Friends of the Siskiyou County Museum
Spring 2026 newsletter

Who Were the Kanakas?

The name "Kanaka" pops up all through gold country, not just in the Mother Lode of the Sierra Nevada mountains but also in the areas of the "northern mines" in far northern California and southern Oregon. Most are aware that this refers to Hawaiian miners, but other than some place names barely a trace of them remains in gold country. "Kanaka" is a translation meaning "people" or "man," but who were these people and what happened to them?

Their story as it relates to us begins back when the Hawaiian Islands were known as the Sandwich Islands. In the late 1700s trade with China was becoming increasingly important to Europeans. In 1777 British Captain James Cook was sent across the Pacific to locate a good stopping point for ships to restock with food and water, do any needed repairs, or overwinter, and Hawaii is what he found. It wasn't long before merchant and whaling ships from France, Russia, Spain and the United States were stopping there as well. The islands became a common stopover for ships heading to California or the Pacific Northwest.

Traditional Hawaiian culture was thrown into disarray with the arrival of western civilization, making opportunities to leave and explore the world an attractive option for young men especially. Already intimate with the ocean, many signed on with ships and became skilled seamen. Working on Russian ships, they visited otter fur trading outposts from California's Fort Ross north into Alaska. They also worked for the Hudson Bay Company and Pacific Fur Company and in 1811 helped found the fur outpost of Astoria, Oregon (which, incidentally, was not a success).

In 1839, Swiss businessman John Sutter, on a Hawaiian stopover, recruited a group of Kanakas to come to California with him. Reliable laborers, they helped build Sutter's Fort and likely his mill as well. Although almost first on the scene when gold was discovered in California at Sutter's Mill, they were shunted aside when the hoards arrived the next year. So the Kanakas

Upcoming Events

Siskiyou Stories

May 9 @ 1pm

East Side Story,
The Tulelake Homesteaders

with Kendall Hannon

Vintage Wedding Dress Exhibit

June 13 - 27

Museum Family Fun Day

Sept. 26

INSIDE

Museum open Tue - Sat 10 am - 3 pm

mined the less desirable or worked-over ground, as did the Chinese. Still, they were industrious and spread out all over gold country, leaving the name "Kanaka" here and there. In our area, a few miles down the Klamath River there is Kanaka Bar, Kanaka Cemetery, and the Honolulu school. In southern Oregon Kanaka Flat was a sizable "suburb" of Jacksonville.

In the end, the Kanakas experienced the same discrimination as the Chinese. They were dark skinned and kept to themselves, and that was enough to raise suspicions and deny citizenship to those who wanted to stay after the gold rush. So they faded away from gold country and almost everyone returned to the islands. But it turns out their erasure was not quite 100%. Some Kanakas inter married with Indian women. Whether this was a common occurrence is unknown, but such a situation was documented and surprisingly overlooked by the Bureau of Indians Affairs in 1916. At that time a federally recognized Native group dubbed the Sacramento-Verona tribe, actually a mixture of Kanakas and Miwok Indians, was given 160 acres of land east of Sacramento. They are now called the Shingle Springs Band of Miwok Indians, and opening their casino in 2008 was controversial due to their Hawaiian heritage, one half of a dual heritage that they do not shy away from.

By Jill Livingston

Siskiyou Daily News Jan. 18, 1946

"Bobby" Wetzel, blinded in war, skiing again

Again displaying the courage of the true soldier that he was during the bloody battle of Italy's Vulterno River —the battle that cost him his sight — Robert D. Wetzel, 21, of McCloud, has resumed his place as a ski champion.

The young man's left eye had been torn from its socket and an exploding land mine and steel fragments had pierced the right eye.

When he returned from Italy last year, blinded, it was said he never would again ski. To an average ski enthusiast, that would be bad enough, but to Bobby, California Ski Association's Class B jumping champion, it was stark tragedy. To him skiing was living.

That passion for skiing and a courage surpassing all obstacles won. Last Sunday Bobby again skied.

