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Kerbyville

The Pioneer Gold Camp of Oregon

By Dennis H. Stovall

AT the foot of the pine-clad hills, with its one long street, and overlooking the winding river and the valley of the Illinois, in Southern Oregon, nestles Kerby, the pioneer mining camp of Oregon. Kerby today is as quiet an old country town as one cares to see. On the broad porch, fronting the maple-shaded Pioneer Hotel, a big, lazy dog lies and sleeps the empty hours away. Near the dog, with his chair tilted against the wall, jackknife in hand, the gray-haired Old Timer sits. His hours are as regularly kept as are the dog's, for, unless the winds and rains are too severe, both are inevitably at their posts. In this event they are driven inside the spacious room that serves at once both as office and lobby of the hostelry. Inside, the dog occupies a plentiful portion of the hearth before the big fireplace; the Old Timer tilts his chair against the wall. Inside or out, if he has an audience, the Old Timer tells of the days of old, the days of gold, the palmy and strenuous days of the fifties; if he has no audience, he whittles.

About the only thing that disturbs Kerby nowadays is the stage which, twice daily, rolls through the town, once from the east, once from the west. The loiterers about the livery stable and the hotel, the saloon and the stores, saunter down the street to the post-office, and crack a joke or two with the driver as he throws the mail bags down. When the driver takes the mail bags in hand again, snaps his whip, and the coach disappears in a cloud of dust, the crowd straggles back, each one to his respective bench or dry goods box. The dog curls up on the porch, the Old

Timer goes to his accustomed seat, and Kerby falls once again asleep.

But Kerby has not always slept. In the early days, the settlement, then known as Kerbyville, was the gayest and thriftiest, and exchanged more "dust" than any other mining camp north of San Francisco. That was during the gold-fevered era of half a century ago. Then the streets of Kerbyville seethed with the stampede of two thousand excited gold-hunters. From the saloons and dancing halls issued, day and night, the clink of glasses, the boisterous merriment of revelers and the hubbuboo of the faro tables, intermingled with shouts, shots, yells and cries. Kerbyville was, in truth, but a California mining camp moved over the Siskiyou. It was composed of the same stampede that swept the plains in forty-nine.

A few miles below Kerbyville, on the Illinois River, Josephine Creek empties its foaming waters into the larger stream. It was here, at the foot of Eight-Dollar Mountain, gold was first discovered in the "Oregon country," April 2, 1851. The news of this discovery, whispered from man to man, from claim to claim, from camp to camp, brought a living stream over the narrow frail of the Siskiyou, and started swarms of men up every gulch, creek and river in Southern Oregon. There was not a bar, not a creek-bed, not a gravel-bank that did not abundantly produce the royal metal. Then the news, distorted, exaggerated, glittering, carried by the swift-flying wings of the pioneer "wireless telegraph," spread like wildfire. An endless caravan, a long line like some mighty reptile, crept over the crags and down the

steps into the valley of the Illinois. With rocker and pan and shovel, millions in nuggets and yellow grains were cradled from the auriferous beds of the streams. Gold! gold!—there was no limit to the precious stuff!

Today, in passing along the one street of the old town, the traveler will find but a few decaying relics of the gay Kerbyville of the palmy days. The old courthouse is gone, but the town hall, scarred and weatherbeaten by the rains and winds of many winters, deserted save by the rats, still remains. On up the street is the old jail, just as it was forty years ago—a two-story, dark, gloomy structure. The winds and the weather, the worms and the decay of half a century have done their work, and long since put most of the old dance halls and shops out of business. The walls of the remaining ones lean toward the center, the windows and doors are boarded up, and a few beer signs, punctuated by the bullet-marks of the pioneers' six-shooters, cling des-

perately to the decaying walls. The pioneers—the older ones of the early fifties—have nearly all resumed their restless march for a better Eldorado, and passed from view over the Long Trail.

The story goes that a billiard table is responsible for the founding of Kerbyville. In the summer of 1853, Alonzo Martinez, a Spanish packer, contracted to deliver a billiard table to the proprietor of a saloon at Althouse, one of the first camps established in the Illinois Valley. Martinez, or "Tig," as he was more familiarly known, owned a pack mule noted all along the Coast for her remarkable perseverance and strength. Anita was her name; and Anita was the pride of the old packer's heart. It was on the back of Anita that Tig placed the billiard table, and made the attempt to get the big, awkward package over the eighty-five miles of narrow, mountainous trail. Anita gave way beneath her load before reaching her destination. Within eight



KERBY AS IT IS TODAY—At the foot of the mountains flows Josephine Creek, where gold was first discovered in the Pacific Northwest.

miles of Althouse she dropped dead with fatigue and exhaustion, and nearly broke the heart of her master. The saloon keeper would not pay Tig because he had not delivered the table, so the packer let it rest where Anita fell with it. In his thirst for revenge, an enterprising idea came into the Spanish head of Alonzo Martinez. He would build a saloon around the billiard table and advertise a "grand opening." He did so, and with the only billiard table north of San Francisco as a drawing card, got the whole stampede headed his way. Tents and shacks and cabins went up about the "Dewdrop" by the score. Within a fortnight it was a thriving mining town, and that town was Kerbyville.

