Early Travelers Through the Modini Ingalls Ecological Preserve
by Dennis K. Fujita

The low-angled morning sun strikes the slopes of the Modini Ingalls Ecological Preserve (MIEP) revealing subtle traces of an old wagon and stagecoach toll road. We are attempting to map the route of the “Calistoga Road” or the “Foss & Connelly Toll Road” which winds its way up the steep terrain of MIEP and the Mayacamas Mountains Audubon Sanctuary (MMAS), properties now managed by Audubon Canyon Ranch.

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Between approximately 1865 and 1910, this road was used to transport visitors by stagecoach from Calistoga and Healdsburg to the Geyser Springs Hotel. Over the past century of disuse, landslides have obliterated some sections of this road, while other sections have been integrated into ranch roads that are still in use today. We can still identify about 90% of the 3.3 miles of the old toll road extending from the southern border of MIEP near Blue Gum Creek uphill to Schoolhouse Flat at the old town site of Pine Flat (see red line on map above).

In July 2011, Jim Modini, Ray Robinson and I took a ride with Audubon Canyon Ranch ecologist and MIEP and MMAS land manager Sherry Adams. As we slowly traveled the Modini Ranch roads, Jim told stories about some of the people, animals and unique events associated with the ranch. We learned of the early explorers and settlers, Clark Foss and stagecoach routes, the deer, mountain lion, bear and other wildlife that are still sighted today, sheep and cattle ranching, mercury mining and Chinese laborers who worked at the quicksilver mines and on road building projects. With respect to Clark Foss, Jim stated, “Teams of 6 horses pulled the stagecoaches. Foss drove his horses hard, but with great skill. They didn’t go clomp-a-clomp-a-clomp. Foss always had that whip a crackin.”

Jim described the route of the Foss Road through his ranch with enough detail that we were later able to walk its entire 1.3 mile length through MIEP, along with 2.0 more miles through MMAS, armed with a camera and a hand-held GPS unit. Jim also pointed out the general location of what he and Shirley called “Foss Basin,” where Foss reportedly maintained a stable so that exhausted horses could be exchanged for fresh ones to pull the stagecoaches the rest of the way to the Geysers. Sherry and I were later able to locate Foss Basin where we found some artifacts with the aid of a metal detector that are consistent with the existence of a stable.

About 15 years before the development of the Foss Road, William McDonnell became one of the earliest settlers in the area. McDonnell was a native of Missouri who arrived in California as an overland emigrant in 1846. In 1849 he married Eleanor Graves, a survivor of the Donner Party, and they worked a 500-acre ranch located between MIEP and Knight’s Valley. In a few years, the adjacent land would become the ranches of Henry Briggs, James Hood, George Hood,
M. M. Keyes and Calvin Holmes. All of these properties lie near McDonnell Creek and Mayacama Creek. But in the early 1850’s, the McDonnells (and Cyrus Alexander in Alexander Valley) were considered to be the only American ranchers living between Northern Sonoma County and the Oregon border.

Because of his helpful nature and the location of his ranch, McDonnell became well known as a guide for anyone who wished to visit the Geysers. One of the first recorded visitors he led through MIEP to the Geysers was John Russell Bartlett, the U.S. Commissioner for the U.S. and Mexican Boundary Commission. Between 1850-53, the members of the Commission traveled extensively throughout Northern Mexico, California and the Southwest. The steam vents, hot springs and fumaroles at the Geysers did not particularly impress Bartlett, but he acknowledged that they may have entered a quiet phase, or that the environmental conditions at the time of his visit were not optimum for viewing the steam emissions.

In November 1861, McDonnell guided William Brewer, Josiah Whitney and Chester Averill of the first California State Geological Survey on foot and on mule back to investigate mercury mining prospects near the Geysers. Their route took them along McDonnell Creek and its tributaries. These streams are fed from the watershed lying between Pine Flat and Ingall’s Bluffs, a prominent outcrop that defines the northern boundary of MIEP. From Brewer’s detailed 1861 descriptions in *Up and Down California in 1860-1864*, it appears that McDonnell guided them through what is now MIEP and portions of MMAS. This conclusion differs from that of Joan Parry Dutton (as she described in her book *They Left Their Mark – Famous Passages Through the Wine Country*). Dutton believed that the Whitney party began their ascent further north from Ray’s Station closer to Geyserville and Red Winery Road. To reach Ray’s Station, the party would have had to travel at least six miles north and return to the McDonnell ranch before being led up the canyon along “the creek of his (McDonnell’s) name.” The more-likely point of ascent into the mountains for the Whitney party began at the McDonnell ranch just northeast of the confluence of Mayacama Creek and the Russian River. Within a few years, this route would become the “Foss Toll Road” or the “Calistoga Road.”

