

# How Lee Vining Became a Town

When J.B. went down to check on his new "spread," he saw that there was not enough pasture available to nourish his 100 or more cattle and sheep. He would have to grub out large sections of sagebrush to make more pasture, an arduous process. Meanwhile, he knew just the place to graze them. About a mile and a half south, on a high hill overlooking Mono Lake, was a place the farmers called, "Poverty Flat." It had been named that because the dirt was hard-pan,<sup>1</sup> and because the wind blew so fiercely at times. Later, it was renamed "Lakeview."

It was covered with wild pasture and dotted with huge clumps of willows. It was quite suitable for livestock.

In 1900, when I was only a year old, J.B., along with J.S. Cain and Mrs. Condron (the former widow Nay) got land grants from the Federal Government for the Flat. According to the Mono County Courthouse record, it was divided into three parcels.

J.B. got the largest portion — the lower half of the Flat, to the north (just west of the present Lee Vining High School).

Two years later on July 8, 1902, Pete Celini, an Italian farmer, bought the entire property for \$800.

Mrs. Condron was paid \$200 legal money. J.B. got \$500, and J.S. Cain got \$100 in gold coins.

Celini retained the land for four years, and in 1906, tempted with the prospect of making a considerable profit, sold it to J.B. and Orilla Anderson for the sum of \$2500.

This is when Christian Mattly (Chris) entered the picture. Chris was 12 years old when he arrived here from Switzerland with his bothers, Peter and Hill. The boys went to live with their Uncles Lou and Paul Mattly at Lee Vining Creek. There, they made "Mono Lake Salts," no easy task.

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<sup>1</sup>Hard-pan: Hard packed clay and dirt.

The vats used for boiling the lake water down, were powered by piñon wood, which was cut on the hill to the west of Lee Vining grade. The wood had to be hand sawed, then chopped and loaded on mule-driven wagons.

The Mattlys packaged the salts in half-pint and pint packages, then shipped to it Los Angeles to be sold, where there was a ready market for "Mono Salts."

Years later, Lou and George Williams manufactured the salts, as well as a popular formulated cream which they marketed and sold under the trade name of "Sal-Mono." Mono salts were used for arthritis and athletes' foot, and had numerous other uses. Bathing in the lake water is said to have many beneficial effects.

Chris was an avid believer in the "Salts." As an adult, he drank either a glass of the lake water or dissolved salts every day. Some think he may have drunk too much, because chemicals and salt can settle in the circulatory system, blocking it.

Chris was often seen in the company of his faithful dog "Fritz," an unusual animal, half coyote and half shepherd. Fritz was an excellent hunter, but his career was cut short when his fondness for a farmer's ducks caused him to be shot.

Chris married Anna Keller of Benton in 1922. Anna was a widow, with many children. For several years before Fred Keller died, the Keller

family had lived at Benton, where Fred worked as a ranch hand for August Mathieu,<sup>2</sup> on the Mathieu ranch.

The story goes that one day Anna gave a gypsy fortune teller a half dollar to have her hand read. The gypsy solemnly told Anna that her husband would die in a farming accident and that she would lose her eldest son within a year.

Anna scoffed at the dire prediction and ran the woman off the property with her broom.

The gloomy forecast became a reality within the year. The eldest son was killed in a shooting incident and Fred lost his life as he worked, when a wagon he was driving overturned and he was trampled by the panic-stricken horses. The fatherless children were placed in a convent.

When Chris and Anna married, Chris had already bought the Flat from the Andersons for a reported sum of \$4000. The children were taken out of the convent and brought to the Basin to live. They were Clare, Vier, Jay, Jim, Anne, Fred, and Verne.

Chris had a weatherbeaten face, a handlebar mustache, and wore glasses. He was short, just 5'5", and his temper was even shorter.

To accommodate his large, new family, Chris had his cousin Hill build him a two-story house at the west end of what is now Third Street. This house is much the same as when it was first built.

Chris and Anna worked hard, with the children helping them. Chris had a large garden (vegetables grew well there). He had ten milk cows, and raised a few sheep and pigs. He sold milk in three- and five-gallon cans. The neighbors dropped by twice a week to pick it up. There were about 50 or 60 chickens. Anna sold eggs and made 25 pounds of butter twice a week, which she sold. Jim Keller vividly recalls churning the butter in a 50-lb. barrel in a creek, by the present Cal-Trans building. It was a big job for a little boy.

As he sat by the fire on cold winter evenings, Chris mulled over the fact that since the Tioga road was built in 1909 to connect with the "Great Sierra Wagon Road," travel over the rough and winding road had been increasing by leaps and bounds. There was a practical side to his otherwise dreamy nature; and now one of his dreams began to take shape.

