Weaverville: The little town that could

—By Patricia Lawrence

PART I

It is often the small towns that make America great. Weaverville, population 3,500 and county seat of Trinity, is one of those towns. Two million acres makes Trinity County one of California's largest in size, while only 14,000 inhabitants (and no stop lights) make it one of the state's least populated.

A good place to begin exploring Weaverville is the Jack Jackson Historical Society Museum. A native son of Weaverville, the late Jack Jackson was the founding director of the Historical Society's Museum, Research Center and History Park.

Rich in mineral wealth and human ingenuity, Trinity County stretches across two mountain ranges. The Klamath Range defines the top two-thirds of the county, the Coast Range the bottom. The ridge of South Fork Mountain divides them. Plate tectonics tells us that the Pacific Ocean plates are subducting under the North American Plate. Since the beginning of the Precambrian Era 540 million years ago, the Sierra Nevada, Coast Ranges, and Klamath Mountains have contained rocks in sediments that were dragged from the distant ocean floor, then plastered and molded together by the collision of these plates to help form the mountains. Fortunately for many people, in the rocks and sediments are imbedded the gold and other minerals that have made Trinity County famous around the world.

The first person to take advantage of mineral laden geological process was Major Pierson B. Reading. Reading was the recipient of a 26,000-acre Spanish land grant along the Sacramento River where Redding is now. In 1845 the adventurer followed a wide and swift flowing river west, where he found gold nuggets in the streambed. The Major, as well as the Nor-el-muk who lived there, (a sub-tribe of the much larger Wintu nation), had no use for the soft yellow nuggets. Reading named the generous water course the Trinity River, thinking erroneously that it emptied into Trinidad Bay, but he left the gold!

In 1848 news of the gold discovery at Sutter's Mill in Coloma gave Reading reason to think the nuggets he had seen a few years earlier in the Trinity River were valuable. He returned for the nuggets and in one summer alone, at the confluence of Weaver Creek and Trinity River, at what is now Douglas City, Reading took out over $80,000 worth of gold.

After Reading, hopeful prospectors came from all over the world to try to find the precious mineral. Drake, Howe, Soloman, Mulligan, Browder, and Fagg. Armentrout, La Grange, Weaver and Yep. Edgcombe and Lautenschlager, Kruttschnitt and Paulsen...they left place names like German Town, English Town, China Town, and French Town.

As was often the custom, towns and streams were named for the man who first found gold there. John Weaver was with companions when they discovered gold near the present city of Weaverville. The three drew straws to determine whose name was bestowed on the town.

Most gold miners expected to find gold and then find their way back to their homeland. Some never returned; by choice or misfortune. Every day people risked their lives for gold; even Major Reading was 'pressured' off his claim by other gold miners!

In the 1840s, China was embroiled in a bloody civil war and great droughts created famine. Economic and political hardships forced young, able-bodied men that weren't soldiers off farms in the country; they flocked to Shanghai, Canton, and other coastal cities looking for work. From ships in ports, greatly exaggerated stories spread that California was resplendent with mountains and mountains of easy to pick up gold.

Six Chinese companies or tongs, early 'temp-agencies,' hired many of these out of work farmers to travel to California to work on the railroads and in the gold mines. The men were shipped off in teams based on their language or dialect so they could communicate with each other. Hundreds of Chinese miners came to the Weaverville area in the 1850s. Despite hardships, discrimination, and taxes on foreign miners, they settled here, bringing with them, what seemed to the other miners, peculiar Chinese traditions and their Taoist religion. Disputes between Chinese were settled in battle, in a field at the west edge of Weaverville. The infamous 1884 Tong Wars were a show of strength between the clans. These skirmishes may have been acceptable ways of settling disputes in China, but they were alienating behavior in Weaverville, especially after a few Chinese miners were killed.

Chinese success in the mines is attributed to cooperation and what some might call the team work inherent in their culture. Even though they were mercilessly discriminated against in the gold mines and towns, it was the Chinese clan cooperation that paid off. They not only worked their own often marginal claims successfully, they would take over abandoned claims, reworking them to extract more gold.

