GHOST TOWNS of CALIFORNIA

Your Guide to the Hidden History and Old West Haunts of California

Philip Varney

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Voyageur Press

FOR WARREN WEAVER
AND
IN MEMORY OF MARY SHUMWAY WEAVER

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BEDS
WITH
SPRINGS

TO THE READER

Ghost Towns of California is intended for people who seek the unusual, enjoy history, and savor solitude. Some of the destinations in this book will be unfamiliar even to most Californians, like out-of-the-way Campo Seco, Goffs, and Helena. Other sites attract thousands of visitors annually, such as Columbia, Bodie, and Calico. Chasing down the ghost towns and mining camps in this book will take you from sea level to elevations exceeding 8,000 feet. You will view some of the West's loveliest rivers, driest deserts, and grandest mountaintops. In the process, I hope you will see California as you have never seen it before. That certainly happened to me.

I was a ghost town hunter long before I became a ghost town writer. I have been prowling California's back roads in search of the forgotten since 1974. My third ghost town book, published in 1990, covered California from the Mexican border to Death Valley and Inyo County. My sixth ghost town book, published in 2001, extended north from New Idria, in the hills southwest of Fresno, through the '49er Gold Rush Country, made a surprising stop in San Francisco Bay, and proceeded to the northern and eastern reaches of California.

The book you have in your hands takes the best towns from those two books and adds sites I overlooked in those volumes. All entries have been revised, in some cases extensively, from their original versions. As a prime example, in my Southern California book, Death Valley's Ryan received only passing attention because it was closed to the public and could only be photographed from a distance. This book features the first authorized published photos of Ryan since the 1930s, and I provide an extensive description of what remains at Ryan today. The site is still closed to the public, at this writing, but I was given special permission to visit, photograph, and even stay for several nights.

If you want to find more sites than I have featured here, those two recommended books are listed under my name in the bibliography at the end of this book.

I wrote my first book, *Arizona's Best Ghost Towns*, as a result of my frustration with the way other such books generally had been organized: Most of them had the ghost towns listed alphabetically, not organized geographically, which seemed far more logical to me. Some books had their maps buried in the back instead of

The City Hotel in Columbia offers only the finest amenities.

up with the ghost towns themselves. I wanted a completely practical, informative guide that would give me everything I needed next to me on the seat of my truck. That first book's success led to seven more.

This volume, like my other books, arranges towns so you can visit places in natural groups, beginning with Coloma, where the Gold Rush began, and ending with Llano, an abandoned ghost of the Mojave Desert.

Each chapter features a map of the area, a history of each town, specific directions to each site, and recommendations when necessary for vehicle requirements. For example, some towns are on paved roads near major highways, while others are on dirt roads and require a high-clearance vehicle. Although I never needed to use four-wheel drive for this book, I did utilize it on recent visits to two sites, Cerro Gordo and Leadfield. I have also accessed each of these sites in a two-wheel drive pickup.

You might be interested to know, for this book, how I selected which towns to include and which to exclude. To begin, if there is very little left at a site, it's not going to be included unless it is in proximity to another, better site. For example, although Kelso offers only one major historic building (a *very good* historic building, however), it is along the route between two worthy sites, Shoshone and Calico.

At the other end of the spectrum are former ghost town sites that have been thrust into the twenty-first century. Visitors to Gold Rush Country may wonder why I have not included some important towns along Highway 49, like Auburn, Placerville, and Sonora, all of which were definitely historically significant. Quite simply, if a town seemed "buried under modernity," as author-historian Richard Dillon put it, I omitted it. For example, although Placerville has some lovely downtown buildings, the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have rather overwhelmed the nineteenth.

