

# Little Mountain Valley Through the Years . . . Little Has Changed

## Walker Basin

by Eugene Burmeister



Little is known about the early history of Walker Basin. No records are found to tell who first looked down into the rich valley from the surrounding ridges, and few Indians remained there when the first white settlers arrived in 1857. The Kawaiisu of Shoshonean origin and also known as the Plateaus, Paiutes, and Tehachapis had a village in the valley. There they found an early paradise, for the basin had plentiful game, good groves of trees for camping, small lakes and a fine stream for water and fish, and rugged mountains offering protection from

enemies. The earliest known pathfinder to the area was Joseph Reddeford Walker, who discovered Walker pass in 1834 on his route east out of the San Joaquin Valley and for whom the pass a few miles northeast of there is named. The basin also got its name from this early explorer as did the famous Joe Walker Mine.

The earliest settlers in Walker Basin were stockmen and farmers, enticed to the valley by its good grass, rich soil, adequate water, and ideal climate. The first to settle there was Charles H. Weick in 1857. A native of Germany, Weick raised a few cattle and farmed at the west end of the basin. After his death January 8, 1873, at the age of fifty, he was buried at his request on a little mound on his ranch.

Weick was followed the next year by the John Becks, the Bob Wilsons, the Blackburns, and three bachelors, William Weldon, Joseph V. Roberts, and Gabriel Lockhart. The March 16, 1859 edition of the San Francisco Alta California gives an account of a fisticuffs between Roberts and Lockhart following a disagreement over a dog. Roberts' dog had gone with Lockhart into the woods and stayed there all day. When they returned home in the evening, Roberts thrashed the dog and tied him up. Lockhart then fed the dog and angry words arose, ending in blows between the two bachelors. Roberts and Weldon moved a few years later to South Fork Valley where they went into the butcher business in connection with their stock ranch, supplying meat to the miners along the upper Kern, and where Weldon founded the town named for him.

Abia T. Lightner, Sr., who was born in Pennsylvania in 1801, moved to Keyesville in 1855 from Santa Clara County where he had conducted a Baptist seminary for five years. When he found his mining and milling operations unprofitable, he sold the Mammoth Mine and in 1858 bought land, a three-room adobe house, farming implements, and about one hundred head of Spanish cattle, "little and lean and wild," at the southwest end of the basin from Bob Wilson, who moved to the Fort Tejon area. Lightner raised potato toes, wheat, and large quantities of alfalfa which he sold at the booming mining town of Keyesville for forty to fifty dollars a ton, and later delivered to the soldiers at Fort Tejon for sixty dollars a ton. He built a grist mill on Basin Creek in 1860 and ground the wheat raised locally on shares. The census of 1860 shows that he had 160 acres of improved land and 80 acres of unimproved, valued at \$1,500. His farm

implements were valued at \$200. He owned three horses, three mules, twelve milk cows, twenty-five beef cattle, and four pigs, with a total value of \$1,000. It was while hauling produce to Havilah one frosty morning in 1867 that he lost his life. On a downgrade, his foot slipped from the brake and he was thrown forward under the wagon wheels.

Daniel W. Walser, a native of Missouri, moved from Tulare County to the basin in 1864 where he bought Myron Harmon's hay field from Hamp Williams, who had bought the land from George Walker, and engaged in farming. Harmon, who operated the Summit Sawmill and an ice house on Greenhorn Mountain, had a blacksmith shop in Keyesville. He came to the basin each year and cut the rank hay that grew on the subirrigated meadow in the east end of the valley.

Walser cleared willows from a meadow along Walser Creek, grubbed and broke the soil, erected ranch buildings, and in 1869 set out a fine orchard. He added to his holdings until he owned 2,700 acres. In 1866, he was appointed as one of four commissioners to organize Kern County. His son, John "Cas" Walser, served as sheriff of the county from 1923 to 1935.

A few long-horned Spanish cattle were brought in and turned loose in the hills, but it wasn't until 1867 that the first purebred cattle were introduced to the basin. That year Walker Rankin, Sr., a native of Pennsylvania, arrived, acquired a large amount of land around Caliente and in Walker Basin, brought in the first Herefords, and soon built up a sizeable White Face herd. The following year Rankin married Lavenia E. Lightner, daughter of Abia T. Lightner, Sr., born in Missouri in 1847. Their son, Walker Rankin, Jr., who married Mary Alice Williams, still lives on part of the old Lightner ranch and has followed in his father's footsteps as a rancher and farmer.

