

Part 2 of Exploring the Sierra – The Feather River Country

Tom Butt, August 19-26, 2010

We are back from the Feather River Country and a week mostly without cell phones and email.

The first three days we enjoyed the hospitality of Bob Knight and Donatella Scabini at their vacation home in the [Gold Mountain](#) community outside Graeagle. Bob is the father-in-law of our son, Daniel, whose family joined us for the weekend. Gold Mountain is a Frank Lloyd Wright themed resort community overlooking the Feather River Canyon. Their home was design by the Wright-related Taliesin Architects, Inc.



Above, Bob Knight, Jim (a local fisherman) and Daniel at Eureka Lake, allegedly an early and late season hotspot. We were skunked. Eureka Lake fed the gold processing works at the Eureka Mine, below (now a state park)

Below, Sara, Shirley, Donatella, Daniel, Bob, Ryland and Seamus (the dog) on the Feather River in Graeagle



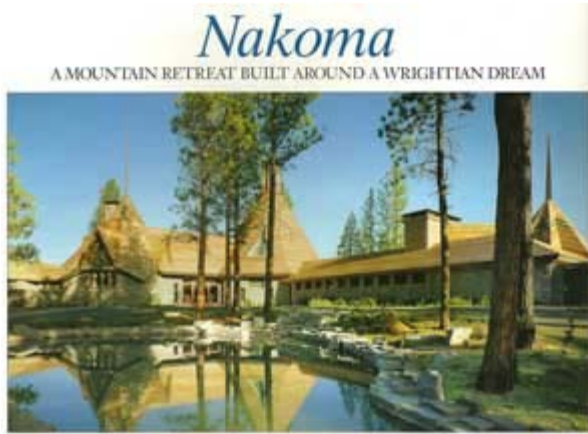
The rest of the week, Shirley and I roamed the backroads and hiking trails of the Plumas and Sierra County mountains, camping, hiking and fly-fishing.

Until about 1850, Plumas County belonged to the Native Americans, the Maidu to be exact. The first Europeans were gold seekers pushing yet further into the mother lode and the famous mountain man, [James P. Beckwourth](#), an African-American who discovered the lowest pass across the Sierra Nevada and the following year navigated a wagon trail for California-bound emigrants from western Nevada, through Plumas County, to the Sacramento Valley.

Close behind the miners came the loggers and sawmill operators to provide the fuel and structures needed for mining. Mining played out in the 1880s, but in 1910, the Western Pacific Railroad opened a transcontinental line running through the Feather River Canyon.

Then came golf, which appears to be the real economic engine of the sparsely populated region, just slightly ahead of shopping the rustic boutiques and craft fairs of Graeagle. The Graeagle area has more golf courses than the City of San Francisco and almost as many restaurants. I don't play golf or shop, but we were interested in the hiking and fishing, which also draw visitors.

Plumas County has a total population of 20,122 with 13,000 registered voters. Turnout is a little over 50%, so it takes about 3,000 votes to be elected to a countywide office in a two-way race, fewer if there are multiple candidates.



The showplace of Gold Mountain is the golf clubhouse dubbed "[Nakoma](#)," designed in 1924 by Frank Lloyd Wright for Nakoma

Country Club in Madison, Wisconsin. The original was never built until the owners of Gold Mountain collaborated with Taliesin Architects, Inc. – the Arizona-based extension of Frank Lloyd - Wright's architectural practice – to bring the building to life.

Like many real estate developments and golf courses, Gold Mountain fell on hard times recently, and the clubhouse closed. The Schomac Group, Inc., developers out of Tucson, AZ, picked up the golf course, the 23,000 square foot Nakoma, and all the unsold lots — improved and unimproved, residential and commercial — at Gold Mountain for less than \$4 million. The clubhouse is now open again for business.



Fishing and dipping in Jamison Creek in Johnsville



About ten miles up the Feather River from prosperous and trendy Graeagle is the hardscrabble former railroad and logging town of Portola. Once hosting a maintenance facility for the Western Pacific and sawmills, Portola seems to be just hanging on. You can buy a cute Victorian Cottage on Main Street for \$50,000 that would cost ten times that much in Graeagle and other Sierra towns. However, this past weekend was not only the [28th Annual Railroad Days Festival](#) but also the 100th Anniversary of the Western Pacific's arrival. There is an impressive Western Pacific Railroad Museum in the company's old



The only decent trout I caught was in the Feather River Canyon

yards with enough rolling stock to start a railroad. While we were at the museum, a special excursion train rolled in made up of antique passenger cars carrying 600 passengers up the Feather River Canyon from Emeryville.

