

EARLY HISTORY OF LAST CHANCE

High up in the grand Sierras
Neath the fearless eagles glance
With the sunshine of God on its rugged face
Is the brave old camp Last Chance
From a poem by H. H. Richmond

According to Andy Houk, one of the earliest pioneers in that area and who lived in Last Chance for over 50 years, died, and is buried there, this is the way it was discovered and named. In 1854 two prospectors seeking new diggings had spent the day on the mountain prospecting without success and late in the afternoon on the top of the hill one of the men said to his companion as he filled his pan, "Now this is the Last Chance. If there is no gold in this pan we leave." There was gold in the pan and they named the place Last Chance. They had come to an outcropping where at some time in the ancient past, a part of the mountain had slid off and left a part of an ancient river channel exposed. This was a little further down the side of the ridge from where the town of Last Chance was later located. It was called Missouri Flat by the miners. No doubt, because most of them had come to California from Missouri.

There were no trails or roads and the only means of travel was walking and carrying what one could on his back. A prospector carried a small pick, shovel, axe, a frying pan that he cooked in and also used to pan the dirt for gold.

The two prospectors spent the remaining days of summer panning and getting as much gold as possible. Winter weather usually began in September so when it started storming they left. They told about their discovery and the following summer when the weather was good, prospectors from everywhere went to Last Chance and the little community flourished and eventually a town that boasted of more than 500 votes grew up.

One of the pioneers, William Ray, discovered another outcropping about one mile farther down the ridge on a point overlooking the river. Soon a camp flourished there which was named Hell's Delight.

Then another man named Jake Bomboy discovered another outcropping about a mile farther up the ridge where a large channel had been exposed. He named the mine The Morning Star and soon a small camp flourished there that later was known as Star Town. At one time there were 17 homes perched on the steep river hillside like swallow's nests.

The outcropping at Missouri Flat proved to be very rich and the extent of each man's claim was an area about 20 or 25 feet square. That was about as much ground as a man could work with just a small pick and shovel and a pan to pan his gravel, during the few summer days in which he could stay and work. Winters were very severe in those days and if it stormed in September, it was snow. The average depth of snow was from 12 to 14 feet. The ground remained covered with snow until late in May or June. Water was no problem for a prospector as springs were

everywhere. They filled their pan with gravel and panned it at a spring or a small puddle of water they created.

The first prospectors were interested in getting as much gold as possible and did not take time to erect a crude shelter for themselves as they knew they would have to leave when it stormed. They found their way down across the rivers and canyons to where men were working near what is now Foresthill. They told about their discovery in Last Chance and soon it was well known by prospectors everywhere. Some of these second groups of men did take time from panning and worked together in constructing crude shelters for themselves. Log cabins were not the rule as the logs were too big to be handled by man without the aid of equipment. Their shelters were made of rough boards that were slit from Straight grained trees. In time some men with a horse or mule did find their way to the area and more tools and equipment were taken there.

When this second group of men arrived the ones at Missouri Flat realized they should erect shelters from themselves on ground that was not pay dirt. They moved nearer to the top of the ridge and over to a place which they later named Shady Grove Canyon. It was not a real canyon but was a protected place on the hillside where springs were plentiful so they erected shelters there in which to live.

There were no women among the first prospectors but finally a man named William Parkinson and his young wife arrived in the area. He saw there was a need for lumber so instead of mining he erected a saw mill that was operated by water power. A ditch was dug to the nearest canyon where water was available. The original heavy timbers for the mill were hewed or whip sawed. Trees were close to his mill sight and he did the logging with bulls. Soon there was plenty of lumber and houses were built in Shady Grove Canyon and where the town of Last Chance grew.

The first few years only surface mining was done but when lumber became available sluice boxes and small flumes were made and ground slicing was carried on. It never occurred to these first miners to do any tunneling or underground work.

A man named William Thomas who had come to Last Chance in 1858 with his wife Elizabeth, and two other men, conceived the idea of finding out where the gold in the outcropping came from. They began digging into the mountain side and soon found a channel which they named El Dorado. Mr. Thomas was not a well man so most of the labor was done by the other two. In a few years time he became so ill that he went to San Francisco to see a doctor. There he died from a hemorrhage of the lungs. His partners soon decided to move elsewhere and Elizabeth Thomas became the sole owner of the El Dorado. Before going to San Francisco, Mr. Thomas admonished his wife to hang on to the property as he was sure that it would become a good mine. How right he was! In time six channels became a part of the El Dorado.

