



CANDLELIGHT TREK

KINGS RIVER AREA

MARCH 16, 2024/6029

Good Morning! Welcome to the Jim Savage Mariposa Battalion 1852 Candlelight Trek.

Be sure to keep your hands, arms, and body parts inside the roller coaster car at all times!

We start our trek today at Dan's Antique Truck Yard. Established in 1997, Dan's yard has an eclectic collection of old iron that perhaps only the truly discerning eye can appreciate. Anita sees it as yard art, and Dan's mom calls it junk, as do at least one of the neighbors. But the Hell with the neighbors, Dan was here first!

As we leave the truck yard, you might notice there are river rocks in the pastures down the street. Up on the hill to the south, there are even more. It's hard to believe that this relatively flat land was once the mighty Kings River. But up on the Hill, as well as on the lower parcel just before you turn onto Riverbend, there are thousands of river rocks of all sizes. This was the river bed a long, long time ago. Strangely, Dan's place has relatively few rocks.

Going south on Riverbend, after a couple of miles you'll go over to Kirkman Hill. You'll see lots of citrus trees, and you'll cross over the Enterprise Canal, the east Branch Ditch, the Hansen Canal, Mud Creek, and the historic Fresno Canal created by Moses Church and the Fresno Irrigation Company in 1871. Church built this canal to deliver water to the ranch of A Y Easterby.

Easterby bought 5000 acres sight unseen in 1868, for the price of \$1.80 per acre, hoping to sell the land for \$5 per acre. Church lived in Napa at the time and needed a place to graze his sheep. Easterby allowed Church to bring his sheep to Easterby's land and graze them there. Thinking that he

may have purchased worthless desert, Easterby finally travelled to Church's camp for a visit. He was shocked to discover knee-deep grass and sunflowers. He immediately set about planting wheat for harvest in 1869. Sadly, the crop failed for lack of water.

Easterby was familiar with irrigation systems, so he hired Church to build a series of canals to get water to his ranch. Church diverted the flow of the Kings River down the usually dry Fancher Creek bed to Easterby's ranch, and ultimately built other canals to send water all over the area. Easterby planted 2000 acres of wheat, and in 1871 Leland Stanford came to the area with an inspection party as a prelude to building the Southern Pacific Railroad. Seeing this green "oasis," the only green they had seen since leaving Stockton, they decided there and then that a new town (Fresno) would be built here.

There are hundreds of miles of irrigation canals built by Moses Church. Savage has a monument to Moses Church at the Fresno Irrigation District Office in Fresno.

Along Belmont Ave, you will see the Consolidated Canal on the south side of Belmont. This canal is the main water supply of Kings River irrigation water for Fowler, Reedley, Parlier, and Sanger, and small portions of Kings and Tulare Counties, through the auspices of the Consolidated Irrigation District.

Once Belmont becomes Trimmer Springs Road, you'll see the headworks where the canals all come off of the King's River. This was a controversial location at one time. The headworks were once blown up by rival irrigation districts who claimed the water.

Soon we will arrive at our first stop, the Yank Hazelton Monument.

Yank Hazelton arrived in California 1853 and settled on this homestead in 1857. A cattle rancher, he bought cattle in Mexico and brought them here. On his last buying trip, he also brought back some oranges from Mexico. His wife planted the seeds and they produced the first orange trees in Fresno County. Five generations later, his great, great grandson, Doug Hazelton, started Kings River Packing Company, which is a huge citrus business to this day. Their plant is across the street. The pioneer family's cemetery is on this homestead.



