

Bear Valley a popular spot for millenia

by Lisa Gavon

R-C Alpine Bureau

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Alpine County has always been a little bit of paradise for those that live here. Though the population is small, the appreciation for our stellar peaks and valleys, winding rivers and pristine lakes is great. Every community has a unique feel, and Bear Valley is no exception. When Ebbetts Pass Scenic Byway closes every winter, it is cut off from the county seat in Markleeville. If you want to get there, it would be by snowmobile only, or by going the long way around: up over Carson Pass, curving around by Angel's Camp and then past Calaveras Big Trees.

Bear Valley's meadow started out as a glacial lake, gradually filling in with soil from the rim. It turns out humans have always had a fondness for this high elevation haven. Not far from Bear Valley, one of the earliest known inhabited structures on the North American continent was discovered in Gabbot Meadows. Charcoal found in the hearth was carbon-

dated to approximately 9,800 years ago. Archaeologists from Peak Associates also uncovered stone projectile points, implements, and a mysterious map-like petroglyph. The Late Pleistocene excavation site was submerged under the 62-billion-gallon Spicer Reservoir in 1988.

Creation stories from the Washoe indicate that this land has always been their home. The abundance of grinding rocks that still dot the countryside are additional proof of that. Traveling to Lake Tahoe in the spring of each year, locations in both Bear Valley and nearby Hermit Valley provide evidence of seasonal encampments. The roads that have been established are based on the ancient trails they used for hunting, gathering, and trading.

It is recorded that explorer Jedediah Smith put the area of Bear Valley on the map in 1827 while traveling between Utah and California. As if all of this was not enough to gain notoriety, the region was first known as "Grizzly Bear Valley." The Grizzlies have long since disappeared, and today it is known simply as Bear Valley.

By 1860, cattleman Harvey Blood had obtained a patent for summer range land. Soon thereafter, Blood began maintaining the road and establishing tollgates. Bear Valley was

known at that time as Blood's Station until the highway became a public thoroughfare. One of the local peaks was named after Blood's lovely daughter, Reba.

The Blood family sold their holdings in 1920 to the Bishop Mining and Cattle Company. Thirty-two years later, the Orvis family purchased it, grazing their cattle on the verdant meadow land, and conducting logging operations.

Son Bruce Orvis acquired a permit for 400 acres of Forest Service land. Working with forester Harry Schimke and mill operator Maury Rasmussen, they opened Mt. Reba Ski Resort in 1967. Orvis had a vision to create "Bear Valley Village." The lofty ceilings of the Cathedral Lounge are still at the center of a 400 lot subdivision today. Since its inception, importance has always been placed on retaining the natural landscape, acknowledging the true reason people are there. The richness and beauty of the land calls to them.

Jim Bottomley eventually bought the entire enterprise and renamed it Bear Valley Ski Company. In traditional family-owned fashion, Jim worked to improve the resort's facilities and operations, as did his son, Tim, when he took over as company president. In 2005 a three-partner group purchased the ski company, and it changed hands once again in 2014, presently being run by Skyline Development.

The population was a mere 121 lucky souls in the 2010 census. That number includes former Alpine County supervisor, newspaper publisher, author, and real estate agent Eric Jung, who penned the definitive history of Bear Valley: "Bulls, Bears, and Highway Fares."

You can look to his volume for more details about this unusual community in the Alpine mountains, surrounded by Stanislaus National Forest lands.

In summer months there is rock climbing, hiking, kayaking, boating, swimming, camping and glamping. Winter is open for snowshoeing, snowmobiling, sledding, tubing, along with epic downhill and cross country skiing. The Bear Valley Music Festival receives high praise and is a tradition each summer.

Each season offers something special, and in synch with our natural world. Filled with the sense of a vibrant and ever-changing history, Bear Valley is a magical, one-of-a-kind place.

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