Other early basin ranchers included Jim Miller, Pete McGuirk, William H. Johns, and Tom Williams. Williams' son, Nicholas, who was born at Havilah May 25, 1866, just fifty-three days after Kern County was organized from parts of Tulare and Los Angeles counties, was the first white child born in the newly-organized county. When Williams lost his ten stamp mill down the Kern River in the flood of 1867, he moved his family into a small cabin on the Walser ranch where he worked as a ranch hand. The family located a few years later on Thompson Creek and bought a few cows from Walser for ten dollars a head. Nick Williams also followed the ranch business, acquiring 5,500 acres through purchase and homesteading in Walker Basin and on Piute Peak.

The first settlers came to the basin before roads came to the area. Prior to the opening of roads, neighbors got teams and wagons together twice a year for trips to Los Angeles or Visalia for provisions. In either direction the trip was a precipitous one. To the south, they came to one very steep point coming off the Old Lions Trail into what is now Oyler Canyon. There the wagons were lowered by ropes or cables. When they returned from the shopping trip, the wagons were unloaded at the foot of the hill and pulled up to the top, while the contents were packed up on horses. The load was then picked up and hauled home. On August 6, 1863, upon returning to Fort Tejon through Walker Basin from Camp Independence where his troops had been sent to quell the Indians in Owens Valley, Captain Moses A. McLaughlin, Company G, Second Cavalry, California Volunteers, wrote: "From Walker Basin to Aqua Caliente, distance about twelve miles, the road is almost impassable, being obliged to lower the wagons by means of ropes attached to the hind axle tree." David Smith carried the mail on horseback between Visalia and Tejon, passing through the basin, until his death in 1857 when the route was taken over by James Dunlap of Linn's Valley.

By the fall of 1864, a road had been beaten over the divide from Hot Springs Valley to the newly-established gold camp at Havilah and on to the basin. It was mid-1865 before funds solicited from Los Angeles merchants and residents of Elizabeth Lake, Willow Springs, Tehachapi Valley, and Walker Basin opened a road to the south. Later that year, funds solicited to the north opened a road between Havilah and Visalia.

Two years later, in 1867, Colonel Thomas Baker, the founder of Bakersfield, completed Baker Grade, or Baker Toll Road, connecting Bakersfield with Havilah via Walker Basin.

It wasn't until 1875, with the arrival of the Southern Pacific to the railroad terminus at Allen's Camp, which was renamed Caliente by the Southern Pacific, that a road was built between Caliente and the basin. The Oyler Canyon Road, named for John Franklin Oyler, a Keyesville businessman who became Sycamore District road overseer, was owned by Judge Theron Reed, Edwin R. Burke, and John D. Cochran, and was built by Cochran. The group later bought the Baker Toll Road for \$1,200 to eliminate competition, but the toll road between Caliente and the basin proved a failure and it was soon sold to the county. The road was improved in 1878.

Several stage lines operated through Walker Basin. The John J. Tomlinson Stage Company established service between Los Angeles and Havilah in 1865. When Tomlinson withdrew service in 1871, interests represented by Samuel Harper took over the line, and in 1871, George Andrews acquired the line. Wells Fargo and Company began express service through Kern County in 1867 with an agency in the basin. The Inyo Stage Line ran from Caliente through the basin to Owens Valley during the 1870s. All of the stage lines were confronted at times with highwaymen, and history records a number of holdups in the Walker Basin area.

Teamsters from Los Angeles hauled supplies through Walker Basin to the new county seat at Havilah. Because of the winter isolation, freight wagons came through in the fall, pulled by as many as ten animals. The suppliers returned in the spring to replenish stocks. With the closing of the mines and the coming of the railroad at Caliente, most of the stage lines ceased operations. Smaller, privately-owned lines continued to haul passengers and freight for some years, however. One of these was the line owned by Nick Williams, who ran a four-horse, two-seated Concord between Walker Basin, Caliente, and Piute from 1906 to 1912. Williams sold out in 1912 to Sam Maxson who put into service one of the first motorized stage lines in the county between Caliente and Kernville via the basin.

