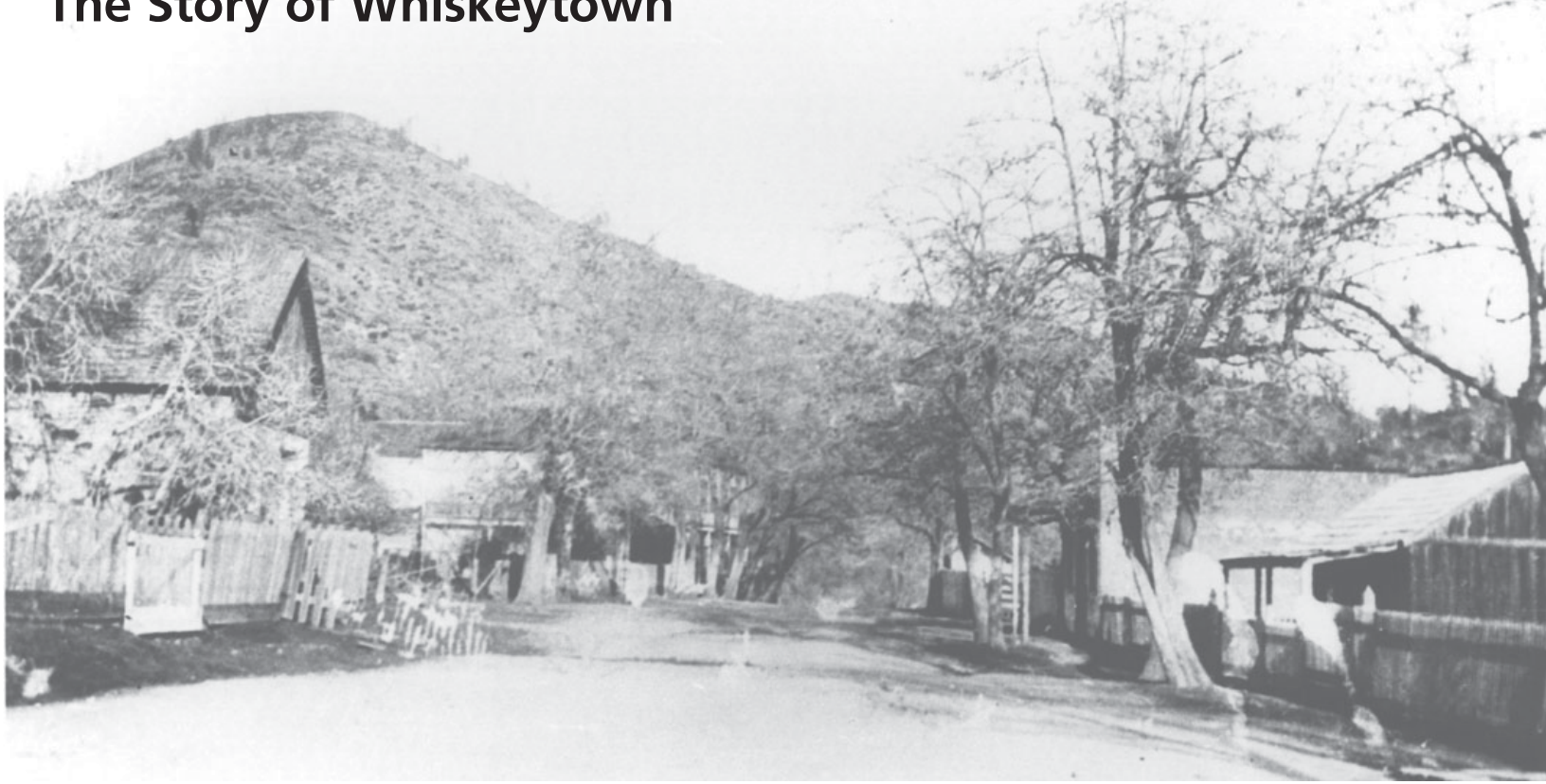




The Story of Whiskeytown



The discovery of gold during the mid 1800's stirred the collective imagination of thousands of people across the world and enticed many to California in the hope of finding instant wealth. New settlements appeared overnight throughout the foothills of the Sierra and Trinity Mountains. Here in the "northern diggins," nestled in a small canyon along Clear Creek, Whiskeytown sprang to life.

