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John Shipe and the Dutchman's Lost Clay Pipe Mine

In the hills above Sanger there is a valley known as Shipe's Valley. The valley is located near the intersection of Ruth Hill Road and includes the fabulous Baker Hall Airport! If that doesn't pinpoint it for you, then just look up Dunlap Cemetery and you'll be right near Shipe's Valley.

The valley was named after John Shipe, who came to California via Pennsylvania and in 1853 settled in this valley. He was originally from Germany, or maybe he was Dutch? No one knows for sure. His name at times was spelled Shipe, or Schipe, or Schippe. No one knew for sure exactly how it was spelled. But he was surely known as a miner, a trapper, a sluice robber, an Indian killer, a bear hunter, a murderer, a squaw man, a big man of incredible physical strength, and in all cases very violent. He thrived on violence.

A mean drunk, no sensible man picked a fight with John Shipe, especially when he was drunk. That was when he was the most dangerous. He was known to carry a double barreled shotgun, two .45 caliber Colt Dragoon pistols, and a long knife carried in a sheath.

Trouble seemed to follow John Shipe, or maybe it preceded him? In any event, he always seemed to be in places where bad things happened. And sometimes where good things happened.

In 1865, in a barroom along the Kings River, an argument lead to the death of a bar patron at the hands of a man

named Jefferies. Jefferies was not happy with the bar customer and shot him several times. As misfortune would have it, John Shipe had been drinking with both of them. Jefferies and Shipe left the bar into the mountains and were headed for Shipe's cabin in his valley. But soon, Shipe returned alone, riding Jefferies horse and using Jefferies saddle. He was also wearing Jefferies six shooter, and his clothes. It didn't take the Pinkertons to figure out what had happened to Jefferies, the fugitive.

Shipe also helped in capturing an outlaw named Jim Raines, overpowering him after he gained Raines trust by pretending to be an exhausted bear hunter. Locals guessed that Shipe went on the law and order side because of the prospect of violence during the chase and capture of criminals.

But John Shipe was also a prospector. While working in Inyo County, he shot and killed six Indians who he found in possession of a rifle and some other belongings that were the property of a miner friend of his who had gone missing. The troops stationed at Camp Independence didn't take kindly to this sequence of events, and soon they were out trying to capture John Shipe.

Now these soldiers weren't the most savvy squad, and as they were passing through a very narrow canyon portion of Kearsarge Pass, a voice rang out clear as thunder, "Retreat, and be damned quick about it." The owner of this voice was unseen, but that didn't matter to the soldiers who were so suitably impressed that they instantly made a hasty retreat. John Shipe returned safely to his home, unmolested.

But violence wasn't his only claim to local fame. At one point he claimed to have found a three foot thick ledge of clay with gold laced in it. The ledge was supposedly located in a roaring river, high on the side walls. Shipe thought it was the Kings River, but it could have also been one of the side forks of the Kings. He just wasn't certain. Or at least, that's what

he said. Of course, he told others that the ledge was near Horseshoe Bend on the South Fork of the Kings, near where it meets the Middle Fork. And he told still others that it was nearer to Piedra.

As stories in the old west go, this one was embellished. Or was it? Shipe claimed to have been following his dog down a slippery bear trail, lost his footing, and in clambering up the hillside, unearthed the ledge of clay and gold. As he was thought by some to be Dutch, the tale became known as The Dutchman's Lost Clay Pipe Mine. Or sometimes it was the Lost Dutchman's Clay Pipe Mine. In yet other versions it was known as Schippe's Lost Clay Pipe Mine.

Supposedly Shipe offered to take people into the canyon to find the lost mine. But before they could gather their belongings and head into the mountains, Shipe was involved in a rather heated argument, and was killed. According to one version of the story, he had written to relatives in Holland, or was it Germany, and had told them exactly how to find the mine. Evidently, one of his relatives came to Fresno County and looked for the ledge. With no luck.

According to Shipe's Indian wife, her young brother had been with Shipe when he discovered the ledge. Supposedly they went into Visalia with a very rich sample. He told many people in town about it and left the sample with the Sheriff for safe keeping. He promised to take the locals into the mountains the next day up to the ledge. Of course, he got roaring drunk that night, started a barfight with the local Marshal, and was killed in the fracas. That was on December 1, 1868.

The sample from the ledge eventually sold for over \$3000, which was a huge sum of money in 1868. Predictably, the Indian boy never would tell where the ledge was located. So, today, if we venture out into the Kings River canyon, somewhere between Piedra and Horseshoe bend, there lies

a fortune in gold just waiting for us at the Lost Dutchman's Clay Pipe Mine.

Or is there? Did it ever really exist? Or did John Shipe actually steal the sample from some other miner and then cover his tracks by creating this fabulous story about a gold filled ledge in the river canyon? We'll probably never know.

But if anyone here assembled wants to try, I just happen to have a secret map to that ledge, and I'm selling it to the highest bidder!