



# WAWONA JOURNAL

by TOM BOPP

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There has been some controversy about the presence of salmon in the Merced and South Fork of the Merced in the vicinity of Yosemite, Wawona, and upper reaches of those areas. In my research on Wawona history, I've collected the following references which may shed some light on the topic. Note that credible sources (such as respected Yosemite historian Jim Snyder) doubt that salmon ever made it up to Yosemite Valley or Wawona.

--Tom Bopp

## **Fish (Salmon), Miners & Indians in 19th Century Yosemite**

Mariposa Gazette articles researched & compiled by Tom Bopp

Articles listed by date of issue/page/column (spelling & grammar per the original).

### **11/12/1856 p2/col2 Entire article:**

The Indians upon the South Fork, and upper parts of the main Merced river, are much dissatisfied at the failure of their Salmon fishing, which is caused by one or two dams upon the lower part of the river, which obstructs the course of the fish. Large quantities of salmon are annually killed by these Indians, and being prepared in their own manner, form the staple article of food during the winter. – Fishing thus, being a failure, we may look out for some stealing, particularly if the season should be severe.

### **08/24/1857 p2/col3 Entire article:**

Mr. Clark, residing at the Yo Semite crossing of the South Fork of the Merced , informs us that a number of Indian hunters have killed two grizzleys and eleven deer near his place during the past week. Their piscatorial performances are also worth noticing. On Wednesday last they dug about six bushels of a weed known as the “soap root;” pounded it up fine and poured it into the South Fork, which at present is very low. It had the effect to stupefy and to produce a sort of inebriating influence on the trout of which there is an abundance in that stream. Over 2000 fine, fat, tipsey fellows, weighing from half a pound to three pounds, were taken while under the influence of this “soap root” decoction.

### **11/24/1877 p3/col3 Entire article:**

Those Dam Fish Ladders. –The last Grand jury in their report, which we published two weeks ago, made strong allusions to the cause that impeded the salmon from climbing over the fish ladders, that don't exist either at the McCrellish dam (commonly known as the “Johnson or Crown Lead.”) or the dam, of the Mariposa Land and Mining Company, both of which are on the Merced River about four miles apart. The law requires that ladders shall be built, in order that the salmon may pass up the river, as at certain

seasons of the year it is their inclination to do. Hitherto, the salmon have been, and are yet deprived of the sacred privilege of navigating the streams to their source, on account of the dams heretofore named. Which have not only deprived "Lo" the poor Indian of his regular annual feast of salmon, but likewise the honest miner and citizens who inhabit the banks and vicinity of the Merced river a distance of 75 miles above the dams alluded to. It is now expected, under the instructions of the Grand Jury, that the District Attorney will forthwith commence legal proceedings against the dam owners referred to and unless they speedily [sic] respond to the notice given them to comply with the law in such cases they will find a dam big bill in judgment against them, of a magnitude sufficient, that if converted into fish ladders, a numberless school of salmon could pass over at once without the least impediment.

**12/13/1879 p3/col3**

**Entire article:**

Those Fish Ladders Again. —It will be remembered that this scaly subject of fish ladders, which is one of importance, has been for the past ten years harped upon without arriving to a successful termination, except that, which has of late brought about a prospect of success. District Attorney Goucher in response to numerous complaints called the attention of a late Grand Jury, who, after an investigation found a bill against the owner or owners of the Crown Lead Dam. Upon being informed of this fact they have taken steps toward the construction of a proper ladder, over which the salmon family can pass successfully. This bit of news although fishy will be most favorably received by the people residing on the Merced River and vicinity above the Crown Lead Dam, who have not seen a salmon for years. We were shown a letter under date of the 8<sup>th</sup> instant, addressed to District Attorney Goucher from Col. Frisbe, State Fish Commissioner, purporting to the effect, that Fred McCrellish owner of the aforesaid dam property, had given orders to his agent in charge, Mrs. M. E. Porter, to examine at once the Benton Mill Dam Fish Ladders, and have those of the Crown Lead constructed in like manner, and if she cannot procure the necessary material for construction, to have the same sawed at the mill, and draw on him for the payment. It is to be hoped, there will be no more dam obstruction to be complained of hereafter.

**08/07/1880 p2/col2**

**Entire article:**

Lookout for Salmon!!! —The owners of the Crown Lead dam on the Merced river, represented by Fred. MacCrellish, of the Alta, have at last completed good fish-ladders on that dam obstruction. Salmon are now coming up the river, several having been already killed at Benton Mills, and as there are fish-ladders at the latter place, the finny tribes will doubtless soon swarm in the headwaters of the Merced river. This will be a blessing to the people living anywhere near the river, but just at present it is not lawful to kill salmon, as the law prohibits it from August 1<sup>st</sup> to November 1<sup>st</sup> in each season. However, long may MacCrellish wave!

**04/17/1886**

**(p3/col4) [Article excerpt]:**

COMMUNICATED.

April 8<sup>th</sup>, 1886 .

Editor, Mariposa Gazette—Dear Sir

--Herewith I send you a copy of my communication to the Fish Commissioners for the State of California, and their reply to the same as it pertains to matters of interest, or ought to be of interest to all citizens of Mariposa county. I would be pleased to have you, in behalf of the citizens, publish the same, with any comments from yourself deemed pertinent to the case. By so doing you will favor your subscribers at-large, as well as your sincerely. H. H. Todd.

To Angevine Reynolds, Esq., Mariposa, Cal .

Dear Sirs:--I desire to bring to your notice, a serious grievance, complained of, by the citizens of Mariposa county, and especially by those who reside easterly from, or above certain dams on the Merced river, namely, in their being deprived of the fish food (principally salmon), that they are entitled to.

