

floor in the usual custom of country farm houses. Charley told them about the one-sided battle with Farragut's fleet and how he regretted the loss of *CSS Mississippi*.

His grandfather had his own war stories as usual. The family had heard the same stories many times in the past about the time he went to Alabama with General Jackson in 1813 to fight the Creeks. This was just before he married Dicey in Tennessee. He said that fighting in the war was why he was a Union man and opposed to secession, which everyone already knew anyway.

Charley's uncle, Jesse Read, who lived on his farm next to John and Dicey's land, had to tell his stories again about the battle of Buena Vista in the Mexican War when he was shot in the leg fighting with Colonel Jefferson Davis.

Charley remembered seeing his uncle off on a steamboat at Satortia when he left for the war with others from Yazoo County. Jesse was living with them in Satortia then.

Two years later when he was eight years old, Charley's family moved to a plantation next to his grandparent's land. His parents, William and Maria, signed a one year contract with Jim Downey, who was from an old Raymond family. The lengthy contract stipulated that certain production and profits were expected for the year. Charley remembered it as a time of trouble. Things had not gone very well, and his father wound up owing Downey a lot of money.

It was after this set back when his father and uncle John started talking about leaving for the gold fields in California. It didn't seem like a good time to leave since his mother was pregnant, but they were dead set on going. Plans were made for Maria and the children to move to Jackson with her younger brother until his father returned.

In the first week of April 1849 the emigration company left Vicksburg by steamboat and traveled north on the busy Mississippi, then up the Arkansas River. At Fort Smith the brothers were amazed to find thousands of people from all

over the country making preparations for the journey to California.

They purchased wagons and equipment, then moved out along the Canadian River in a boggy morass of deep mud. About two weeks later they came to the crossing of another old trail that came up from San Antonio. The junction of the two trails was where Jesse Chisolm, a half-breed Cherokee, lived with his Creek wife.

The party soon came to the ruins of Chateau's Trading Post, abandoned years earlier after Comanches scalped all the people and burned the buildings. On down the trail they passed ancient petroglyphs of animals on the high bluffs of the desolate, uninhabited Llano Estacado.

In late July William and John arrived at the colorful little Spanish town of Anton Chico along the ancient route of the Spanish Conquistadors. The old families in the village were sheep herders who had emigrated there from northern Spain around 1690.

A few days later their wagons rumbled into the old town of Santa Fe, overflowing with emigrants to the gold fields. The party sold their heavy wagons and bought pack mules for the dangerous journey across the desert.

After paying an outlaw gang to ferry them across the Colorado River, they started making preparations to cross the dreaded Jornada del Muerta (Journey of Death) over the blazing sand of the Sonora Desert.

The brothers discarded most of their gear and started at night along the flat desolate wasteland with no forage or water along the way. Several days later they entered an area of high sand dunes and big mounds of giant oyster and clam shells over a foot wide. Green tufa from an ancient shoreline was visible on distant cliffs.

Two more days of hard travel brought them to a sandy arroyo surrounded by high dunes that was supposed to have

water. A shallow hole in the wet sand slowly yielded about half a cup of murky water over a period of time.

Dead mules and wagons and equipment covered the sand for several hundred yards. There was a pile of rocks with a little cross of sticks on top. Nearby were the well preserved bodies of three gold seekers from New York lying on the burning sand beside their dead mules.

The situation was getting desperate now. Everything but their last few biscuits, almost empty water bags and a sack of mesquite beans for the animals was discarded.

Suffering from the heat and near death from thirst, they finally came to a small Indian village at the western edge of the desert and drank from a cool spring flowing from a rocky formation.

The brothers arrived in San Diego with only the ragged clothes on their backs. After resting in a hotel a few days they boarded a sailing vessel for San Francisco, then took a steamer up the river to Sacramento. In the crude tent city overflowing with gold seekers from all over the world were long rows of more than one thousand graves from a recent epidemic of typhoid fever.

William and John bought a few pack mules, picks and shovels, enough food for a couple of weeks and started into the hills. In a saloon that night at Auburn, they heard about a new strike up the trail at Nevada City and decided to give it a try.

In a drizzling rain the next morning, they started into the higher elevations where ponderosa and towering sugar pine trees were growing. Two days later the brothers arrived at the bustling mining camp of Nevada City along the flooded waters of Deer Creek.

They first stopped at Dr. Caldwell's Store, which was a rough canvas shanty, and bought food supplies, then wrote letters home to tell the folks they had made it to the gold country. Crossing the rickety bridge over Deer Creek they

went up Main Street, passing several saloons and gambling houses. That night they camped at the top of the hill at an old Indian campground across the trail from a little Catholic graveyard.



Nevada City in 1999 – photo by author

Early the next day the gold seekers set out to stake their thirty by thirty foot claim. The land along Deer Creek had already been staked out. After traveling about five miles into the hills, the brothers came to a promising place in a stand of sugar pines along a little rushing creek.

