

The California Gold Country

Highway 49 Revisited



Mariposa

Town History - Gold Discovery, Early Citizenry, Legends

Historic Sites - Local Ruins, Relics, Buildings & Scenery

- St. Joseph's Catholic Church
- Mariposa County Jail
- Mariposa County Courthouse
- Trabucco Warehouse
- Mariposa I.O.O.F. Hall

Town History

The poetic name Mariposa, Spanish for "butterfly," was first applied in this region by members of the Moraga Expedition, to a small stream at the foot of the Sierra Nevada mountains. The party had left the Mission San Juan Bautista on September 21 of 1806, on an expedition to locate suitable sites for a proposed string of inland missions to parallel those located along the coast. Led by Alferaz Gabriel Moraga, they crossed the San Joaquin River on September 27 and during that afternoon encountered, "myriads of butterflies, of the most gorgeous and variegated colors, perched about on the surrounding trees." Camping that evening on a slough not far from the main river, the chaplain and diarist of the expedition, a Franciscan priest named Father Pedro Munoz, made this entry for September 27, 1806:

"This place is called the Mariposas because the great multitudes of these, especially at night and in the morning, could not be more troublesome, their eagerness to hide from the rays of the sun reaching such proportions that they pursued us everywhere, so much that one got into the ear of one of the Expedition Leaders, causing him great discomfort and not a little effort to extract it."

The mining camp of Mariposa materialized in the spring of 1849 when a miner named Alex Godey found a few flakes of gold while prospecting the streams of Colonel Frémont's Las Mariposas Grant. Gold was plentiful in the vicinity and it wasn't long before a good number of miners were settled in along the small flat bordering Mariposa Creek, a little ways below the present Hwy 140 bridge. Later that fall, Palmer, Cook & Co. sent about fifty men from San Francisco to work a claim they had leased from John Charles Frémont, which later became the Mariposa Mine. Their arrival soon led to a townsite being laid out, and Mariposa took its first step towards permanency.

In addition to the rich placers of the area, the camp chanced to be located on the gold-bearing quartz veins of the Mother Lode. Its future thus insured, the small mining town grew in size and importance as miners from the surrounding areas gravitated to the rich diggings. Saloons, general stores, restaurants, and hotels were quickly established to take care of the miners' every need.

Mariposa County was one of the original twenty-seven counties created in California when the boundary lines were drawn in 1850. At that time it occupied more than one-fifth of the state's area or approximately thirty thousand square miles. Stretching from the Coast Range to the present Nevada state line, and touching Los Angeles County on the south, Mariposa County unwillingly became the "Mother of the Counties," as huge parcels of land were annexed away to create six new counties and

add pieces to five others. It was eventually whittled down to its present size, a mere 1,455 square miles. The county seat was moved here on November 10 of 1851 from the nearly abandoned Agua Fria, which had lost most of its population to the rapidly expanding Mariposa.

Although he never lived in Mariposa, Colonel John C. Frémont—the famed explorer, army officer, and presidential candidate—had a major influence on local events. In fact, he at one time owned the entire town as it was located within the boundaries of his vast, forty-four thousand acre Mariposa Land Grant.

In 1847, Frémont gave \$3,000 to Thomas O. Larkin, the U. S. Consul to the Territory of California, in order to buy the Santa Cruz Ranch, a choice piece of property located near San Jose. When next Frémont and his wife happened to meet Mr. Larkin, they were in for a little surprise. “To their stupefaction the Frémonts learned that Larkin had not bought the Santa Cruz Ranch as he had agreed to do, but instead had bought for them a wild tract of land somewhere high in the Sierra Nevada called the Mariposa Ranch. It was inaccessible, a hundred miles from the nearest settlement, one hundred and fifty miles from San Francisco, with no farming land, too wild and cold in winter even to graze cattle, and overrun with hostile Indians.” Quite possibly, Larkin may have bought the Santa Cruz Ranch for himself.

