

LASSEN—A PAGE FROM HISTORY

By Elisabeth L. Egenhoff

In the far northeastern portion of California stands a mountain; a peach-and-vanilla-ice-cream, fairyland sort of mountain, quiet, benign, serene. Yet its pastel loveliness is sustained by tantrums and tumults, spitting fume, and flame, and molten rock—for it is one of the fire and ice beauties of the Cascade Range, and the most recently active. It has rested, quiescent, for more than fifty years. Even so, Lassen's last grumbling is well enough remembered, and its pulse is measured constantly by seismograph so that, should some new and disastrous fit of temper be brewing, there will perhaps be adequate warning.

Before the coming of white men, the Lassen region was a sort of Indian "Four Corners" area. To the north of the peak were the Atsugewi, to the south the Maidu, to the southwest the Yahi, and to the west the Yana, their territories radiating out like spokes of a wheel with Lassen as the center. Sensitive to the nature of the mountain, those early Californians conceived it to be the home of a powerful spirit; yet they hunted

and fished there, and made use of the hot springs in their medicine. The all-too-frequent earthquakes they found as disturbing as do we; so they told stories about them, and made theories to dispel the mystery of their origin—just as do we.

The Maidu, for instance, developed a scientific enough explanation of Lassen's earthquake phenomena, once one accepted their basic theorem: that is, that the world floats on a great sea, anchored by five ropes stretched by the Creator to keep it from drifting. The earthquakes come when someone gets to fussing with the ropes, and happens to shake them.

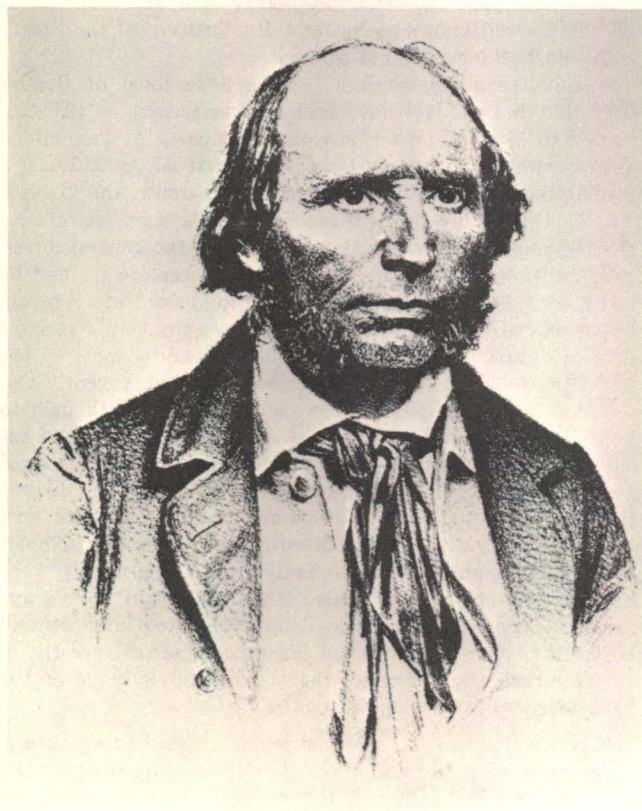
The Yana attributed earthquakes to Mo-s-ugi-yauna, who lived at a marshy spring on Round Mountain, and who had the petulant habit of shaking the ground whenever he wanted to make known his displeasure. And he was so easily displeased! He took violent exception to strangers. Worse, he raised a truly virulent temper when forced to hear a language other than that of the Yana. In fact, they say, some chattering Yreka Indians once precipitated such a violent reaction in Mo-s-ugi-yauna that only the hasty and prayerful plea of a resident Yana, and the assurance that *he* had not spoken thus, could eventually quiet the furious shaking.

One quake reported by the Atsugewi was, they said, so bad it shook the very boulders on the flats, and made many people there desperately sick. Canyon dwellers met an even more terrible fate, for the rocks falling from the cliffs killed and buried them. In the midst of the terror, one ancient crone ("whose hair was almost green", said the story teller) in desperation grabbed up a rock and bashed it time and time again against another, all the while singing a quavering prayer. The shaking ceased.

Geologists have indicated that the last of the three great avalanches that form Chaos Jumbles came crashing down from Chaos Crags some 250 years ago, around the year 1700. Is it possible that some of the Atsugewi lie buried beneath those great angular blocks of lava? Is it possible that what the survivors passed on by word of mouth, from generation to generation, is actually the story of the creation of Chaos Jumbles?

