

# TOWLE BROTHERS, PIONEER LUMBERMEN OF THE SIERRA

The Towle brothers, pioneer visionary lumbermen, managed the largest lumber operation in the Sierra for nearly 50 years, beginning when Allen Towle started up a water-powered sawmill at Dutch Flat in 1856. A younger brother, George, left the Towle's home in Vermont a year later and the mill became the Towle Brothers Company. Another mill was built at Lost Camp in 1860. With the need for lumber and timber to construct the Central Pacific Railroad, the first Kearsage Mill began production in 1863, and the Alabama Mill was built in 1865.

During the Civil War while the harsh winds of the violent conflict swept over the country, there were sentiments expressed in Placer County for both the North and the South. There were disputes, arguments and often fisticuffs, but there was little blood-letting over who supported either the Blues or the Grays. The differences over the war even reached to the Towle lumber mills in the Sierra.

Northern sympathizers seemed to only seek work at the Kearsage Mill while the Southern backers went to work at the Alabama. The North-South conflict started the great Kearsage-Alabama cruiser battle that was fought in daily production records. The records of the lumber output were posted each day at the mills and in the office. On Saturday nights there were often fisticuffs involved in the settling of affairs in Dutch Flat when the two opposing sides met, but little more than that came of it.

Soon the new railroad's demand for lumber to build snowsheds and trestles near Donner Summit prompted the Towles to push for expansion. Edwin Towle left Vermont to join his brothers, and the ambitious lumbermen added more mills at Canyon Creek near Towle in 1865 and followed with the Donner Lake Mill in 1866 near Truckee.

By 1875, the lumber tycoons were shipping their products by rail throughout Nevada and California. The *Dutch Flat Forum* reported that year that "the finest stick of timber ever produced by the Towle Brothers, a 27 by 36-inch, 30-foot long piece that was clear throughout," was

part of a shipment to the Comstock Ophir Mine at Virginia City. The next year the brothers began building their own railroad to haul lumber from the new Kearsage Mill near Emigrant Gap.

It was reported in a scientific journal in 1882 that the Towle Brothers had four mills with a capacity of 100,000 feet every 12 hours. According to the report, they used about 150 oxen, 30 to 40 head of horses and mules, and employed about 300 men, who lived in six or seven boarding houses in the mountains.

The massive and wide-spread operation also included a plant near Alta where doors, windows, fruit boxes, mouldings, sashes and blinds were manufactured. Eight telephones and some 18 miles of telephone lines also were installed to several mills and logging camps connecting to the main office at Dutch Flat. By this time, lumber yards were opened at Auburn, Newcastle, Wheatland, and Tucson, Arizona.

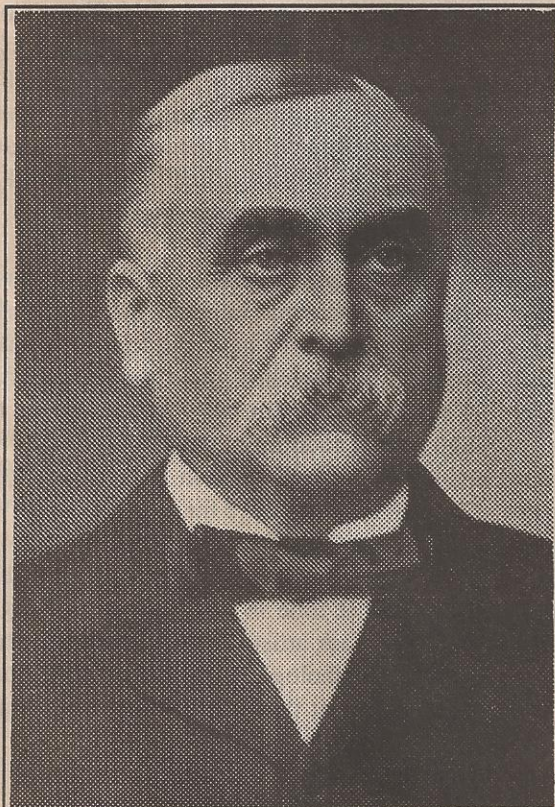
In 1882, a company town was established at Towle and additional mills were opened at Lowell Hill, Burnett, Texas Hill in Placer County, and Bear Valley, Deer Creek and Steep Hollow in Nevada County. The Towle Brothers General Store carried a variety of merchandise for workers in lumber camps, mines and at the mills. The town became a busy trading center.

