

LIFE IN PLACER COUNTY'S
EARLY DAY MOUNTAIN MINES
1903 - 1907

By Lynford (Bud) Scott

This story of Placer County's early day gold mining and happenings in its remote mountain regions is from memory as told me by my late parents Leslie Meredith and Fannie Lardner Scott. My mother's maiden name was Fannie Branch, being a descendant of the Lardners, Placer county pioneers who settled in Auburn and vicinity in the 1800's. This spans the years from their marriage in 1903 through 1907.

Some of the dates mentioned were verified from postmarks found on greeting cards kept in an album by my mother. My parents have long since passed on, but the happenings related here seem as though they were told to me yesterday. Although this is not a first hand account, in a sense I was witness to some of the happenings as I was born at Bullion on April 13, 1907. My brother Arden Branch Scott was born in Auburn in 1905.

Shortly after their marriage in 1903 in Auburn at the ages of 28, my father was hired as blacksmith at Black Canyon Mine on the headwaters of the Middle Fork of the American River. Westville was about three miles up the mountain above the mine at the northeast end of Foresthill Divide. Foresthill Divide Road starts near Baker Ranch above Foresthill. From

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an altitude of about 4,000 feet it gradually increases to approximately 5,400 feet at Westville.

Back in those days this was a wild, primitive area requiring a rough trip by wagon or horseback over tortuous grades and hazardous passages from the main supply center of Auburn.

My father, above all, was a master blacksmith, able to sharpen the drills for the mining operations, shoe the horses and cantankerous mules, and do the hundreds of other jobs expected of a blacksmith. On many occasions his ability to repair a broken part or build a new one was the means of keeping the mining operation going. He fashioned many of his own tools, and although he had only a grammar school education, no line of work was too complicated for him to master.

For my mother this stay back in the mountains was quite a contrast from the happy life she had been accustomed to at her parents' fruit ranch near Penryn. She was the youngest of four children. A host of friends and relatives lived nearby and all enjoyed an active social life. Black Canyon was a world apart from all this happy life, as Mother said she didn't see another woman for the first six months of her stay there.

Black Canyon, as its name implies, is located in a deep canyon on a tributary of the American River. The shadows fall early here as sunlight was limited by the high mountains surrounding it.

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If memory serves me right, Dad said that Black Canyon Mine was the largest gravel gold mine in the world at that time. Not being familiar with mining operations, I don't know about such things.

my folks' cabin was across the river from the main trail. During high water the trip across was made by use of a hand-propelled platform dangling below a cable stretched high above the river; it rode on flanged wheels and was known as a Dutchman. This was always a terrifying experience for Mother.

During the height of winter the mine was shut down due to heavy snows. My father was kept on as watchman and maintenance man at this time of year.

This remote area was a hunter's paradise. Back in those days hunting was less a sport than now, as for the most part it was carried on to supply meat for the table. Deer could be found on a series of benches or flats that extended up the mountain. If they weren't on the first bench, they probably could be found on the second or third. Bear could be heard bawling in the timber across the river at times.

Above all, Dad liked to hunt bear. He also used traps to catch them. One bear he caught had a white stripe down its back from head to tail. In tanning the hide, though, the process failed and the hair could be pulled out by the handful. The Chinese had a standing order with Dad for the gallbladder, as they believed it contained aphrodisiacal powers.

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At every opportunity Dad would shoulder his gun and head up the mountain. While hunting one day, he saw a bear standing with its front feet up on an old fallen tree. He got off a shot but, due to the cloud of blackpowder smoke, could not see if he had killed the bear or if it was running toward him, so he retreated in haste. On going back later, he found that he had missed and the bear had pulled a great slab of bark off the log as it bounded away in the opposite direction.

Food supplies, mail and other necessities were to be had at Westville, about three miles up the mountain. Winter snows caused this to be a strenuous trip. Dad fashioned a pair of skis, and after much practice was able to get about the country on them fairly well. Another man at the mine also made a pair of skis and the two of them would often race. The trip up the mountain to Westville took about three hours through the snow, but the downhill run only required a fraction of that time on skis.

