



Chapter Three: Exploration and Exploitation (1850-1885)

Increasing Activity in the Lumber Industry

By the middle 1880s, the pioneer era in the southern Sierra was coming to an end. A generation of mountaineers had crawled over the range, seeking resources and opportunities. From their efforts had come development of significant livestock grazing industries, realization that the southern Sierra probably did not harbor any great mineral treasures, and a growing lumber industry. This growth resulted both from improving technology for handling large trees and from a steadily growing market for lumber in the San Joaquin Valley farm towns. **The Timber and Stone Act of 1878** had been designed to encourage private ownership of timber lands, and together with the ongoing survey efforts of the government in the early 1880s, a timber land rush of sorts developed.

Theoretically, the entire Sierra Nevada had been for sale by the federal government since California became a part of the United States in 1848. Practically, this was not the case, because the land had not been surveyed. Most early timber operations simply took trees from public land. First survey priority, of course, went to the valley lands below, but by the early eighties the Jeffersonian system of township and range was extended across much of the southern Sierra. As the townships were surveyed, they became available for private purchase at the General Land Office in Visalia. A few pioneers had already claimed homesteads in the mountains, and in areas like Mineral King mining claims had been established. But the majority of the land remained unassigned. Several federal laws made the most valuable portions available to the public. The Swamp and Overflow Act transferred "swamp" lands to the state to be sold to raise money for reclamation purposes. Another act decreed that section 36 in each township should be transferred to the state to raise money for schools. The Timber and Stone Act, as mentioned, made land endowed with timber or building stone available inexpensively.

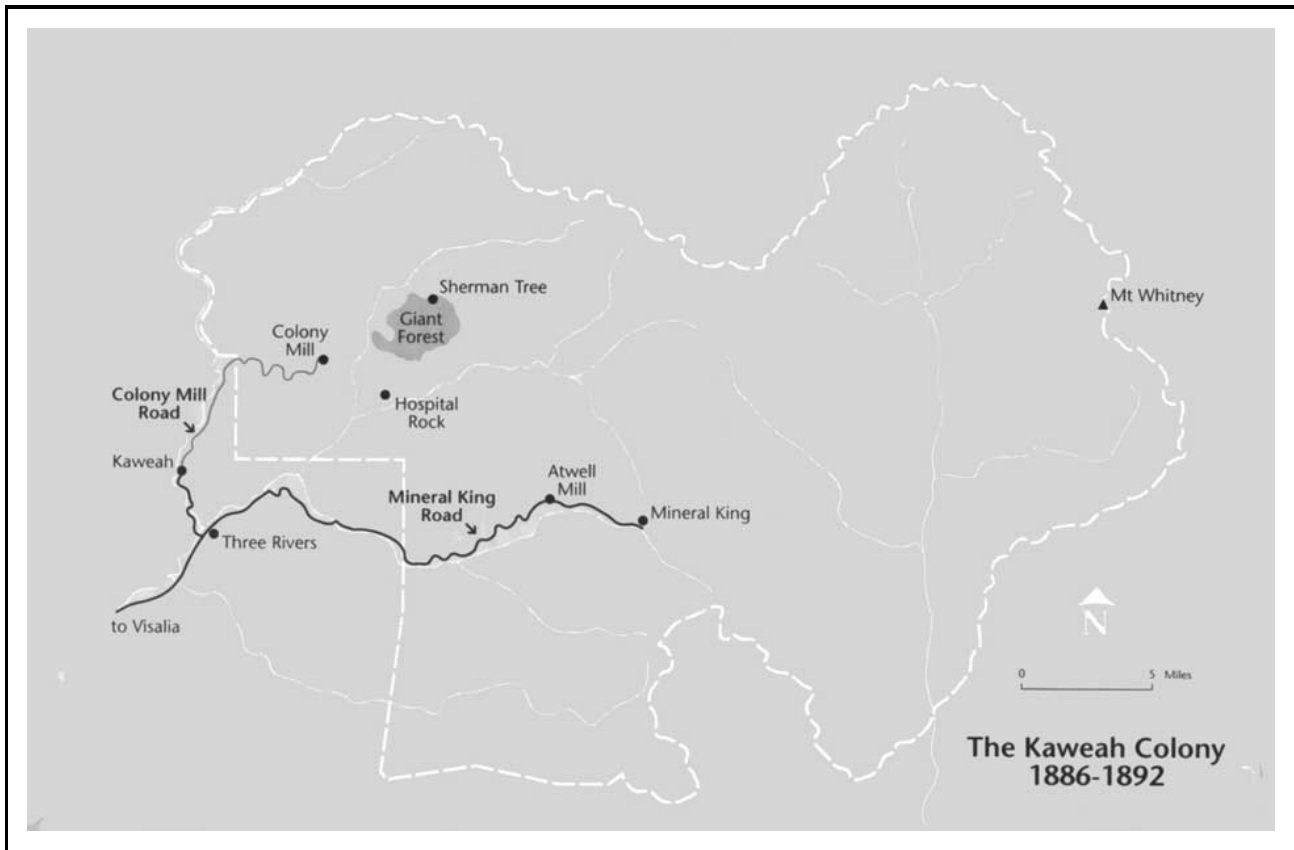
Using these laws, the various groups interested in the Sierra pursued the lands appropriate to their needs. The cattle industry found in the Swamp and Overflow provisions a way to take permanent title to the mountain meadows they already controlled. Lumbermen used both the school section provision and the Timber and Stone Act to assume control of forested areas. Only the sheep-men trusted to the continued openness of the public domain, a trust that ultimately would leave them without a land base in the Sierra.