Over the hill a short distance of about three fourths of a mile, three prospectors were doing some digging. They were John Hyland, Henry Williams and Seth Labaree. They discovered a mine which they named The Home Ticket. They named it that as they were in hopes they would find enough gold to buy a ticket back East to their homes. Most of these early miners came to California with the idea of staying no longer than three years at the most but rarely, if ever, did any of them return to their eastern homes. John or Jack as he was called, Henry and

Seth worked the Home Ticket which was an entirely different channel from the others in that area. Gold was much finer in this channel and never were nuggets of any size found in it.

At Last Chance there was the El Dorado Mine and further down the ridge there was the Caledonia, Lewis Flat and where the mountain plunged off to the river, Hell's Delight. Several different channels were discovered at Hell's Delight. One was owned by a man named Elijah Bishop, called Bishop's Mine. Two others named John and Henry Parmilee owned a claim which was known only as Parmilee's Mine. One that was called The Slab was owned by some men who had brought their wives with them. One's name was Martin. The Slab was very rich and the men had gold jewelry made for their wives from some of this gold. A jeweler named Jones came to that area and he did a big business in making jewelry from the gold. There was no alloy in this jewelry and as gold is soft the designs wore off on the rings where there was wear.

There were many mines up the ridge from Last Chance. Some of them were Little Hope, The Golden Fleece, The Golden Gate, Miller's Defeat, Bloody Ravine, Pine Nut, Blue Eyes, Flat Ravine, Pat Rabbit's, Barney Kavanaugh's and others. Not any of these proved to be as rich or as large as those at Last Chance. Some were soon worked out and some were worked for years before operations ceased.

Just above the town sight where the saw mill was located was a stand of beautiful trees, mostly Ponderosa pines, sugar pines and firs. These were felled to furnish the lumber for the mill. Water was brought to the town from Deep Canyon by ditch and flume. A ditch full of water ran down each side of the street and every home had a garden.

Prior to this everything the pioneers used or ate had to be brought around the "Horn" in sailing ships to San Francisco Bay, then up the river to Sacramento where it was loaded onto Ox teams or pack mules and taken to various camps scattered for many miles. One of their greatest hardships was the lack of fruits or vegetables. Dried apples were a part of the food brought around the "Horn" but often they were wormy and occasionally mildewed. Very few wild fruits or berries grew in the area and what little there was, was eaten by the bears, foxes and other wild animals. Some of the women wanting fruit so desperately gathered the thorny wild gooseberries, dried them in sacks and beat them with sticks to break off the thorns, then made a sauce of them. How they must have welcomed the coming of the water which meant they could plant the precious seeds they had brought with them from home.

In the little town there were two hotels, a butcher shop and a saloon. In 1862 a two story place was built that was called a Hurdy Gurdy House. Women that were known as Hurdy Gurdies travelled from camp to camp entertaining the men and gambling with them. This house, as was the case of many of the early public houses had an upper and lower porch across the front. On holidays and Sundays, a string band entertained the town folks on the upper front porch. A lean-to was added to the building. It was a confectionary store and sold some groceries such as dried apples and coffee. A second lean-to was added to the other side of the building and served as a barber shop and a wash room. When families began to arrive a school house was built just above the town. It was a two story building with the school room occupying the bottom floor and a meeting hall above. There was no regular Masonic or Odd Fellows Lodges in Last Chance but members of these organizations occasionally met in this hall.

A Frenchman named Busley – spelling of his name is not correct. I have spelled it as his name sounded in English and I never saw in any article about Last Chance. My grandparents spoke of him as being a French cabinet maker, Mr. Busley. Most of the furniture for the hotels, the school and some of the homes was made by him. There were not many children to attend the school, perhaps no more than 10 or 12 so only a few desks were made. When the school house burned, a few desks and the brass bell were saved. Each desk was about the size of an ordinary bureau top in length and width. It was not quite the height of a regular table. A small board about 3 inches high across the back and down each side to about 9 inches from the edge where it tapered down to about 1 inch high – just high enough to keep a book or a slat from falling. Two children sat at a desk on an ordinary bench usually too high for a 6 year old's feet to rest on the floor so the youngster sat with his feet dangling. If his legs "went to sleep" he got up and walked around for a few moments, or the teacher dismissed the class for a short recess. The teacher was a male who augmented his small salary by performing any labor he could get such as lending a hand at the saw mill on a Saturday, or spading a garden spot, or helping a woman cover the walls of a room with cloth.

