

# **Early Trails of Southwestern Trinity County**

**Thomas S. Keter**

**May 1998**

**(Submitted to the Trinity County Historical Society)**

**(Reedited and published on [solararch.org](http://solararch.org) February 2009)**

Long before Euro-Americans arrived in northwestern California, the Athabascan speaking Nongatl, Lassik, and Wailaki inhabiting the region we refer to today as southwestern Trinity County had already created a complex network of trails. These trails were used to connect nearby villages with distant communities, to facilitate the hunting of game, and to provide access to areas where plant resources were collected. The aboriginal inhabitants of the region also used trails for access to religious sites and for inter-tribal contacts--including trade, communication, and social interaction. Thus, during the prehistoric era, trails provided much the same function to their users as the most modern roads and freeways provide societies today.

In the 1850s merchants seeking routes from the San Francisco Bay area to the markets in the goldfields, cattlemen, and hide hunters began to explore southwestern Trinity County. We will take a look at four trails established during this era that were to play an important part in the development of this isolated, and even today, remote region. Although there are no references to these trails in the ethnographic record, given their strategic locations it is likely that all of these trails had been used for hundreds of years prior to the beginning of the historic era.

## **Southwestern Trinity County**

Inland from the redwood belt of the northwestern California coastal region lays a narrow band of mountains--the Bald Hills--dominated by oak woodlands and open grassland prairies. This region stretches from about the Schoolhouse Peak region of Redwood National Park east of the town of Orick--south for about a hundred miles through southwestern Trinity County to about Round Valley in northern Mendocino County. This region is not rich in minerals. Instead of the gold bearing granites of the Trinity Mountain region, the Bald Hills are composed of ancient river sediments deposited during the Cretaceous Period on the bed of an ancient ocean.

South Fork Mountain forms the divide between the gold mining regions of the Klamath Mountains of eastern Trinity County from the cattle and sheep country of grasslands and oak woodlands of the Bald Hills. The crest of South Fork Mountain stretches from the headwaters region of the South Fork of the Trinity River in the Yolla Bolly Mountains north to Last Chance Ridge and forms the divide between the Trinity River basin to the east and the Mad River basin to the west for over 40 miles. South Fork Mountain varies from about 4,500 to 6,000 feet in altitude and was a formidable physical barrier isolating southwestern Trinity County from the rest of the county--especially in the winter when deep snows made the crossing almost impossible.

During the early years of the gold rush, the isolated region of southwestern Trinity County was largely ignored by the county government and the residents of Weaverville, Lewiston, and the gold regions of the Trinity Mountains. For example, in Issac Cox's (1858) history of Trinity County written in 1858 no mention is even made of the southwestern portion of the county. This lack of attention by the county government greatly influenced the way the area was settled and contributed to the general lawlessness that infested the region during the last few decades of the 19th Century. The residents of southwestern Trinity County had more in common with the residents of southeastern Humboldt and northern Mendocino Counties both socially and economically. Thus, although the gold rush and the settlement of Trinity County began in the late 1840s and early 1850s, it was not until 1854 that the first Euro-Americans began to explore the southwestern part of the county.

### **The County Line Trail**

During this era, the principal force driving development of northwestern California was gold. The main function of trails constructed during this period was to provide as direct a route as possible to the mining districts. Quite likely, these newly arrived settlers followed the numerous Indian trails that crisscrossed the region---the precursors of the extensive trail network that developed during the last decades of the 19th century.

By the spring of 1850, trails led from the newly established towns on Humboldt Bay to the mining areas on the Salmon and Klamath Rivers centered on Orleans (for a short time the county seat of Klamath County) and Sommes Bar and to mining region centered on Weaverville. The earliest trail to be constructed in southwestern Trinity County was developed to link the coastal settlements of the lower Eel River Valley in Humboldt County with Trinity County. The five Cooper brothers settled in the Hydesville area and in 1852 blazed a trail leading to Hyampom where it connected with other trails heading to the mines. The Eel River-Weaverville Trail headed east from Hydesville up the Van Duzen drainage crossing over Shower's Pass to the Mad River. The trail then ascended Eight Mile Ridge to the crest of South Fork Mountain before dropping down the mountain's eastern slope and crossing the Trinity River and reaching Hyampom.