On one of these trips for supplies Dad brought back a little black puppy tucked inside his coat with just his head sticking out. They named him Tonto and he became a much-loved member of the family. Tonto grew to be a large powerful pooch and Dad took him on many of his hunts for deer and bear. Mother felt uneasy when left alone without Tonto's comforting presence.

On one of their infrequent trips to Auburn, the folks took Tonto. Not having seen another dog since weaned from his mother, he lit into every dog he encountered, thinking it just another denizen of the wild.

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On arriving back at the mine, the folks mounted the high-wire Dutchman, as the river was high from snow run-off. As usual, Tonto had to swim the river. As they started across they could see him swimming far below, but he had difficulty bucking the strong current. They watched anxiously and were horrified when he was swept over the boiling rapids far below the crossing and disappeared from sight. Mother and Dad arrived at the cabin and as they sadly got settled and started a fire in the stove, thinking all the while Tonto was a gonner, there was a scratching at the door. There stood Tonto, wet and bedraggled, but with tail wagging. It goes without saying the folks were overjoyed and smothered him with affection. Tonto was stiff and sore for days after, restless and groaning in his sleep as if dreaming of his ordeal.

One day after work Dad shot a black bear caught in one of his traps up on the mountain. He was able to drag it down the steep mountainside to the flat in front of the cabin where he planned to skin it. As it was getting dark, Mother came out with the kerosine lamp. A rope was thrown over the limb of a tree and secured to the bear. The job of raising it off the ground was begun. As Dad would lift and heave on the bear, Mother would snup the free end of the rope with one hand while holding the lamp in the other. When they had raised the bear about the proper height for skinning, the old rope broke. The bear hit the ground with a thud and the lamp was plown out. The bear's carcass gave off a gurgling sound similar to a "growl". In the excitement of the moment, and the pitch darkness of a moonless

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night, they both ran for the cabin door, getting there about the same time. After regaining their composure and having a good laugh, they went out and finished the skinning job.

On another occasion a group of mining engineering students from a university were making a tour of inspection of the operations. One day during their stay Dad asked them if they would like to accompany him to check a trap he had set up on the mountain. They eagerly accepted. Sure enough, there was a big bear in the trap. Excitement reigned since most of these young men had never seen a wild bear before. They decided to try to bring the bear back to camp alive. There were no tranquilizing darts in those days, so they finally subdued him by holding him down with a long, heavy pole. This was no easy task, as the bear resisted to the last. He was finally roped to a long stout pole and carried back to camp by many willing hands.

Dad made a steel collar and fastened it around the bear's neck. A long chain was fastened to this and the other end secured to a large stump. When Mr. Bear was made free of his bounds, he jumped up on the stump. From there he made one great bound down the hill toward freedom, only to come up with a terrific jerk at the end of the chain. He gathered himself up, climbed up on the stump, never to try that again.

Dad fed and watered that bear for several months after that and he became fairly tame. As he was getting fat, the steel collar started to cut into his neck. Rather than have him go through the ordeal of choking him down again, the superintendent of the

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mine told Dad he would have to be put out of his misery, so Dad got out his six-shooter and did the job.

By now you no doubt have come to the conclusion that this is a bear story rather than about mining. My father probably figured a boy would much rather hear about bear hunting than the complexities of gold mining.

For a change of diet the folks would often fish for trout in the clear cold stream below the cabin. The bottom of a large dishpan could be covered with beautiful big mountain trout while fishing from one rock at streams edge.

While working at Black Canyon mine, the superintendent died. He must have been a fine man who was well liked by the workers, as after attending the funeral services, Dad said he never cared for organ music after that.

