

Okieville

Workers with families began to bring them along to Pine Creek in the late 1930s. Previously only bunk-house space had been available and turnover was high. In an effort to attract the more stable "family men," 15 small houses were built near the tailings pond below the A Level mill. The spot, which was home to the first women and children to live at the mine, was nicknamed Okieville probably because some of its residents were from the state of Oklahoma. Winters could be rough for the workers' families as yearly snowfall averaged nearly 15 feet at the site. Drifts piled up to great depths around the houses and there were few trips to town, especially during winter when storms closed the road up Morgan Creek.

Most workers parked their automobiles down by the Pine Creek Mill and hitched rides up to A Level on passing mine vehicles. During World War II Pine Creek workers were given priority at Bishop grocery stores due to the mine's status as critical to the defense effort. Grocery orders were called into Bishop and the goods brought up the hill once a week by company truck.

Children at Okieville had to create their own entertainment, but fishing was good at nearby Morgan Lakes and the surrounding mountainous terrain provided ample room for exploring.

When a school was built at Scheelite in 1942, children got to class by catching rides down the hill with the night shift workers and returning with the afternoon shift. Some of the wives were employed as workers in the mine office. There were some workers that enjoyed skiing and took advantage of the inviting snow-covered slopes during winter. A dozer operator would haul their skis while they walked from Okieville up to the mine office. After work they would finish the day by skiing back down to their houses.

The few houses available at Okieville couldn't begin to handle the flood of employees coming in as part of the war production effort. Four more bunkhouses were erected adjacent to the Scheelite pilot plant for single employees, but living quarters for men with families were still in short supply. Bishop was 26 miles away, a long commute in the days of gas rationing and scarcity of vehicles. To relieve the situation, a construction contractor threw up eight houses one-quarter mile east of the present site of Rovana in about 1940. They were constructed of raw, bark-covered slabs and covered with red tar paper. The place was called "Red Houses," a name that stuck even after the rough exteriors were stuccoed over. Shortly after completion of the Pine Creek Mill, four flat-roofed houses for "staff" with families and a staff house for single employees were built nearby. These houses were damaged by an avalanche in 1952, after which three were moved down to Rovana. The last house remaining at the mill site was torn down in the late 1970s.

Another 29 houses for married employees were built by U.S.V. halfway between the mill and Scheelite, just down-stream from the mouth of Gable Creek. These were

quickly filled to capacity and the company built an additional 26 pumice block houses along the north side of the Pine Creek road near the Scheelite pilot plant.

By 1943 there were enough families living in the canyon that the federal government built a school for kindergarten through eighth grade students. The school was located across Pine Creek road from the Scheelite housing site, and at one point over 80 students were enrolled. The building also served as the heart of the canyon communities, giving an identity to the place. Mrs. G.N.S. "Millie" LeBleue was hired as the school custodian and cook. She was also the book-keeper for some of the housing projects. In 1945 the company managing the project tried to terminate Millie for "not being tough enough" with the tenants in securing rents. Members of the Pine Creek Community Club went to her defense and management relented, letting her stay in the position. The same year the Federal Public Housing Authority built a 52-unit apartment complex on the north side of the Pine Creek road, one mile below Scheelite. Individual buildings contained three to four apartments each and a community center was also built. This location known as Federal Housing, or just "Federal," was the government's contribution to the housing crunch during the war years.

Unfortunately, due to a faulty oil heater, the Pine Creek School burned in November 1947. The Round Valley School, six miles down Pine Creek, was too small at the time to handle the overflow from Scheelite. Subsequently, classes were held for the canyon students in the basement under the Pine Creek Mill office until a new building was added at Round Valley. Millie LeBleue, and teacher Myrtle Walsh, transferred down to the Round Valley School along with the students. They both stayed on until they retired years later. Millie is remembered by many for her wholesome meals and Myrtle for her stories of a childhood spent in a Colorado mining camp.

In 1946 the Gable Creek housing site was inundated by flash flood debris and 12 houses were destroyed beyond repair. After this disaster it became apparent that a safer site for employee housing was needed. The Foreman Ranch near the mouth of Pine Creek Canyon was purchased by U.S.V. for this purpose and in 1947 it became the site for the Rovana housing project.

Houses were transported to the site from a variety of places in the canyon. The first arrivals were the 15 surviving structures of the Gable Creek flood along with four houses from the Tungstar millsite. After abandonment of the A Level site in 1949, the Okieville houses were trucked down to Rovana by the R.J. Goulet Construction Company. Bringing those homes down the narrow switch backs of the Morgan Creek Road was a feat in itself. They were cut into four sections and loaded onto a short cabover tractor and semi for the descent. Going around some corners, the outside dual tires hung off the road. These all-wood homes comprised the upper rows of the site which was named Rovana Village; the name coming from a combination of the "Ro" from Round Valley and "vana" from U.S. Vanadium Corporation. The streets were named after states of the Union to match the letters in the word "vanadium".

Production demands of the Korean Conflict and the government tungsten stockpile program resulted in the need for more housing. Fifteen additional stucco houses were completed on the lower rows of Rovana in 1951. This brought the total to 85 houses, all still in use today. The Federal houses were occupied into the 1960s, when they were sold and moved to various locations in the Bishop area. The Scheelite houses were occupied by employees until 1969. They were later demolished and the remains dumped into the nearby tailings ponds. A warehouse now sits on the Pine Creek school's cement foundation.

In the High Sierras

In the high, Sierras 'neath azure skies so blue,
Majestic is their splendor to the stranger's view.

We've got the sagebrush on the floor of the desert
at our door, and the snowcapped mountain peaks
around us. And when the sun sets on the Whites
it's one of nature's grandest sights. The friendly
streams and mountain lakes surround us.

In the high Sierras where friendships are so true,
And California beckons, I'll hurry back to you.

Written by Dorothea Herman-Servanti while living at Rovana. Her song caught on quickly and was sung with piano accompaniment at many Pine Creek and Round Valley social events. It was even recorded at a studio in southern California, but never released.

courtesy of Mary Mae Kilpatrick and Donna Herman-Hollenstein