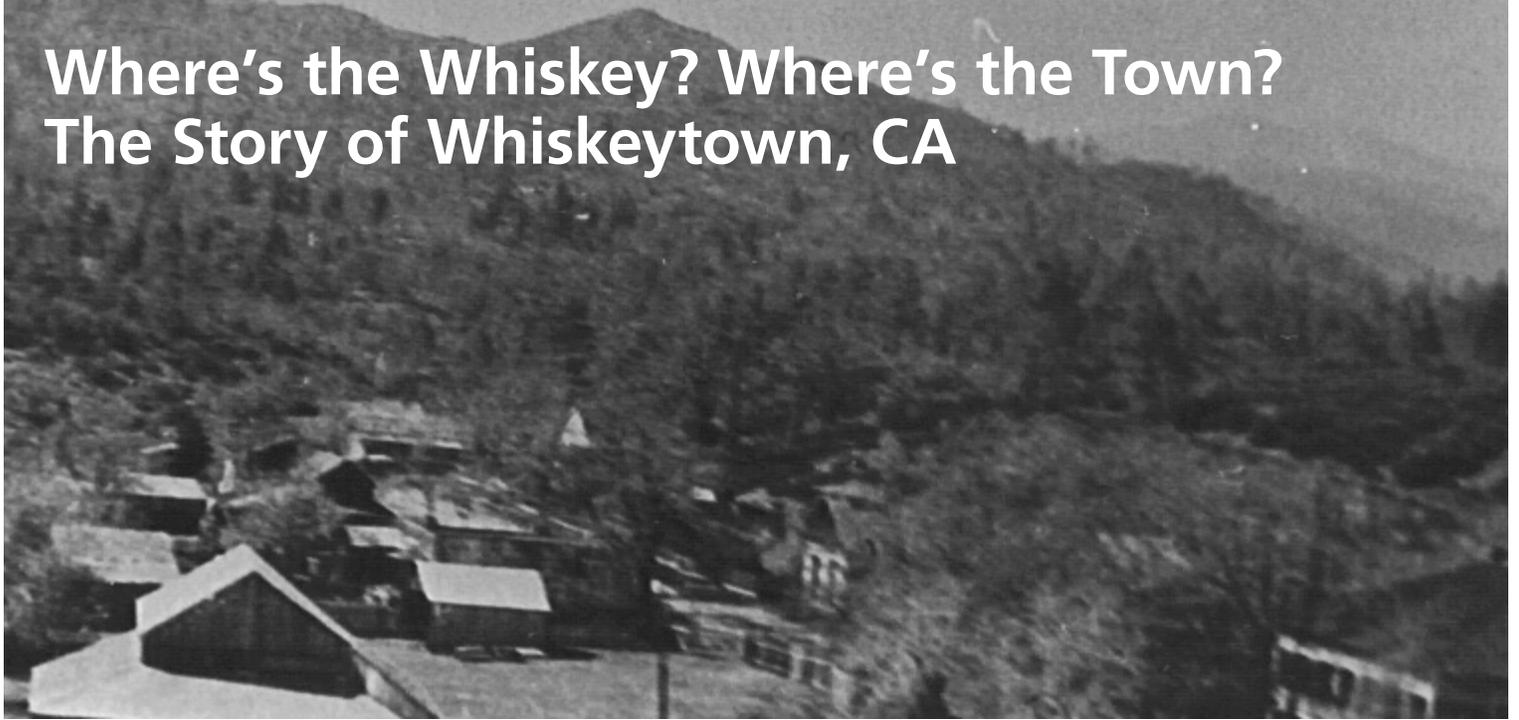




Where's the Whiskey? Where's the Town? The Story of Whiskeytown, CA



Whiskeytown, California, circa 1900. Whiskeytown National Recreation Area Historic Photo Collection.