The Yana knew the mountain as "Yana Wahganupa", or "Little Shasta"; the Atsugewi called it "Wicuhirdiki". Other groups had other names: "Millouyahha"; "Komo Yermani" ("Water Mountain"); "Yerman Y Aidum" ("Mountain-which-was-broken-off"), and "Amblu Kai" ("Mountain-ripped-apart", or "Fire Mountain")—terms that would suggest that the primitives were not entirely without sophistication as to the origin of the peak. Between the Indian names and the name "Lassen Peak" (the official designation, by edict of the U.S. Board of Geographic Names in 1915) there stretches an interesting little trail strewn with various nomenclatural discards.

The first, "San Jose", is attributed to Don Luis Arguello, Captain in the Spanish army and sometime Governor of Spanish California. If he did indeed see and christen the peak (though Dr. Erwin Gudde, late distinguished author of *California Place Names*, could find nothing to verify the claim), it was during a trip of exploration in the year 1821.



Peter Lassen.

Six years later, in 1827, Jed Smith—"pathfinder of the Sierras", explorer, fur trader, and God-fearing mountain man par excellence—designated a chain of mountains that included the peak "Mt. Joseph". Charles Wilkes, Commodore in the United States Navy, who explored Mexican California and hesitated not to call it a plum ready for picking, sanctified the mountain, calling it "Mt. St. Joseph" on his map of 1841. During the following decade, Mt. St. Joseph devolved into "Snow Butte"; Peter Lassen showed it (along with Brokeoff Mountain) on a map he made in 1844 with the assistance—probably—of John Bidwell, as "Sisten Buttes". In popular local parlance, however, "Lassen's Peak" predominated. By 1855 "Lassen's Peak" had become "Lassen's Butte" (or Lassen's, Lassin's, or Lawson's, depending on the conviction of the writer). Years later, probably around 1875, "Mount Lassen" started its climb to popularity; but the decision of the Board in 1915 settled the matter, in our time at least, and the lovely mountain is now "Lassen Peak".

Lassen Peak takes its current name from Peter Lassen—an odd derivation, perhaps, considering the man's phlegmy and surface homeliness against the mountain's erratic nature and pink-and-white beauty; yet it is a good name, its hallmark honor, courage, and kindness. For the past 120 years, and perhaps a bit longer, no one who has travelled in the far northeastern portion of California can have escaped it: first, because of the prominence of the man in the affairs of the area; second, because it was attached to so very many geographic and cultural features of that region. In a way, though, the progenitor of these multifarious titles has thrown the whole nomenclature out of joint; for, says his biographer, Ruby Johnson Swartzlow, he took his father's first name—Lars—as his own last name, yet derived Lassen rather than Larson!

Peter Lassen was born in 1800, and trained during his youth as a blacksmith. He worked at his trade in his native Denmark until his twenty-ninth year, then took ship for America, working his way across the ocean to pay for his passage, and landing in Boston in 1829. For awhile he stayed on the east coast, then moved west to Missouri, where he again worked as a blacksmith. But he was ever a pioneer at heart, and the call of the unknown West was too much for him; in the spring of 1839, when he was approaching two score years, he joined a party of twenty-nine emigrants en route to Oregon.

The long, dangerous journey over little-known trails he made without serious mishap, and settled at the site of Oregon City for the winter. In the spring of 1840 he sailed on the *Lausanne* (which had come to Oregon bearing a cargo of Methodist missionaries)—three weeks down the Columbia River to Baker's Bay, thence south along the coast for thirteen days, to Bodega Bay. Here he and six companions debarked, and, at the invitation of the Russian governor, relaxed for ten days as guests of the Russians at Fort Ross. Then, purchasing horses from their hosts, they headed for the Sacramento Valley and Sutter's Fort, taking a round-about way to avoid any difficulty with local Californians—for they were in California sub rosa, not having entered through Monterey, as required of foreigners by the Mexican government. Captain Sutter, friendly and hospitable soul, took two of the party, Lassen and William Wiggins, down the river by sailboat to Yerba Buena (the little pre-Gold Rush settlement of some half dozen houses that developed into the rough-tough, sophisticated city of San Francisco), and no doubt

smoothed any official wrinkles in their way. Lassen and Wiggins continued on to San Jose, where the former spent the winter building a water-powered sawmill, with which he is reported to have cut some 50,000 feet of timber. Then, again developing "itchy feet", he sold the mill for a hundred mules, and tried to get together a party to return to Missouri.

