



“CANNONBALL”: A BIOGRAPHY OF C.B. SHAVER

by Douglas Shaver McDonald II

High in the western slope of California’s Central Sierra Nevada, nestled amidst a vast expanse of timberland, there lies a deep blue body of water surrounded by shades of evergreens. The sweet smell of sugar and white pine is heavy in this brisk mountain air. Scattered across the lake, an occasional fisherman can be seen, or a family with a picnic spread out upon some of the largest sand beaches in the Sierra. Wildlife, timber, and sunshine abound here at one of California’s most beautiful vacation spots. Fresnoans use the short drive to Shaver Lake as a quick, clean escape from the Central Valley’s heat of the summer, and from the fog of the winter.

Shaver Lake means something to me. The lake is one of my favorite places to be, eliciting nostalgia for summers of my childhood spent on its sand beaches. Amidst the beauty of the snow covered tress and hills of the area during winter, the Christmas vacations spent at our home in Shaver were the happiest times of my life. Recently I discovered a deeper appreciation for this area. In fact the lake and adjoining town has an exciting history that bears the significant influence of my great, great grandfather, C. B. Shaver who moved here from Michigan in 1891. Throughout my childhood I had heard the legacy of the great C. B. Shaver, but never had more than a superficial awareness of our family's ties to the past. My great, great grandfather is most fondly remembered in my family as the man whose work as president and manager of the Fresno Flume and Irrigation Company served him enduring fame as the nameplate for the town and reservoir of Shaver Lake, California. I have never ventured to learn much more than that. Only recently have I tried to answer the questions of “Who was this man? What was he really like? How did he earn the namesake of the most significant landmark in the area? To my pleasure, I have discovered that the initiative and dynamic personality of C.B. Shaver founded one of Central California’s earliest successful lumber operations and was instrumental in the development of the early economy of Fresno County. In its day, the Shaver mill was the largest Fresno County had ever known, cutting a total of 450 million board feet of timber.

As a youth, Charles B. Shaver quickly worked his way up in the lumber industry. He was born in Steuben county, New York, in 1855. He was the son of John and Mary Shaver who were millers in the state until 1864 when the family moved to Michigan to pursue farming. Charles B. was next to youngest in a family of four children. He was educated in Michigan and at the age of eighteen entered the lumber trade in Detroit, under the employment of the firm, Whitney and Stinchfield. He quickly rose to the position of foreman, and remained there as such until 1882 when he left to pursue his interest in building logging railways for A. B. Long & Son and later, in 1889, for the White Friant Lumber Company in Grand Rapids Michigan. There he developed skills that would be

invaluable to him in his future, several hundreds of miles west in California. In two years of work with White Friant Lumber Company, he built 14 miles of logging railway and put in over one-hundred million feet of logs and rail. Then in 1891, he traveled to Missouri and built a mill for Boyden & Wyman Lumber Company. After completing work there, he ventured to California. By the age of 35, Shaver had mastered the intricacies of the lumber industry and established himself as a prominent figure in his trade, well skilled in both the know-how and business sense necessary for the successful operation of a lumber company.

Like many other early timber operators, Shaver had run out of lumber in the East. On his visit to California, he and his brother-in-law, Lewis P. Swift, toured the forest areas of the Sierra Nevada. Amazed at what they saw in the Sierra east of Fresno, they returned home to Michigan with a wild proposal and received backing from Grand Rapids financier, George Long. Shaver was interested in acquiring an interest in the Pine Ridge Flume & Lumber Company. This young company had vast holdings of timber and water rights in the relatively undeveloped Pine Ridge area of the Sierra above Fresno.

For a long time, logging in this area had been limited by the difficulty of moving timber by wagon down the precipitous journey to Fresno. Attempts to construct a railroad to the area had failed when the tremendous cost of surmounting the Tollhouse grade, or rugged East Slope, could not be met. In what proved to be an ingenious plan, the Michigan group bought a controlling interest in the company as well as several additional mills and surrounding timberlands including the Musick sawmill and 2,300 acres of the timberland of William Stephenson. The newly organized company became known as the Fresno Flume & Irrigation Company. Shaver and Swift proposed the survey and construction of a dam and forty-two mile flume from Stevenson Creek to Clovis. A previous attempt by the acquired flume company had failed when their faulty U-shaped flume was unable to hold enough water to float lumber for its own construction. However, the Michigan group believed that a better designed attempt would work. They designed a V-shaped flume that had fewer joints and a stronger frame. The completed flume made the first successful attempt at getting mass amounts of lumber from Pine Ridge down to the valley. The flume required about nine million board feet of lumber to construct, at a cost of \$200,000. Perhaps one of the greatest feats of the company was not the actual construction, but the fact that they accomplished this \$200,000 project with only \$30,000 in available capital.

