

## **Yreka: Pioneer Mining Town** **By Dennis Powers**

The early-1851 discovery of gold 30 miles south of present-day Yreka on the Scott River attracted miners from all directions. In March of that year, a mule-train packer from Oregon by the name of Abraham Thompson was leading six men across the Siskiyou Trail to that find. Owing to a heavy rainstorm, he decided to camp that night on the “flats,” a quarter-mile from what is now downtown Yreka.

Although prospectors before had found some gold there, the amounts were insubstantial and they would soon leave for other parts. This time, the heavy rains had deeply soaked the ground. While watching his pack mules the next morning pull out the branch grass by their roots to eat, he was surprised to see flecks of gold on the roots. The group decided to stay there and dig for the precious metal.

The gold was there in large quantities, and the word soon went out that this discovery was “the richest square mile on earth.” There were 2000 miners in tent camps, shanties, and a few rough cabins on the flats by May, everyone searching for the gold at “Thompson’s Dry Diggings.” By August 1851, 5000 people--primarily miners but with dry-good merchants and some families--were camped at Shasta Butte City, Yreka’s present location, to be closer to the nearest water supply at Yreka Creek. They believed that this area was the “second mother lode.”

With the continued mining and commercial activity, residents began building wooden structures on Main Street, now named Miner Street. About one year after the gold discovery, the California legislature created Siskiyou County. Adjacent to the Oregon border, it would be the fifth largest California county by area, and include towns such as Yreka, Mt. Shasta, Weed, Dunsmuir, McCloud, and Tulelake, as well as Butte Valley, Scott Valley, Shasta Valley, and the Klamath River Corridor.

Since another town was also called Shasta in the area, the city changed its name to Yreka, which was the local Indian name for Mt. Shasta that meant “North Mountain.” The famous “Poet of the West,” Joaquin Miller, described Yreka during 1853-54 as a lively place with “a tide of people up and down and across other streets, as strong as if in New York.”

In a few years, Yreka changed from another boisterous gold-rush town into a permanent city with laws and governance. Stage lines from and to Oregon used it as a primary stage stop. With a courthouse built, along with the first hospital, church, and school, Yreka was selected to be the county seat for Siskiyou County.

The legendary Lotta Crabtree, who began her career in these Northern California gold-rush towns, performed in the Yreka area during the mid-1850s, frequently at the Arcade Saloon on Miner Street. According to these stories, the lonely miners threw “thousands of dollars” worth of gold nuggets onto the stage after a performance. With a sense of permanence, the town incorporated in April 1857.

As typical with other mining towns, however, when the gold played out, many of the miners, merchants, and their families left. In twenty years, the population was only 1,100 hardy folks. On July 4th, 1871, the bad times continued when a fire consumed most of the business district in its fiery destruction of thirteen blocks, including many stores, a hotel, theatre, all of the livery stables, the Catholic Church, a schoolhouse, and numerous residences. Despite this huge setback, the town people came together and rebuilt; this also brought about the numerous brick buildings that today line Miner and other Yreka streets. A short-line railroad in 1889 then connected the city with the Southern Pacific's West Coast line.

As farming, timbering, and ranching replaced mining, the city began to grow again. In 1941, Yreka came to national prominence as the temporary state capital for the State of Jefferson. With neighboring counties in Oregon and California feeling disenfranchised from their state governments, the succession movement began there. Outside of Yreka, armed men erected roadblocks every Thursday on Highway 99 and handed out their "Proclamation of Independence" before letting drivers continue on. When in a matter of weeks the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, the movement came to a quick end.

The downtown along West Miner Street is now listed as an historic district on the National Register of Historic Places and as a California Historical Landmark. Over seventy, pre-1900 homes (with numerous stately Victorians) still stand, all within a few blocks of the downtown. With tourism and recreational interests joining Yreka's economic base, it has 7,750 residents today and is the most populated city in Siskiyou County.

Starting from a group of six grizzled men, Yreka has grown over time to become much more than a stagecoach stop.

Sources: "Yreka Chamber of Commerce: A History of Early Yreka, California," at [History \(With Images\)](#); City of Yreka: History," at [Further History](#); "City of Yreka: Fast Facts," at [Fast Facts](#).