You might say that he had a "vision."

He invited his relatives and neighbors to one of his famous Canasta parties, hinting that he would be discussing an issue of great importance.

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<sup>2</sup>Father of Pete, John, Frank and August.

They pestered him for details; but he gave nary a clue, saying it was a secret.

Toward the end of the evening, as Anna fortified the curious guests with refreshments, Chris revealed his "great" plan.

He began by saying that before long he expected there would be a great increase in travel through Yosemite. (The road, in fact, had only recently been improved to accommodate touring cars.) He explained that with this in mind, he planned to sell the lower portion of his ranch to Bob Currie, a butcher who owned a slaughterhouse up Lee Vining Creek.

Basinites in attendance were Pearl and Jake Mattly, the Hess brothers (also from Switzerland), the Donellys, Montroses, and I, George La Braque.

They listened, dubiously, as he went on to say that he intended to subdivide the upper portion of his property, and that he was giving them the first chance to buy lots. He told them to go home and talk it over and to let him know what they decided. One man timidly asked, "What will you call it?"

## Leroy Vining of Vining's Rancho

Chris tugged thoughtfully at his mustache, then replied, "I will call it Lee Vining."

The others had heard the story of Leroy Vining, who had come into the Basin with his brother Dick, on a quest for gold in 1856, and who had died around 1870.

The brothers were from La Porte, Indiana, originally. They traveled from Mariposa into Coarse Gold at Yosemite to mine and trap.

They worked first as hardrock miners for the "Shepherd Mine" at the top of Tioga Pass.<sup>3</sup> The mine failed, but reports of gold at Monoville by a Lieutenant Moore encouraged them to stick around. They hired an

<sup>3</sup> *Tioga*: An Iroquois name meaning "where it forks." The road over the Tioga Pass was originally an ancient Indian footpath. The Great Sierra Wagon Road was the first finished portion. Today, the road is a sleek, two-lane highway, bordered by Alpine meadows, granite peaks, timber stands, and glistening snowcaps.

Indian guide to take them down through Bloody Canyon,<sup>4</sup> by way of Mono Pass, panning for gold as they followed Walker Creek. Dick Vining parted with Leroy and drifted north. Leroy built a large sluice box at Rescue Creek (directly opposite the present town). He was recovering a sizeable amount of gold dust, when he learned of the rich placers being discovered at Mono Diggings, a few miles to the north. He established a claim, which is said to have been one of the richest there.

Leroy was well acquainted with the fact that mining made a man mighty thirsty. He opened a makeshift "saloon" in the foothills, at the mining camp named "Monoville." The settlement included several hotels, a Chinese laundry, grocery store, barber shop, and livery stable.

Because of his colorful speech and important "airs," he was called "Captain Vining." He did well, until a heavy snow caved in the roof of his establishment. As the miners were vacating the premises for a new bonanza in Aurora, Leroy took the little stake he had saved and bought property at the base of Tioga Pass (in the vicinity of the present Senior Citizen camp). He built a small cabin near the creek for his Paiute wife and himself, and then started a sawmill. His spread, which included a small meadow, became known as "Vining's Rancho."

"Vining's Rancho" is identified on Clayton's map of Esmeralda and Mono Counties. Clayton refers to Lee Vining River, although the name Rescue Creek was given this stream by Von Schmidt, who did the official survey in 1856.

Leroy was a rugged outdoorsman, and handy with a gun. A gun, however, proved to be his undoing. One day, around 1870, as he was hauling lumber on the rough road from Bodie to Aurora, the buckboard jolted suddenly, throwing his gun out of the holster on his hip, and causing it to discharge accidentally. In a few minutes, Leroy Vining was dead.

His wife went back to her people, and later, Albert Silvester picked up "Vining's Rancho" for back taxes.

Chris Mattly's guests all knew this story. They left with their heads swimming at the unexpected proposition; and in the days that followed, others, especially Chris's Uncle Jake, pleaded with Chris to forget his brainstorm. But Chris had made up his mind.

<sup>4</sup>*Bloody Canyon*: The canyon might have been named because of the bloody battles between the Kuzedika Paiute and the Yosemite (Yokut) Indians over control of the brine shrimp "lots" at Mono Lake. (The Yokuts considered the brine shrimp to be a delicacy.) However, in John Muir's essay on "Peaks and Glaciers of the High Sierras," he claims it may have been derived from the red color of the sides, or from the bloody stains left by mules and horses whose hooves were cut by the sharp rocks on the path.

# Chris Mattly, Founder of Lee Vining

A public meeting was held to discuss the idea. Some Basinites were not sure they wanted a town. Most thought it was a huge joke; but soon the idea caught on and was accepted.