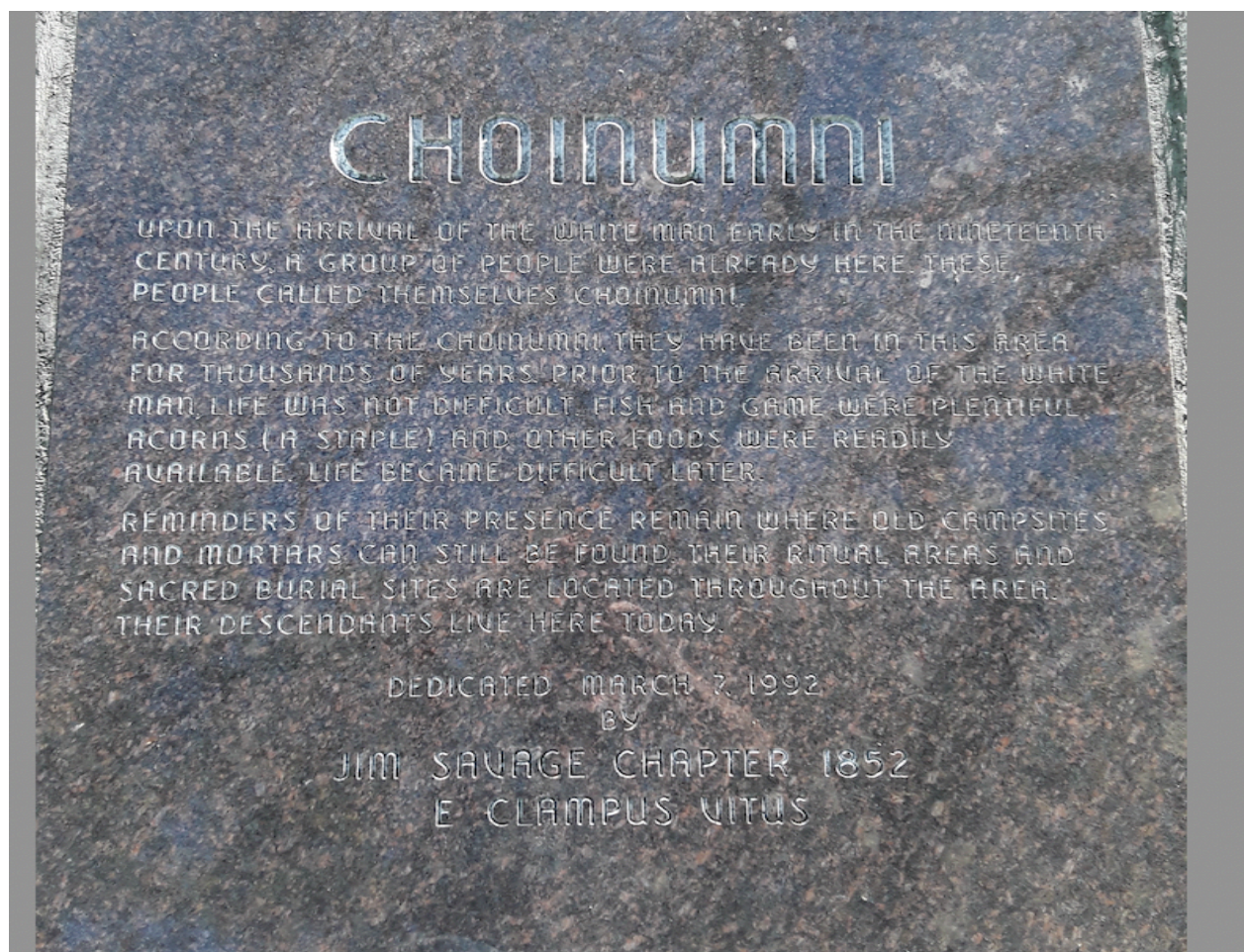
Next, we will travel through some citrus orchards, horse ranches, and past the Kings River itself. We'll go past Winton Park and the village of Piedra, but more on Piedra later.

Our next stop is at Choinumni Park. This is a Fresno County Park that occupies land once inhabited by the Choinumni Indians. To the left of the entrance is our Choinumni Monument.



The Choinumnis lived in this area and all the way up the river past the dam and into the mountains. (They also lived near Dan's Antique Truck Yard, as there are grinding stones just about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile away from where we are camping today.) Their largest village was in the area now known as Sycamore Cove under Pine Flat lake. They've lived in this area for thousands of years.

This area was ideal for the Choinumnis. There was plenty of small game, birds, fish in the river, and acorns. They lived here quite peacefully until the white men came. Back in the late 1800's, the Choinumnis refused to sign the treaty that would hand over their lands to the government. As a result, they are not now considered an official tribe, so no casino and no government benefits. They are currently trying to achieve "official tribe" status, but it is an uphill battle.



Around the corner, near the Group Campground, we will stop again. Here we will see evidence of the Choinumni presence in the area. To the left of the road is a hillside with some nice looking rocks on it. A close examination of those rocks will reveal grinding stones. This is where Indian wives would spend their time grinding acorns and seeds. They would boil the ground acorns and make a paste-like substance that was their main food source. The acorns were plentiful in this area, as you can see by the many oak trees still in the area. The acorns fall in the late summer and early fall, and will keep for a long time as long as they are kept dry.



The beauty of this park is remarkable, especially in the spring and early summer when the river is running high. If you ignore the modern bits and pieces, you can almost still see the Choinumnis happily and peacefully going about their business.

Our next stop is near the base of the dam. Pine Flat Dam was begun in 1947 and finished in 1954. At one time, the Kings River was a monster. When Gabriel Moraga and the Spaniards camped near here, they saw a river that was fully 300 yards wide. That would cover the canyon from wall to wall. This was on the 6th of January, 1806. It must have been a really heavy rain year.