A person new to ghost town hunting might tour the second entry in this book, Georgetown, and wonder just what I consider a ghost town to be, because Georgetown has shops, restaurants, a hotel, and an elegant bed and breakfast inn. In addition, its population more than triples on occasional festive weekends. By my definition, a ghost town has two characteristics: the population has decreased markedly, and the initial reason for its settlement (such as mining) no longer keeps people there. At the peak of its mining frenzy, Georgetown had an estimated population of well over 10,000 citizens; as of the 2010 census, 2,367 people live there, and virtually no one makes a living in a mine. A ghost town, then, can be completely deserted, like Skidoo, Helena, and Llano; it can have a few residents,

like Chinese Camp, Shoshone, and Willow Springs; it can be protected for posterity by the State of California, like Coloma, Columbia, and Bodie; or it can have genuine signs of vitality, like Murphys, Downieville, and Weaverville. But in each case, the town is a shadow of its former self.

Ruins in Campo Seco.

I had mixed feelings about charming, smaller towns like Sutter Creek and Jamestown. They weren't quite so obviously up-to-date, and both feature attractive business districts and residences, but they still seemed on the whole to be too, well, *bustling* for my taste. Since you will be traveling through many of these towns on your way to others, feel free to explore them on your own.

I also omitted many towns that I have enjoyed visiting but felt that the buildings weren't sufficiently distinct architecturally. These towns were the most difficult to exclude, because virtually all ghost towns are interesting at some level. So, to fans of Hornitos, Sheep Ranch, and Gold Run, all I can say is that I had to eliminate towns, and these were some of the last to go. I was standing in each of them when I made my decision.

One site not included in this revision, I am sad to say, is the aforementioned town of New Idria, because thirteen of its buildings were destroyed by a suspected arsonist in 2010, leaving precious little to see.

People living in sleepy places like Dutch Flat, Locke, and Keeler may be offended about inclusion in a "ghost town" book. But their communities have "ghost town" indicators: in each case, their population has dropped precipitously, and once-bustling businesses and schools have closed.

Some guide books I have used when traveling in the West were apparently written principally for armchair travelers. Unfortunately, some have been written by armchair authors. I cringe when I realize that a book I'm using has been written by someone who obviously hasn't personally observed what he is writing about. I first saw some of the sites in this book in the late 1970s and early 1980s. But I visited or revisited every single site in 2010 and 2011. The photographs in this book were all taken within that same time period. The book's emphasis is on what remains at a town, not what was there in its heyday. I describe what to look for at each site, and I suggest walking and driving tours.

The Murphys Hotel at night.

I also make recommendations about museums, mine tours, and mill tours. To see them all would be expensive and somewhat repetitious, so I give advice based on comparisons to similar tours throughout the West. My observations are candid, and I received no special consideration at such sites. I paid all entrance fees at attractions, and guides knew me only as another tourist.

Speaking of being just another tourist, I received no special access to sites for photography other than at Ryan, in Death Valley. For previous books, my photographer partners, John and Susan Drew, and I paid for permits or were given special privileges because of the projects. I did not do that for this volume. I also put away all my film cameras and lenses and, for the first time, used a digital camera with only two zoom lenses. I did not use either a flash or a tripod. I wanted to take photos that any person could take. If you like the photos of interiors in North Bloomfield or Bodie, you can take the same shots through a window, just as I did. I enlisted the help of my good friend, Dr. Michael Moore, who is an accomplished photographer and my mentor when it comes to digital photography. I also invited him to submit images for Chapters 5 and 6, and seven of his photographs were selected.

When it comes to looking for photographic subjects, I suggest starting with graveyards. Almost every town has a cemetery, even if it has little else. Some of my most enjoyable but poignant moments have come while walking around graveyards, since emotions are often laid bare on tombstones. To read the grief of parents in the epitaphs of their children is to see the West in absolutely personal terms. History comes tragically alive in cemeteries, and headstones make wonderful photographic subjects, as you will see in this book.

To visit all of the sites in this book without frantically racing from one to another, I would estimate that you would need from three weeks to a month. You might plan for a bit longer just to allow for other attractions you might find along the way—and weather. I took months more than that and drove thousands of miles farther than you will, but then I was looking at many ghost towns that I eliminated. I also needed to photograph in optimum light, so seeing a wonderful, photogenic place like Bodie at noon was not acceptable.