The pioneer lumber executives were the first to use tractors, or steam wagons, to haul logs and lumber. At peak production, they had about 30,000 acres in lumber holdings and operated some 36 miles of narrow gauge railroad.

During the 1880s, a Towle Brother pulp mill could produce 1,000 pounds an hour. The pulp was loaded on railroad cars and sent to a mill in Stockton.

Progressive and perhaps ahead of their time, the Towles were the first to have electric lights in their town. Their electric system was operated by generator on the pulp mill water line. The trio also pioneered the box shock business with factories at Towle and in Sacramento.

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*George W. Towle, who along with his brothers, Allen and Edwin, pioneered lumber production in the Sierra. Photo from W. B. Lardner and M. J. Brock's History of Placer and Nevada Counties.*

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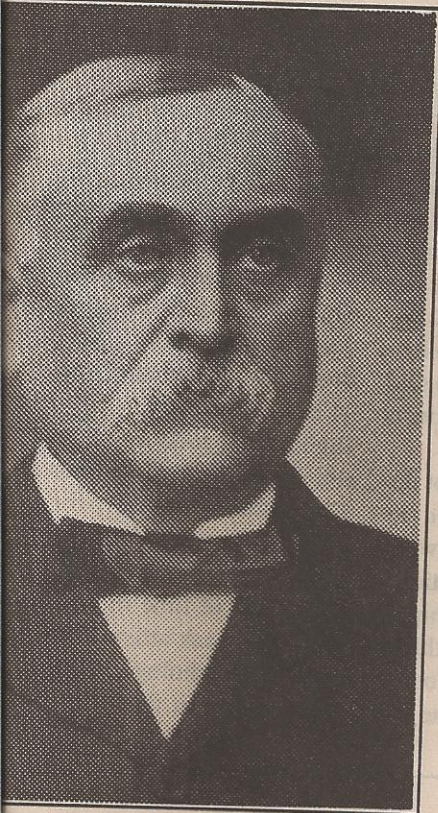
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# Brothers laid foundation for stu

*(Editor's note — Neighbors periodically runs stories about historical Placer County people, places and buildings. This article highlights the Towle brothers and their lumber company near Dutch Flat and Alta.)*

By Donna Howell  
Special to Neighbors

Today it is hard to imagine the foothills covered with timber, "progress" has so changed appearances.

Hills and valleys have been flattened by people who thought there was no end to the land and resources.

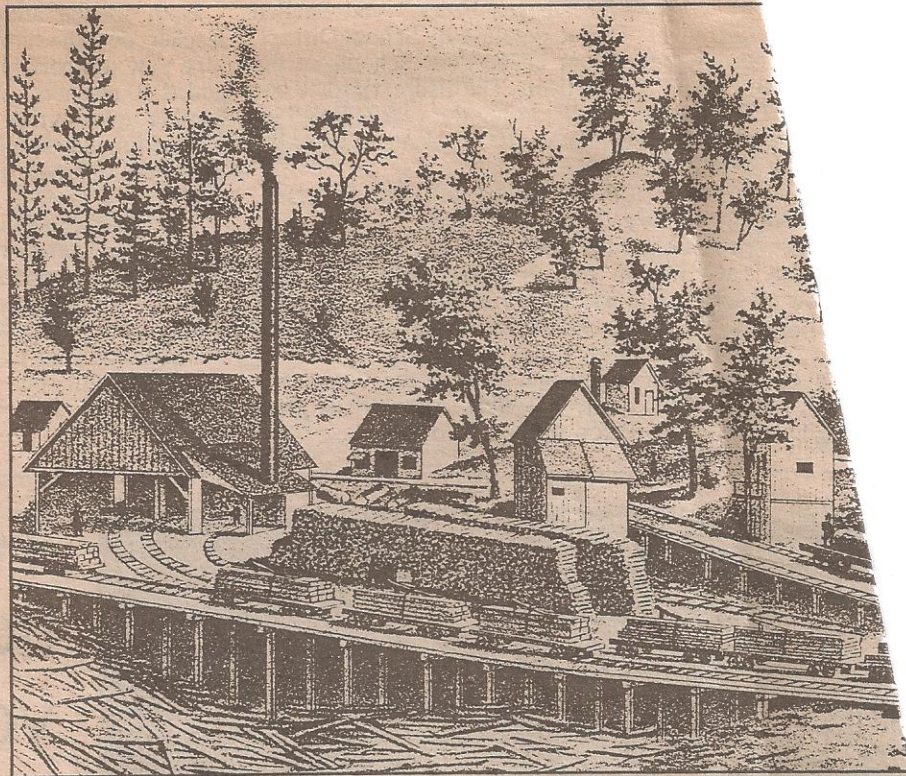
As the white man established himself during the Gold Rush, trees were consumed at an alarming rate. They were used for building flumes and shelters and for heat. There was such a demand that it was only natural that many mills sprang up.