The idea for Pine Flat Dam came from the need to prevent flooding in the valley. But, if you really dig into it, the actual need was to cut off the supply of water going to the Tulare Lake Basin and thereby drain the lake so that farmers like JG Boswell and Salyer American could farm there. It took decades for them to realize their wet dreams of farming the dry basin, but after 1954 it all came true and the basin has mostly remained dry...until last year when Mother Nature showed the farmers how the cow ate the grass.

There was a logging flume that came through the canyon here as well. The narrowness of the base of the dam shows us that the canyon must have been wall to wall water in that location, and yet the flume popped right through there. The flume initially ran from the mill at Millwood down Tenmile Creek to the Sanger Lumber Company yard in Sanger. Eventually, Hume Bennett Lumber Company would extend the flume to their lake, Hume Lake, and then connect it to the existing flume at the base of Tenmile Creek. At that point the flume was 64 miles long. That might be a trek for another day.

If we go a bit beyond the base of the dam and past the old RV park, we will stop and stare across the pasture to the west. If we squint our eyes, we might just see some little white crosses and some glittery stuff way off in the distance. This is a sacred Choinumni burial ground. It has been here for centuries. It is still in use today, which is why you see the white crosses and freshly tended graves. It is off limits to everyone except the Choinumni people. So, we will respectfully look at from this distance.

As we go back, there is a raised rock platform with what looks like a monument pedestal in the middle. Was this a Savage Monument? Was it a Corps of Engineers monument? The plaque was probably bronze and as such ended up in a recycling yard. Maybe Savage should put up a new granite plaque, explaining the history of Pine Flat Dam?

As we head back past Choinumni Park, on the right we will see the Piedra Post Office. This is NOT the original site of this Post Office. This was the site of Doyal's Store...a hamburger stand/ bait shop/ last minute supply kind of place that seemed to have been here since the dam was built. They had pretty good burgers. But somewhere between the mid 1980's and the early 2000's, Doyal's moved to the actual village of Piedra and built a bigger store. The Post Office moved from the village of Piedra to this location.

After going west on Trimmer Springs Road, we will turn left on Piedra Road and cross the cool bridge. Piedra was the site of a rock quarry owned by the ATSF Railroad. The quarry was on the left just after we pass the bridge. This was the ATSF Wahtoke Branch that ran north from Reedley through Minkler, past Tivy Valley, and on to Piedra. The branch was built in 1911.

The quarry initially supplied the ATSF with rock ballast, but when Pine Flat Dam was under construction, the line was

extended east to the dam site for the delivery of tools, equipment, rock, sand, and other supplies. Up until the late 1970's the rock crusher and most of the infrastructure was still in place.

Piedra has been known as Del Piedra, Delpiedra, and Piedra, and had a US Post Office from 1920 to 1943, called Delpiedra. In 1949 it became Piedra. The ATSF Piedra Depot was a freight agency until 1939. There were also stock pens located nearby. The tracks came from the west, crossing Piedra Road in several places, to the depot and the small yard. Sadly, the depot was removed in 1952. The branch line was abandoned in 1965. The original Post Office site was across the street from the depot.

Now we'll make our way out Piedra Road toward Minkler. Again we'll pass citrus orchards, horse ranches, huge mansions, and pretty scenery.

Along the way we will pass Avocado Lake. This lake is actually a gravel pit that was created during the construction of Pine Flat Dam. There is a swimming area, but beyond that the sides are very steep and drop off quickly. Lots of people have drowned here. Usually they are people that don't know how to swim, but waded out too far in the water and then slide down the steep incline.

In late 2002, there was a tree that was hit by lightning during a storm. The top of the burned stump of the tree resembled the Virgin Mary. Instantly people began coming here to pray and gather to see the image of the Virgin. They made a pathway, put up benches, lit candles and left food and statues, and generally made a big deal out of it. But one day, the tree was cut down during the night, and the people were very sad. No one knew what had happened until a local crazy NAZI/KKK guy named Bill Gaede claimed that he had cut down the tree because he was tired of so many Mexicans

coming to the lake and doing drugs. He was later arrested for carrying a concealed gun without a permit.

Eventually we will turn east on HWY 180 and go to the fabulous metropolis of Minkler.

Charles Ozro Minkler was a 13 year old boy in Iowa when he ran away from home and came to California. He first worked bundling and tying wheat sheaths on his arrival in the valley. Ozro, as he was known, would ultimately become a farmer in the Sanger area.

In 1892 he built a small shack of a store and the area around it became known as "Minkler." The family expanded the town enterprises into a saloon, a blacksmith shop, a livery stable, and a hotel. Located a few miles east of Centerville, the town became a staging point for teams heading into the Kings River watershed area of the mountains.