I regret to report that fishing was not good. The Feather River in the canyon turned out to be the best of a bad lot.

Graeagle, for what is left of a once gigantic gold mining operation, and on the way back down the mountain took a refreshingly ice-cold swim in Jamison Creek. From there, we headed in the late afternoon up to the Gold Lakes Basin area and found a campsite on Gold Lake.

Leaving Gold Mountain on Sunday, we stopped at the [Plumas Eureka State Park](#) in Johnsville, just out of

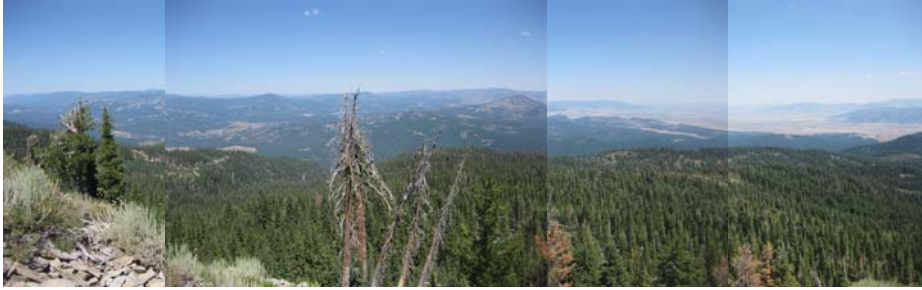


Above, Shirley on the Deer lake rail. Below, napping at Butcher Ranch Meadows

Monday morning, we watched four ospreys working Packer Lake and made a reservation for dinner at [Packer Lake Lodge](#). We then took a great hike up to Deer Lake at the head of Sawmill Creek, a 5 ½ mile loop with about 1,000 foot elevation gain to the 7,068 foot high lake. After a picnic lunch, a nap and a quick dip in the ice cold lake, we had an early dinner at Packer Lake Lodge and were asleep before dark, the only occupants of Diablo campground below Packer Lake right on Packer Creek.



becomes Butcher Ranch Road and goes up and over the erra City. We stopped at the old deserted Robinson Cow Camp and walked down through the Butcher Ranch Meadow for a picnic on the creek, surrounded by great wildflowers. Late afternoon found us in quaint little Sierra City where we stocked up on ice, checked email at the local bar (internet access) over a couple of cold beers and looped back up the Lakes Basin to look for a campsite. This time, we chose Sardine Lake and went swimming in nearby [Sand Pond](#), warm enough to stay awhile but still refreshing.



Wednesday, our last full day, called for something spectacular. We considered conquering the lookout at Sierra Buttes but settled on the more modest goal of [Haskell Peak](#). The Haskell

Peak Trail starts off another logging road, Haskell Peak Road (Forest Road 09) and climbs 1,157 feet in a 4-mile round trip to the second highest peak in the area.



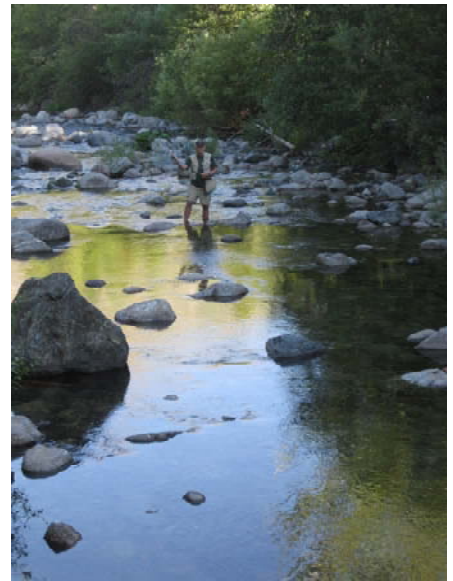
Haskell Peak

After another visit to cool off in Sand Pond, we found a campsite at the Wild Plum Campground just outside Sierra City. Dinner was at the [Mountain Creek Restaurant](#) that features outdoor dining on a cascading patio through which runs a mountain stream. I started a sketch of the Sierra Country Store that I had to finish the next day due to darkness.

Thursday was going home day, so we headed west on Highway 49, making a detour to [Malakoff Diggins State Historical Park](#), once the largest hydraulic mining operation in the world. In 1884, a court case stopped

the dumping of hydraulic mining debris into rivers and essentially

ended the practice that, driven by greed for gold, almost destroyed northern California's waterways and caused floods from the Sierras all the way to San Francisco Bay. A late lunch in Nevada City, and it was back in the traffic and home by dark.



SIERRA COUNTRY STORE
SIERRA CITY, CA
TUE AM 8.26.10