Not many people were interested; so Lassen drove his mules to the Cosumnes River where he might be in touch with his friend, John Sutter. There he wintered his stock, including now some cattle and horses. His spare time he spent working at the Fort, making fine bridles to sell, and repairing guns and agricultural equipment.

It was through Sutter's influence on Mexican Governor Micheltorena that Lassen was, in 1844, granted Mexican citizenship and his Bosquejo Rancho, more than 22,000 acres near the present town of Vina, east of the Sacramento River. The map resulting from the survey he made, probably with the help of John Bidwell, shows a house on the north side of Deer Creek; a wheat field, rice field, and "watered field"; and a canal, and saw and grist mill on the south side of the Creek. Hiring labor on the local market—for "Old Pete" or "Uncle Peter", as he was called, maintained most friendly relations with the Indians, living alone amongst them quite comfortably—Lassen soon had a self-sustaining ranch going, crops maturing, and several buildings pleasantly situated under huge old trees. All travelers were made welcome, including Lt. John C. Fremont, exploring for the United States Government, and Lassen's hospitality and generosity soon became as well known as Sutter's. But in spite of this auspicious start, things did not go well.

Anxious to obtain settlers for the little town of Benton City that he had laid out at his ranch, Lassen in 1847 returned to Missouri. Here he gathered a party of immigrants (along with a charter for California's first Masonic Lodge), leading them back to his town by his own route, the "Lassen Trail". Unfortunately it turned out to a long, hard, uncharted route, for Lassen, though he knew the general direction, had not yet had the opportunity to explore it: and he lost his way. After considerable wandering he did win through, but it was at the cost of a near mutiny; the trail was later dubbed "Cape Horn" and thoroughly cursed by most of the 8,000 or so unsuspecting Gold Rushers who subsequently travelled it. The circuitous "Lassen cutoff" (as it was thought to be by the poorly informed '49ers before they took it) did not enter the boundaries of the present Lassen Volcanic National Park, but ran east of it near Poison and Feather Lakes; the "emigrant trail" shown on maps covering the Park area is Nobles' trail, over which Lassen guided William H. Nobles in 1851. Though the Lassen Trail drew some mighty hard words from those who travelled it—for many of them came near to starving on it—Uncle Peter's unstinted kindness and hospitality, once they reached his rancho, helped greatly to alleviate their anger over the many difficulties suffered on the hard journey.

Whether for lack of business sense, a too-trusting nature, overgenerousness to those in need, or some other reason, "Old Pete" had by mid-1850 lost title to his rancho and—perhaps with a certain relief—set out to do some prospecting. Though he was early bitten by the gold bug, and succumbed to the resulting fever from which he never completely recovered, he was no more successful, so far as riches went, at mining than at ranching. Before giving up Bosquejo Rancho, he prospected on the Feather River—where, according to J. Golds-

Survivors' Hill and the Devastated Area in 1965. The forest is beginning to return. Compare with the photo taken in 1911, before the eruption (page 214) and those immediately after (pages 214 and 225).



borough Bruff, who accompanied him, he was lost most of the time; now, released from all ties, he wandered north and east into Indian Valley, to a spot a few miles east of Greenville in Plumas County. Here he and two companions set up a trading post, built a log cabin, and raised vegetables to sell to Gold Rush immigrants. They also prospected (with little success) over lands later found to be rich in gold.

The year 1855 found Lassen prospecting with several friends in the vicinity of Honey Lake. Here he apparently was convinced that his luck had turned for the better, for he moved his headquarters from Indian Valley, and dug two miles of ditch to bring water to work his new claim. For ten days things went well—and then the water gave out. "Old Pete" met the discouragement calmly, built a log house, set up his forge at the front door, and, with a friend who had stayed with him, proceeded to welcome travellers as ever. Some stayed the night, some stayed months. His gold discovery set off a "rush" of sorts, but brought no great profit to him.

Meanwhile, Lassen became involved in the activities of the new community forming about Isaac Roop, who had moved to Honey Lake from Shasta City and settled the site of Susanville. Not knowing whether they belonged to California or the territory to the east, but feeling definitely "cut off" from their western neighbors, some twenty settlers set up an independent territory which they christened "Nataqua"; Lassen was voted president, Roop secretary of the Nataqua convention. Uncle Peter never saw the eventual denouement of this action—the formation of the Territory of Nevada, and the California county named for him; for in 1859 the prospecting fever took him again.