The magnitude of the construction and development of the Shaver mill and flume is difficult to understand from a modern perspective. This project was no small feat during the time it was built, 1892-93, a period of steam engines and tough manual labor. The U.S. was on the verge of an industrial revolution, much of the logging just prior to this time had been cut by hand and transported by huge teams of oxen, much of the new lumbering techniques such as the steam donkey had only recently been introduced. The proposal of building a flume 41 miles over steep terrain and rugged wilderness presented a task of magnanimous proportions.

The labor intensive construction of the mill, dam, and flume was a major undertaking for the young company. Everything associated with the mill and construction project had to be hauled up the mountainside by freight wagons including huge boilers and saws necessary for the new mill. The rock fill dam completed in 1893, was about 50 feet high and about 300 feet long, with a capacity of 5000 acre feet. Rock was mined in a nearby

quarry and carried to the site in horse drawn ore cars. At the base of the dam, began the 41 miles of flume to the Clovis mill. Designing of the flume was the responsibility of a young John S. Eastwood, one of Fresno's first engineers. The new flume was built right on top of the old flume, production was difficult, and portions of the flume were built over extremely rocky ground. In some sections, towering trestles had to be built from the bottom of 90 foot deep canyons; in other areas, such as the tollhouse grade, workers had to be lowered down sheer rock faces to install necessary footing. However, production was expedited by the fact that lumber and other materials could be floated down completed upper sections to positions of later construction.

Even though the company had quickly established itself, once in operation, it experienced only moderate success. A nationwide depression in 1894 nearly put the organization out of business. At one time the company was forced to pay workers with credit vouchers which were redeemable at the Fresno office and only if funds were available at the time. Many workers discounted their checks for 50 cents on the dollar. These circumstances put tension on already shaky labor relations. On more than one occasion, C. B. Shaver, plagued by writs and attachments, was forced to hide out from the sheriff and creditors. Working through these difficult adversities, the company held on, and by 1900, the company was experiencing sufficient returns to expand their production with the installation of a railroad and a 42 ton Shay locomotive which was disassembled and hauled up the mountain in pieces to be reassembled at the mill.

By 1905, having survived labor struggles and the depression, the company was into full swing, operating two steam powered mills equipped with double-bands, dry kilns, railroad locomotives and cars, tugboats and booms, with the capacity of 35 million feet of lumber per year. A newspaper at the time quotes their supply of sugar and white pine as "practically inexhaustible, as there are twenty thousand acres of timber around the lake." Of course, today no one would ever consider a timber reserve inexhaustible, but for the rate at which logging was being conducted by the company, the 15,000 acres of virgin timberland was more than they could deplete. The company employed a force of 600 men and turned a lucrative profit. The same article quoted its production as "an important factor in the industrial development of the country." The flume floated upwards of 20,000,000 board feet of lumber annually from Pine Ridge to the planing mill in Clovis. As the head of such a successful operation, C. B. Shaver was also an influential director of the California Sugar and White Pine Agency with powerful connections and markets for lumber throughout the state. While some of the lumber planed in the Clovis mill was used in the production of boxes for the association of box factories located in San Jose and by orange dealers in Southern California, most of the lumber was used in Fresno by raisin shippers.

Much of the company's success was due to the efforts and strict work ethic of the management and workers at the mill. Lewis Swift headed production and acted as foreman at the Shaver mill, he was very strict, but a good and ingenious man. He was nicknamed "Scrap Iron Swift" for his ability to improvise almost anything the mill needed. The mill workers lived in an area known as sulfur meadows -- which consisted of the mill, blacksmith shop, dry kiln, general store, barn, stage stop, and a cluster of cabins. Later a one-room school house was installed. For the most, life was strictly business at the mill. In the interest of running efficiently, the company did not allow any unmarried

woman at the labor camp. Workers in search of night life were rumored to have ridden the flume down to “flesh spots” below Shaver, where they could catch the morning stage back to the mill for work.