Frémont was bitterly disappointed at having been sold what he considered a worthless parcel of land. However, when gold was discovered in placer deposits near his property, Frémont became less bitter. As his grant was a “floating” grant, with its exact boundaries undetermined at the time of making, Frémont quite probably laid claim to some land which wasn’t his in an effort to gain control of the mines. The U.S. Land Commission eventually ordered a survey to determine the exact boundaries of the grant. Alexey W. von Schmidt did the survey during the months of April and May of 1852. Laid out in three sections, the grant (which was for agricultural as well as mineral land) was often referred to as the “Frying Pan Grant” due to the survey’s resemblance to that utensil. The survey also chanced to include a section of the Mother Lode gold belt.

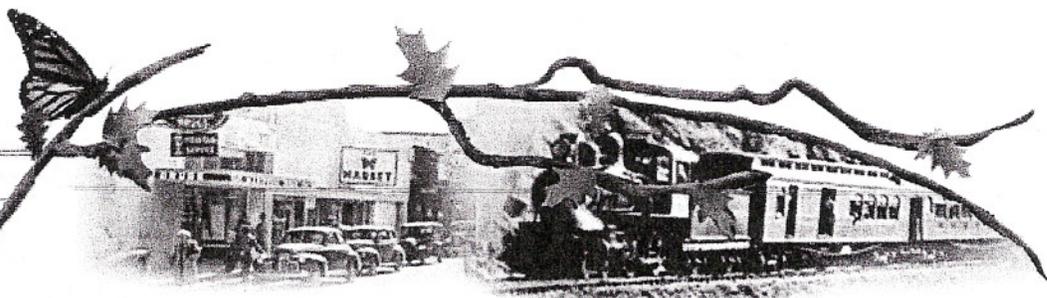
The town’s streets were laid out in 1849, with many of them being named for members of the Frémont family. The main thoroughfare, Hwy 140, is also known as Charles Street, after Frémont himself. Jessie Street was named for his wife, Jessie Benton Frémont, while Bullion Street was named for her father, Senator Thomas “Old Bullion” Benton. Jones Street honors Frémont’s brother-in-law, William Carey Jones.

Located on Hwy 49, Mariposa remains one of the most important towns in the Southern Mines. In addition to being the county seat, it is also on the main road to Yosemite National Park, which accounts for thousands of visitors each year. The town has a good number of historic structures still intact, and an excellent museum and history center that should not be missed.

MARIPOSA

-Home of Yosemite-
and A Lot More

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Mariposa County History

Californians tend to consider the gold rush as the beginning point of their history. In terms of establishing permanent towns (especially in the interior) and leaving a written historic record, this solipsism is understandable. The truth, of course, is that human societies dwelt here for 8,000 to 10,000 years before the gold rush, though our knowledge of that period is frustratingly sketchy. Even the first Europeans, the Spanish, left no settlements in present day Mariposa County, and few written records, although it was the expedition of Gabriel Moraga in September, 1806, which bestowed *Las Mariposas*, the Spanish name for butterflies, on the region because of the incredible number of these insects they encountered.

The first American to make a mark on Mariposa was John C. Fremont, soldier, explorer, and (later) presidential candidate. In 1847, while California was still Mexican territory, Fremont instructed his acquaintance, Thomas O. Larkin, to purchase the Santa Cruz ranch, a piece of property near San Jose. For some reason, Larkin purchased the Rancho Las Mariposas instead, to Fremont's annoyance, since this worthless land was over one hundred miles from the nearest settlement, had no farms or ranchlands, and was inhabited by hostile Indians. The discovery of gold the following year, however, completely altered Fremont's reaction. The gold rush was on and settlers flooded the area. Mariposa turned out to be at the southern end of the mother lode, and in addition to the town of Mariposa, a number of other settlements sprang into being, such as Agua Fria (briefly the Mariposa county seat in 1850 and 1851), Hornitos, Indian Gulch, Bear Valley, Coulterville, Mount Bullion (Princeton), and Bagby.