Why are we called to these places where so many lives have toiled and so many have been forgotten? My late friend, mystery writer Tony Hillerman, in a foreword to my book *New Mexico's Best Ghost Towns*, captured the answer:

"To me, to many of my friends, to scores of thousands of Americans, these ghost towns offer a sort of touching-place with the past. We stand in their dust and try to project our imagination backward into what they were long ago. Now and then, if the mood and the light and the weather are exactly right, we almost succeed."

Our "touching-places with the past," however, are in immediate and long-term danger. Vandals tear up floorboards hoping for a nonexistent coin. Looters remove an old door with the vague notion of using it, only to discard it later. Thieves dislodge a child's headstone, heartlessly assuming no one will miss it.

Remember: These old towns are to be explored and photographed, but also protected and treasured. You must be a part of the preservation, not the destruction. As you visit the places in this book, please remember that ghost towns are extremely fragile. Leave a site as you found it. I have seen many items on the back roads that tempted me, but I have no collection of artifacts. If you must pick up something, how about a fast food wrapper or a soft drink can?

When I was doing fieldwork for my book *Ghost Towns of Colorado*, I found the following notice posted in a lovely but deteriorating house. It eloquently conveys what our deportment should be at ghost towns and historic spots:

> Attention: We hope that you are enjoying looking at our heritage. The structure may last many more years for others to see and enjoy if everyone like you treads lightly and takes only memories and pictures.
>
> —*Philip Varney*
> *Tucson*

Important Note: *The State of California has, at this writing, slated many California State Parks for closure beginning in 2012 for budgetary reasons. Five of the sites in this book (North Bloomfield and the Malakoff Diggins, Plumas-Eureka, Shasta, the Weaverville Joss House, and China Camp) are state parks or contain state parks within them. Be certain that the places you want to visit are open. See the individual entries in the text; in each case I give my assessment of how seriously that closing will affect your enjoyment of the site in question. The easiest way to check is to go to http://www.parks.ca.gov. One of the subheadings will be "park closures."*

INTRODUCTION

GOLD! GOLD! GOLD FROM THE AMERICAN RIVER!

When James Marshall found gold in California's American River on January 24, 1848, he set into motion one of the most incredible economic and social upheavals in history. When he made his find, California was still a part of Mexico. Nine days later, Mexico ceded to the United States a vast territory west from Texas and north to Oregon. In doing so, Mexico gave up, unknowingly, the most astonishing concentration of gold the world has ever seen.

Originally Marshall's find was viewed with skepticism. A San Francisco newspaper in May of 1848 scoffed, "A few fools have hurried to the [American River], but you may be sure there is nothing in it."

A few days later, however, storekeeper Sam Brannan, who had been to the area of Marshall's discovery, paraded through San Francisco with a bottle full of gold dust, exclaiming, "Gold! Gold! Gold from the American River!" The rush was on, and San Francisco practically emptied, its citizens heading to the gold fields—and conveniently passing Brannan's store, full of supplies, along the way (Brannan would become one of California's wealthiest men and reportedly its first millionaire). Another of the city's newspapers complained a few days later that "the field is left half planted, the house half built, and everything neglected but the manufacture of shovels and pick axes." San Francisco's harbor eventually was clogged with rotting, crewless ships.

In the year of 1848, only 400 people immigrated to California. During the following year, with word of Marshall's discovery trumpeted across the nation, and then the world, an astounding 90,000 people descended upon the area. Author J. S. Holliday states that California "would be transformed from obscurity to world prominence; . . . from a society of neighbors and families to one of strangers and transients; from an ox-cart economy based on hides and tallow to a complex economy based on gold mining."

Gold seekers swarmed from across the nation on the early pioneer trails that had opened the West, like the Oregon and Santa Fe trails. Some attempted short cuts across infamous Death Valley, while others took a southern route that

A wooden headstone in Bodie.

crossed arid sections of Arizona and Mexico. The average successful trip took about a hundred days and covered two thousand miles.

Those who could afford the passage often opted for sea travel. A 15,000-mile journey from New York to San Francisco around Cape Horn took from five to eight months, but those willing to brave the dangers of the jungle could cross the isthmus in Nicaragua or Panama and shorten the sea voyage to six or eight weeks.