Chris's first move was to hire Charlie Fulton, the stage and mail driver, who was also the Mono County Surveyor, to survey the townsite.

The upper half of the property was solidly overgrown with high, tough willows that had to be chopped and hacked out of the way before surveying could proceed.

Chris hired some local lads to help Charlie: August Hess, Don Mattly, the Carrington brothers, and Jim Keller, his own stepson. Jim pulled the chain, packed a hatchet, and hauled the stakes.

Anna and Chris saw a chance to establish a school for the children. There were two schools in the Basin at this time. Mono Lake School, to the north, across from Mono Inn, and the Crater School, to the south, at Farrington Meadow.

Early one morning Anna marched to the little rise at the southwest part of the townsite. There, with her children trailing behind her, she "walked off" the portion she wanted set aside for the school. It was not an accurately measured piece of property; indeed, the finished division of the town into lots had a patch-work effect. The lots which Anna walked off, and which she and Chris deeded to Mono County for a school, were numbers 7, 8, 9, 10, and 11. The Mattlys added the stipulation that if the school were to be discontinued or moved, the property would revert to their heirs.

The Lee Vining Grammar School — much expanded and improved — occupies this land today.

The townsite caught on. The Courthouse records show that the first lots were sold in 1926, for \$50 per lot.

The buyers were: Guy Carrington (2 lots),<sup>5</sup> Glenn Mattly (2 lots),<sup>6</sup> Bill Hess (3 lots),<sup>7</sup> Gus Hess (3 lots),<sup>8</sup> Margaret Calhoun (1 lot).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Grocery store.

<sup>7</sup> First garage.

<sup>8</sup> Gas station-bar-restaurant.

<sup>9</sup> First post office, barber shop, and bakery.

In 1927, lots were bought by Bill Donnelly (1 lot), Anna Currie (1 lot),<sup>10</sup> Peter Gilli (2 lots),<sup>11</sup> Bill Parmalee (1 lot),<sup>12</sup> Albert Silvester (1 lot), Lawrence L. Bodle (1 lot), Margaret Calhoun (1 lot), Henry Heavrin (1 lot), James Green (1 lot), and F.A. Mansfield (1 lot).

In 1930, lots were purchased by George Mitchell, Gus Hess, Frank Donnelly,<sup>13</sup> William Currie, and me, George La Braque.<sup>14</sup>

As usual, "inflation" arrived, and the next lots sold for \$150-\$200. Amazingly enough, the going price for a lot in the townsite today ranges from a low of \$18,000 to a high of \$25,000 — provided any can be found, that is.

Chris, having a large stake in the school, served for many years as a board member, custodian, and jack-of-all-trades, which helped keep the school running smoothly.

Other board members were Bill Banta,<sup>15</sup> Gus Hess, and Jim Stewart, who was President of the board for many years.

Mrs. Nora Archer, a widow with several children, was the first superintendent of schools. She attended nearly every board meeting, and had very precise standards and high ideals.

The first teacher was Miss Young. She lived on the second floor of the Mattly house, and later moved to lower Lee Vining Creek, where she

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<sup>10</sup> Currie's Meat Market.

<sup>11</sup> El Mono Hotel.

<sup>12</sup> Restaurant.

<sup>13</sup> Restaurant, the O.K. Cafe.

<sup>14</sup> Shell Station, La Braque Motel.

<sup>15</sup> Bill's youngest son, Don, is—and has been for many years—chairman of the Lee Vining Utility District.



could house all her felines in a very large house. These were strays that she simply could not resist — and there were *dozens* of them. She lived there until her death.

The second teacher was Mrs. Lottie Van Allstyn. Oh, Yes!! I remember her well. My daughter Lily was in the first grade (1929), and quite a mischief. I vividly recall the welts raised on her bare legs, put there by Lottie's willow switches.

It was a very sad thing for Chris and the children when Anna died in 1925, giving birth to their son Leo. Leo was sent to relatives in Bakersfield. Chris kept the others at home with him.

At this time there was no road through the townsite. From the south, the highway took off in the vicinity of the present Lee Vining airport, down over the hill north of Cramasco's truck garden (now Dondero's), along Mono Lake. When you reached the bridge over Lee Vining Creek, *on this side*, you made a sharp left following the creek upward, across a bridge, and stopping at Anderson's (later Curry's). Then you entered town by foot. If you wanted to go on to Tioga Lodge, you'd continue *northward* (instead of turning left up the canyon). Later, a Forest Service road was built above town. It originated at the Lee Vining Dam and continued high on the hill beyond town, coming out at Tioga Lodge. You had to double back, so to speak, to get into Lee Vining proper.