In April of 1859, Lassen set out with two companions for the Black Rock Range in Nevada to look for the lost Hardin silver mine, reportedly discovered by James Allen Hardin when he crossed the country in 1849. It was an illfated attempt. On April 26, encamped on Clapper Creek, members of the little party were ambushed as they slept. According to Asa Fairfield's *Pioneer History of Lassen County, California*, Lassen met his fate with his characteristic coolness and courage: "... Just as day was breaking, Wyatt was awakened by the report of a rifle. He sprang to his feet and called to his companions. He jerked the blankets off Clapper and

caught him by the shoulder. In so doing he turned the man over. Blood spurted from Clapper's temple, showing that he had been shot clean through the head. Wyatt started to run, calling upon Lassen to do so, too. 'Uncle Pete', however, remained standing by the bed shading his eyes with his hand and holding his rifle easily with the other, trying to discover where the shot came from. While he was still peering into the rocks a second shot rang out and Lassen fell." Wyatt ran, then, and escaped.

The killings were, as usual, attributed to Indians; however, it has also been suggested that they may just as well have been the work of renegade whites. Probably no one will ever know.

The first party to reach the scene buried the victims at the site of the murders. Later, in November of 1859, Lassen was re-buried with Masonic honors, at the spot where he had first camped in Honey Lake valley, under a huge pine tree. Two monuments erected to his memory can still be seen there.

So died Peter Lassen: stubborn, generous, kindly, honest, fearless, bumbling backwoodsman, sometime ranchero, and unsuccessful prospector. Unsuccessful in gaining worldly rewards, perhaps; yet no one stood taller in the estimation of his neighbors, for they have given his name far more generously than any other to the geography of that beautiful part of the State he for a time inhabited.

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The preceding material has been drawn almost exclusively from the following publications. They can be purchased by mail from Loomis Museum Association, Lassen Volcanic National Park, Mineral, California, or in person at the Loomis Museum in Lassen Volcanic National Park.

Lassen, His Life and Legacy, by Ruby Johnson Swartzlow. 1964. 90 pages, many illus. including maps. In addition to being an excellent—and so far as we know, the only—biography of Peter Lassen, this book contains a series of *Lassen Trail Photographs* by Henry C. Lind, showing the country through which he passed.

Indians of Lassen Volcanic National Park and Vicinity, by Paul E. Schulz. 1954. 176 pages, illus.

Stories of Lassen's Place Names, by Paul E. Schulz. 1949. 62 pages, map.

Road guide to Lassen Volcanic National Park, by Paul E. Schulz. 1950 (7th ed., 1962). 37 pages, illus.

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MARY R. HILL, Editor

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A LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Woodland, California
June 22, 1970

Dear Editor . . .

Recalling some incidents [regarding the Lassen eruption of 1914-15]: In 1927 of September, two of us from the P. G. and E., George Duncan and myself, decided on a weekend trip to climb Mt. Lassen due largely to some kidding by our lineman.

We drove to Viola, stopping at B. F. Loomis' hotel for directions. He was very cooperative until he found out that we worked for the P. G. and E. Thinking that his troubles with his D.C. generating outfit had a priority, he took us out to the power plant. An electrician from Chico worked for a week on it without getting anywhere and went home.

I had just undercut the commutator on my Dodge 23 generator and noticed that his commutator needed the same treatment. Well, to make it short, we got one generator working to his delight. From then on nothing was too good for us at the hotel where he entertained with incidents that had happened at the Mt. Lassen eruption. Many of his photographs showing different stages of eruption were exhibited on the hotel walls of the living room, some being touched up in color by his artistic wife.

The Lance Graham incident, as I recall it follows. The five of them were standing close to the crater when it blew out. Graham was knocked out and slid down in the debris some 50 feet or so, lodging on a rock. The rest of the party took off down the mountain, as it was shaking plenty by then.

Finally the shaking slowed down and some one remembered seeing Graham down in the crater, so they decided to go back and haul him out, first carrying, then dragging, and finally leaving him on the mountain, as the shaking became frightening! Graham was still unconscious when B. F. Loomis and a packer went back and picked him up. Mr. Loomis says, "I never saw a man so torn up as Graham was and live."

Several people in Woodland that had lived in Manton and knew Graham, agreed with the story. Graham was still living in Manton around 1930. Some early mountaineers were pretty rugged.

Very truly yours,
W. F. Loughboro

P.S. We climbed Mt. Lassen from the steep west side getting a little snow and rain on the way up. There were steaming vents on top, a little pond of water on the southwest side of the crater with some floating rocks. We skied down on hard snow with our hobnailed boots most of the way, which was some relief from the hike up.—W.F.L.

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Air view of Mt. Lassen in 1963. Photo by Rogers Air Service.

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