Within a few years of its construction, a portion of the Eel River-Weaverville Trail was rerouted. The new section of trail became the main travel route to Hyampom and the mines in Trinity County from Hydesville and the Eel River valley. This new section of the Eel River-Weaverville Trail was completed in 1856 (*Humboldt Times* August 2, 1856) and retained the name Eel River-Weaverville Trail. This section of trail also became known as the County Line Trail. The *Humboldt Times* (August 2, 1856) reported on the first pack train to carry supplies from Eureka to the mines in Trinity County over the new trail and in the next weekly edition, the *Times* (August 9, 1856) provided the first-hand account of a Mr. Howland traveling the new section of trail. In the article Howland states that:

Leaving Shower's Pass, I took the new trail, surveyed by E. Davis Esq., bearing  
*to the left of the old trail* [emphasis added]....

The whole distance is about 80 miles and I should think a pack train might make the trip easily in about five days. The distance by the old trails varies little from this, but they are not so pleasant, and have not the facilities to be found on the new one.

After the trail crossed over Showers Pass (at the divide between the Van Duzen and Mad River watersheds), the new section of trail forked to the north of the old trail and continued down slope to the Mad River. . It crossed the Mad River about one mile north of Pilot Creek and then climbed east to Pilot Ridge--hitting the ridge near Mud Springs. Eventually, a section of this trail was rerouted to cross the Mad River adjacent to the mouth of Pilot Creek. From Mud Springs (just to the west of the Trinity County line) the trail dropped down into the Pilot Creek drainage crossing the creek near the future site of Becker's Cabin. The trail then climbed South Fork Mountain and headed north along the crest a short distance before it dropped down to the east on the trending ridge line immediately to the south of Kurlin Creek leading to the South Fork of the Trinity River. Here, the trail crossed the river and finally connected with other trails at Hyampom leading to Hayfork, Weaverville and the other mining centers of Trinity County. This new section of the Eel River-Weaverville/County Line Trail shows up on the 1872 GLO map and is referred to as the "Hayfork Yager" trail.

During the late 1850s travel on this trail was dangerous and sometimes lead to the loss not only of the pack animals and the supplies they carried but sometimes the death of the packers as well. For example, as noted earlier, the County Line Trail originally crossed the Mad River about one mile below (north) of the mouth of Pilot Creek. This spot is now called Olmstead crossing. In July of 1862 four men, including William Olmstead, were attacked by Indians at this location. One man was killed and Olmstead was wounded. In about September of the same year there was another Indian attack along the trail at the same location against three men driving hogs to the mines in Trinity County. All three men were killed in the attack (Bledsoe 1885:221-222).

Today, only a few portions of this trail remain, much of it has been covered by logging roads both on private lands and National Forest lands. One section of the trail (on Six Rivers National Forest, Forest Trail 5E19) can still be hiked. This section leads from Becker Cabin adjacent to Pilot Creek up the western slope of South Fork Mountain for a distance of two or three miles before it is lost in logging roads.

## **The Long Ridge Trail**

The first Euro-Americans to enter the Yolla Bolly country north of Round Valley were probably members of the Kelsey Party and the Asbill brothers in May of 1854. The Kelsey party was commissioned by a group of Petaluma merchants to locate a trail between Sonoma County and the mines in Trinity County (eventually, as we shall see, portions of this route became the Round Valley-Weaverville Trail). Frank and Pierce Asbill and their friend mountain man Jim Neafus planned to winter in the region hunting deer and tanning the hides which were in great demand in the mining districts.

The men traveled north through Round Valley into the North Fork Eel River watershed passing over Long Ridge--most likely following a prehistoric foot path--that during the late 1800s

became known as the Long Ridge Trail-- spending the night of May 16, 1854 camped at Soldier Basin. The next day, they continued north paralleling the North Fork, again following Indian trails to Hettenshaw Valley. The Asbills and Neafus remained here, establishing a camp while the Kelsey party continued on (Asbill ms. n.d.).

During the 1860s and 1870s the Long Ridge Trail provided the main access along the ridge to a number of homesteads and, after 1879, to the Long Ridge School located in Section 36 near Schoolhouse Springs. To the south near the confluence of the North Fork Eel River and Hulls Creek, this trail connected with the Covelo-Weaverville Trail linking the area with the town of Covelo in Round Valley. To the north and west trails led to Kettenpom and Hoaglin Valleys and from there trails led to Zenia, Blocksburg, and Alderpoint

Today, County Road 520 winding along the crest of Long Ridge past School House Springs to the southern end of the ridge follows that same general route as the Long Ridge trail.