As mentioned earlier, Bob Currie operated the slaughterhouse. He had a hardworking, well-liked Paiute named Jaspar Jack working for him as slaughterer. Bob sold his meat at the small meat market he'd built next to Glen Mattly's store (Lee Vining Market today).

Bob had the first electricity in Lee Vining. He paid \$40 for the first pole, to bring electricity to his business. The sewer system went in many years later, and is one of the oldest sewer systems in existence.

Because Bob needed water in the worst way, his friend Bill Banta helped him shovel a ditch of some 50 yards to bring water down from an open ditch that took the water to the school.

Bill Banta was no stranger to the Basin. He had come into Mono Basin from Owens Valley in 1918, to peddle vegetables. The demand was so great that he soon had five trucks operating. The vegetables were grown and trucked in from the rich farming community of Bishop. Bill would often find his payment in chickens, eggs, and so forth; and a few times Paiutes paid him in gold coins.

Around 1930, the first water line was brought in at a point where the Blaver residence now stands. Fred Silva was the foreman. Paiute lads who worked on the line were Harry Tom, Frank Sam, Billy Williams,

Billy Abe, and Dick Charlie. It was put in with a plow, a team of horses, and, mostly, a lot of shoveling.

Bill and Gus Hess, together with Guy Carrington, put in the pipes and copper fittings. These were hooked up to all businesses and homes.

The new waterline didn't work at all well, and that's an understatement. The reason is that at the south end of town, on the hill, a 4-inch line was installed. This narrowed to a 2-inch line in the middle of town, and to a 1½-inch line at the lower half. The lower half of town was often without a drop of water. A very frustrating problem..

The town made do with this for many years until the school board and townspeople agreed that this water system was obsolete. A real water system, with uniform pressure, was needed. In emergencies the original system was not dependable.

Plans were drawn up for a new waterline; and the townspeople called on the County of Mono for financial aid. The next step was to circulate a petition. The signers agreed to pay a 6% school tax. The amount of money needed to be raised for the project was \$3500.

Bill Banta bought the water pipe from the City of Los Angeles for 25¢

per foot. The County money was given as a loan, and there was some free help from the Federal government as well.

The townspeople borrowed one tractor, and the City of Los Angeles loaned them another. The line was completed in 1940, and everyone paid \$40 for each hook-up.

Bill Banta had two lots, as well as the grocery store he had bought from Glen Mattly.<sup>16</sup> He gave the Edison Company an easement for the electricity to come into the town through his property. This line is still called the "Banta" line by the company.

Around 1927, the persuasive Chris had convinced Gus and Bill Hess to move their garage into town from the Tioga Lodge location. They did so, taking in Guy Carrington as a partner. There was a method in his madness, so to speak, as Chris usually had several broken down trucks in need of repair; and the brothers were excellent mechanics.

Their first garage was at the north end of town. Later they established a permanent garage and gas station at the south end of town. Gus' oldest son, August, is still in business there.

Gus and Bill married two Paiute sisters, Lula and Mildred Charlie from Owens Valley; and both had large families.

With their large Dodge trucks, Bill and Gus moved the building for the school in from Mono Mills. We Basinites would have occasion to call upon these trucks for much of the heavy work done in the Basin. For many years, Gus and Bill hauled the heavy mining timbers up to the Log Cabin Mine, an extremely difficult task because of a steep, rough grade that had several hairpin turns. Even though they had to proceed at a snail's pace, they always made it.

Chris and young Gus had been good friends. Gus was kind of his "protégé." They worked together for the good of the town for many years. At Chris's death, Gus took over many town matters, becoming town "Constable." Gus has sometimes been called the "Father of Lee Vining."

Up to the 1930s, there had been little "law and order" in the townsite. Mike Lazovitch of Bodie built and ran the "hot spot of relaxation and bamboozlery, Bodie Mike's Bar and Restaurant."<sup>17</sup>

An Italian, Julio Zuninio, owned Julio's Saloon, next door; and Bill Fuller ran the adjoining Sez Bill Cafe. Their patrons enjoyed "wild and woolly" times, with an occasional murder or shooting scrape to liven things up.

<sup>16</sup> Lee Vining Market (Barsi).

<sup>17</sup> Bodie Mike's Bar & Restaurant is now owned and operated by Jim and Edna Nicely.

One cold, blistery day in 1934, Chris went out woodcutting to Deadman with a four-horse team. As he started home, the horses started running wildly, for some reason. The wagonload of wood overturned, with all the wood falling on top of Chris. When he did not return all night, Pearl and Glen Mattly went looking for him.

They found Chris very cold, dazed and smashed up, with broken ribs and other injuries. He had also suffered a slight stroke. He lived until 1937, but he never completely recovered from the accident.

Many of these old friends of mine played leading roles in the formation of Lee Vining.