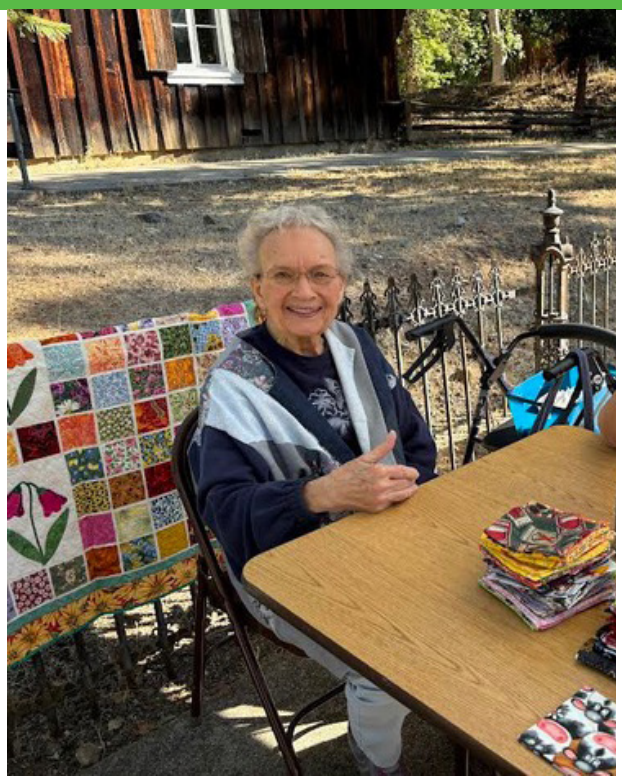
Following the dark image of his brother against the brilliant snow, five times he swung slowly but faultlessly down the difficult slopes of Mt. Rose near the University of Nevada where he and his brother are students.

Aided by glasses, Bobby can now see shadows against a bright background. And the quietly spoken commands to "swing right" or "swing left" given by his brother, Gerald Wetzel, kept him on the course.

Gerald, 22, is also a veteran. They are sons of Mr. and Mrs. Gerald Wetzel, Sr., of McCloud and grandsons of the late Mr. and Mrs. George Wetzel of Yreka. Mrs. Mabel Pashburg and Con DeWitt of this city are aunt and uncle of the lads.

Volunteer Spotlight

Idabel Crowell



Idabel getting ready to help kids sew bean bags at our annual Museum Family Fun Day.

It's hard not to admire the industry and creativity of Idabel Crowell. At 91 years young, she is an inspiration and avid member of the Friends of Siskiyou County Museum (FSCM).

She has spent most of her life involved and dedicated to the creative arts. Many of her quilted and machine embroidered items continue to be featured and on sale in the Siskiyou County Friends' Museum gift shop. In addition, each October, Idabel teaches sewing to dozens of kids attending the Annual Family Fun Day at the Outside Museum. She eagerly shares her knowledge (and her smiles) with the kids who crowd around her, eager to practice a little stitchery.

Idabel was born in Oklahoma, "in a little place out in the country," but came to California with her mother and sister (Patsy) when she was just five years old. The trio drove from Oklahoma to Redding, California.

Her love of fabrics, sewing, crocheting, macrame, and embroidery was then kindled when her mother bought a 10-cent book when she was just six. Together they learned to crochet. As Idabel noted, "I learned to do everything—except tatting." She began making her own clothes (mostly skirts) when she was in high school, and then made her husband George's shirts as well as daughter Arlene and son Paul's clothes. She even made Arlene's wedding dress plus five bridesmaids' dresses, and her own mother-of-the bride's dress. She added with a chuckle, "I never did that again."

When she learned that she could win prize money at the fair for her sewing projects, Idabel began to enter various items into the fair each year. That first year, she entered twelve pieces and won 8 ribbons and $63.00. She said, "It was enough to buy more fabric for the next year."

Idabel also discovered quilting and shared that the "quilting bug really bit" her. She took classes from Scott Valley quilter Carolyn Pimentel, and went on to win awards for some of her quilts, in particular a quilt she made for her granddaughter; it took first at the fair. She also entered a jacket she made that year as well.

In addition to sewing, etc., Idabel took art lessons and began painting. One of her oil paintings her husband had framed, and it still hangs in her home. Another hobby, which Idabel loved, was gardening. She noted that she misses it dearly, since it's not something she can do these days.

Regardless of her age, however, Idabel continues to inspire others and is an eager supporter of the museum and the Friends' group. She has a number of projects available for purchase at the museum gift store!

By Gail Jenner

The Automobile Gold Rush

Gold mining using "low tech" methods was the norm among the Automobile Gold Rush miners of the 1930s.