They pitched a tent, then built a fire to cook side meat and beans and heat a pot of coffee. That night as wolves howled in the hills nearby, John started coughing from the

wet weather, and William had pangs of guilt about leaving his pregnant wife.

The creek was too high during the rainy season to start panning. They cleared a level spot at the top of the ravine and built a little log cabin with a rock fireplace. During the next few weeks the water was still too deep to pan.

In early March the rains stopped, and the rushing water in the creek started going down. It had been an unusually wet winter with over one hundred inches of rain and deep snow in the mountains. The creek dropped to a workable level, and the brothers waded into the ice cold water and dipped their pans into the sand and gravel, swirling them around. When a few specks of shiny gold appeared in a pan, they started yelling and dancing around the camp.

William and John soon built themselves what was called a rocker, a wooden box on curved legs with riffles at the bottom. Production was better now with the new rocker. Each day their bag of gold dust was growing. After they had a good size poke, the brothers rode back to Nevada City and sold their gold for \$18.00 an ounce.

At Bower Brothers Express they sent money home and bought some mining supplies with most of what was left. At the Bella Union Saloon on Main Street, a sexy French girl was dealing twenty-one. She had the attention of a bunch of ragged miners who hadn't seen a pretty girl in a while.

The next morning they walked over the bridge at Deer Creek to Dr. Caldwell's Store and bought a bag of potatoes for eating raw to avoid the scurvy.

Back at camp the excited miners rocked almost sixty buckets a day for the next few weeks, producing gold dust and an occasional good nugget. William said it was hard work, but sure beat running a farm for someone else.

Things were going real good until William got sick in the middle of June. He was having bad headaches and a fever that seemed to be rising every day. When he got a rose

colored rash on his body and severe nose bleeding, John rode to Nevada City and brought Dr. Caldwell back to the camp. The doctor said Bill had a bad case of typhoid fever and gave him a mustard plaster and Jamaica ginger. He told them an epidemic had been running through the camps since the warm weather came in.

In the early morning on Sunday July 6, 1850 William died quietly in the cabin. John carried his body on a mule to a store in Nevada City that claimed to have an undertaking parlor. He was buried with a wooden marker in the little Protestant graveyard along the trail to Downieville on the northeast edge of town.

The town was full of drunk miners still celebrating the 4th of July. Two days earlier a lawyer in town read the Declaration of Independence, then everybody lined up and marched down Main Street shooting pistols in the air.

With his brother dead and his cough getting worse, John was ready to return home. He sold everything, then mailed a letter to the family telling them about William's death and enclosing money for Maria. John said he would be returning home by way of Panama.

John started down the trail the next morning and arrived at Sacramento a few days later. He took the first steamer to San Francisco, then booked passage to Panama on a sailing vessel.

During the long voyage, several passengers on the ship died of cholera and were buried at sea. After they dropped anchor at Panama City, John learned that hundreds of gold seekers were waiting for ships to California. It was common for ships to be several weeks overdue, and large numbers of emigrants died from cholera in the meantime.

He made arrangements to cross the isthmus with a small party of Americans from the gold fields. Early one morning they started into the mountains on horseback with an Indian

guide and soon entered a tropical rain forest filled with exotic birds and chattering monkeys.

The party came down from the cool mountains late that afternoon and entered the steaming jungle. At a mosquito infested little Indian settlement on the Chagres River, they had a meal of rice boiled in coconut milk and spent the night in a bamboo hut. It rained that night and the hut leaked. The next morning they boarded a small boat with a thatched roof and shoved off into the swift current.

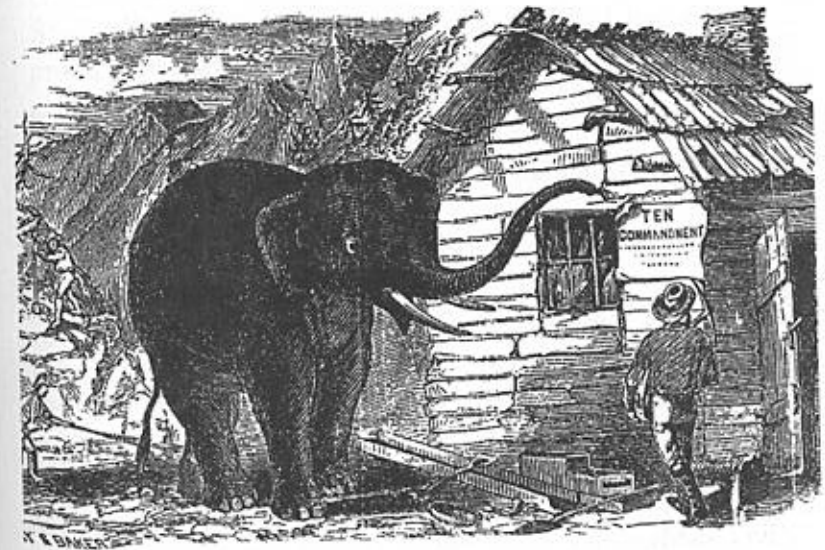
Continuing down the river they spent each night at other little Indian settlements. Six days later they arrived at the jungle town of Chagres on the Gulf of Mexico. John spent the night in a crude bamboo hut with a dirt floor called the Crescent City Hotel, possibly the best place in town.