Whatever route they used, the Argonauts came and came. Between 1848 and 1860, California's population exploded from 14,000 to 300,000. In the early days of the rush, the population was almost exclusively male. One lad in Nevada City inscribed in his diary, "Got nearer to a female this evening than I have been for six months. Came near fainting."

Not all the hopefuls came from the United States, although estimates start at more than sixty-five percent American. Mexicans and Chileans streamed in from the south. English, Scots, Irish, and Welsh, many of them experienced miners, came from the British Isles. Germans, French, and Scandinavians arrived. By 1852, about 25,000 Chinese had joined the throng, looking for the promised wealth of *Gum Shan*, "The Golden Mountain."

The reason for the stampede was genuine. The Mother Lode was an immense body of gold that extended down the western foothills of the Sierra Nevada (Spanish for "snow-covered range") for an unbelievable distance of a hundred miles. It began north of Coloma and ended near Bear Valley (an area covered in Chapter 1 of this book).

Although the Mother Lode was the most famous, other extremely rich deposits were found in Nevada, Placer, and Sierra Counties (Chapter 2). A third bonanza was revealed only two months after Marshall's discovery when Major Pierson B. Reading found gold more than 200 miles north of San Francisco, leading to a separate gold rush near the Trinity and Klamath Rivers (Chapter 3). The size and scope of the California Gold Rush defies simple description, but it can be capsulated in two almost unimaginable facts: in a mere four years, the world's supply of gold *doubled*, and with the United States leading the way, more gold was discovered worldwide between 1850 and 1875 than in the previous 350 years combined.

Initially, gold was easily retrieved from secondary deposits in streams and along banks. The gold's size varied from small particles, known as "flour gold," to nuggets weighing as much as several pounds. Prospectors would then search upstream for the source of that water-borne gold. Those primary deposits were often so pure that

gold could be extracted with a shovel—or even a spoon.

The Boone Store and Warehouse in Bodie holds a true mystery: A safe stands inside that no one can open, and no one knows what is inside.

A recurring pattern developed in the quest for riches. As Henry David Thoreau said of the Argonauts, "They go to dig where they never planted, to reap where they never sowed." Prospectors were exploring everywhere that looked promising. When a discovery was made, there would be a futile attempt at secrecy. After the revelation, there would be a frantic dash to stake claims—or jump someone else's. Frequently, once the word was out, the discovery would be wildly exaggerated. Mark Twain, who witnessed the Gold Rush firsthand, once defined a mine as "a hole in the ground owned by a liar."

At the site of each new bonanza, a tent city appeared. If the deposits lasted, more permanent wooden buildings would be constructed, bringing merchants, saloonkeepers, prostitutes, and eventually a postmaster. Everyone in camp depended upon gold in one way or another. Some camps turned into full-fledged towns with solid brick buildings and signs of gentility, like newspapers and an opera house. When the gold deposits failed, however, the town would empty and the same cycle would begin anew at the next "El Dorado."

The easy pickings of the Gold Rush were exhausted by the 1860s. Getting to the more difficult deposits required hard-rock quartz mining and, later, newer methods—hydraulicking and dredging. These procedures required capital investment, elaborate equipment, and an organized workforce, basically ending the era of the single miner working his small claim.

Even large-scale mining eventually gave out, although some mines produced for decades after the Gold Rush bonanza ended around 1884.

Inventions in the industrialized world had an enormous effect upon the United States, nowhere more dramatically than in California. Vastly improved communication came with Samuel Morse's improved electromagnetic telegraph in 1832 and Alexander Graham Bell's patenting of the telephone in 1876. Mining gained a powerful force for moving earth with the invention of dynamite in 1867 by Swedish chemist Alfred Nobel.

But nothing changed the American West—and California—as much as the completion of the First Transcontinental Railroad in 1869. The British publication

The Economist, in the middle of the nineteenth century, commented that in the 1820s the speed a man could go unaided was about four miles per hour, "the same as Adam." By horse, it was up to about ten miles per hour for any distance. But, *The Economist* went on, by the 1850s, a man could, by train, habitually go forty miles per hour and occasionally as high as *seventy*.

