



# El Dorado Hills

## El Dorado Hills Commerce Came with the Gold Rush

By Debi Drake-Maurer

Along the Old Clarksville-White Rock Emigrant Road, the Mormon Tavern was built in 1848 or 1849 by a Mormon named Morgan. Situated slightly east of the south end of today's El Dorado Hills Golf Course on U.S. Highway 50, the Tavern offered true "roughing it" hospitality for gold seekers. In his book, *The Early Inns of California* (1954) author Ralph Herbert Cross recounted the story of John Ingalls' stay there in December, 1849. "O how it rained that night. If we had had a tight roof I should have cared nothing for it but truly a respectable rail-fence would have made a splendid roof compared to the one we had. . . as we could not get within a rod of the fire we made up our minds to turn in and get warm. . . the berths were all taken up so we had to spread out blankets on the ground. We were obliged to cover up our heads as well as our bodies for the rain came down in torrents. I had just got into the house when a man stepped square on my head in getting into his berth. I should have thought that rather rough treatment at home but we don't mind such little things in CA. . . The next morning it rained equally hard but at about nine A.M. we packed up for I was determined not to pass another night in that house."

The 1850 census indicates that Ashel (Asahel) Lathrop, was running the Mormon Tavern. According to J. Kenneth Davies, author of *Mormon Gold* (1984, Olympus Publishing), "Lathrop had been a Captain of Ten in the Mormon migration of 1847. He probably moved to California with Lyman and Rockwell in the spring of 1849." Author Davies speculates, "Lathrop may well have been living with three polygamous wives (as in the 1850 census) he's identified with his wife Jane and her sisters Hannah and Sarah Peacock." The Illinois, Missouri and Utah birth states of the children born to the three women parallel the Mormon's westward odyssey.

Ralph Cross's book continues the story. "About 1851 the place seems to have been remodeled and enlarged. The dining room is about one hundred feet in length and it is not unusual for all its tables to be occupied by teamsters, while more wait for a second and even third serving." The Mormon Tavern was "operated by Franklin Winchell in 1851. It became a Pony Express remount station of the Central Overland Pony Express. Here on April 4, 1860, pony rider William (Sam) Hamilton changed horses on the first trip eastward of the Pony Express." (California Registered Historical Landmark #699.)

Cross notes that the Tavern was later run by a John Beaver, who may have been the "Reverend John Beaver", referred to in Charles Perry Winchell's 1926 obituary in the *Mountain Democrat*. " . . . in 1860 (C.P.

Winchell) accompanied his Uncle, Reverend John Beaver, to El Dorado County. In 1867 C.P. Winchell married Miss Euphemia E. Bence of Clarksville. The following year he purchased the Old Mormon Tavern on the interstate road between Clarksville and Hangtown Crossing."

Another story recounted by Cross took place in the early 1870s. During a dance at the Mormon Tavern, James K. Page decided to play a practical joke on some of his fellow revelers. He put croton oil (a highly poisonous extract of the castor bean plant) in the coffee. This resulted in the deaths of three men. Page's macabre sense of humor finally went too far as he was hanged at Placerville on August 10, 1883 for the murder of an unidentified man and his horse in the New York Ravine area. According to Hank Joerger, his grandfather, Joseph Joerger, purchased the Mormon Tavern around 1876. "Joseph was born in 1830 in the Alsace-Lorraine region of the French-German border. He and his brother came to the U.S. in 1848. While they worked on the Erie Canal in New York, Joseph's brother drowned. My grandfather then came out to El Dorado County in 1851. He started mining down near where Prairie City Road is and I guess he was pretty successful as he was able to purchase thousands and thousands of acres of land."

During a 1997 interview, Lillian (Joerger) Macbeth, who was born in a cabin near the Mormon Tavern in 1912, recalled that her grandfather, Joseph Joerger, "purchased the Willet place in 1851. It's now the Springfield Meadows subdivision. He slowly purchased a lot of little farms until he had over 3,000 acres here, which included the area that became El Dorado Hills." In the tradition of his French forbearers, Joseph Joerger became a dairy and beef cattle rancher. The Joergers ran their cattle up to their land in Martis Valley near Truckee to graze during the hot summer months and drove them back down to the El Dorado Hills area for the rest of the year.

"The family's dairy building was back a few miles north along what is now El Dorado Hills Boulevard. They had a huge, maybe five-foot tall butter churn that would have to be turned for hours. Since the ranch was located so far out from the big cities, my grandparents couldn't sell the milk. So they made butter and shipped it by rail to the fine restaurants in San Francisco." Macbeth notes that her grandfather Joseph and his second wife, Martha Ella (Smith) made full use of the Mormon Tavern as they had nine children. "The Tavern had a master bedroom and ten small bedrooms. My grandparents treated their hired men royally as they also lived in the Tavern and had three meals a day. My grandma Martha Ella loved to cook. She got up at 3 or 4 a.m. every day and would make ten loaves of bread."

"My grandpa Joseph was known as 'Grasshopper Joe.' He was only 5'2" tall and was a real live wire," Macbeth laughs. "He was a great organizer and was a good boss. Every week he'd have big picnics and everyone from the area would come." After many years of hard work on the dairy and cattle ranch, Martha Ella Joerger finally convinced her "live wire" Joseph they deserved the ease of city life. They moved to Oakland in 1913. Joseph died the following year. Martha Ella, who was twenty-six years younger than her husband, lived until 1928. According to Macbeth, the Joerger barns stood south of Mormon Tavern, where a historical marker today commemorates the Tavern's historical significance. Westbound travelers on U.S. Highway 50 literally drive right through the site where the Mormon Tavern stood. "My Uncle Joe renovated the building so it was beautiful! After his death, it was condemned by the State in the early 1960's when the freeway was planned. My folks, LeRoy and Mary Frances Joerger, didn't even know about it as we were running a dairy down in Winters," laments Macbeth. "Before we heard the news,

the Mormon Tavern was burned to the ground as a practice exercise for the local fire department. It was such a sad ending for a place with so many good memories."

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