In the early 1860’s, merchants in Healdsburg and Calistoga developed a road through Knight’s Valley and Alexander Valley. Since this road, now Hwy 128, would benefit commercial interests from Napa to Healdsburg, Samuel Brannan and other influential businessmen had little trouble raising funds to build the road. Like many of the early wagon roads, it was primarily built by Chinese laborers.

Clark Foss was born in Maine in 1819 (one report says he came from New Hampshire; “one of the finest physical specimens to ever come out of the Granite State”) and later moved to New York. Foss arrived in California in 1856, and by 1857 he had settled in Healdsburg raising hogs. Later, he worked in the livery business and began driving stagecoaches out of Healdsburg.

By 1865, Foss and a business partner named Connelly with assistance from Sam Brannan of Calistoga had constructed a toll road through today’s MIEP and MMAS. Initially it was reported to be barely seven feet wide in some places and featured steep, unprotected drop offs to the valleys below. But by following McDonnell Creek to Pine Flat, this Foss Toll Road allowed passengers from Calistoga to reach the Geysers more quickly than before. This new road shortened the distance to the Geysers from Calistoga by approximately six miles since it eliminated the need to drive further north in order to join the road coming from Healdsburg that passed through Ray’s Station.
Clark Foss, famous stagecoach driver, owner of the stage line & toll road to the Geysers, proprietor of the hotel at Fossville in southern Knight’s Valley & brief owner of the Geyser Springs Hotel (Photo courtesy of the Healdsburg Museum)

Views in July 2011 of two sections of the old Foss Stagecoach Road at MIEP and MMAS (photos by D. Fujita)
An improved Healdsburg road through Sausal Canyon to Pine Flat and the Geysers was not completed until 1874, just before the mercury mining activity declined due to a precipitous drop in the price of mercury. Severe storms a few months after its completion added further insult by causing major washouts of the new road. To the embarrassment of the backers of the new Healdsburg Road, freight and passengers were forced to use the competing Foss Toll Road while extensive road repairs were being made. But shortly after those road repairs were completed, there was a mass exodus from the mines, and Pine Flat businesses were abruptly shuttered.

Despite these setbacks, the Geyser Springs continued to attract wealthy visitors from around the world. Just as the Grand Tour of Europe included “must see” destinations, the equivalent “Grand Tour of America” required visits to Yellowstone, Yosemite and the Geysers. The $25 fare from Calistoga to the Geysers (equivalent to $1,000 today!) meant that most visitors were quite wealthy. They included J. P. Morgan, Mark Hopkins, Charles Crocker, Leland Stanford, Tom Thumb, the famous Flood family of San Francisco, William Randolph Hearst (age 15), former President Ulysses S. Grant, Vice President Schuyler Colfax, General William Tecumseh Sherman, Horace Greeley, Lotta Crabtree, Mark Twain, Giuseppe Garibaldi, the Prince of Wales (later King Edward VII), several U.S. Army officers and veterans of the Civil War including Colonel H. W. Freedley and Captain C. D. Mahaffey, William Jennings Bryan, the French-born English writer Hilaire Belloc, the landscape painter Thomas Hill, and two of photography’s pioneers Eadweard Muybridge and Carleton Emmons Watkins.

It is reported that an early stagecoach passenger of Foss’s, Tom Thumb of P.T. Barnum’s “The Greatest Show on Earth”, encouraged Foss to become more of a showman in order to capitalize on his stagecoach driving skills. Thereafter, “Colonel Foss” (or “Old Chieftain”) always wore a pearl-gray Stetson hat, a long duster coat, sported mutton-chop sideburns, wielded a 14-foot whip, handled the reins with dexterity, and shouted at the top of his lungs so that on-coming or slower traffic made way for his stagecoach. He demonstrated the ability to turn around a wagon drawn by six horses in downtown Healdsburg at flat-out speed without overturning it. Within a few years, he became world-renowned as a fast, but safe, driver. Many passengers reported that they were motivated to visit the Geysers more to experience the thrill of a stagecoach ride with Foss than to see the Geysers themselves.