The transcontinental railroad linked the Midwest to California. The journey that Argonauts took in 1849 to the Gold Rush, which, as previously mentioned, took an average of about a hundred days, was reduced only twenty years later to *seven* days. Stagecoach lines became obsolete. The Oregon Trail, one of the original routes—using one branch or another—to the Mother Lode, became a relic. And the effect upon mining was enormous: with railroads to carry ore out and supplies in, costs were significantly decreased. Ore that had previously been too expensive to mine, mill, and smelt could now yield a healthy profit. Mines that had been abandoned were reopened and mined profitably, and their tailings were reprocessed for overlooked gold, using new technology. (Note: For the definition of mining terms like "lode" and "Argonaut," consult the glossary on pages 229–231.)

Nevertheless, mining towns are created to fail, as they exist to extract a finite quantity. When that quantity is gone, the town is doomed—unless it can find another way to prosper.

Many of the towns in the first three chapters of this book did indeed find a new way to prosper by becoming charming places people want to visit. But the others have faded almost to obscurity.

The last four chapters of this book leave Gold Rush Country. Not all mining in California was for gold, and not all ghost towns were once mining camps. Several unusual and interesting sites stand not far from the Mother Lode near San Francisco Bay (Chapter 4).

During the decline of Mother Lode mining, a new strike in the 1870s brought a short but glorious life to the now-spectacular ghost town of Bodie, east of the Sierra Nevada (Chapter 5). South of Bodie in the same chapter stand several more ghost towns east of the Sierras well worth exploring, including Cerro Gordo, the first site in this book that was rich in silver, not gold. Cerro Gordo, improbable as it may seem, helped to turn Los Angeles from a sleepy pueblo into a major metropolis.

Prospectors learned to endure many hardships in their quest for riches. Nowhere is that more evident than in the final two chapters of this book. Death

Valley (Chapter 6), where untold numbers of prospectors died from the harsh elements, produced modest yields of gold, silver, and lead, but the real bonanza there was found in a more mundane commodity—borax. As the world discovered its many uses, borax became by far the most profitable mineral extricated from Death Valley.

The Mojave Desert (Chapter 7) also created challenges for miners, railroad builders, farmers, ranchers, and travelers who simply wanted to cross it. The enticement of mineral riches brought hardy people to the landscape in spite of the dangers, and when huge gold deposits were found in Randsburg, along with silver and borax in Calico, the rush was on yet again.

To experience California's mining history, one can explore its remnants: the mining camps and ghost towns that were eventually abandoned in search of new wealth. The tent camps have disappeared. Visitors can walk empty hillsides where a thousand people once lived and not see a trace of their presence. The majority of wood-frame towns have vanished as well, having fallen to fire, vandalism, salvage, or the most final of all forces—gravity. Some delightful ones still exist, however, and the best are showcased throughout this book.

The communities with brick buildings, as one might expect, have generally survived the best. Chapter 1's Columbia, for example, is an historic treasure. Most, however, have become the "old town" sections of modern cities that rather overwhelm their historic districts.

That does not mean, however, that no true exploits await the reader who follows the back roads of this book: there is nothing for the ghost town enthusiast that rivals the thrill of entering a tiny and charming town like North Bloomfield or exploring the brick ruins of Shasta. Often the adventure is enhanced by the journey itself, like ascending the Yellow Grade Road to Cerro Gordo or heading into stunning Titus Canyon beyond Leadfield. Sometimes the excitement is the inherent solitude of many sites, like somnolent China Camp or Campo Seco. And even in the very-much-alive towns, like Murphys and Nevada City, an invigorating energy and sense of history surrounds you as you stroll with shoppers who have visited nearby wineries and have spent the night at delightful bed and breakfast inns. Finally, there is nothing quite as contemplative as a visit to a ghost town cemetery, where many unanswered mysteries are posed on the half-told tales of headstones.

Your California ghost town adventure begins here.

