Gold Camps in California, What's in a Name?

In 1848 miners flocked to California in search of gold. By 1852 the population in Butte County alone numbered nearly 25,000. With few exceptions, all mining required water for panning or sluicing operations. While gold was available in many dry areas, unless it was surface gold it was hard to process without water. In the winter months, the water level at the banks of the larger rivers would rise significantly with rapidly moving currents. In the winter months many miners would venture inland to smaller creeks. It was not unusual for these creeks to be dry during the summer months. It wasn't until about 1855 that ditches began to be dug, some stretching miles, to collect and move water year-round to various mining operations in the dryer areas.

By 1852 in Butte County, large numbers of miners began to cross the Forks of the Feather River moving to higher ground in the foothills searching for gold during the winter months. Miners would collect in certain areas and name their camps. Many times, the news from the camps was spread by the accounts of stage drivers who serviced the larger gold camps. The miners themselves would also spread the news when they went to the larger camps for supplies. Newspapers would publish accounts of the miner's camps in their area and their successes. These accounts would be picked up by papers in other parts of the state. Some of these gold camps would grow quickly once their successes were published in the papers. They would also die quickly when the newspapers reported that the gold was playing out in their camp.

The names of the mining camp's tended to reflect the name of the most prominent miner, Bardees Bar, Diamondville (the founders last name was Diamond) etc.; Also the prominent nationality of the camp's inhabitants, Frenchtown, Spanishtown, etc. Some had names based on unique characteristics, Dogtown; there were a lot of dogs in the town, etc.

Many times, these camps were less than a mile or two apart. The same name was used several times in one county. There were two camps named Rich Gulch in Butte County in the early 1850's: one near Ophir (Oroville) and another on the other side of the county near today's Yankee Hill. The same name caused problems for stage drivers who delivered mail and supplies to local stores, hotels, etc., so the Rich Gulch site near Ophir would become known as Thompson Flat to avoid confusion. By the late 1850's the government assigned official post office names to larger populated areas. Names were changed at the request of the postal service or the community decided they needed a more formal name. Many times, names were consolidated into one name serving a larger area. Many of these later names are still the names of communities, towns and cities that exist today.