We all know how gold mining gave rise to the first major influx of population and laid the groundwork for the formation of Siskiyou County, but did you know that there was a secondary "gold rush" many decades later? It's true that following the initial nineteenth century Gold Rush mining continued to be a major occupation in western Siskiyou County, albeit in a less frenzied manner than in the 1850s. Independent miners still came and went but mining companies with many employees such as Black Bear Mine on the Salmon River were the most stable and productive over time. Then the 1930s saw the arrival of a new kind of independent gold miner, the ancestors of some families still here today.

Two things were responsible for this; the Great Depression and the price of gold. Clearly, a city was not the place to be if there were no jobs. If you were not disinclined to live a more humble, rural existence, moving to the mountains would have been an attractive option. Anybody was allowed to go out and prospect for gold or other minerals on the public lands, and it came with a bonus; the opportunity to file a mining claim. You could legally mine without one, but having a claim restricted others from mining "your" piece of ground. And as long as you worked your claim, according to an 1872 law you were allowed to live on it, build a cabin, grow a vegetable garden, plant fruit trees. As a miner in the National Forest you could also live at least partly "off the land" by fishing and hunting. (I can image that regulations were not strictly adhered to or enforced.)

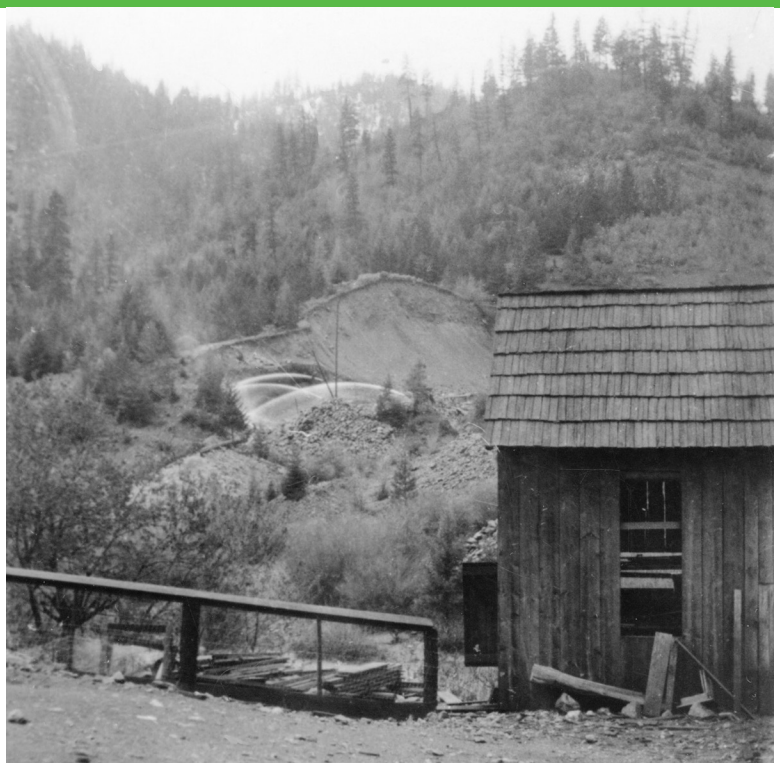
But gold, or the hope for it, was a bigger draw for a certain type of person than a place to grow vegetables, and a change in its value made the move to the mountains even more worth a shot, the prospective hard work more tolerable. As the Depression remained steadfast in the early 1930s, people made the connection between gold mining, even in its relatively low tech form, and a possible inflow of some cash. Would-be miners trickled into the mountains, the idea gained momentum. California Governor Rolph and State Mineralogist Bradley encouraged these miners. The state distributed thousands of "how to mine" manuals to get them started and hosted demonstrations of simple mining techniques.

Then in 1934, the set price of gold jumped from $20.67 per ounce to $35, and the Automobile Gold Rush firmly took hold throughout the western US, including here in Siskiyou County. The fruit of these mostly very small operations constituted only about 3% of gold production in the Depression years, but the profits, meager though they might be, were crucial to the independent miners involved. The US Mints continued to automatically purchase all the gold brought to them, but they required a two ounce minimum. If the miner needed cash before two ounces had been gathered, which was frequently the case, he could always sell to one of the 200+ buyers licensed by the mint who, of course, took a cut.