48
MARSHALL

1

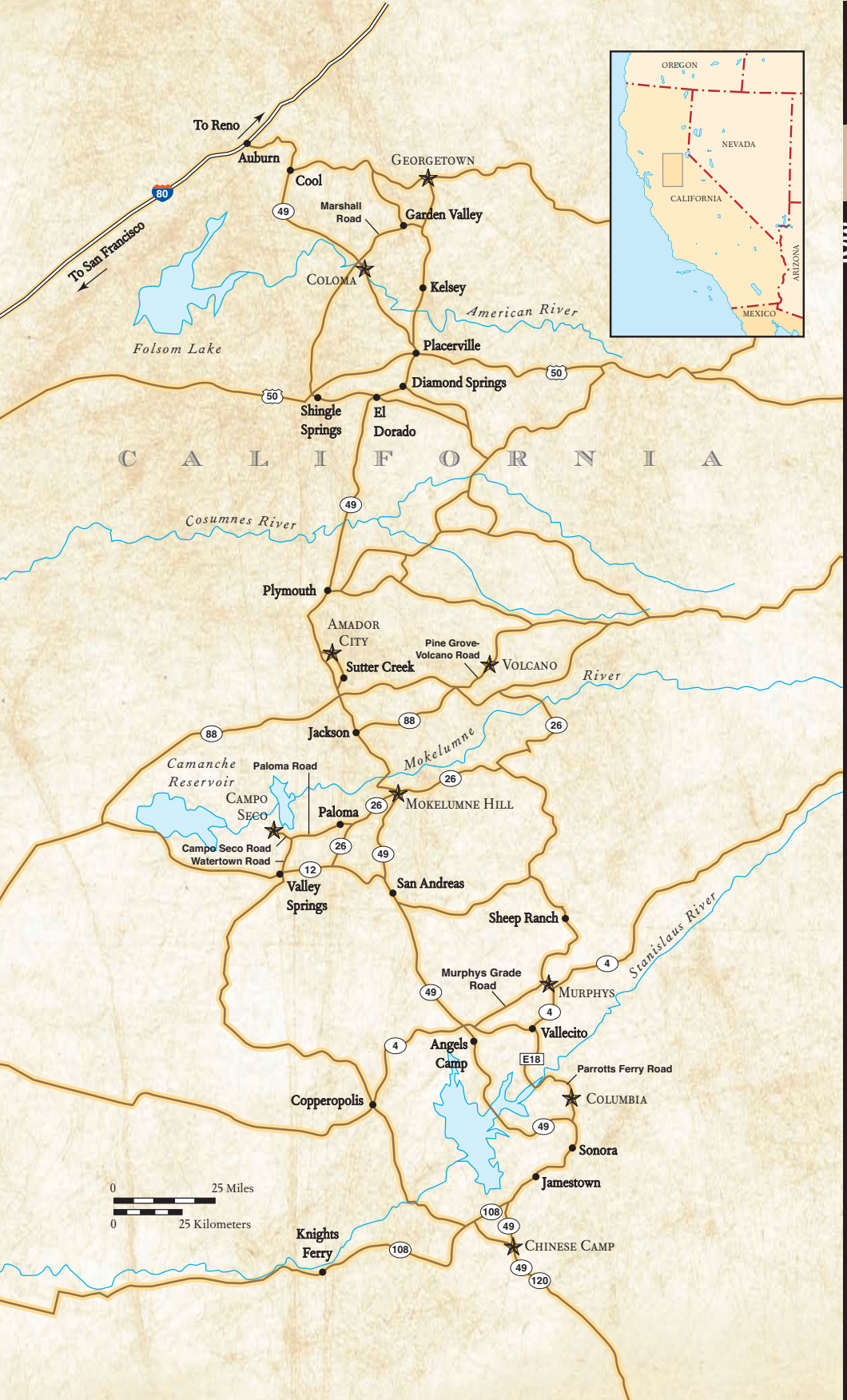
GHOSTS OF THE MOTHER LODE

THE CALIFORNIA GOLD RUSH CHANGED THE COURSE OF HUMAN HISTORY, not just in the United States, but also across the globe. People worldwide, hoping for a markedly better life, abandoned their situations and headed for California. The population of California exploded from about 26,000 to more than 380,000 in only twelve years, with a large percentage of that number descending upon the sites in this chapter along with many other towns that have either become major communities or have disappeared completely.