Mr. Busley made cupboards for dishes and food for the wives. The dish cupboards were plainly made of planed boards usually about 14 or 16 inches wide. They were about 5 feet high with the lower shelf being about 27 inches from the floor. However, at the special request of a housewife the shelves extended to within 6 to 8 inches of the floor. There were 2 doors which opened from the center out. The food cupboards were slightly different; instead of solid doors each door had an upper and lower panel that was made from a piece of tin. It was ornamented by cutting narrow slits in the tin with a thin bladed knife like tool. Usually each panel was centered by small holes which looked as though they had been made by a present day nail but only square nails were known at that time so some type of punch tool was used to make these holes. Around the small circle of holes a circle of the slits extended then more tiny holes until a design about the width of the door was made. A sort of a quarter circle filled each corner. These open spaces served as a means of permitting air to circulate in the cupboard. They would also have served as screens but there were no houseflies or flies of any sort in that area at the time.

When women came with their husbands, sleeping on the ground went out and crude beds were made. There was no such thing as bed springs or mattresses as we know them today. Rough boards only partially planed, were nailed solidly across a form and served as the place to lay a mattress. A wild wirey bunch grass grew in that area. It was called Antwine Grass by the pioneers. In Charles Francis Saunders' book "Western Flower Guide," it is listed as Squaw Grass (*Xerophyllum Tenax*.) As soon as the snow melts bunches of it begin to grow. It blooms very quickly and soon begins to dry. The leaves are about 14 inches long, narrow and have a peculiar dry roughness. When it bloomed the pioneers cut the bunches and gave each hand full as he cut it a tight twist or tied it into a loose knot to dry. When completely dry the bunches were loosened and it was stuffed into a bed tick that was not entirely sewed closed in the center. Occasionally when making the bed the women reached through the hole in the ticking and stirred the grass around. With a blanket or comforter over it, it served as a comfortable bed. Many of this type mattress was still being used in Michigan Bluff, Bath and Foresthill long after the turn of the century.

The kitchen was the main room in these early homes. It was usually the largest room in the house and the dining table and wood range was always in it. A pantry opened into the kitchen and all food was prepared in it. The dishes were washed in dish pans or on a table in the pantry. Even though running water was available it was not piped into the house. It ran into a barrel out of doors and water was carried inside in a bucket.

Now I will go back and tell a little more of the story of some of the mines.

When Elizabeth Thomas received word of the death of her husband he had been buried two months. The Masons in San Francisco took charge and gave him a Masonic burial in the old cemetery in San Francisco. She had bore him three children but one had died as an infant and was buried in the cemetery at Last Chance. When the miners heard of his death they all came to her aid, bringing her food and doing what they could to help her. She had many offers of marriage. She was a petite and demure little lady who had been reared in a religious home where her father was a deacon in a Methodist Church. She had never experienced or known any roughness among men until she came to California. She greatly appreciated the miners giving her help but she definitely was not interested in marriage to any of them. She had met John Hyland and realized that he had been used to an entirely different life from what he was then living. In fact, his father was a Presbyterian Minister and he had been studying law for two years in the University at Ann Arbor, Michigan before he came to California. He went to pay his respects to Elizabeth and fell in love with here and it was not long before they married. He took over the management of the El Dorado and they then were the sole owners of the mine. He was also one third owner of the Home Ticket. Seth Laborie and Henry Williams continued working at the Home Tickets, but John Hyland was caring for legal rights and matters for miners at Last Chance and later became a poll tax collector for Placer County and Justice of Peace.