Foss started the first stagecoach line over the Healdsburg road via Ray’s Station to the Geysers in 1863. That route ran from Healdsburg up steep terrain around the northwest shoulder of what was then named “Sulphur Peak” or “Godwin’s Peak” (now called Geyser Peak) to an elevation of about 3,200 feet above sea level. The stagecoach drivers normally paused at this vantage point so that travelers could marvel at the sublime views of the Santa Rosa plain, meandering Russian River, coastal mountains, and fog-bound Golden Gate. On clear days, the snowy peaks of the Sierras could be seen to the north and east.

Beyond “Sulphur Peak” the wagon road turned northeast along a narrow ridge with 1000-foot drop offs on both sides known as Hogs Back Ridge. Within a two-mile downhill stretch and 35 sharp turns, the road descended about 1500 feet to the Geysers Hotel. It is reported that Clark Foss transported thrilled and/or terrified passengers by racing down this last section in as little as nine and a half minutes. The steepness of the gradient can be appreciated by the fact that the return ascent from the hotel back to Geyser Peak typically required an hour and a quarter.
Traffic along the Foss Toll Road picked up in 1869, the year following the completion of the Napa Valley Railroad connecting Napa with Calistoga. Upon disembarking from the train at Calistoga, Geysers-bound passengers could ride in Foss’s stagecoach to comfortable accommodations at Fossville. This well-appointed inn was located at the southeastern edge of Knight’s Valley, just north of the divide between today’s Napa and Sonoma county line. A forested ridge, known locally as Murray Hill, defines the county boundary and also separates the waters flowing to the Russian River from those flowing to the Napa River.
Fossville was located in a small, secluded valley drained by Bidwell Creek, not in a broad and open plain as depicted in Thomas H. Thompson’s 1877 etching shown above. Foss had purchased a tavern and enlarged it to become a sumptuous hotel for guests traveling to the Geysers from either Calistoga or from Healdsburg. The Fossville Hotel had 25 guest rooms and was 70 feet long by 25 feet deep with verandahs on three sides. To compete with deluxe accommodations in Calistoga, the hotel was furnished with red plush drapes, fancy chandeliers, a piano, comfortable sofas and chairs, and a prominent table containing a leather-bound guest register. Other structures in Fossville included a post office, a large barn, stables and a well-equipped blacksmith shop.

In the parlor, guests could use stereopticon viewers to enjoy a collection of photographs of the Geysers taken as early as 1869. Photographers Carleton Emmons Watkins and Eadweard Muybridge, who later became well known for his work with Leland Stanford in creating the first motion pictures of a galloping horse, took many of these early photographs. Locally, Muybridge gained notoriety for murdering his wife’s lover at the cabin of a mine superintendent near Pine Flat. A sympathetic jury later acquitted Muybridge of the crime on the basis of his “temporary insanity” plea.

An August 5, 1869 article in the *Russian River Flag* newspaper of Healdsburg described a typical ride to the Geysers from Healdsburg in one of the Foss & Connelly Stage Line’s open-air stagecoaches manufactured by Emerson and Haigh and pulled by six color-matched and spirited horses. The open-air, three-seated wagons were beautifully painted and had wide leather throughbraces running lengthwise which produced a characteristic swaying action as the leather straps absorbed sharp jolts. In that year, a young driver named James H. (“Jimmie”) Albertson made 3 or 4 trips per week over the Healdsburg route while Clark Foss made twice daily runs.
from Calistoga via Fossville to the Geysers. This meant that Foss drove an average of 105 miles per day, becoming a wealthy man in the process.

Clark Foss’s skill as a driver was spread worldwide by reports from his prominent passengers as well as by Robert Louis Stevenson’s references to Foss in his book *Silverado Squatters*. Stevenson also reported that the first time he used a telephone was in 1880 to talk to Foss. While out for an evening stroll in Calistoga, Stevenson entered the lobby of the Magnolia Hotel run by a Mr. Cheeseborough who asked if he would like to speak to Clark Foss. Knowing that Foss had earlier departed for his residence at Fossville about six miles north of town, RLS was somewhat confused by the offer since he knew nothing about the existence or capabilities of telephones. Cheeseborough showed him how to hold the new apparatus to his mouth and ear. Upon finding that R.L.S. had little to say into the new contraption, Foss brought their brief conversation to an end, reportedly so that he could return to his evening grog.