Discoveries of gold during the mid-1800s stirred the collective imagination of thousands of people across the world and enticed many to California in the hope of finding instant wealth. Practically overnight, new settlements appeared throughout the Sierra Nevada foothills and Klamath Mountains. Nestled in a narrow valley along Clear Creek, a place called Whiskeytown sprang to life.

A Miner's Town, A Mule, and a Barrel of Whiskey

Whiskeytown, like most Gold-Rush communities, had its beginning as a cluster of tents. Miners, mostly young and unmarried, accepted the hot summers and rough living conditions. Even the everyday reality of harsh physical labor could not discourage them from their quest for gold. It was not long, however, before entrepreneurs arrived, transforming the wilderness outpost into a permanent settlement and convenient supply depot for the local miners. Whiskeytown also became a comfortable stopover for travelers, pack trains and later on for stagecoaches traveling the main route to the Oregon Territory.

With a steady influx of business from miners and travelers, the town soon boasted a hotel, stable, general store, several saloons, a post office, and school. While Whiskeytown was a small community compared to the town of

Shasta which was located just a few miles east, individuals near and far came to Whiskeytown to participate in such activities as turkey shoots and dances provided by the town's merchants. The saloons became a social center for the miners, where they could drink, gamble, swap stories and learn of any new gold discoveries.

While no one really knows the origin of the town's name, local folklore tells of a miner by the name of Billie Peterson who had a mishap in the 1850s. While hauling supplies back to his mine, the pack on his mule's back broke loose and a whiskey barrel tumbled down the hillside, breaking on rocks below and spilling its contents into the creek. From this christening came the name Whiskey Creek, and the small settlement next to the creek became known as Whiskey Town.

How Miners Got the Gold

Around Whiskeytown and throughout California, miners initially used a method called placer mining, the removal of gold from streams and creeks using a pick, shovel and gold pan. To work a larger area, the miners progressed to using sluice boxes and long toms, which allowed them to wash more dirt and gravel from the heavier gold.

Using the placer mining method, some miners in the Whiskeytown area did well. A gold nugget weighing over five pounds was recovered in Mad Ox Canyon, while an eight pound lump of gold interspersed with quartz was found in Whiskey Creek by men named Ben the Boatman and Harry Dickens.

After placer gold deposits were mined to exhaustion, other types of mining became more popular. Hardrock mining entailed digging deep shafts into hillsides to get to gold-bearing deposits, while hydraulic mining used high-pressure water cannons to remove tons of dirt and gravel.

In a bold attempt to supply water to the various mining operations during the dry season, a series of flumes, ditches and aqueducts were built, allowing the miners to work year round. By 1856 the Clear Creek Ditch Company had built a ditch system that was a staggering 41 miles long and ran from the Tower House through the Whiskeytown area and then south along Clear Creek towards Horsetown.

The Wintu Lose Their Homeland

Though some individuals did very well during the California Gold Rush, it's important to note that many did not. When European American, Chinese, and other immigrants moved into the area, they collectively outcompeted, murdered, and massacred the Wintu. Many of these indigenous people whose homelands included the Clear Creek and Whiskey Creek watersheds died from the guns and germs of immigrants. The vast

majority of Wintu survivors were forced onto reservations. Nevertheless, a small number of American Indians continued to live in the community of Whiskeytown.

The Wintu exist to this day in northern California and are represented in such entities as the Redding Rancheria. This is a testament to perseverance against all odds.

Making a Name Official

By the 1870s, not only the vast majority of Wintu had been displaced and disenfranchised, the majority of gold deposits were gone as well. While some mining for gold and other minerals continued for decades in and around Whiskeytown, the majority of residents of the small community left. Those that remained ranched, farmed served the few travelers who passed through, and continued to try their luck at mining.

For several decades, the U.S. Postal Service apparently refused to acknowledge the name of the town because it felt Whiskeytown was an unwholesome name. However, upon the community's 100th anniversary in 1952, the Women's Improvement League of Whiskeytown successfully lobbied the Postal Service to make the historic name official.