Around 1905 a move was made to Auburn where my brother was born on April 12. Sometime after 1905 my father went to work at Bullion mine, several miles up the Forest Hill Divide Road and about three miles angling down into the steep canyon of Bullion Creek, a tributary of the Middle Fork of the American river.

Bullion, during its heyday, was quite a sizeable community of around one thousand people. There was a 50-room hotel, lodge hall, post office, school stores, blacksmith shop, stables, bunkhouse, saloon and many workers' cabins, some with families. The office, near the mining operations, was in a two-story building and contained a large concrete vault where the gold bullion and other

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valuables were kept.

At Bullion Mother was more contented, as she had the companionship of many other women. Dad played the violin and would often play at dances held in the lodge hall, accompanied by mother on the piano. Dad would have made a good showman, as he excelled at tricks of magic, could put on a puppet show, play a harmonica, jew's harp, tap dance, and had a good singing voice. Back in the old days folks made their own entertainment when living in these remote mining communities.

Due to the steep terrain, most of the buildings at Bullion were set on long underpinnings, or sat on a level spot dug out of the hillside. A few of the cabins were built right over the creek. This is where the Chinese workers lived. Wooden steps and staircases extended from the main roadway through town to many of the buildings.

It was in April of 1907 that I was born in Bullion. The doctor had been alerted to be ready to ride as the time of my arrival was getting near. When the time did arrive, the doctor took the long ride of twenty miles on horseback to no avail as I had arrived in the meantime with the assistance of an efficient midwife called Belle. I got a bad start in life, being frail and sickly, but after a life in the out-of-doors I can be thankful for better than average health now.

Some of my father's love of the out-of-doors and fishing and hunting must have rubbed off on me. I still plan to go deer

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hunting though eligible for Medi-Care. I have tagged 46 bucks in past years, but must confess I have never bagged a bear although I have seen quite a few while deer hunting.

While in the Foresthill area in 1963 I had the good fortune to meet Mr Russell Powell who lives at Michigan Bluff. Mr. Powell, a long-time resident of the area, said he was born at Bullion and acquainted with my folks during their stay there. He was seven years old at the time. Also, he had a picture of the town taken about the turn of the century. He said electricity was used at the hotel and in the mine. It came from a generator quite a distance down the creek. Mr. Powell said he understood it was put in for use in the Sunny South Mine which was operated by a Mr. Power. After this operation was abandoned because of a queasy ground condition making the tunnel unstable, Mr. Power made arrangements to go into the Bullion mine where Mr. Wesley and Mr. Crosbey were running a tunnel. Mr. Power was to branch off the main tunnel to hit the Great Channel. Mr. Powers hauled Wesley's ore cars for him as he had an electric motor to pull the cars with.

At first the town was called Centerville, but when they got the post office, they had to change the name to Bullion as there was another Centerville in California. (There is a Centerville in Humboldt county and possibly a post office was there in the early days.)

A lady I met in Foresthill said she wondered where the miners had dumped the tons of beautiful quartz crystals taken from Bullion.

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The Bullion area proved to be in as wild an area and with as much game as Black Canyon. Both areas especially ideal habitat for bears, although they ranged high and wide over the entire American river drainage.

Dad built a tree house over a deer lick. He told of staying up in it too late one day and when darkness overtook him, Mother became worried and had a neighbor hike up the mountain with a lantern to get him. My cousin Alvin Johnson of Sacramento said he had seen the tree house not too many years ago while deer hunting in the area. Other oldtimers of the area no doubt remember it.

Dad also built a bear trap on the mountainside, across the creek from Bullion. (I have a picture of him standing alongside it.) This trap was built of logs from trees up to a foot in diameter which were cut right on the spot. It was box shaped, about six feet high, six feet wide, eight feet long, and had a heavy door which was suspended vertically over the entrance. There was a small opening on one side with steel bars in it. When a bear went inside and pulled a cow head or other bait off a hook, the door was triggered, dropping it over the opening, and cutting off the bear's only means of escape. The riper the bait, the better. Bears have an excellent sense of smell and would be drawn to the trap from miles around.