Since the most easily obtained placer gold had already been panned from the gravel and scraped from rock crevices long before by the first set of miners and then reworked by Chinese miners, it took perseverance to support a family this way. One thing that was dif-

ferent about this later gold rush, aside from the improved transportation, was the fact that often entire families were involved in the mining activities. Even a marginal amount of mining success combined with abundant fish and venison for the taking could support a family adequately, if not luxuriously. And there was always the hope for a big nugget.

Miners must be optimists. A healthy man could shovel about 10 cubic yards of material per day into a sluice box, with the potential of gleaning a tenth of an ounce of gold. That would have brought $3.50 a day after the price of gold was raised. But government surveys revealed that where the gravel had been worked and reworked over the years the take might be only 25 or 50 cents a day. The average take in California was $6.02 a week. Good thing a loaf of bread cost only a nickel.



Miners with a little capital might join up with others to do some hydraulic mining. The Klamath Mountains, unlike the Sierra Nevada, were not affected by legislation restricting hydraulic mining.

Local purchases for food and supplies were routinely paid for in gold, one way the two "rushes" were similar. Another similarity was the low tech equipment developed decades ago being used again, such as pans (which soon were in short supply), and easily built rockers and sluice boxes. The higher tech post-first Gold Rush advances such as monitors or giants (water cannons) for hydraulic mining and dredges used by larger operations were generally beyond the reach of these newly arrived miners. But workers with some capital could band together to form small companies and perhaps invest in hydraulic equipment and dig the ditches needed to bring the water their way, or build themselves a small dredge, or gather the supplies needed for hard rock mining (explosives, timbers, ore carts, etc.). These methods were far more productive than swirling sand and gravel around in a pan daily for eight hours, but out of reach for most of the mining families.

It should be noted that the Klamath and Trinity mountains were unique in California in that the areas were not included in the 1884 Sawyer Decision, a lawsuit that prohibited the discharging hydraulic mining debris into rivers and streams in the Sierra Nevada. So miners with the means, the knowledge and the ground to do so mined hydraulically here, and the scars are still visible. But the majority of the Automobile Gold Rush miners used the low tech, inexpensive or homemade equipment.

A small dredge in the Klamath River near Horse Creek in 1939. This one was a franction of the size of dredges built and operated by big companies.

It is estimated that one in ten California males (women and children were not counted) participated in the Automobile Gold Rush for at least a

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County Snapshot - 1852

Siskiyou County was founded in 1852, and in that year a census of the county was taken. There were 2,214 residents, a virtual population explosion since the pre-gold discovery 1850 census. It goes without saying that Native Americans were not counted, but among the (mostly) Caucasian immigrants and emigrants, it is interesting to note where they came from. As far as states go, the top "home states" were (in descending order) New York, Ohio, Kentucky, Pennsylvania and Missouri. From foreign countries they came mostly from Ireland, Germany, Canada, Scotland, Italy, Norway and many who just claimed "Europe," plus a sprinkling from South America and Mexico.

"Occupation" was another blank to fill in, with the vast majority identifying as "miners," as I suppose they were leaving their old lives and occupations behind. The next highest ranking occupations were farmer/rancher, trader, packer, carpenter and cook, all of whom could ply their trades quite well with miners as their customers. But there were other more unusual or colorful trades listed; Brickmaker, Watchmaker, Card Player, Gent (?), Molder (?), Hunter, Weaver, Prostitute (naturally) and last but not least, Circus Rider.

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short period time, and only one in twenty of those were able to fully support themselves this way. Some worked for only a season or two, or mined between other short term jobs as they came along. 1935-1936 was the height of the Automobile Gold Rush. After that many gave up the chase, while the more successful or settled-in miners stayed on, some of them deciding to become permanent residents. *By Jill Livingston*

NOTE: Most of the material in this article came from the book *The Automobile Gold Rush and Depression Era Mining* by Charles W. Miller.

Deb Perdue from the Siskiyou County Library gave a wonderful and well attended *Siskiyou Stories* presentation earlier this year about the history of our library system, with other tidbits of county history thrown in such as Babe Ruth's visit to Dunsmuir and Yreka. We strive to arrange a variety of speakers for our monthly lecture series. AND, there is no admission fee and we provide snacks!

a 501 (c)(3) nonprofit, EIN 82-1833303
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Everyone Welcome!