On a few occasions mill workers were known to make these flume rides on small board rafts called flume boats. The experience was a pre-modern experience comparable to the popular amusement park rides featured at Disneyland and Magic Mountain. The full forty-one mile ride to Fresno took about six hours, but only the braver individuals would ride the most dangerous parts of the flume which in some places reached speeds in excess of 35 miles per hour. The most thrilling part of the ride was the steep section between Pine Ridge and Tollhouse. A tale by Cliff Field of Pine Ridge recalls a time when Shaver missed the stagecoach to the valley and decided to ride the flume down through this section, figuring he could catch the stage before it reached Tollhouse. He made the journey in 7 minutes, over a distance that normally takes nearly an hour by stagecoach. Although he made it down faster than the stage, he regretted losing his derby hat which blew off during the wild ride. It is apparent that the man behind the stigma of lumber magnate, was a regular Joe, a man like anybody else -- fun loving, jovial, and a man who reveled in life.

Several articles of his time refer to him as having a lot of “pluck.” In June of 1898, the box factory and planing mill in Clovis were totally destroyed by fire. Shaver’s reaction is best described by a magazine article which states “a little thing like that would not disturb the equanimity of an old Michigan lumberman, and just to show that the glorious climate of California has had no deteriorating influence upon the pluck, endurance or perseverance of Mr. Shaver, it may be said that he had the entire plant rebuilt on a larger scale than before and running, within 50 days from the date of the fire.”

My great, great grandfather was married in Grand Rapids, Michigan during his tenure with A. B. Long and Son, to Lena A. Roberts of Pennsylvania. They had three children, Grace, Ethel, and Doris. Doris McDonald was my great grandmother. Shaver was also an active member of the community, a Mason, and associated with the Benevolent Order of Elks. He also participated as a member of the Chamber of commerce, socially, he identified with the Sequoia Club, and politically as a Republican. A story about his old Stanley steamer best helps explain his character. He was one of the first in Fresno to acquire a horseless carriage and each morning, after he got it fired up, he would roar through the downtown area, for which he acquired the nickname of “Cannonball Shaver.” A Fresno newspaper of his time described his appearance as “portly of figure, genial of countenance ... passionately fond of a good cigar.” He was a familiar figure in Fresno and at the lumber mills, easily recognized by his dark suit, stubby cigar and derby hat. Cannonball was known to walk around all day in the mill with the same cigar which he never lit.

Shaver was described as “a dynamic individual with a flair for getting things done.” He was esteemed as a skilled salesman, the fact that he started the Fresno Flume and Irrigation Company, a million dollar project, with only \$30,000 in capital was proof of this quality. In the fledgling years of the company, after the two year construction of the logging flume and mill in 1892-94, Shaver’s business sense and resourcefulness kept the company afloat long enough to await reaping the substantial rewards of the fully operational mill in the 1900’s.

But despite his good humor and flamboyant attitude, he was unable to defend against the unexpected. C. B. Shaver died shortly after he turned fifty. Medical Science of his day was unable to treat an infected goiter in the back of his neck. Compounded by diabetes, the infection took its toll and he gradually weakened until, on Christmas day, 1907, surrounded by four of Fresno's most prominent doctors, Shaver died at his Fresno mansion. Shaver's funeral at the Fresno Episcopal Church was one of the largest the community had ever seen. He was buried at the Mountain View Cemetery.

In 1912, a few years after Shaver's death, Harvey Swift, brother of Lewis Swift, and the succeeding President of the Company, sold to Ira Bennett of the Hume Bennett Company which had other logging interests in the San Joaquin Valley. Shaver's wife, Lena, who had maintained an interest in Shaver's holdings agreed with the sale for \$950,000. The move turned out to be a very prudent one, as just two years after the sale to Bennett, a huge snowstorm wiped out parts of the aging flume, and the undercapitalized company was unable to recover.

Today the old Shaver mill site lies at the bottom of a much bigger Shaver lake, the old saws and steam engines of my great, great grandfather's company have long since silenced, but the effects of his work during the fifteen short years in California can still be seen. Although the time has long since passed, I still marvel and wonder at how it must have been like to live at that time, with so little of today's technology that we take for granted. The men of my great, great grandfather's time had tackled a major feat with the simplest of tools, but great ingenuity and strength of will.