A small crew of men worked in the El Dorado. At first the only channel known there was the El Dorado and nothing was known of the geology or the formation of the area. A study had never been made and nothing was known of the early upheavels or the ancient rivers that had been covered by lava and new rivers that had formed. Two prospectors had discovered a small outcropping on property that they knew was a part of the El Dorado. They began secretly working this at night when no one was working in the El Dorado. They became a little too daring and started working in the day time. They did not know it was not the same channel as the El Dorado. It had been a channel from a later river that had been formed after the El Dorado and flowed directly above it. There was a small lava cap that had covered the El Dorado between the two channels. One day the men in the El Dorado thought they could hear work going on above them. They would stop work and listen but were not sure even of what they thought they heard. Finally one day they heard a blast which could not be mistaken so they investigated and sure enough discovered the pair that were working above them. This channel they called the Sharp Stick. It was worked as part of the El Dorado. In all the El Dorado mine consisted of 6 channels - the El Dorado, Sharp Stick, Morning Star, also called the Big Channel, Root Hog, Blue Channel and Little Channel. Most of these channels were not discovered until after 1903 when Davis M. Ray took over management of the mine for a company of men from the Middle West. They purchased the mine from Hyland and persuaded Mr. Ray to reactivate the old mining camp that had practically been dead for many years. Mr. Ray's parents had lived in Last Chance, coming there in 1864 when he was a tiny baby and a

brother and sister had been born there. His father, John, was a brother of William who discovered Hell's Delight. Dave had spent several of his youthful years working for Mr. Bishop in his mine. The Big Channel was rich and coarse gold was found the entire length of it. The Root Hog was a small channel, also rich with coarse heavy gold. Not all the channels consistently carried gold their entire length. There would be pay streaks which would be worked out and then a hunt had to be made to pick up the pay again.

Mr. Ray had 3 dumps at the El Dorado - one for the waste dirt that tumbled down the mountain side - one for the regular pay dirt that he washed regularly and one that was a prospect dump. A few car loads of dirt would be run out from the channel underground then washed and checked and tested to see if it would pay to keep working in that spot underground. Pay dirt was shoveled into cars, then taken to the dump where it was washed. Washing the dump was somewhat similar to hydraulic mining. Water was piped from a reservoir that was higher up the mountain side than the dump. A man stood across the bottom of the pile of pay dirt. It was forced through a box, wide at the top which narrowed and led to the sluice boxes where under heavy force it speedily tumbled over riffles in the boxes where gold was dropped and was caught. At the El Dorado the sluice boxes zig-zagged back and forth for a long distance down the mountain side. When the dump was empty, the riffles were taken up and the gold was shoveled into gold pans. It usually took an entire 10 hour day to clean the dump and the upper lot of riffles. Mr. Ray usually did the clean up himself. The bed rock was always cleaned by a trusty man who dug down into cracks and crevices in the rock. He was known as the bed rock cleaner and did not do pick and shovel work. He was a specialized man and drew special pay.

The Morning Star or Big Channel entered the mountain at Star Town on the north side of the hill. It flowed at a later period in the development of the world and was at a higher elevation than the El Dorado. It was worked down grade and was very rich. At some time in the ancient past another great upheaval occurred and the great river disappeared. The supposition was that a part of the mountain slid off taking the big channel with it. Below Last Chance it was picked up again and called the Caledonia, and at the brow of the hill it disappeared forever.

A way back in the mine a log jam was found in the ancient channel. The logs were in as perfect state of preservation as though they had very recently been living trees. The miners said they looked to be the same as the present day trees, pines and firs. They had been covered by lava and no air was around them so they did not rot. At another place in one of the channels an oak tree was found but it had become petrified.

After Mr. Ray reactivated the El Dorado, Frank Tillotson took over the Home Ticket and worked it for a number of years. It finally became the property of a man named John Thompson who had become wealthy in the saw mill business in Virginia. His heirs still own the Home Ticket which is being worked under lease at the present time.

A company headed by Mr. Threldkil and Mr. Bloom bought the mines at Hell's Delight- consolidated them and the mine is now known as the Pacific or Pacific Slab. It was operated for a number of years under the superintendency of William Davis. Finally operations there ceased and the mine was idle until a few years ago when Mr. William Wilson of Foresthill began a small hydraulic operation there. He is interested in most of the old mines at Last Chance and possibly some day they will become reactivated again. Otto Brink was the last man to do any

mining at the El Dorado. He sold the property but the present owner is not working it. The original families who owned the Blue Eyes and Pin Nut are still holding them but they have not been operated on any scale since America went off the gold standard. There is an old saying, "Thar's still lots of gold in them thar hills," but the problem now is finding it.