Water Becomes the New Gold, But Whiskeytown Name Remains

As years grew to decades, the concept of claiming the waters of northern California for southern Californian agriculture became popular. After the construction of Shasta Lake and Dam in the 1940s, plans to bring Trinity River water over the mountains to the Sacramento River grew strong. Whiskeytown Lake and Dam became part of this major reclamation initiative.

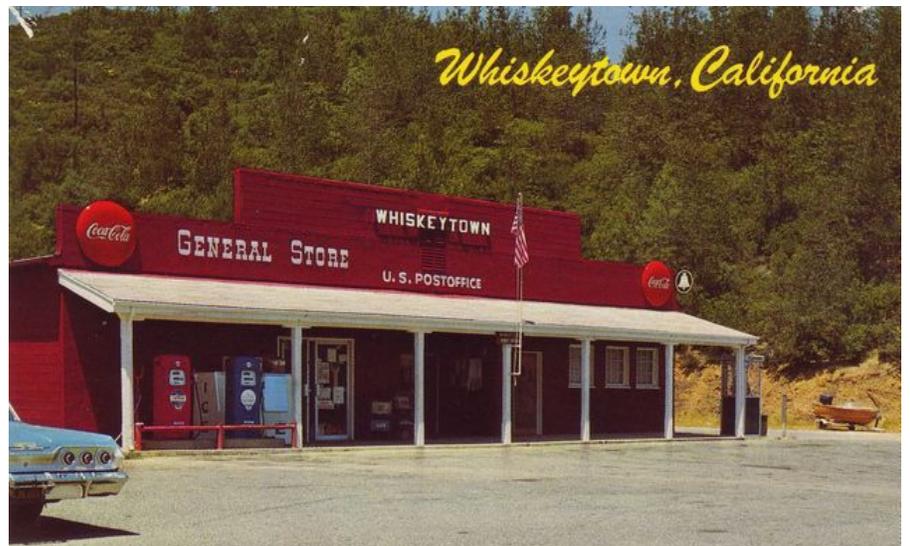
Before flooding the valley in the early 1960s, property was purchased from Whiskeytown residents and a few homes and businesses were moved down the highway to the town of Shasta. Among the few structures saved were the post office and general store building, schoolhouse, and cemetery. The general

store in particular moved to a site near the present day Whiskey Creek Day Use Area. While it continued to operate into the 1990s (see photo below), in the 2000s it became derelict. Its remnants burned to the ground during the 2018 Carr Fire.

In the summer of 1963 dammed waters filled the valley where once stood the small community of Whiskeytown. Two years later, Congress passed and U.S. President Lyndon Baines Johnson signed into law legislation creating what is officially known as Whiskeytown-Shasta-Trinity National Recreation Area. And so, although the community of Whiskeytown is long gone, the colorful and historical name remains.

Right: vintage postcard showing the Whiskeytown General Store and U.S. Post Office, circa 1965. Though the building had already been closed for several years, its remnants burned to the ground during the Carr Fire of 2018.

Below right: U.S. President John Fitzgerald Kennedy dedicates Whiskeytown Dam on September 28, 1963. In the president's opening remarks, he pays tribute to the dam's unique name (see text box below). *Whiskeytown National Recreation Area Historic Photo Collection.*



"I was reminded, when I read my itinerary, of a poem by Stephen Vincent Benet called 'American Names,' and he starts off:

*'I have fallen in love with American names,
The sharp names that never get fat,
The snakeskin titles of mining claims,
The plumed war bonnet of Medicine Hat,
Tucson and Deadwood and Lost Mule Flat.'*

Then he goes on to talk about some famous American names, not Whiskeytown, but I think he could add it to the roster, because the name of this community tells a good deal about the early beginnings of this state and country."

- U.S. President John F. Kennedy at dedication of Whiskeytown Dam