In 1856, Kerbyville was made the county seat of Josephine. The county was named in honor of Josephine Rawlins, a popular and pretty young lady of those times who came with her father into the Oregon gold fields early in the year 1851. At the time of the designation of Josephine there were several thriving mining camps in the Illinois Valley, in which section nearly the whole of the Southern Oregon population was centered. There were Waldo, Althouse, Browntown and Kerbyville. Before the designation of the county, Waldo had been unofficially used as a county seat, but with the holding of the election Kerbyville won the trophy by a large majority.

The first mining law framed in the vast empire of America was drafted and adopted by a crowd of miners gathered on the banks of Josephine Creek, near the spot where gold was first discovered in the Oregon country. This meeting of miners was held on a beautiful morning, April 1, 1852, a half-hundred gold diggers being in council. Prior to this time there were no mining laws embodied in the Oregon code, or any other code, and the miners found difficulty in staking claims. The six-shooter was law and gospel in those days. But even this failed to designate the limits and bounds of a quartz or placer claim. Trouble arose, and several men had to die before the miners

arose to the necessity of adopting a uniform rule. Here is what it was:

"Know all men by these presents: That the miners in council assembled, this, the first day of April, 1852, do ordain and adopt the following rules and regulations to govern this camp:

"Resolved, first, That 50 yards shall constitute a claim in the bed of the creek, extending to high water mark on each side.

"Resolved, second, That 40 feet shall constitute a bank or bar claim on the face, extending back to the hills or mountain.

"Resolved, third, That all claims not worked, when workable, after five days, be forfeited or jumpable.

"Resolved, fourth, That all disputes arising from mining claims shall be settled by arbitration, and the decision shall be final.

"E. J. NORTHCUTT,

"Chairman."

Kerbyville was the county seat of Josephine for twenty-eight years, and those twenty-eight years covered the palmy days of the old mining camp. It was during the fifties and the first part of the sixties, however, that Kerbyville was at its height. This was the period that the brush was on for the surrounding placer beds of the Illinois Valley streams. Each day during those rough-and-ready times Kerbyville was in a



THE OLD JAIL IN KERBYVILLE—A relic of the old rough-and-ready days.

state of ebullition, boiling, bustling with gold-fevered humanity. To the hitching bars along each street-side, scores of pack animals, mules and cayuses, stood, stamped and fought the stinging flies. Rough-clad miners, singly and in groups, moved to and fro along the street. Miners were there from the auriferous bars of the Illinois, Josephine Creek, Silver Creek, Althouse, Galice and the Rogue. The gravel beds of each of these yielded abundantly of their golden metal, and into Kerbyville the yellow stuff poured lavishly. Here was the center. Here the treasure streams emptied. Hordes poured in and hordes poured out, and the yells and shouts of preparation as mules and ponies received their packs, the jar and clank of shovels, picks and pans, as beasts of burden, camp-laden, brushed each other in passing by.

Along in the latter part of the sixties, Kerbyville began to decline. No town on earth could keep up the pace she had led during the palmy days of her prosperity. Like a rocket, she was destined to soar, burst into a glory flame for a

while, then flicker and fade from view. The miners that swept that district during the pioneer days were a restless lot. They scratched the surface, dug no deeper than the length of their shovel handle, for that was their limitation, then moved on, breathless, like the small boy chasing the rainbow for a pot of gold. The old town passed successfully through two bloody Indian wars, a smallpox epidemic, and a long winter famine, with weeks of snow piled high, and all trails blocked, provisions gone, and salt selling for its weight in gold, and flour a dollar and a half a pound. Those were strenuous days, but Kerbyville went safely through them all. The stampede passed, and the camp dropped into a silent slumber. There is nothing to disturb it, save the roll of the stage, the clatter of passing hoofs now and then, and the salutation of a farmer as he drives up to the store front. On the hotel porch the big, lazy dog lies curled asleep, and the Old Timer sits tilted against the wall, jackknife in hand, whittling. There is nothing else to do.



AN OLD HOUSE IN KERBYVILLE—Built in 1858