The historic towns of the Mother Lode vary from busy small cities like Placerville and Jackson to two state parks, Coloma and Columbia, and to charming, picturesque communities like Georgetown, Volcano, Amador City, Mokelumne Hill, and Murphys. Even with all the gift shops, wineries, bed and breakfast inns, and historic hotels, there is still room in the Mother Lode for two real ghost towns: Campo Seco and Chinese Camp.

James Marshall's statue points dramatically down to the spot on the American River where Marshall first saw gold.

Across the street from the Saint Charles Saloon in Columbia.


To Reno
Auburn
Cool
Georgetown
Marshall Road
Garden Valley
To San Francisco
Coloma
Kelsey
American River
Folsom Lake
Placerville
Diamond Springs
Shingle Springs
El Dorado
C A L I F O R N I A
Cosumnes River
Plymouth
Amador City
Sutter Creek
Pine Grove-Volcano Road
Volcano
River
Jackson
Mokelumne
Camanche Reservoir
Paloma Road
Campo Seco
Paloma
Mokelumne Hill
Campo Seco Road
Watertown Road
Valley Springs
San Andreas
Sheep Ranch
Stanislaus River
Murphys Grade Road
Murphys
Vallecito
Angels Camp
Parrotts Ferry Road
Columbia
Copperopolis
Sonora
Jamestown
0 25 Miles
0 25 Kilometers
Knights Ferry
Chinese Camp
OREGON
NEVADA
CALIFORNIA
ARIZONA
MEXICO

COLOMA

Coloma is the logical place to begin California's Gold Rush history, since it was in Coloma, on January 24, 1848, that James Marshall peered into the American River. He later recalled, "My eye was caught by something shining in the bottom of the ditch. . . . It made my heart thump, for I was certain it was gold. . . . Then I saw another."

John Augustus Sutter, German-born in 1803 of Swiss parents, came to California in 1839 and became a Mexican citizen. He received a 50,000-acre land grant and was appointed the *alcalde* (a title embracing the duties of judge, lawyer, marshal, and mayor) for the entire Sacramento Valley.

His empire, which he called New Helvetia, featured a large adobe fort (still standing in Sacramento) that offered protection, food, and retail goods to nearby settlers. He also laid out a town called Sutterville, constructed a flour mill, and, providentially for California, sent James Marshall to the Coloma Valley, along the South Fork of the American River. There Marshall was to supervise the building of a sawmill, with Sutter and Marshall sharing the profits.

As sawmill construction neared completion, Marshall was inspecting the millrace, the channel through which the river would run to turn a wheel to power the sawmill. That is where he saw the glitter in the river, changing the course of California and utterly ruining Sutter's vision of a frontier agricultural dynasty.

As word of the gold discovery spread, Sutter's workers abandoned the unfinished sawmill, and his field workers and other tradesmen quit to find their fortunes. The New Helvetia that Sutter had envisioned was doomed, and Coloma became not a quiet sawmill town but a camp of frenzied Argonauts.

Because there was no law enforcement, neither Sutter nor Marshall could keep squatters out, and the banks of the American River became alive with prospectors as the gold fever spread. Although Sutter tried to profit from the fabulous find, he never did. He lamented, "What a great misfortune was this sudden gold discovery for me!" He attempted to get compensation for his lost lands, but the American courts ruled that his Mexican land grants were invalid. He eventually left New Helvetia for Pennsylvania, where he was buried in 1880.

Coloma was the first Gold Rush town, but it was hardly the richest. The river's placer deposits were depleted quickly, and the town, with a population of 5,000 in 1849, was in decline by 1851, although many of the buildings you will visit were erected after that year.

WALKING AND DRIVING AROUND COLOMA

Most of Coloma is within Marshall Gold Discovery State Park. Begin at the visitors center—the Gold Discovery Museum—where, in addition to paying a modest fee (for admission to the museum and park, a guide booklet, and

St. John's Catholic Church, built in 1856, features an unusual bell tower that is separate from the church itself.