As the placer gold played out during the 1850s and early 1860s, hard rock quartz mining, organized by companies and worked by employees (who often lived in company housing and patronized company stores) replaced most of the thousands of individual miners and their tents, shanties, and the entrepreneurial businesses that had served them. "Less colorful, more orderly", is how one expert describes the change in communities that survived. A dwindling number of individuals, however, continued working small claims and mines.

Although the gold rush frenzy faded, it was responsible for roads being built and communities established, so that now settlers could turn to ranching, farming, and the small businesses serving them, along with the mines. The Railroad built along the Merced River to El Portal enabled various large scale enterprises. In fact during the 1920s close to 2,000 people lived and worked in the Merced River Canyon between Bagby to El Portal.

The Yosemite Lumber Company logged sugar pines from the slopes bordering Yosemite from 1912 until 1942. Faint signs of the inclines (tracks going straight up the side of the hills) are visible today in El Portal. Smaller logging operations continued elsewhere in Mariposa County through the 1950s. The Yosemite Portland Cement company quarried limestone from 1928 until 1944. A surviving building and sheds still exist across the river from Highway 140, about two miles west of Savage's Trading Post at the South Fork of the Merced. In the 1930s and 1940s a barium mine and crushing plant operated in El Portal. Also in the 1930s, due to an



increase in the price of gold, many mines resumed or stepped up the level of their operations, and individuals again took to the river and creeks to do placer mining.

The presence of Yosemite meant that tourism, as far back as the 1870s, played a role in the life of the county. Two competing stage roads to Yosemite Valley were opened in 1874, the Big Oak Flat Road (which evolved into present day route 120) and the Coulterville Road (today's Greeley Hill Road and Old Yosemite Road). Not much later, the Washburn brothers built a Road connecting their Wawona Hotel with the Valley (today's Wawona Road, although it descended through the hills rather than the tunnel, which was built in the 1920s). In 1875 the railroad got as far as Raymond, in Madera County, whence stages carried passengers over Chowchilla Mountain to Wawona. Big progress came with the Yosemite Valley Railroad from Merced to El Portal in 1907. Initially stages took passengers the rest of the way into the Valley, but they were soon replaced by motor busses. In 1926 the "all weather" highway, present day route 140 was completed. Among other changes, this was the first route into Yosemite that brought travelers directly through the heart of Mariposa town.

The growth of automobile travel since World War II has seen annual visitor levels to Yosemite rise from a few hundred thousand to four million. With the decline of small industrial operations (mining and logging) and of family and subsistence farms, the county's economy today is more tied to tourism than in earlier decades. Another change, which has been accelerating since the early 1990s, is an influx of retirees and second home owners from the Bay Area, Southern California, and the Central Valley. These new citizens are drawn by the climate (over 300 days of sunshine yearly), the beauty and accessibility of the outdoors, and the relaxed lifestyle. The opening of the new University of California campus in nearby Merced is likely to gradually influence the influx of newcomers who have younger economic and lifestyle interests.

The General Plan of Mariposa County, a recently updated version, continues the desirable rural lifestyle. Minimum parcel size in rural areas is five acres. Seventy percent of the county's residents live outside the towns of Mariposa and Coulterville, with many choosing to develop either on individual parcels, or within the large parcel subdivisions, which are still developing. Most new citizens are expected to provide for their own utilities and minor roads.

The towns of Mariposa and Coulterville have utility districts, with various levels of service provided within the subdivisions. Basic emergency services are available with the Sheriff Department, Mariposa County Fire Department and CalFire, Mercy Ambulance, and the Mariposa County Public Works Department. John C. Fremont Hospital, opened in 1950, provides emergency, primary and long-term care with air transfer available.

More than half the county is in Federal Reservation, with another twenty-five percent devoted to agriculture. This means that most of the residential lands available are along highways 49 and 140 through the middle of the county. Because of the desires of the citizens as expressed by the General Plan, the face of Mariposa County is unlikely to undergo radical change.