As he waited for a ship going to New Orleans, John had a conversation with a gruff middle aged man one afternoon in a bamboo shack that passed for a saloon. The angry man said he was Sheriff of Jefferson Parish near New Orleans, and was waiting for a ship to return home. He said about five weeks ago he boarded a sailing vessel in New Orleans to serve a warrant on one of the passengers. The ship sailed away while he was still on board and put him off at Chagres, the first port of call.

After waiting for three more weeks, John and the sheriff boarded a steam sloop for New Orleans with a number of other gold seekers. Most of them had just enough money to get home, but one passenger was said to have gold dust worth \$22,000.

John returned to his parent's farm, and eleven year old Charley wanted to know everything that happened on the journey. He was deeply saddened by his father's death. John spent many hours telling him about their great adventure—the thrill of finding gold and seeing the elephant.

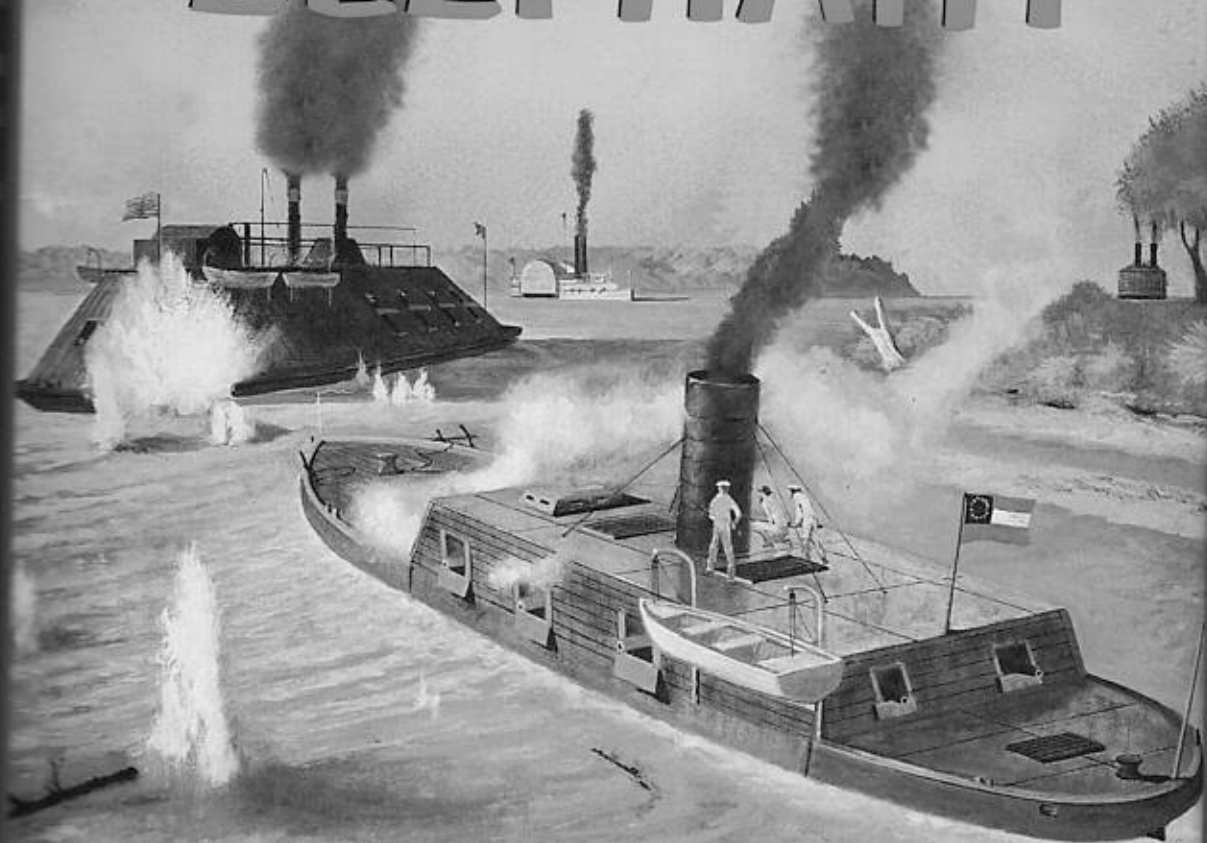
John died of consumption in 1853 and left his parents, John and Dicey, his estate of \$3800.



"Seeing the Elephant" from Nevada City Newspaper in 1855

The expression "I saw the elephant" came from a story about a farmer who always wanted to see an elephant. He rode to town one day to see the circus and an elephant was leading the parade. After his terrified horses overturned his wagon and dragged him down the street, he said, "Well, I don't give a damn, I saw the elephant."

HE SAW THE ELEPHANT



CONFEDERATE NAVAL SAGA
OF
LT. CHARLES "SAVVY" READ, CSN

HEWITT CLARKE