Though the Timber and Stone Act was designed to give individuals ownership of 160-acre timber tracts, in reality it often served to put large blocks of forest land into corporate ownership. When a new tract opened for entry, a lumber company would recruit a number of individuals, have each make his perfectly legal purchase, and then buy the lands from them. All this could be arranged so that the person who actually "bought" the land from the government received nothing more than a little pocket cash and a pleasant trip to the mountains. In the middle 1880s this strategy was applied to forest lands in the Kings, Kaweah, and Tule river areas.

Some of the same men were involved in both the Kings and Tule river logging enterprises—specifically Smith Comstock, and a partnership consisting of Hiram Smith and Austin Moore. Comstock had begun cutting sequoias near Grant Grove at what is now known as Big Stump in 1883. During the middle years of the same decade Smith and Moore, operating as the Kings River Lumber Company, acquired almost 30,000 acres of timber lands in the same vicinity. In the middle of this sea of private lands the government retained title only to the four square miles of land containing the Grant Grove itself; these had been withdrawn unilaterally from sale by Theodore Wagner, U.S. Surveyor General for California, in 1880, to prevent their sale and destruction. On the North Fork of the Tule River, Comstock, Smith, and Moore operated as partners in the Tule River Lumber Company. Eventually, several different generations of ownership cut over most of these lands and returned them to the government. Immediately north of Grant Grove, in Converse Basin, Smith and Moore destroyed the largest giant sequoia grove between 1892 and 1908. Ironically, despite the large scale of logging, transportation costs remained so high that no profit was ever made.

In the Kaweah country, transportation also remained a critical problem. Because the terrain of the Kaweah canyons was so rugged, only one road—to Mineral King—entered the Kaweah forests, and that road was so steep that it was not much use for lumber hauling. Nevertheless, the Kaweah area was also surveyed and opened to purchase. Here the story takes an odd turn, however, for the interested parties were not the usual corporate interests but rather a loose association of frustrated labor union socialists from the San Francisco Bay area.

The Kaweah Colony, as this group called itself, grew out of a small San Francisco group known as the "Cooperative Land Purchase and Colonization Association." Organized primarily by Burnette Haskell, a lawyer and self-appointed leader in the local labor movement, the association had as its goal the development of a worker's cooperative based on the philosophies of German socialist Laurence Gronlund. Late in the summer of 1885, association member Charles Keller found himself seated on a train immediately behind P. Y. Baker, the land surveyor who had been directing work in the Giant Forest area. As he listened to Baker tell about the forests of the Kaweah country, Keller concluded that here was an opportunity of which his association might be able to make something.



Keller presented the scheme to the group, and a scouting party visited the area in September 1885. They liked what they saw, and in the following month forty members of the association filed Timber and Stone Act claims on the Giant Forest area. Altogether, they claimed ten square miles of forest. In Visalia, after they filed their claims at the land office, a seemingly small problem developed. George Stewart, editor of the newspaper in which legal notice of their claims had to be printed, noted that nearly all of the claimants gave the same San Francisco address. Suspecting that another timber swindle was in the making, Stewart requested a government investigation. In response, the local land office suspended the claims until they could be studied.

The problems generated by Stewart surprised the colonists but did not discourage them. They knew that they were not part of anything illegal and so proceeded to implement their scheme. In the spring of 1886 Haskell and the first contingent of colonists arrived to begin work. They established themselves along the North Fork above Three Rivers at a settlement they called "Kaweah," and went to work. The major obstacle to their success was that the timber they had claimed, including the Giant Forest itself with its immense sequoias, was far from any usable transportation route. Only Hale Tharp's cattle trails entered the area, and there was no way lumber would ever travel over them. Briefly, they considered building a railroad, and they talked to the Southern Pacific about possible junction points. But when it became apparent that such a project was beyond their means, they settled upon building a wagon road. For the next several years they labored to construct a road across the rugged terrain west of Giant Forest. By the late eighties they had built twenty miles of road and were poised to begin logging just west of Giant Forest.