

## ILLINOISTOWN

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This information was taken from a tape recording made by Gene Markley of a presentation given by Stella Cortopassi to the Colfax Historical Society. The meeting was held in the home of Mrs. Heffren. The date of the meeting is not known to the transcriber.

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I'm sure most of you know the history of Illinoistown that has been recorded in the annals of Placer County. However, I will try to relate to you as much as I know of the place from persons who were born in Illinoistown, including myself, and what little I've gathered from other sources, and also from my late mother.

Illinoistown started in 1849. It was first known as Alder Grove. It was a distribution point for supplies for neighboring camps and a trading center, second only to Auburn. It was regarded as the head of wagon navigation on the divide between the Bear River and the North Fork of the American River. Pack mules bore merchandise from Sacramento to the mining camps beyond the rim of the canyons on either side. One of the trails went up to Mineral Bar Hill. At a later date one of the most important turnpike roads in the county was constructed with a substantial covered bridge crossing the river. It was known as the Mineral Bar bridge and road, seven miles in length, entering and leaving the canyon which was about 1500 feet in depth. It was constructed by Charles Rice & Company, and cost about \$75,000.

When the wagons reached Alder Grove, as Illinoistown was first called, a corral was built in the upper portion of the valley, and it was designated as "Upper Corral". In the early summer of 1849, three log buildings were erected for trading posts; one by Sears and Miller at the extreme lower end of the valley, the other by John W. Piersons at the spring at the "Narrows", and still another about a quarter of a mile above, at the eastern side of the valley, by a Mr. Neall.

The first pioneer settler in May of 1849 was E. T. Mendenhall who had left his young wife and baby in San Francisco while he came mountainward to find a place suitable for his wife and family. He fell in love with Alder Grove and Upper Corral. Mr. Mendenhall was the first pioneer mountain fruit culturist of Placer County. He planted the first apple trees on the Keck place. He also built the Keck home and lived there until the Central Pacific Railroad reached Colfax. He sold his home to Jacob Keck. His son, George,

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was the first child born in Illinoistown. His daughter, Elvira Mendenhall Angwin was a baby when she came to Illinoistown.

The Egbert brothers were also among the first pioneers. The Honorable Jacob Keck sent the first box of apples to England, to a friend, and they withstood the journey very well.

In the wintertime, water came pouring down the hill between the Vivian and McGinn homes. A large ditch was formed which ran by the Methodist Church - I'm speaking of Colfax here- through the flat. When it got to the Keck place it was called "The Branch". It was dry in the summer. In the wintertime it often overflowed its banks and swept away the little footbridge that crossed the ditch in front of the McCarthy home. The old ditch is filled in, making a broad street which heretofore was almost an impassable street when the water was high and the bridge by the Iowa Hill Bar had to be used.

J. O. Graham set out the first grapevines on the dry hillside. They were the most delicious grapes, grown without irrigation. By the way, I want to bring to your attention that when my father planted his vineyard, he never irrigated the grapes. You are not supposed to irrigate grapes. That is why it makes the wine tastier. The vines around the Lodi area, they have to irrigate them because of the extreme heat, but the wine has a little more of a watery taste.

There was Lodge #51 in Illinoistown, under a charter from the Grand Lodge of California, dated May 3, 1854. It was located in Illinoistown until 1868 when Colfax absorbed the ancient town and moved its quarters there. On June 24, 1868 the Lodge dedicated the new hall.

The post office in Illinoistown got its start on November 22, 1853. The postmaster was Mr. Brazil Bricow. He was the only postmaster, according to the records of the Post Office Department in Washington D.C. He took office when Franklin Pierce was President, and continued to serve under James Buchanan, Abraham Lincoln and Andrew Jackson.

The first school in Illinoistown, as it was printed in an early newspaper, was located on the highway where the Cortopassi home stands (that's my home). However, to be more accurate, it was located in the lower front garden of my home where the olive trees are located. There was a spring there with mint growing around it. It was a one room structure built from timbers gotten out by Ed Brickley from his sawmill just below the school house. The timbers were hauled to the site by ox teams.

The school room was heated by a large stove and there was a kettle of boiling water for sanitary purposes. Basins, towels and soap were at the back entrance to the school. The desks were made of



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milled lumber. The recitation bench was a long one in front of the teacher's desk. Scholars had to recite pieces or write compositions. The first teacher was Mary Rice Parker. The second was Mrs. Galloway. Frank Sanderson taught the first school in Illinoistown in 1854 and 1855. The first public school was taught in 1858 by a teacher named Bluet. The second school in Illinoistown was used as a packing shed by the Egbert brothers, and was remodeled into a two story school building. The older pupils occupied the lower floor while the younger ones had to climb the stairs built on the outside of the school house.

The school was in Upper Illinoistown where the weeping willow stood. This is near the present Colfax Motel, past the Highland House on old Highway 40, now called Placer Hills Road. Mr. A. H. Goodrich and Mr. O'Dwyer were the teachers. Mr. A. H. Goodrich was also the second Superintendent of Schools in Placer County. When the new school in Colfax was built, this second one in Illinoistown was put on rollers and moved to Colfax and used as a wagon and blacksmith shop. The building was later used as an auto repair shop.