Ozro married Emma Bailey, and together they had two sons, William Orville Minkler and Charles O. Minkler (who was known as Charlie). Some of the Minkler grandchildren still live in the area.

As previously mentioned, the ATSF built the Wahtoke Branch in 1911 to serve the farms in the area and access the quarry at Piedra. At Minkler, the Wahtoke District wye'd into the ATSF Porterville-Orosi District, coming from Porterville. This line originated just north of Bakersfield and served many east valley towns including Porterville, Strathmore, Lindsay, Exeter, Woodlake, Seville, Cutler, Orosi, Orange Cove, and Minkler. This provided access to national markets for locally grown agricultural goods. The railroad was abandoned in 1973.

In 1920, Ozro Minkler built a new, bigger store next to the small store. This store would sell nearly everything a

farming family might need from groceries to Red Crown Gasoline and Sierra Ice Cream. Meat, cheese, canned goods, all had a special place. Of course, beer was also sold there, and the store still retains a special license that allows them to sell beer and have patrons drink their beer in the store.

1920 additions to the new store would include an adobe ice house and a wooden bait house, which are both still standing today, although the ice house was damaged and moved several feet backward after a car hit it in the 1970's. Ice was purchased from the ice house in Sanger in 300 lb. blocks that were perforated into blocks. When someone wanted to buy ice, the store clerks would chip away at the perforations with an ice pick until the blocks were separated from the large block. Red worms were available in the bait house, for fishing. The store would also serve as the Minkler Post Office for many years.

Ozro ran the store with his son William until 1935 when Ozro died. William continued to run the store until about 1940 when the store business was sold to Grace Russell. Grace leased the building from the Minklers, but owned the business.

In 1970, Sylvia Ashcraft bought the business from Grace Russell. She also leased the land from Charlie Minkler (Ozro's grandson), until about 1978 when she purchased the entire town. The name "Minkler Cash Store" was stipulated in the lease arrangement, and could never be changed.

This was a "cash" store, meaning that you could buy things there using money. Credit was given to certain local farm families. But this was not a "trading post." You couldn't trade their goods for farm products, as you could in some stores, hence the name Minkler CASH Store.

Many of the shelves in the store are original to 1920. The counter was added sometime in the 1940's by Grace Russell's husband, before he left her claiming that this business was too much work.

The current owner is Mary Novack, who is Sylvia Ashcraft's daughter. She ran the store with her mom, grandma, and sisters back in the 1970's. The store was then open all day seven days a week. At one point, Mary was scheduled to work on a Sunday, but she had a date that day. No one else was going to be available, so Mary begged her mom to let her have the day off. Her sisters also argued her case, and Sylvia finally relented and allowed the store to be closed. For the first time in over 50 years of operation, the store closed that Sunday, and has never opened on a Sunday again.

In 2004, Sylvia Ashcraft put the whole town up for sale on eBay. The asking price was \$600,000. Silvia was 83 at the time and was in failing health, so she decided to part with the property. Happily for us, no one ponied up the money and the family still runs it to this day. The store has been run exclusively by women since 1940.



Across the street is a memorial garden, memorializing two local police officers who were killed in the line of duty during a shootout here with a crazy man that lived down the street.

In the Memorial Garden, we are currently building a monument to the Minkler Cash Store. We aim to dedicate it on April 7, 2024 at our Spring Doins.

As a side note, for the past two years, the Minkler cash Store has hosted a St. Nicolas Day Parade. St Nick's day is on the 6th of December, and people from the area decorate anything and everything they find and put it in the parade. Last year's parade had a couple of decorated tractors, a decorated little kid's Barbie car, complete with little kids driving it, several decorated vintage cars, a decorated cow, a few Rhinos and Gators, and a decorated fire truck (I wonder who that belonged to?). needless to say, it was a blast!!! We think it is the shortest parade in California, if not the entire west.

Back on the Road, we will head to another huge metropolis...Centerville.

Originally called Scottsburg (or Scottsborough), the town was founded in 1854 in the low lands of the Kings River. In 1858, WW Hills established a ferry at Poole's Crossing, but during the winter of 1861-2 the ferry and the town were completely destroyed by flooding. The town was rebuilt on higher ground, only to be destroyed again in 1867. The town was finally moved to a bluff overlooking the location of the flooded town, and was named Centerville.

Hwy 180 passed through Centerville and Minkler for several decades, but has now bypassed both towns. Mary Novack at Minkler Cash Store is happy because she has seen no drop off in business, and can now stage events like the St. Nick's

Day Parade without anyone bothering her for blocking the road.



Now we will head back to Dan's Antique Truck Yard for history lessons, a visit with the Emperor, and HOCO!