Tragedy occurred in 1874 when Foss lost control of his horses while descending a steep incline on Murray Hill near the beginning of a trip from Calistoga to Fossville (another contemporary report states that he was returning from Pine Flat to Calistoga when the accident occurred). The most complete account of the accident is contained in a *Russian River Flag* (Healdsburg) newspaper article of July 2, 1874 as reported by a Mr. Sweeney of Geyserville:

“... coming down the hill into Knight’s Valley from Calistoga, with a load of passengers, a line got under the tail of one of the horses, and the team started to run. Foss put on the brake, but a leather broke off, a wheel bursted, Foss was thrown out and run over by the wagon and the team ran on down the hill. The general result is: a lady’s skull fractured (she didn’t survive), a young girl severely bruised and cut in the head, a six-year old boy’s shoulder dislocated, a babe slightly injured and Foss hurt so badly as to be laid up in bed.”

For the remaining seven years of stagecoach driving following the accident, Clark Foss remained a colorful and vocal driver, but he drove at more moderate speeds. In 1881, Foss retired and sold the business to his son Charley C. Foss. Clark Foss passed away at Fossville in 1885 following a brief illness and was buried in the cemetery at St. Helena. Charley maintained the Foss Road and the stage line through 1910, but strong competition from the automobile brought an end to the stagecoach business. Passengers could then travel in comfort to the Geysers aboard one of R. T. Bruce’s 12-passenger “Mountain Wagon” Stanley Steamers over improved roads from Cloverdale and Healdsburg.
Situated near the central western boundary of the MIEP is a flat peninsula of land identified as “Foss Basin” by Jim and Shirley Modini. They believe that Clark Foss maintained a stable and blacksmith shop at this location. Here, fresh horses could be hitched to his wagons for the steep climb to Pine Flat and beyond to the Geysers. Fires and land slippage have erased evidence of a dwelling, a barn and stable or even a spring to water the animals, but some clues remain. The fire-scarred skeleton of a large big-leaf maple (Acer macrophyllum) attests to the nearby presence of ground water. This dead maple and several other maples and numerous Douglas fir in MIEP and MMAS are believed to have succumbed to the devastating Geysers Fire of 2004.
At Foss Basin, bricks and various pieces of rusty metal lie scattered on the grassy flat. Some of the bricks possess an octagonal-shaped frog (an impressed design in the shape of a rectangle with scalloped corners) bearing the manufacturer’s name: “R. Brown & Son” of “Paisley”, Scotland (in business from 1836-1938). On another brick we can read “Cow---” (probably indicating Joseph Cowen & Co. of Blaydon-on-Tyne, England, 1823-1904). It is surmised that these bricks were transported by ship to America as ballast. We do not know if they were used at this site or were destined for use at the Geysers or at Pine Flat or in furnaces at nearby mercury mines.

In addition to numerous bricks, a preliminary visual survey aided by a metal detector in October 2011 by the author and Sherry Adams revealed the presence of porcelain or ceramic fragments, two horseshoes, a chisel, many square nails, broken pieces of an old metal stove, and many other buried metal objects whose locations were simply marked with flags for future excavation and study. One of the largest objects we found at Foss Basin was a piece of manufactured metal whose intended use is not known. Photographs of this object are shown below:
These artifacts represent some of the physical reminders of the Foss Road and the people who used it. The Modinis, who willed MIEP to Audubon Canyon Ranch after over 60 years of careful stewardship, have asked that the stories of those who passed through these lands not be forgotten. Their desire to protect the land and honor those who came before us inspired this report.

Ray Robinson on the Foss Toll Road at MMAS
(3 photos on this page by D. Fujita)

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REFERENCES

HEALDSBURG MUSEUM, 221 Matheson Street, Healdsburg 95448. Phone (707) 431-3325. Curator Holly Hoods and Assistant Curator Meredith Dreisback. Open Wednesday – Sunday from 11 am to 4 pm. Free to the public, but donations are welcomed. The Research Center is open Thursday to Saturday 11 am – 4 pm, but by appointment only.

SHARPSTEEN MUSEUM OF CALISTOGA HISTORY, 1311 Washington Street, Calistoga, CA 94515. Phone (707) 942-5911. Open daily from 11 am to 4 pm. For adults, a $3 donation is suggested.


Boston Journal article of August 31, 1869 described Clark Foss and his driving style. This article was reprinted in the Russian River Flag (Healdsburg, CA) on September 23, 1869 under the title of “The California Geysers: What Visitors Say of Foss and Our Other ‘Big Sights’.” The article describes Clark Foss and contains a reference to what is known as “Whiskey Springs.

