Alturas

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EXAMINER SECTIONS

Wild West lives on in remote California

ALTURAS, Modoc County - I pulled the Cherokee into the vacant parking space and looked up at the faded sideboards of the old hotel.

"Niles Hotel and Saloon," announced a hand-lettered sign from the second-story balcony. A genuine wooden sidewalk led up to the double doors of the entrance, and in a grimy window full of cobwebs were sepia-tinted photographs from the 1800s.

A rusty Colt .45, a limp and yellowing lace fan and two worn button-top shoes surrounded the pictures. Authentic, no doubt about it.

It seemed so much like the archetypal West that I half-expected a tumbleweed to come rolling down the street. In fact, I was in Alturas (Spanish for "Valley On Top Of A Mountain"), and it certainly is that.

Traveling north on Highway 395, I had come to the extreme northeast corner of the state in search of another California, a sagebrush-and-chapparal California - one that belonged to the West, as opposed to the West Coast. Here in Alturas I was on the edge of the Great Basin, closer in distance to Boise, Idaho, than I was to San Francisco.

And yet I was still in my home state. Inside the Niles Hotel I found Victorian decor and a satisfyingly light "California cuisine" lunch. On the wall by the entrance were many articles from various papers attesting to the four-star quality of the meals.

To the south of Main Street was the gravel road leading to the Modoc National Wildlife Refuge. As I had entered town I had seen 50 or 60 snow geese and some sandhill cranes flying in to the waterways. East of the refuge the snowy peaks of the Warner Mountains rose to a height of 8,000 to 10,000 feet. The refuge has a car tour route and trails to wildlife viewing blinds, and for a moment I wavered, tempted by the call of geese and the wind blowing over the cattails.

But the pink and blue mural across Main Street

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of pronghorn antelope in a sea of sagebrush and the larger than life-size image of Lane Frost on a bucking bronco painted on the side of the building reminded me of my search for the "real" West.

A stop at the Modoc County Museum before lunch had whetted my lust for the past. Lynchings, murders, cattle rustling and Indian attacks had been the norm in this deceptively peaceful-looking area, I discovered. And the center for all this had been just over those mountains to the east, in a valley once known as "The Bloody Ground" because of all settlers and wagon trains killed by Indians there.

Now known as "The Surprise Valley," this area had been a magnet for Civil War deserters in the 1860s, and also to cattlemen and Basque sheep ranchers, leading to violent clashes over grazing land. It was also a magnet to me, hoping for a hint of history and any surprise a valley so named might offer.

It was 35 miles east to Cedarville, according to my map. Past Sulley's Trailer Lodge and Nifty's R.V. Park the road began to climb. Cottonwoods gave way to stands of aspen along a shaded stream. Juniper yielded to Douglas fir and pine. I was in the mountains, and the cool air felt good.

Then I was over the summit and sprawling before me was the vast sea of sage and desert I'd seen in the antelope mural in Alturas. To my right rose the Warner Mountains, and below me lay a tree-shaded little town: Cedarville.

Originally called Deep Creek, it was once a camping spot for wagon trains heading to Oregon over the Applegate Trail. Now it's a sleepy village of white-frame houses and old Victorians, picket fences and gardens.

I cruised past the park, a pleasant expanse of green lawn and picnic tables, and spotted an old log cabin sitting pretentiously near the playground equipment. A sign by the door told the story of William Cressler and James Bonner, who established the log structure as a trading post in 1867, making it Cedarville's first building.

Further past the park was Main Street, like a snapshot from a 1910 photo album. As I walked the cracked and tilting sidewalks I peered into the windows of false-fronted buildings.

Ila's Kitchen tempted me with promises of homemade pies, but the drugstore had a soda fountain and I couldn't resist reliving childhood memories. I slurped a cherry soda to the bottom with my straw with no one telling me it was

rude.

From the boy at the soda fountain I had also learned that if I turned left on my way out of town I'd find myself on the Surprise Valley National Backcountry Byway. So I did. On my right, cattle ranches merged into distant desert. On my left, farmland met forest and rose to rocky mountain ridges. Pulling out my binoculars I saw that those pale dots in the distance were antelope. It was the mural come to life.

