

# History of Monterey Trail

In the early 1800s the trail southward from Captain John Sutter's comfortable fort near the American and Sacramento rivers passed through a fine grove of oaks just before it crossed the Cosumnes River. This trail was an important route for travelers in the early 1800s because it led to Monterey, the capital of both Spanish and Mexican California. Known as the Monterey Trail, the road crossed the Cosumnes River where Highway 99 crosses it today, just south of Elk Grove.

It was actually the second Monterey Trail, for the first one was closer to the River – what we call Franklin Road today. Because of frequent flooding during the winter, travelers sought a route on higher ground, which we know of today as Highway 99. During the days of the Gold Rush, the routes were known as Lower Stockton Road (Franklin Road) and Upper Stockton Road (Highway 99). The frontage road of the highway is still called Stockton Road.

Long before there were California places called Elk Grove, Laguna Creek and Franklin, tule elk roamed the region of the delta waters and the river called “kossum” by the Miwok Indians. Great oak trees, many of which still stand, provided nourishing acorns, a staple of the Miwok diet. There were fish of many varieties, and the kossum (salmon) was particularly desirable. Miwok people traveled as far south as Yosemite, but the Cosumnes Valley is where they obtained their best acorns and, of course, their salmon.

An early map made by Spanish explorers in about 1807 lists several phrases that describe the south Sacramento county region. The river flowing from the mountains toward the mighty Sacramento is called “Rio de Cosumnes.” Just north of the river, where Elk Grove is today, there is the notation “Elk abundant here”. Just a bit farther north the map states “Prairie Flowers” where the town of Florin is.

What now takes us four hours to travel from Sacramento to Monterey was a journey of many days for a man with a horse. The prosperous traveler traveled with two horses so that one could carry his gear and he could ride the other. Crossing the Cosumnes River was an adventure in itself. A tule raft awaited the traveler who placed himself and his gear on the raft. He then pulled himself over to the other side by a rope attached to a tree on the other bank while the horses swam across. Food and rest were provided for all by the ferryman who lived on the south bank.

Great flocks of birds were a sight to see especially in the spring and fall when millions of species traveled the great Pacific Flyway. The Stone Lake region was a stopping place just as it is today. One traveler wrote of seeing nothing but birds, thousands of birds – of all varieties, as far as he could see across the fields.

The Monterey Trail became a well traveled route after the discovery of gold. Every manner of horse-drawn vehicle made its way to and from Sacramento and Stockton, the

two rapidly growing centers of gold rush activity. In the summer great clouds of dust greeted travelers, and in the winter, several feet of mud made the trip interesting. Stockton Road, as it came to be called, became an important thoroughfare which it has remained to this day.

Whether they were in the saddle or in coaches or wagons, travelers needed many services when they were on the road. It didn't take long for enterprising merchants to establish businesses along the main routes so that those who found themselves on the road could have food, horses, clothing and other niceties. Messages could be left for friends and relatives, valuables stored, information obtained about the local area, and word-of-mouth news passed on. The proprietors of the early day stage stops and hotels therefore held many positions: salesmen, bankers, mailmen, newsmen, real estate promoters and employment agents.

Though these establishments did not have the luxuries associated with the Hiltons and Hyatts of today, good care was provided for the men and women of the road. Yes, occasionally there really were women travelers.

Both Stockton Road and Jackson Highway were major routes to and from the gold mines. All early roads had hotels, stage stops or road houses conveniently spaced to meet the needs of traveling folks. They were usually a day's ride apart – seven miles seemed the rule; thus places called 7 Mile House and 14 Mile House that became known as stops along the roads of northern California. Eventually, post offices opened at many of these stops. Stores and shops expanded and eventually came the development of small towns. This is how Elk Grove, Franklin and Union House had their beginning days.

The man who built the Elk Grove Hotel & Stagestop was James Hall. He had come from Missouri to the midst of exciting gold days in the northern mines. Hall realized that the riches to be had were greater away from the mines than in them. He decided to build a hotel on busy Upper Stockton Road, and the place he chose was just north of the Cosumnes River about fifteen miles from Sacramento. Large oak trees dotted the countryside, and the tule elk wandered through the grove as they sought water in the Cosumnes River. Hall set to work making his own bricks from the clay soil of the area. By the summer of 1852, he was finished with an elegant two-story building that reflected California's natural heritage. Behind the hotel majestic oaks provided shelter for all kinds of wildlife. Antelope, coyote and tule elk were always present as were thousands of ducks and geese that flew around the many sloughs nearby. From the upper front windows of the hotel, the tired traveler could look across miles of tall grasses toward the mighty Sacramento River to the west. Mount Diablo, rising in the southwest, seemed but a short distance away.

Summer evenings brought cool breezes from the Delta even when daytime temperatures rose above 100 degrees. Toward the east, the valley flatlands rose gently into the Sierra Nevada foothills. To the north and south stretched the giant valley of the Sacramento and San Joaquin Rivers. Surely the California newcomer must have been filled with wonder at the splendor and beauty of the place. Along with the marvelous view, Hall's hotel

provided travelers with good food, companionship and entertainment. There was even a ballroom upstairs. A post office was established with James Hall as the first postmaster. Stages stopped on a regular basis, and soon many services were available at the Elk Grove Hotel & Stagestop on the Monterey Trail, so long ago.

Source: Elizabeth Pinkerton for the School Names Committee, Elk Grove Unified School District, July 1998.

