

A Very Short History of Bowling

“The rolling on the Bowling Alley never leaves off for ten consecutive minutes at anytime during the entire 24 hours. It is a favorite amusement at the mines, and the only difference that Sunday makes is that it never leaves off for one minute.”

The above is quoted from the “Shirley Letters,” accounts by Louise Amelia Knapp Smith Clappe of her life in mining camps along the Feather River in 1851 and 1852. The “Shirley Letters” are a collection of 23 letters sent by Mrs. Clappe, using the pen name Dame Shirley, to her sister Mary Jane in Massachusetts. They were published individually in “The Pioneer” a San Francisco based magazine in 1854-1855. They were collected and published in book form in 1922.

Bowling, both indoor and outdoor, has a much longer history than one might imagine. In the 1930’s British anthropologist Sir Flinders Petrie found a primitive form of the game in a child’s grave in Egypt that dates back to 3200 BC.

In 1366 King Edward III outlawed bowling because his troops were spending too much time bowling and neglecting their archery practice.

The English, Dutch and German immigrants to America all brought a form of bowling to their new homes. Lawn bowling was the most popular and there are still many cities named “Bowling Green” on the East Coast.

In 1819 author Washington Irving’s “Rip Van Winkle” awoke to the sound of “crashing nine pins.” In Colonial America 9 pin bowling was outlawed because of the gambling that accompanied the game. To circumvent the law, 10 pin bowling came into being.

Besides the “Shirley Letters” account from the Gold Rush period, John Plimpton, local historian and expert on mining along the American River, relates that in 1851 the gold camp of Grey Eagle City, along the Middle Fork, boasted eight stores, nine boarding houses, two gambling saloons, one 10 pin bowling alley, twenty-six bars, two carpenter shops, two blacksmiths, two bakers, two butchers and even one church. Grey Eagle City is an excellent example of the boom and bust nature of many early Gold Rush camps. It existed for only nine months.

A much smaller camp, Sandy Bar, along the Middle Fork, had, in 1851, five stores, three boarding houses, seven bars, one ten pin alley, one blacksmith, a baker and a butcher.

The first newspaper held in the collection at the Placer County Archives is the Placer Herald dated 1852. It was published in Auburn. Prominent among the advertisements is one for the International Bowling Saloon, which according to the text also carried the “finest liquors and cigars.” By 1854 the newspaper is already referring to it as “the old Bowling Alley” so it is quite likely that it was in existence in Auburn before 1852.

The American Hotel/Shanghai/Auburn Ale House was the site of the Diana Bowling Saloon that burned in 1855. A. J. Kenison, the local soda manufacturer had a Bowling Alley at the back of

his place near the train station in 1888. In 1890 he was offering a Stevens rifle and a Winchester Rifle as prizes for bowling contests.

In 1904 the doors to the Rialto Bowling Alley opened opposite the now long gone Freeman Hotel near the Railroad Station.

A typical Bowling Alley at the turn of the century was most likely a fairly rowdy male dominated place. In 1905, perhaps hoping to entice a higher caliber crowd, Huber and Williamson opened a new Bowling Alley on High Street that was "eastern-made" for \$1600.00 and outlawed drinks and cigars.

Indoor bowling was standardized in 1895 in New York City establishing the American Bowling Congress for men only. The Women's International Bowling Congress was not formed until 1917 in St. Louis.

The Grand Sierra Resort in Reno has a fifty lane Bowling Alley and the National Bowling Stadium is on N. Center Street in Reno. Bowling is enjoyed by ninety-five million people in more than ninety countries world-wide.

--April McDonald, Auburn City Historian