All four types of gold extraction were used in Trinity County; panning at first when the gold was tumbling down stream beds, then rocker and sluice boxes or long tom's, that sifted gold from river rocks. Then came the much more mechanized deep mines, stamp mills, and finally hydraulic water monitors that tore apart mountains with water pressure as strong as the streams they destroyed.

At the museum's History Park, the steam-powered Paymaster Mine stamp mill that once crushed ore in search of gold can be seen running on Saturday's of three-day holiday weekends, the Fourth of July and the Friday after Thanksgiving.

Women in the gold rush and early California are not always apparent in history books. The Jack Jackson Memorial Museum immortalizes California's pioneer women and children, with one of the largest historic textile collections on the west coast. Bridgett Carson, the director of the Historical Society's Museum, Research Center and History Park, specializes in textiles. The clothing on display was manufactured mostly in San Francisco using silk and thread from China. To protect delicate textiles from light damage, garments are rotated biannually. The current themes through 2010 are "One hundred years of baby clothing", and "The Gilded Age: Garments from the 1890's." In autumn the museum is open daily from noon to 4:00 p.m.. Online www.trinitymuseum.org or 530-623-5211.

Photos by Patricia Lawrence

Joss House today, with front porch under repair.

Next to the Jack Jackson Memorial Museum, you'll find one of the most unique historic buildings in California, "The Temple of the Forest Beneath the Clouds," now the Weaverville Joss House State Historic Park. According to "The History of the Weaverville Joss House, and the Chinese of Trinity County," a little booklet by Douglas and Gina McDonald, the Joss House is a Taoist Temple. Tao, meaning "The Way," is not a true religion, but rather a mystical philosophy embodying the underlying harmony and order in the universe." Taoism subscribes to the 1,500 year old teachings of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, that aim at serenity through harmony with nature.

In 1853 the Chinese in Weaverville built a small Taoist joss house they named Won Lim Miao, or Won Lim Temple. The temple was a place for them to put their gods and worship them. This temple burned down. A second temple was built and it also burned to the ground. The third and present temple was dedicated April 18, 1874 with the addition of carved dragon fish on the roof to ward off fires.

In 1956 native son Moon Lim Lee, Joss House trustee and grandson of one of its original contributors, gift-deeded the 'Temple Amongst the Forest Beneath the Clouds" to the California State Park System.

Moon Lim Lee was born in California to Chinese parents in 1903. His father was an unsuccessful miner, but a successful baker and grocer, providing food and other supplies to the minors. Moon Lee's grandfather and grandmother returned to China; the rest of the family stayed in Weaverville. Tragedy struck when Moon's grandmother was killed in route, presumably because she was wearing expensive jewelry.

Although there were over 2,500 Chinese in Weaverville when the Joss House was built, the temple is small, and will hold only a few people standing. There is nothing to sit on. People worship in the Joss House individually, any time of the day.

The types of the carvings, art and artifacts in the alters and along the walls, and high ceilings cannot be found in China today. In China's 1960's cultural revolution, most of the Taoist temples and artifacts were destroyed. These relicts of a long ago Chinese past, that were so painstakingly brought here by sea, land and river to Weaverville over 140 years ago were saved by Moon Lee and others; as well as the dragon fish that adorn the roof, that keeps the building safe.

Appointed by Ronald Reagan Moon Lee served as a California State Highway Commissioner. As Moon Lee admitted in a 1980 interview, being commissioner was his greatest achievement, even over being named California Citizen of the Year. Travelers on I-5 would remember Moon Lee if they only knew of one of his accomplishments: in the 1950's when I-5 was being designed, it was Moon Lee that insisted the rest stops be only forty miles apart. Moon Lee died on November 8, 1985 at age 82.

Lee has left a warm spot in the hearts of Weaverville-ites. He saw the importance of preservation of history, as do the citizens of Weaverville today; not only in the historic district of Weaverville, but in the forests that surround the fire prone town.

Moon Lee Rest Area on Highway 299 between Weaverville and Douglas City.

Ten years ago in the forests above Weaverville, people were concerned when they gazed upon the first clearcut forest on private industrial timber land; and they didn't like what they saw. They started talking among themselves, and to the Bureau of Land Management and the Trinity County Resource Conservation District (TCRCD), to find out what could be done to have a say in what happens to the Weaverville Basin forests. To their good fortune, at the same time the BLM Community Forest Stewardship program began nationwide.