A MINER'S TOWN

Whiskeytown, like most gold rush communities, had its beginning as a cluster of tents. Miners, mostly young and unmarried, accepted the cold winters and dismal living conditions. Even the everyday reality of harsh physical labor could not discourage them from their quest for gold. It was not long before entrepreneurs arrived, transforming the wilderness outpost into a permanent settlement and convenient supply depot for the local miners. Whiskeytown also became a comfortable stopover for travelers, pack trains and later, stagecoaches traveling the main route to the Oregon territory.

With a steady influx of business from miners and travelers, the town soon boasted a fine hotel, stable, general store, and several saloons. Individuals near and far would come to Whiskeytown to participate in turkey shoots and dances provided by the town's merchants. One of these businessmen, Benjamin Mix, hosted many of these special activities at his hotel, advertising flamboyantly that no expense would be spared to make each event a success. The saloons became a social center for

the miners, where they could drink, gamble, swap stories, and learn of any new discoveries of gold.

While no one really knows the origin of the Whiskeytown name, local folklore tells of a miner by the name of Billie Peterson who had a mishap in the 1850's. While hauling supplies back to his mine, the pack on his mule's back came loose and a whiskey barrel went tumbling down the hillside, breaking on the rocks below and spilling its contents into the creek. From this christening came the name Whiskey Creek, and the small settlement that established itself next to the waterway became known as Whiskeytown.

Whiskeytown Hotel



MINER'S MADNESS

The first miners initially used a method called placer mining, which was the removal of gold from the streams and creeks using a pick, shovel and gold pan. To work a larger area, the miners progressed to using sluice boxes and long toms, which allowed them to wash more dirt and gravel from the heavier gold.

Using this method, the miners in the Whiskeytown area did very well, earning fifteen to fifty dollars for an average day's work. For example, an eighty-one ounce nugget was recovered in the Mad Ox Canyon, and then a seven to eight pound lump of gold interspersed with quartz was found by Ben the Boatman and Harry Dickens in Whiskey Creek.

When the amount of gold found through placer mining declined, other methods of extracting the precious metal were used. Hard rock mining entailed digging deep shafts into the hillsides to get to gold-bearing deposits and hydraulic mining used high-pressured water to move tons of dirt and gravel. In a bold attempt to supply water to the various mining operations during the dry season, a series of flumes, ditches, and aqueducts were built, allowing the miners to work year round.

By the time it was completed in 1856, one company, called the Clear Creek Ditch Company, had built a ditch system that was a staggering forty-one miles long and ran from the Tower House Hotel, through the Whiskeytown area, and south along the Clear Creek drainage toward Horsetown. By the 1870's, however, the bountiful gold deposits disappeared and the miners drifted away.

After twenty-seven years of service, the water stopped flowing and the Clear Creek Ditch was abandoned in 1882. Remnants of the water ditch can still be found in the Tower House Historic District and below the present day Clair A. Hill/Whiskeytown Dam.



(Photo courtesy of Shasta Historical Society)

AFTER THE GOLD RUSH

The fortunes of Whiskeytown declined at the turn of the century. No longer did the hills support the prospectors, nor was Whiskeytown on the main route to Oregon. The few remaining residents ranched, farmed and served the few travelers who passed through, and nearly all mined for what was left of the area's

gold. During the Depression, the price of gold jumped from twenty to thirty five dollars an ounce, making it possible for an individual to support himself on a subsistence level. On the outskirts of the town, a few miners lived in a collection of shacks and tents.

THE FINAL OUTCOME

As the Depression drew to a close, the concept of claiming the waters in Northern California for agricultural purposes became a reality with the completion of Shasta Dam in 1945.

Known as the Central Valley Project, its purpose was to supply sufficient amounts of water to farmers. The project was to include the construction of a dam at Whiskeytown. Property was purchased from residents and the area cleared of most vegetation and buildings. Among the few structures saved were the Whiskeytown Post Office and

schoolhouse. The Whiskeytown Cemetery was also relocated just below the dam.

Construction of the dam began in 1959, and during the summer of 1963, water filled the canyon where once stood a bustling community. President John F. Kennedy dedicated Whiskeytown Dam on September 28, 1963 before a crowd of over 10,000 people. He spoke briefly of the development of the American West and the significance of Whiskeytown Dam and its relationship to the Central Valley Project.

The waters over the sleepy hamlet of Whiskeytown, which a century earlier had been the scene of rowdy mining camps and scattered claims, now provide recreational opportunities enjoyed by today's visitor.