Each bear caught in the trap would tear off splinters from the walls with his teeth and claws until there was quite a pile of rubble in the bottom of the trap. Dad drove spikes into the walls to prevent the bears from chewing their way out. He caught

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eight bears in this trap during the winter of 1906-1907.

Sometime during the stay at Bullion, Gene Lawson, Dad's half-brother came to visit. Of course he was anxious to see the trap so one day they headed up the mountain to check it. When they arrived at the trap they saw that the door was down, but on looking through the little barred window they could see nothing of the occupant. Evidently whatever was in it had buried itself under the splinters in an attempt to hide. Dad struck upon an idea that soon produced results. He set fire to a dry branch of leaves and poked it through the bars of the opening. In an instant a bear exploded with a roar from under the pile, sending splinters, dust and dirt flying. Gene and my father jumped back with a start. Dad jokingly told Gene they would get on top of the trap, open the door and shoot the bear as it ran out. Gene would have none of that, so Dad dispatched the bear in the usual way by shooting him through the little barred window.

Gene Lawson spent his later years on his ranch near Loomis with his family.

While in the vicinity of Foresthill in 1963, I found the location of Bullion Mine on a map. One warm June day I drove out Foresthill Divide road several miles to a side road that led to a spot called Chicken Hawk Campground. I left the car there and followed an old road up and over the top of Chicken Hawk Ridge. From there, the road slanted down along the side of the steep mountain in a north-eastern direction. From my high vantage point I could see a larger depression I thought would be about where Bullion

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Creek flowed. The old road had been little used of late and had been washed out at several creek crossings. I wondered if this was the same roadbed my folks had traveled fifty-six years before. As I walked along enjoying the profusion of flowers and ferns along the banks, and the fragrant pine-scented air, I imagined that my folks had enjoyed these wonders of nature those many years before.

The roadway wound on deeper into the void. Ridges and canyons came into view far below and eventually joined the main canyon of the American River. A feeling of awe tingled in my spine as I made my way, as though someone unseen was walking with me to show me the way to this place where I first saw the light of day. It was difficult to imagine that practically every square foot of this most rough country had been scoured for gold by the hardy prospectors in the early days. The map marked the locations of scores of old mines scattered all over this vast basin.

After I had traveled what I thought was the proper distance, and came to a flowing stream, I somehow knew this was the place, although there wasn't a building standing and everything was overgrown by brush and trees. I had learned that a fire had leveled the town in the 1920's. I began to look around the area for signs of the town. I soon found flat areas dug out of the steep hillside and many other telltale signs of an inhabited area. There were pieces of pottery, pans, silverware, old castiron stoves, bottles, cans, beasteads, etc. All else of an inflammable nature had been consumed by the fire.

I finally found a trail, formerly a road, leading down through the willows to the creek where I found the tunnel or shaft of Bullion mine. It was at creek level and the water from seepage in the shaft and the creek mingled at the entrance. Some old drillheads lay at the mouth of the tunnel, along with railway spikes, and other iron objects. Some of the huge rocks in the creek bed were drilled to hold bolts for support of some machinery or track. There were some concrete walls down stream, possibly a foundation for a stamp mill.

A short distance from the mine entrance, up the access road, was another trail or road leading off diagonally to the left. Here on a leveled-off area I found the remains of the office building. All that remained of the two-story structure was the massive concrete vault with walls a foot or more in thickness. It was possibly ten feet square and about the same in height. The floor level was about four feet off the ground and one could stand inside with room to spare. A large safe lay rusting out in front of the door on its side with its door open.

That is about all that remains of this once thriving mining community.

As I sat on a rock down by the creek contemplating what I had seen, I could visualize what took place those many years ago when we were part of it, the sound of children playing, dogs barking, teamsters shouting as they urged their faithful charges on, the jingle of hame bells, the rumble of ^{ore} ~~car~~ cars, and the rattle of