An astute person in the Redding BLM office told Weaverville about the program, and today there are 13,000 acres of Weaverville Community Forest and an extensive trail system. One thousand acres is BLM forest, the remaining is US Forest Service land. Interested citizens attend occasional meetings to decide how to manage the land, go on field trips into the forest, and participate in hands on work on Volunteer Days when they might plant trees for example. There is never any pressure or commitment of time to participate.

Two Chow Win Dragon Fish protect Joss house from fire.

Alex Cousins is the Assistant District Manager of the Trinity County RCD office in Weaverville. Another native of Weaverville, Alex went beyond Trinity County for his degrees, only to come back and serve his hometown in a very special capacity. On a rainy day in October, Alex agreed to take me for a tour of the Weaverville Community Forest. Driving through the Community Forest, we stop at the Weaver Creek trailhead information panel. "We are just finishing a logging operation here," Alex says, as we turn onto Democrat Gulch Road. Alex describes the timber harvesting that occurred recently in this section of Community Forest, "This timber harvest is two hundred acres. Its three-fold purpose is to reduce the effects of catastrophic wildfires and to overall improve the timber stand with the result that it will pay its way in sales. Fires come through Weaverville, they come right into town. By reducing the lower ladder fuels, we will save the forest from crown fires and maintain it in a healthy way." The forest is comprised of several species of conifers, oaks and other deciduous trees, with occasional ferns, short grass and leaves covering the forest floor.

Photo of Alex Cousins at the Weaver Creek trailhead information kiosk

It was difficult to tell that logging had just occurred in this forest. Alex talked more about the sustainable harvest. "At the same time we did the fuel reduction, we took out some commercial trees. When BLM sells the logs in a forest timber harvest, the profits go into BLM's general fund. The profits that are made on the sales from forests in the Community Forest Stewardship agreement with BLM are different; these profits stay in Weaverville and are reinvested in the Weaverville Community Forest, for projects that include expansion and improvements to the Weaverville Basin Trail System."

Cousins explains other benefits of the Community forest, "While we opened it up, we left the majority of the big trees. We created local jobs and used local mills. We're developing an infrastructure to continue with this type of forest management. We made $117,000 from 750,000 board feet of mixed conifer trees (.156bf). That money went back into this same forest and trail system." Large limbs are chipped and spread back on the forest floor, and ground crews guided a prescription ground fire though this forest after it was logged.

"The byproducts are many, including an improved trail system and access roads, biomass generation, fire wood sales, and education opportunities. These are the things the community asked for," Cousins states definitively. "One recent autumn afternoon, forty cords of firewood sold out in an hour. The improvements on Community Forest roads reduce the amount of fish killing sediment that goes into the Trinity River.

"A perpetuating sustainable system that is really working," is how Alex describes the Weaverville Community Forest and Weaverville Basin Trail systems. "The RCD is a good link because we're so good at leveraging funds. We find partners like the Trinity River Restoration Project to fund larger projects. We use our in-place (happy) volunteers to help with some phases of trail and road maintenance.

"We try to be friendlier to the forest than with a standard timber sale. We're experimenting with the forest and how they will respond with fire. And they are looking for other services the forest provides that man not include cutting them down."

Alex leaves us something to think about, "When I was growing up in Weaverville, my friends and I all knew we could get jobs in logging. Not so now. Whether you think it's good or bad, those jobs are gone and we're losing that skill set. We're losing the knowledge of how to cut down big trees. We're losing people who can turn around a cat in the woods. We're experimenting to bring jobs back into the forest. The grants won't be there forever; the US Forest Service isn't going to keep paying and paying; we need to do projects that are economically viable. The Community Forest will have to pay its own way."

After spending a few hours with Alex Cousins and drilling him with questions to find reasons why a community would not want a Community Forest or Trail System, he didn't mention a single one. And I could not find a reason either, for this forest and other available forests, not to be Community Forests. If a little community like Weaverville can do this, so can other communities throughout the state.

Weaverville is about an hour's drive west of Redding on Highway 299. Mountain Magic Christmas begins the day after Thanksgiving. For more information contact the Weaverville Chamber of Commerce www.TrinityCounty.com or 1-800-487-4648