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Fong Lee

Jesse Augustus Blasingame was a Mexican War veteran who came to California via the Isthmus of Panama in 1849 to mine gold. He brought with him several men to work with him in the mines from his native Alabama. He soon realized that there are better ways of securing gold that aren't quite as hazardous as mining, and he got into the business of selling and breeding livestock. He settled in the Fresno County area in 1862, and bought property near Big Dry Creek, making him an early day settler in the Academy area and, ultimately, one of the most recognizable livestock breeders in the area. He was an amazing businessman, raising sheep, hogs, cattle, and horses, and he continued purchasing land until his property extended about nine miles in length, from what is now Friant to Academy.

Mr. Blasingame had other business interests in Fresno. He built a hotel called the Ogle House near Tulare and H streets in Fresno. At the time it was one of the finest hotels in town. He also had business interests in San Francisco, and this is where our story really begins.

On a trip to The City around 1861, He was staying at the Russ House on Montgomery Street in the Financial District. While walking in Chinatown, he came across a Chinese boy, about 11 years old, crying in the street. Upon asking what the source of his tears was, the youngster told him that his employer, a local restaurant owner, had beaten him for some unknown atrocity. Jesse Blasingame didn't like the sound of that, so he scooped up the young man and took him into his family, to work as a house boy. Mrs Blasingame taught him how to cook, but the outdoor life was more to his liking and

ultimately he became a ranch hand and worked around the ranch.

The family dubbed him Charlie Lee, even though his real name was Fong Lee. Fong eventually called himself Charlie Lee Blasingame, due to his fondness for the family. The Blasingame family raised him from his boyhood, and he was their ever faithful servant. While working for the Blasingames, Charlie often referred to their property as his property. Those are my cows, my sheep, etc. They weren't actually his property, but he cared for the family's property as if it was his own.

As stock ranching went at that time, and still does to some extent today, in the summer it was customary to take the stock high into the Sierra back country, over Kaiser Ridge, where the weather wasn't quite as hot as the valley, and where there was plenty of food for the livestock to eat. Cabins and corrals were built, and a garden was established to help feed the ranch hands while in the mountains. It would be Charlie's job every Spring to arrive at the camp first, and begin getting things ready for the Spring cattle drive. Every Spring he planted the vegetables in the garden and planted hay to feed the livestock. Charlie hand dug a canal to bring water to the camp from Warm Creek to water the garden and provide water for the ranch workers. The canal is still operational today.

Charlie fell in love with the mountains. He became an excellent fisherman, able to catch a string of fish in places where no one else could even get a bite.

At one point Charlie made an attempt to live at the camp all year round. But the long freezing winter cold and the isolation made it very difficult, if not impossible. The nearest neighbor at that time was at Huntington Lake, almost 30 miles away.

While on the valley floor, Charlie made friends with a large number of people from the local Chinese community. Eventually, Charlie got married to an Indian woman and together they had a son named Sam Lee. His family joined him at the camp when he would go early and get it opened in the Spring. At one point people started calling him Indian Charlie, because he married the Indian woman.

While staying at the camp, Charlie met many people wandering the back country. One of these was an old man named Joseph LeConte. LeConte was a physician, geologist, and professor of botany and natural history at UC Berkeley. He published papers on Religion, Eyesight, Psychology, and Evolution, but his most noteworthy papers were on geology and Earth Crust movements. He was extremely active in exploring the Sierras, and with John Muir, was one of the founders of the Sierra Club, a group first started to fight the exploitation of resources in the mountains by miners and sheepherders. In Yosemite, the LeConte Glacier, LeConte Divide, LeConte Mountain, and LeConte Memorial Lodge were named after him. But even with all his accolades and wide range of experience, LeConte was amazed by this Chinese man living in such a harsh environment year after year. They became fast friends.

The exact location of the Blasingame camp in the mountains above Mono Hot Springs has been somewhat forgotten over time. There is still a cabin there, but a tree fell on it a few years ago. A few know exactly where the camp is located, but it is not easy to find as the forest has reclaimed the trail leading to it. As a tribute to the man who lived there so many years, the camp was named China Camp.

And to honor his friend, Charlie Lee Blasingame, Joseph LeConte saw to it that the tallest mountain overlooking Huntington Lake was named Chinese Peak. Of course, it is now commonly referred to as China Peak.