With the gold boom at Havilah, along Caliente Creek, and in Walker Basin in the 1860s, the Joe Walker Mine in the Quito Mining District soon became one of the most profitable in the area. It was located in the northeast part of the basin March 20, 1866, by Hamp Williams, father of W. Hamp Williams, discoverer of the "Big Silver" at Randsburg. Finding a rich ledge on the surface, Williams staked a claim, selling it a few days later to Burdett and McKeadney for \$2,000. After a 14-foot shaft had been sunk, a third interest was sold to Edwin R. Burke for \$12,500. A 350-foot shaft was sunk on a seventy degree angle, the shaft consisting of three compartments. A 100-horsepower steam engine was used to operate the twenty stamp mill, compressors, and hoist. Wood for the boiler was hauled from nearby oak groves. All machinery for the mine was hauled in with oxen through Visalia from San Francisco.

A sizeable settlement sprang up around the mine, known as Joe Walker Town. More than a dozen families comprised the burg, plus at least one hundred single men from the mine. Quite a social event took place in October, 1866, for the inauguration and christening of the new twenty-stamp mill. The Havilah Courier of October 29 reported that "Everything navigable was brought into use, stagecoaches, buggies, saddlehorses, and burros were mounted and the cavalcade started ... 100 persons, including ladies."

A wide, rich vein soon brought profitable returns to the investors with a six-day cleanup netting \$12,000. As the shaft was sunk, however, underground water began to create problems. Pumps were installed but were unable to keep ahead of the flow. A Cornish pump, weighing more than eleven tons, was brought in from England via San Francisco and Visalia, but it also failed to keep ahead of the water. The mine was acquired a few years later by Judge P. T. Colby, who hired G. P. Kellogg, long connected with the management of the famous Crown Point Mine in Nevada, as superintendent in November, 1873. It was transferred to Senator J. P. Jones of Nevada in 1876, but he

soon abandoned operations. During its operation the Joe Walker produced about \$600,000. Idle for some sixty years under the ownership of the Phoebe Hearst estate which had acquired it for a debt, the mine was bought by Dan Cronin in 1939, and assisted by Tom Duffy, operations were begun in 1941. Water again forced its abandonment. More recently, water from the underground river which flows through the mine has been put to profitable use irrigating sugar beets, sorghum, hay, alfalfa, and grazing land in the basin.

Roundups were annual events for the ranchers. The basin and surrounding ranges were unfenced in the early days and cattle roamed at will for miles. Cattle from the basin strayed as far as Rose Station on the plains of the Tejon Ranch and each spring a general drive was made to brand the calves and to push the animals back toward higher country. In late summer the beef cattle were gathered. Then, a four- to five-day drive was made to Bakersfield where beef sold for fifteen to eighteen dollars per head. Later cattle were driven to Caliente and shipped by rail.

The increase in grain acreage prompted Daniel and William Lightner, sons of Abia T. Lightner, to construct a grist mill on Basin Creek near the Weick home in 1869. Grain also was hauled for grinding from South Fork Valley, Kern Island (Bakersfield), and the Tule River area. The two-stone mill was completed in December at a cost of \$10,000. Walker Rankin, Sr. was listed as owner. In January, 1870, the first wagon load of flour from the mill arrived in Bakersfield. The mill also supplied the Kernville flour market. By 1871 it had proved so profitable that the Lightner brothers had paid off the debt. The two also ran sheep near Allen's Camp.

About 450 acres of wheat were planted in the basin in 1876, but expectations for a bumper crop were dampened by a killing frost, high winds and hordes of grasshoppers. The wheat yielded only twenty-five bushels per acre. The barley crop was limited, also, to only 200,000 pounds, and potatoes, gardens, and fruit were badly damaged. The year saw the abandonment of efforts to raise fruit there. The basin also had 400 acres of meadow in 1876 of which half was in hay.

A school was established in the basin by the Kern County Board of Supervisors May 10, 1877. It was a one-room school with Miss Cora McGrann as the first teacher. First located on the Lightner ranch, the school was built on skids so it could be pulled by horses or mules to the basin's population center. The Walker Basin School District became part of the Vaughn School District August 8, 1932, later became part of the Twin Oaks School District, and in 1949 joined the Caliente School District.

Walker Basin still holds an air of real western living. Dominated by Piute and Breckenridge mountains, with other alluring peaks and ridges in the distance, it is a land of hay, deer and cool nights. It remains a cattle paradise and many of the ranch holdings are still in the hands of families of the original settlers. In recent years, more and more farming land has taken over what was once grazing land. Barley, oats, alfalfa, and potatoes are among crops now under cultivation, dial telephones have come to the area, a dude ranch is under construction, and there is talk of getting a new road to connect the Southland with the Lake Isabella recreational area, but as yet, the face of the basin has changed little since the first settlers came here more than 100 years ago.

(Historic Kern, December, 1964)