I passed a pickup truck pulling a four-horse trailer and the cowboy-hatted rancher at the wheel smiled and waved. I waved back, wishing I was carrying a load of hay instead of suitcases, but feeling like I belonged anyway.

Twenty-five miles out of Cedarville I saw the spire of the white-steepled church through the cottonwoods before I saw the sign proclaiming, "Fort Bidwell - Established 1868." Once a cavalry outpost where troops were stationed to protect settlers from Indians, it bears little resemblance to the 20th century.

Slanting and peeling false-fronts lined the main street. I turned onto Water Street and saw a stone bridge shaded by trees. Opposite the bridge was the Fort Bidwell General Store, advertised in 1874 as "The Fire Proof Stone Store." Built with thick walls to withstand Indian sieges, it is one of California's oldest stores in continuous operation.

I was disappointed to see it was closed, but I walked across the white-washed wooden porch, leaned on the wobbly railing and tried to envision a cold, gray day shortly after Christmas in 1877. It was on that day, and on that porch, that Sgt. Frank Lewis, a well-respected young cavalry officer, shot himself to death in front of his men for reasons long forgotten here.

I found his grave in the old, juniper-lined cemetery on North Street. Here, on a gentle, sage-covered slope overlooking the valley, are the tombstones of many of those early cavalry troopers and their families. Sgt. Lewis's stone is larger than the plain, rounded white ones on either side of him, and set slightly apart from the rest. The weathered epitaph tells that the troopers, out of love for the man, raised money for his stone from their own meager salaries.

As I wandered along the bleak line of tombstones I read of epidemics, still-births, injuries and childbirth tragedies that testified to the short, difficult lives of those early settlers. Looking out at the vastness of mountains and desert I felt awe for those men and women who dared so much. My Jeep and the paved road

were completely out of place and time there.

Leaving Fort Bidwell, the road curved past a hill at the north end of town. There, perched like an empty-eyed visionary peering down at the town, stood a red-brick schoolhouse, abandoned but powerful in its decay. Beyond the hill the road climbed steeply up juniper- and sage-dotted slopes into a shady canyon where aspen trees rustled along Rock Creek.

I stopped to watch a sage grouse strut into the bushes. Wandering along the banks of the creek, I came to a lava cliff pockmarked with shaded nooks. As I came closer to the rock I realized that I was looking at blurred but definite petroglyphs - prehistoric Indian art. Clearly detectable along the entire wall were primitive paintings of mountain sheep, as well as other, more faded shapes.

A raptor soared overhead, crying sharp, shrill notes. Suddenly these were echoed from a tree up the cliff from where I stood. Looking up I saw a red-tailed hawk sweeping in circles overhead and his mate sitting on a tree limb. I was the cause of their anxiety. Softly I walked back to the road and drove on, a sprawling view of the Great Basin unfolding before me.

Here was the vast, unchanged West as the pioneers saw it. My binoculars showed a thin ribbon of road down in the mirage-like sea of sagebrush. It was the old emigrant trail, the California Trail as it was known, crossing warily along the California / Nevada border. This, the principle route of the California-bound 49ers lured by the Gold Rush, made goose bumps rise on my arms as I looked at it. In their journals the emigrants used words such as "dismal," "hellish," and "terrible" to describe it.

One out of every 17 pioneers died along this trail. A large outcropping of rock in the distance was 49er Rock, where 49ers wrote their names in axle grease to commemorate their crossing. The wind sweeping up the valley touched my face like a breath from the past.

Back in my Jeep, the 20th century began to encroach once more as the road descended and curved back toward Cedarville. Old abandoned homesteads were scattered at intervals across the alkali soil, and the steep blue-gray walls of the Warners rose again in the distance. A small band of wild horses kicked up dust miles away as I passed Middle Lake, where archaeologists have discovered two prehistoric "bison hunter" villages. Lodge pits and bison bones carbon-dated to 3,000 B.C. are common along the lake shore.

Suddenly I saw the trees of Cedarville ahead,

catching the deepening afternoon shadows. Thoughts of Ila's Kitchen and homemade pie teased me. It had been a day of adventure and memories: the pungent odor of sagebrush, the wind blowing through junipers on top of a ridge and especially the fingers of the past that entwined around me opening me to things I had never experienced.

The American West, as it was and as it still is. Yes, that is the surprise: that it is all still there, in California's forgotten Surprise Valley.

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