



## The Three Rocks Report

### A Story

#### Sawmill Creek

Sawmill Creek is a small ephemeral tributary that runs into the headwater of the San Benito River. In the late 1800s, a little community of about thirty-five families sprouted at this confluence. The town was known as Small's Camp (named for Rufus Small) and most of the men were sawyers for nearby New Idria Quicksilver Mine. According to Elliott & Moore, this area was a "forest of pines and cedars, some trees measuring five and six feet in diameter."

The creek is named on McCray 1891 map for the sawmill that was located on this creek. There are no obvious remains of the old sawmill left, but Jack James remembers seeing the remnant of the long abandoned cutting pit when he was a teenager some seventy years ago. Jack recalls that the sawmill was located in the small flat where Saw Mill Road junctions with the ridge road.

From Hillhouse's work we read a letter from the New Idria Mine dated February 24, 1858 that reads:

The woodcutters are hard at work, and hard work they have of it. Harder and stubborn wood I never saw, in fact so much so that they found it impossible to make anything at \$2 per cord. Cirilo seeing such was the case, raised the price to \$2.25, so as to keep them at it. A cheaper contract never was made. When they complete their contract, they will not have made 75 cents per day after paying for provision.

The saw men have completed their saw pits and now have commenced work, two saws going. Hammitt, to complete his contract within the time stipulated, finds it will require three saws to be a full force.

From an October 9, 1858 letter, we learn that a road to the upper sawpit is completed:

The road makers are doing fine work. The road from the Aurora to the upper saw pit cost \$200, a first rate road. They are now working on the old road from the Aurora to the chute over the point where they slide the lumber down. In four days more they will have it so the ox team can haul 2500 feet of lumber per day. Ninety men in the mountains.

The sawmill was simply a deep pit dug into the earth and a large pit-saw, operated by two people was used to rip timbers into manageable pieces needed by the miners to crib their tunnels and shafts. A pit-saw was an 8-10 feet long, two-handled saw used to rip a log lengthwise into planks. The pit-saw was operated jointly by a person standing above the log and another in a pit underneath. The senior sawyer stood on the scaffold and held the pit-saw by the tiller, a handle that enabled him to guide the saw. At the other end of the saw, the junior sawyer stood below the timber. Broad axes were also used to make large 8x8 and 6x6 beams out of logs.

The bark was removed by axes in a one to two foot band completely around the tree in the area where the tree was to be cut. Trees were then notched with an axe and cut down with axes and cross cut saws. Hand-loggers used axes and long crosscut saws, also called "misery whips" to fall large trees. This process could take a day or more, and depending on how the tree fell, it could take several more days of jacking, levering, and hauling to get logs to the mill. The fallen trees were limbed and cut into shorter, more manageable sections before being skidded to the sawmill by horses or oxen.

Jack James' grandfather had a cabin in the area that built from lumber cut at this saw mill. Jack remembers dismantling that cabin and using its lumber to built another cabin that still stands near his home on Los Gatos Creek.

#### — References —

Hillhouse, Clarence. *New Idria Quicksilver and Letters: 1858-1859*. Unpublished. 1931

Elliott & Moore. *History of San Benito County, California, with biographical sketches of prominent citizens*. San Francisco, California: Elliott & Moore. 1881.

## The Story Behind that Name

### *Mistaken names*

Most of you know that geographic features, such as canyons and springs are often named for people who lived there or for events that happened there. So, when I came across names like “Robbers Canyon” and “Skeleton Spring” you can easily envision where my imagination went as I contemplated the possible origins of such names. I was struck with the possibility that some famous robber, perhaps Tiburcio Vásquez or the Dalton Gang had hid out there once and thus gave origin to the name. Perhaps they had murdered someone and the skeleton was later found at Skeleton Spring. The possibilities for exciting historical discovery were endless, so it was with great excitement that I began this search for the simple truth ... which is seldom as exciting as our fantasies.

### Robbers Canyon

Bill Howell, an expert on local history quickly deflated my grandiose fantasy about this name as he explained that this canyon's name is simply a misspelling of Roberts. Howell explained that “the canyon should be named Roberts Canyon, not Robbers Canyon, because a family named Roberts lived there in the early 1900s. The canyon is named for the Roberts family who had a cabin where Robbers Canyon meets with Bear Canyon.”

Howell also said that according to other stories, “there was a small mature apple and peach orchard there before Roberts built their cabin, thus indicating that someone else lived there previously.”

This canyon should be named Roberts' Canyon for Rose Mellinger Roberts who, according to land records, proofed-up on his homestead there in 1908.