My complaint is based, chiefly on information and complaints received from various, but to me, reliable sources, also, from a personal observation of six years, during which time I have been engaged in mining contiguous to both the Main Merced river, and that of the South Fork of the Merced river, and near to where they both unite. During said period, to my personal knowledge, no salmon have been seen in those rivers

from the Benton Mills dam to the headwaters of the same. The Causes are as follows:

1st. At the lower, or Crown Lead Mining dam, situated about one-half mile below Split Rock Ferry property, owned in San Francisco, but not worked for some ten years, or over. Fish ladders are in place, that were evidently so constructed as to evade the law, for when the salmon, either by accident, or otherwise are allowed to get over, they are caught in raked sluice boxes, then killed with clubs or other weapons in the hands of the party or parties in charge of (the property.

2nd. In addition to the Crown Lead dam, there is also at a point some two miles further up the river, the Benton Mills dam, where there are also ladders, so constructed, that it would be impossible for any fish to get over.

Above the dams herein complained of the Main Merced river, with its North and South fork and innumerable strong feeders coming from the high Sierras (part through the Yosemite Valley), has an extended water course of many hundreds of miles in which no salmon has been seen for the past fifteen or twenty years, and out of which, at an earlier date the populace of an immense scope of country were blessed with an ample supply of this most valued of all fish food, the salmon.

In connection with the above, I would state that these water courses are clear mountain streams free from mining debris, and also at one time well-stocked with mountain trout, but even they are being rapidly depleted by the too free use of giant powder in the hands of Chinese and other irresponsible parties.

I am given to understand that year after year the officials of this county (with due respect to them), have been notified, probably verbally, only, of the above facts, but so far, no seeming action has been taken by them for the abatement of the evil complained of, hence the necessity of this communication, and trusting your honorable body will deem it worthy of serious consideration, and that early action will be taken in the matter. I am, dear sirs, Yours respectfully,

(Signed.) H. H. Todd.

To the Hon. Fish Commissioners, State of California

Dear Sir:--Your favor of March 9th, at hand. It is surprising that your county officials should permit, and your citizens submit, to the grievous and unlawful wrongs mentioned in your letter. No person or party has the right to obstruct the streams of the State, and thereby prevent the free passage and habitation of food fish therein. State law subordinates the rights of dam owners and other obstructionists to the rights common of piscary, in securing by legislative enactments the free passage and protection of fish. These enactments were made in order that fishing and its food, in its full profit and value, could be freely enjoyed. Merced river is as much covered by the protection of the law, as is the Sacramento, Feather and other rivers, or the bays of the State.

In order to protect fishing rights and to secure and increase fish supplies, the methods and season for the taking of fish are regulated by law, and violations are made offenses. The placing of deleterious, poisonous or explosive substances in the waters of the State, for the purpose of taking or destroying fish is made a crime.

The failing to construct and keep in repair (after notice so to do) sufficient fishway or ladders, or dams, or obstructions is made a misdemeanor. See Section 637, Penal Code; subdivision 6 of Section 642 Penal Code, makes it the duty of the Fish Commissioners "To furnish plans for, and direct and compel the construction and repair of fish ladders and ways upon dams and obstructions."

In order to enforce this provision of the law, the aid of the District-Attorney must invoked, to institute proceedings for the arrest of persons charged...[rest of article cut off; available on microfilm].

**04/17/1886**

**(p3/c3) [Entire article]:**

FISH LADDER.

In the matter of these structures at certain points on the Merced river, known as "Crown Lead Dam, and Benton Mills Dam" complained of as being insufficient to admit the free passage of the Salmon Fish, it is but a few years since, and during the official time of ex-District Attorney Goucher, that these localities were

subjected to an investigation and underwent repairs, which were all supposed to be in proper working order as nothing has been heard of them since. At least the Gazette has received no word pro or con, since, regarding the fish dams. That the wrong complained of by Capt. Todd, again prevails, we have no doubt. It is only a wonder that some one, or Capt. Todd himself, has not complained before. The only legitimate reason to be assigned why notice of the matter has not been taken before, is the fact that, there is scarcely a man living on the river above the Benton Mills Dam till the section of river is reached where the Cranberry mine is located, and where Capt. Todd at present resides. No doubt, the fish ladders need repairing and should be attended to by the respective owners, who will no doubt do so when they have been stirred up by Capt. Todd's reminder. He undoubtedly misses his home market in Oakland and would like a mess of salmon.

**05/01/1886 p3/col.1**                    **[reference to article]:**

"Captain" H. H. Todd is appointed Deputy Fish Commissioner: "got himself into office just by ... endeavoring to obtain ... their regular mess of fish..."

**10/01/1887 p3/col2**                    **Entire article:**

In another column of this paper will be found a response from Fish Commissioner, T. J. Sherwood to a letter from Captain H. H. Todd, Deputy Fish Commissioner, with one enclosed, written by Warren R. Shilling, in regard to fish ladders on the Merced river, we suppose. Commissioner Sherwood's letter would indicate that he intends to go after the cause why salmon cannot successfully travel up the Merced river , and give them a chance to see their friends and the sources of the mountain streams.

**06/30/1894 p 3/col.1**                    **Entire article:**

Salmon are abundant in the Merced river , and fishing is carried on extensively at Merced Falls . Everybody within a radius of twenty miles who can get to the Falls, tries to emulate the example of the chief executive of the nation, "and sit and fish and think." Some very large fish are caught at many places along the river.

**06/12/1897 p1/col2**                    **Entire article:**

Salmon is now running in the Merced river . Numbers have been caught by those liking the sport.

**BACK**

**E-MAIL**

**YOSEMITE MUSIC & ART**