Not far from the Keck home there was a Chinatown on Ed Dwyer's place. This new settlement did not last long. The Chinese cemetery stood at the foot of the hill in the pines, across from the second Illinoistown school house, about where the Colfax Motel is, below the Highland House. After having been buried many years, the Chinese box coffins were excavated, the bones of the dead were removed and were shipped to China. They left the remnants however, old clothes, etc. It was customary when burying a Chinaman to place rice, chickens and a roasted pig by the grave. They also placed punks and red paper around the grave to keep the evil spirits away.

Indians also resided in Illinoistown in the Suburban Pines area. I believe also on the Gibbs property, across the Iowa Hill road. They had their own cemetery there, which is still in existence today. I recall very vividly when one of them expired there was much ado. I could watch with my mother from the front porch of my home. They would erect and place poles over the grave of the deceased, and I imagine wires strung across. I imagine the poles were crosswise so the wires could reach across them. They would hang the deceased's clothes and light them with matches so the ashes would fall on the grave, and all the while dancing and chanting and carrying on around the grave for two nights and a day. We got very little rest, I remember. It was quite an event.

I also recall an Indian, Elmer, from California, and Lucy, a Pawnee from Nevada. Lucy wore a patch over one eye. There was also Molly Jack, she washed clothes for my mother when my mother was ill at one time. On the Iowa Hill road, across from the Keck-Gibson properties, where the left exit leads to Suburban Pines and the

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Forestry Station, the Indians had a mortar and pestle that they used to pulverize the acorns, manzanita berries, etc. for the making of flour from same. I understand that this mortar rock is still existing, however, on a recent survey I made there, I was unable to locate it.

There was a hundred year old oak tree right on the corner of the entrance to the Iowa Hill Road. It was felled when the freeway was being constructed.

The original cemetery was situated on the Winchester ranch behind the existing old garage and service station on Canyon Way Road. The Winchester house was an old Illinoistown landmark and was recently destroyed by fire.

Across from my father's property, just across the existing olive trees, was Frank Callet's Illinoistown Art Gallery, and also his home - two dwellings. I have a picture here that shows it. I recall those two buildings. When I was growing up, they were still there. When I was a young girl I remember that fire destroyed the building. This occurred during the day.

Just a few hundred yards from these two buildings, going West, was a two story house built in 1853. This house was put together with square nails. The Nelson family resided there when my mother married my father in 1907. I still recall years later that it had two tall trees in front, right on old Highway 40. One of the Nelson girls, Nettie, married the second Jacob Keck. From this marriage, five of the seven children are now living - four in the Illinoistown area on the old Keck property - Carl, Walter, Jake, known as "Buzz", and Bertha. George resides in Reno. How well I remember the old Keck home, just a bit below the curve, below the Highland House and Motel on old Highway 40.

COMMENT FROM AUDIENCE - My mother was born there, and so was I.

Cortopassi - If anyone wants to look at the pictures closer, you may do so. They belong to (unable to decipher the name). I have to give them back to her.

There was a field in my day there with the abandoned stage coaches. I have pictures of those, too. And I remember them.

The Kecks children's grandmother rode the first stage coach to Illinoistown from Sacramento. Near Illinoistown there was what was called the old Baldwin place, the Mendenhall Hotel and grandfather Keck's grocery store and saloon. He was also constable of Illinoistown. He came from Pennsylvania in 1849.

At the fort, across from Turner Hill, which is below the new Mountain Village building that is being constructed there, was a



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two story home belonging to Hansen's grandfather - grandfather of Alice Hansen, whom I knew. The Hansens resided on the other Cortopassi property across from the Highland House, who incidently were my cousins. Also the Bain residence was there, but that was before my time. I do recall the carnival shows and circuses on the Keck field below the Kingdom Hall church.

I remember the first airplane that landed there and took passengers up to fly a bit over the Illinoistown area. I recall very vividly how everybody was staring up into the sky with "ohs" and "ahs", afraid that the plane was going to fall.

In lower Illinoistown there were two watering troughs, one on either side of old Highway 40, for the horses. They were just about where the ramp is over I-80, below Dingus McGee's. However I recall only one, but there were two, the other one on the other side of the ramp. I imagine it's more or less hard to tell because of the existing freeway.

Now I will try to give you a bit of the history of my place, the place where I was born. My father bought the property there, 40 acres of it, in the year of 1899, that was 34 years after Colfax came into existence. He built the home there and planted the vineyards for the winery, and it is still in existence today, but of course there is no wine there now. I imagine most of you have seen it, it still has the big name on the doors under the home - "PLACER COUNTY WINERY - 1900". I was born there, and I've lived there practically all my life, except for the two and a half years that I was away from home.

Dad planted 30 or 32 acres of vineyard, and the rest of it was in grain or hay for the horses. Also at the top of the hill, above the County maintenance station, he had three acres there which the Government leased as an experimental vineyard for years. Of course, it was dad's property, but the Government experimented on grapes there, and on the 3 acres there were about 265 varieties of choice grapes, mostly imported from France. They grew loads of red grapes and white grapes there. After the Government was through experimenting there, they had a thermometer there for measuring weather temperature, and we had to change the paper roll weekly. We would roll it up and put it in a carton and send it back to Washington. When they got through with all their experimenting, dad was allowed to pick his grapes and make his wine over there, you know, whatever he wanted to do with it. He may have possibly sold some of the white grapes, I don't remember.

He bought the property in 1899 and constructed the home and winery in 1900. On September 1, 1900, he had a house warming and Alberta Cross was present. She was just a young kid then.