### Skeleton Spring

The word skeleton certainly conjures the fantasies and to have skeleton associated with a water spring is suggestive of the spring's questionable quality; it is sort of like the skull and crossbones icon you might expect to see on a bottle of strychnine. Who would name a spring Skeleton Spring unless they were trying to warn thirsty visitors that the water from this spring is too dangerous to drink. Bill Howell agreed that the name does contribute to a fruitful fantasy, but he also added that he has never seen any skeletons in or near spring, and that the water is quite good. Bill explained that this is just another misspelling. He said “This spring should really be named Skelton Spring after Harmon S. Skelton who had a homestead here in the 1920s.”

### Grabast Canyon

So finally, I figured this out ... these canyons and springs are all named after people who lived there. Well then, I asked Mr. Howell, “Tell me about the Grabast family. When did they move into the area and where was there cabin located?”

“Well,” Bill replied, “there is no Grabast family, you see that is another misspelling.” According Bill Howell, Grabast is not the correct name for this canyon and he suspects that the U.S. Geological Survey didn't have the courage to write the correct name on the map.

Bill explained that “this is a particularly treacherous canyon and it was actually named *Grab Ass Canyon* by E. L. Xavier sometime in the 1950s because of the difficulty he had in removing a buck he had shot from that canyon.” Bill continued to explain that “Xavier claimed that the canyon grabbed him by his ass and wouldn't let him out, hence the correct name, Grab Ass Canyon.”



## Ne Hi Canyon

According to Virginia Birdwell, this canyon is named correctly, but just misspelled. Virginia explains that “the canyon is named after the Orange Nehi soda that Charlie Akers and Harry Trout found there while they were gathering cattle on very hot day.” According to the story, while Charlie and Harry were complaining about the hot miserable conditions of that day, they surprisingly discovered a bottle of Orange Nehi soda lying in a shaded place on the ground. They opened the soda and split it between them and the place has been known as Nehi Canyon ever since.

Nobody knows where the Nehi soda came from; perhaps the ancient spirits took pity on them, but it was more likely left by someone who was part of one of the Dómengine tours Joaquin Rocks. Many broken Nehi and Royal Crown bottles can be found around the Joaquin Rocks area and Nehi Canyon, where the soda was found is just below Joaquin Rocks.

## Pioneers and People

### *Edward Chaffin Tully*

Edward was born April 16, 1826 in Memphis, Tennessee of Lewis Boling Tully and Sarah Chaffin. He spent his boyhood on a farm in Arkansas before he left home to work with his brother Pinckney on wagon trains in New Mexico Territory. Tully, who was a self-educated man joined the U.S. Army in 1844, and served until the close of the Mexican War. In 1848, he piloted a prairie schooner 1,700 miles from Missouri to Chihuahua, Mexico, where he met and married Maria Guadalupe “Lupe” Quintanar.

In 1853, Tully and his brother-in-law, Francisco de Alvarez, drove 20,000 sheep from Guaymas to San Francisco where he was compensated with half the flock.

Along with Wiley Williams, he cofounded the Picacho Mine 1858. Ed moved to Agua Amargosa (Bitterwater) in 1860 and leased part of the San Lorenzo (Sanchez) Grant for sheep pasture. He built an adobe house in the middle of the Bitterwater Valley and become its first English-speaking resident. Other early settlers in Bitterwater were Domingo Villa, R. H. Small, Claudius S. Rudolph, José Olivas, Fred Sawyer, Ernest Zoelin, Trinidad Garcia, Martin Griffin, Joe Cullumber and Fred Rist. Tully Mountain is named for his sake.

E.C. Tully was elected on the Democratic ticket to the State Assembly for three terms (1867, 1873 and 1889) and was instrumental in the formation of San Benito County from Monterey County in 1874.

Edward and Lupe had one child, Edward Alvarez Tully born May 10, 1851 in Chihuahua, Mexico. Edward died on March 3, 1907 in Bitterwater, San Benito County, California. Lupe died in 1915 in Bitterwater.

#### *San Benito Advance, March 20, 1875* – New Mine

The genial face of E.C. Tully has not been seen at his law office for several days past. We learn that the honorable gentleman has, in connection with Mr. Cody, been working with great success upon a quicksilver lode discovered near Tully’s home in Bitterwater valley. A small furnace has been placed upon the ground and quicksilver, worth \$1000 a week, is being distilled and shipped to market. If this yield continues, Hollister well lose a lawyer.

*San Benito Advance, June 3, 1876* – The Hon. E.C. Tully was at the depot Tuesday on his way home to Bitter Water valley. He is now a regular dairyman and farmer and looks as brawny as a mountaineer. He finds more profit in manufacturing cheese than in practicing law.

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