Two early small lumber operations were Clipper Mills and New England Mills. Clipper Mills began in the American River Canyon with a box factory. But with the coming of the Central Pacific Railroad, the settlement relocated near the tracks and became Clipper Gap. New England Mills was the forerunner of Weimar and did not stay in business long.

The best known lumber company was Towle Brothers with its own town of Towle, which was located near Dutch Flat and Alta. The last signs of this town were destroyed when Interstate 80 was built.

There were three Towle brothers: Ethan Allen, George Washington and Edward Warrington Towle, all from Vermont. Ethan arrived in California in 1852 and did some mining in Dutch Flat. His brothers joined him later and by 1856 they were in the lumber business.

Over the years they operated more than 12 mills, moving their base of operations as each area was cleared of trees. Narrow-gauge railroads ran out into the forest to bring back the logs. After one



The Kearsarge Mill in Dutch Flat was part of the Towle Brothers lumber

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section was finished they took up the track and re-laid it in another direction to reach more trees.

The Towles had a sister, May, who married John Henry Robie. The Robies also came from Vermont to help run the business. In 1887, the Robies moved to Auburn so their son, Edwin Towle Robie,

could attend Sierra Normal College.

While in college, Edwin met Ida Stone, whose father had a blacksmith shop on Washington Street in Auburn. They married and had two children, Wendell and Edwina. By this time, E.T. was secretary of Towle Bros. in Auburn.

At its peak, Towle Bros. had retail outlets as far away as Tucson, Ariz., and was considered the most prominent lumber firm in California. The Towles made their fortune with their biggest customer, the Central Pacific Railroad.

They supplied milled ties for the track when the Union Pacific had to make do with round log ties. They also supplied the timbers for the snow sheds. In 1882 there were 225 people at Towle.

In 1900, surviving brother George sold the business to Hull Lumber Co. of Ottawa, Canada. E. T. Robie, J. H. Robie and D. L.

Huntley then Lumber Co. Towle Bros. partnership with V. owned Loomis T. was president in Woodland, Truckee, Tahoe, Colfax.

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of the Towle Brothers lumber empire, which reached its peak in the the 1880s.

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Huntley then formed the Auburn Lumber Co. from the Auburn Towle Bros. retail outlet. In partnership with W. B. Dearborn they owned Loomis Lumber. Later E. T. was president of these and yards in Woodland, Davis, Dixon, Truckee, Tahoe, Grass Valley and Colfax.

For many years, Auburn Lumber had a corner on the market. But after World War II that changed. With the post-war boom came greater demand. The Foresthill Divide opened up with Hughes Brothers, Stockton Box and American Forest Products. There were also smaller finishing mills in the South Placer area.

In Auburn, Fisher Lumber Co. was established on Highway 49. It was purchased by J. R. Simplot of Idaho and became Cal-Ida. Simplot named his lumber division in the same manner as his potato business, Or-Ida. He also had Simplot Soilbuilder Mineral and Chemical division and Grandview

Farms for livestock in Idaho.

In 1964, Cal-Ida was getting nearly 60 million board feet of green lumber from mills in Downieville and Camptonville in California and Chiloquin, Ore. Cal-Ida covered 87 acres and ran two shifts in the moulding mill and box factory as well as a retail yard. The firm shipped finished lumber all over the United States.

George Duff was the general manager until Smiplot sold to Bohemia, which closed the lumber yard in 1982. Auburn Lumber closed in 1985.

With the decline of available trees and the use of sheetrock in construction, the lumber industry appears to have passed its prime. The first logs taken out at Towle were so big they could only fit one on a wagon, and every knot in it was thrown away.

Now, in an attempt to conserve resources, every block of clear lumber is put through a finger-joint machine to make full-size boards.