California Pioneer Register and Index, 1542-1849 including Inhabitants of California, 1769-1800 and List of Pioneers by Hubert Howe Bancroft, Regional Publishing Company, Baltimore, 1964)

California State Gazette (March 22, 1851) contains the first published reference to the Geysers of Sonoma County. It credits Professor Benjamin Stillman of Yale University to be the first scientist to visit the site in March 1851.


Healdsburg Enterprise (Healdsburg, CA) article entitled “A Legend of the Geysers” dated February 28, 1878. Along with various creation legends of the Geysers, the article describes the area, how the Native Americans used the resources and other historical background.

Historical Atlas Map of Sonoma County, California With Illustrations, Compiled, Drawn and Published From Personal Examinations and Actual Surveys by Thomas H. Thompson & Co., Oakland, CA, 1877.


Hutchings’ California Magazine, Vol. IV, January 1860, No. 7. “A Trip to the California Geysers” described an arduous boat journey up Petaluma Creek with frequent muddy groundings on the narrow, shallow and twisting route from San Pablo Bay to Petaluma. This
article was also reprinted in *Scenes of Wonder & Curiosity from Hutchings’ California Magazine 1856-1861*, edited by R. R. Olmsted, embellished by 300 engravings of California life and scenery, Howell-North Publishers, Berkeley, CA 1962.


**Personal Narrative of Exploration and Incidents in Texas, New Mexico, California, Sonora and Chihuahua connected with the U.S. and Mexican Boundary Commission during the years 1850, ’51, ’52 and ’53** by John Russell Bartlett

**Petaluma Weekly Journal** (September 27, 1855) was the first-known newspaper article describing the Geysers in detail. It sought investors and optimistically predicted that a wagon road would “soon be opened along the banks of Sulphur creek…” This Big Sulfur Creek road began from a point north of Cloverdale, but wasn’t actually opened until 1875.

**Pine Flat: A Quicksilver Boomtown** by Robert G. Evans, 2005 is a wonderful book detailing life around Pine Flat and dedicated to Jim and Shirley Modini.


**Russian River Flag** Healdsburg newspaper article dated August 5, 1869 described a typical ride to the Geysers from Healdsburg in one of the Foss & Connelley Stage Line’s open-air stagecoaches driven by James Albertson.

**San Francisco Chronicle** article of May 6, 1906 entitled “Heavy Damage in Healdsburg” described some of the great earthquake’s effects on Healdsburg, Windsor, Sebastopol, the Alexander Valley bridge and at the Geysers. From the road to the Geysers, smoke from the fires in Sonoma County and SF could be seen.

**St. Helena Star** (St. Helena, CA) article of May 20, 1881 entitled “Off for the Geysers” described in detail a trip to the Geysers from St. Helena aboard one of W. A. Elgin’s stagecoaches. They traveled north to Knight’s Valley & upgrade along “McDonald creek” (i.e., the Foss Rd) to the deserted town of Pine Flat.

**St. Helena Star** article entitled “Out on the Road” of August 19, 1892 describes Pine Flat and the Geysers. Notable observations: Pine Flat now has but a single resident and a company is planning to bottle & market Geyser Springs water.

**Santa Rosa Democrat** article dated September 4, 1903 reported that Charlie C. Foss had employed a crew to repair the Foss Road to the Geysers this week. The quicksilver mines near Pine Flat showed resurgence of activity in response to an increased demand and price rise for mercury.

**Silverado Squatters** by Robert Louis Stevenson
Sonoma County Democrat of April 10, 1862 contained the first article that reported mercury mining taking place near Pine Flat & the Geysers.

Sonoma Democrat (Santa Rosa, CA) printed the obituary of Clark Foss on August 29, 1885. Foss died at his Fossville residence on August 27, 1885.

The American Journal of Science and Letters, November, 1851 published Benjamin Stillman’s research report from his Yale University scientific study of the Geysers.


They Left Their Mark – Famous Passages Through the Wine Country by Joan Parry Dutton, Second Edition, 1998, printed by The Sharpsteen Museum Association. This is a very interesting book describing the people who influenced the early development of Napa and Sonoma County.

Up and Down California in 1860-1864 by William H. Brewer of Yale University, Principal Assistant, in charge of Botanical Department, First California State Geological Survey headed by Josiah D. Whitney.

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