### **Sacramento Trail**

Throughout the winter of 1854/1855, the Asbills and Neafus shot hundreds of deer. The deer were skinned, and their hides tanned. In April 1855, Pierce Asbill transported the hides to the Sacramento Valley where he sold them to Kingsley's Trading Post near present day Red Bluff. The trail he pioneered to the Central Valley became known as the Sacramento Trail. Asbill left Hettenshaw Valley heading east and crossed over Mad River Ridge and dropped down to the Mad River. Here, he turned south paralleling the Mad River to Three Forks. From here, he climbed South Fork Mountain and then dropped down into the South Fork of the Trinity River basin, traversed the southern slope of North Yolla Bolly Mountain and crossed over the Trinity/Sacramento divide into the Cottonwood Creek drainage. Asbill then continued east through the eastern foothills of the Coast Range Mountains entering the Sacramento Valley near the present town of Red Bluff.

Portions of the Sacramento trail still remain in use today. Within the Yolla Bolly Wilderness you can still follow the trail (also known as the Humboldt Trail) from the trail head at West Low Gap through beautiful Cedar Basin (where you can see the only grove of aspen trees found in the Coast Ranges) to the Trinity/Sacramento watershed divide at Tomhead Mountain. The trail then continues all the way to Tomhead Saddle.

### **Covelo-Weaverville Trail**

This trail was established to connect cattle and sheep country of northern Mendocino and southeastern Humboldt County with the mining regions of Trinity County. The trail headed north from Covelo passing through Summit Valley (where the Asbills had a large prosperous ranch during much of the 1870s and 1880s) before dropping down to the North Fork of the Eel River at the mouth of Hull's Creek. Here, the trail headed north paralleling the river for about one mile before crossing and climbing to the east hitting the ridge just to the south of Wylackie Hill (near the Travis Ranch). The trail then crossed over Antone Ridge into the Littlefield Creek

drainage, continuing north it forded Red Mountain Creek and then entered the beautiful meadows at Red Mountain Fields.

In the late 1880s or early 1890s Frank Doolittle established the Red Mountain House at this location. The Red Mountain house was a “road house” where the weary traveler or local cowboys might get a meal and a bed for the night. Later, in the early 1900s, the Caution Post Office was also located here for a short period of time with Mrs. Georgie (Annie) Willburn postmistress. It is also along this trail, just, to the south of Red Mountain House, that Jack Littlefield was killed in 1895. Littlefield’s murder and the subsequent trail of the perpetrators at Weaverville are among the most notorious in the annals of the history of Trinity County (see *Genocide and Vendetta* by Lynwood Carranco and Estle Beard for more on this fascinating story). Today, a granite headstone along the trail only a few yards away from where he was murdered marks the spot where Littlefield is buried.

From Red Mountain House the trail climbed Red Mountain to Jones Ridge and headed north dropping down to Three Forks where it continued north paralleling the Mad River for over 15 miles. Then, about the location of the original U.S. Forest Service Ruth Guard Station, near what is today the Bailey Canyon Campground on Six Rivers National Forest, the trail headed east climbing South Fork Mountain. After crossing South Fork Mountain it then dropped down to Peanut and continued to HayFork connecting with the trail to Weaverville.

## **Trails Study**

In 1997, the Heritage Resources Department of Six Rivers National Forest undertook an inventory of the historic trails on the Mad River Ranger District which encompasses much of southwestern Trinity County (Keter 1997). Over 50 trails were recorded and mapped. Today, few of these trails remain. Portions of some of the remaining trails have been incorporated into the Forest Service trail system, however, time, timber harvesting activities, road building, and even nature have all conspired to make it difficult to discern the location of many of the old trails. A good historical map and a keen eye can lead modern day explorers to ridges where old blazes and a well-worn trail tread mark the location of a nearly forgotten trail. It is likely that at one time or another Native Americans, homesteaders, and ranchers passed over this trail on their way through what is today southwestern Trinity County.

## References Cited

- Asbill, Frank  
n.d. The Last of the West. Unpublished Manuscript in five volumes. Mendocino Historical Society, Ukiah, CA.
- Bledsoe, A. J.  
1885 Indian Wars of Northwest California. BioBooks, Oakland. (Reprint.)
- Carranco, Lynwood, and Estle Beard  
1981 Genocide and Vendetta: The Round Valley Wars of Northern California. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman.
- Cox, Issac  
1858 Annals of Trinity County. San Francisco.
- Coy, Owen C.  
1929 The California State Historical Association. Los Angeles, CA.
- Keter, Thomas S.  
1997 Historic Trails of the Mad River Ranger District. Manuscript on file. Six Rivers National Forest, Eureka, CA.

## Maps

Some of the following maps may be useful to those interested in locating the trails of southwestern Trinity County.

The Trinity County Historical Society has a number of excellent maps one of the best is Lowden's 1894 Map of Trinity County.

USGS Hoaglin 15' quadrangle, 1935  
USGS Kettenpom 15' Quadrangle, 1949  
Trinity National Forest Maps 1922, 1927, 1931, 1950