

Discover Stories on the Land

Excerpt 5

Below is another excerpt from the unpublished 1996 book, Stories on the Land: An Environmental History of the Applegate and Upper Illinois Valley, by George McKinley and Doug Frank. The Applegate Valley Community Newspaper, Inc., will be publishing the book in its entirety in 2019.

In the last episode we met the Applegate brothers. Here we meet James Sterling, a gold miner whose surname became a place name in the Applegate.

Unearthing the Applegate

Until 1850, the area between the South Umpqua and Yreka remained mostly unsettled, due to a hostile native population and an isolation too great to sustain an agricultural community. Then, in late 1851 or early 1852 James Cluggage and James Poole found rich placer deposits of gold on Jackson Creek, a tributary of Bear Creek in the Rogue Valley. It was not the first discovery of gold in the area, but it was the kind that excited fantasies of great wealth and riveted the attention of gold seekers. Overnight, the greater Rogue Valley, which until then had only several dozen nonnative American settlers, saw an influx of thousands. Within a year, perhaps a thousand miners moiled for gold in the Applegate/ Illinois study area alone.

In February 1852, Apples and Kearney, packers from Yreka, opened a trading post in a tent. By March, Jacksonville was bustling into shape. By midsummer, at least a thousand miners had arrived, most from California.

This boom mentality brought the first settled inhabitants, a small army of miners, into the study area. As claims filled Jackson Creek, Wagner Creek, and other streams in the Bear Creek drainage, miners spilled into the

Applegate drainage. The natural line of travel would land them in Forest Creek, then called Jackass Creek, the earliest center of mining activity in the Applegate Valley.

Along with the miners came entrepreneurs who understood the usefulness of gold as a medium of exchange and established an array of services that might appeal to hard-working, newly rich males in an atmosphere of social isolation. Within a few years, these services were clustered around one of the Applegate region's first commercial hubs, near the confluence of Poormans Creek and Jackass Creek: Logtown, named after its leading citizen, Frank Logg.

By 1854, most of Poormans and Jackass creeks were being heavily worked all the way to their meeting with the Applegate River, near present-day Ruch. Miners almost certainly also ranged the length of the Applegate River and most of its tributaries, but no miner was quite as lucky—and unlucky—as James Sterling.

With his friend and mining partner, Aaron Davis, James Sterling was lucky enough to uncover a rich deposit on a tributary of Sterling Creek in late spring, 1854. In the few days between their discovery and Sterling's return to stake his claim, the word got out, and when Sterling arrived on the creek that was to bear his name, it was, unfortunately, "staked from source to mouth and rim to rim. Blanket tents were everywhere, and the miners were busily stripping their claims or sinking shafts in the flats" (in the words of Haines and Smith in *Gold on Sterling Creek*). Aaron Davis was one of them.

Sterling turned down the token claim his erstwhile partner offered him and headed for his farm back in

the Bear Creek Valley. In due time, he moved to northern California where he mined near the Oregon border. One could wish to know the motives of those who named in his honor both the creek and the town that sprang up virtually overnight to service one of the Applegate country's richest strikes.

By October 1854, there were perhaps 1,500 people in and around Sterlingville, many of them having been drawn by tantalizing stories, in northern California newspapers, of the strike. The town contained hotels, saloons, stores, bakers, butchers, and a gambling house.

Hostilities between the newcomers and native peoples in 1855 slowed mining activity, but by early 1856, Sterlingville was thriving again, with up to 800 inhabitants and perhaps 30 buildings. Then, as so often happens in southern Oregon, a dry winter hit, depriving the miners of the water they needed to wash gold out of dirt. Some of the miners organized to survey and dig a ditch to bring water from the Applegate River to the diggings around Sterling Creek, but it was too difficult a task, and Sterlingville began its decline. Gradually, get-rich-quick surface mining gave way to "drift" mining, the practice of driving tunnels, or shafts, into stream banks and hillsides.

Shaft mining requires time and capital and attracts people with the patience that bodes well for longer term investment in community life. Most of the placer miners moved on to other, more easily worked gold fields. By 1860, the federal census found only 123 residents in Sterlingville and 30 unoccupied buildings.

Note: Excerpted by Diana Coogle from pages 24 - 25 of Stories on the Land.