

# Jim and Shirley's Secret Spot #8: Big Valley Bluff & The Royal Gorge

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## ROYAL GORGE OF THE AMERICAN RIVER

### Photography from Big Valley Bluff

#### Jim& Shirley's Secret Spot #8

By Jim and Shirley White

Tahoe National Forest Supervisor Richard Bigelow saddled up his horse at Emigrant Gap, mounted, and headed south for Westville on the Foresthill divide to investigate a report of a large forest fire burning near Michigan Bluff. It was 5 A.M. on August 1, 1909. Ranger Bigelow had given orders to the trail crew at Mumford's Bar on May 18<sup>th</sup>, to build a trail from Mumford's Bar on the North Fork of the American River to Emigrant Gap for just this kind of emergency. He had a report that the trail was completed and now was the time not only to inspect the trail job, but to use this new trail to lend a hand in fighting this important fire.

Ranger Bigelow rode his horse across the North Fork of the North Fork, the East Fork of the North Fork and then climbed almost one thousand feet up Texas Hill where he continued south three miles and hit the new Mumford's bar trailhead at a place that was later named Government Springs. Later he would have a water trough installed there for travelers to water their horses before the terrible two thousand feet decent to the American River and a gold miner's cabin called Mumford's Bar Cabin. Upstream from Mumford's Bar about 7 miles was the jewel of the North Fork called the Royal Gorge because of the remarkable beauty of the river running thru the huge soring cliffs between Snow Mountain and the Wabena Ridge.

One hundred and four years later, on November 30, 2013, my wife Shirley and I headed south from Emigrant Gap in our jeep, along this same trail to photograph the Royal Gorge of the North Fork of the American River. About eight miles of the old trail is now a road and paved. At the end of the pavement we turned east off the old trail on forest road 19, a dirt road, headed for the abandoned site of the Big Valley Bluff fire lookout. Two thousand feet below the old site we could see both downstream to the Mumford's Bar Cabin and upstream to Heath Springs, in the upper part of the canyon. Just below the lookout site hidden in the trees was Palmer Camp, a mining camp used during the Great Depression by a miner named Palmer who raised his family there. The old Palmer cabin on the north side of the river was still standing during my last visit 20 years ago. This year we could see at least a mile of the river was dry, with only a hidden flow of water below the river gravel. We laughed as we remembered back in 1947 when we had driven my 1946 Pontiac out to Government Springs and had hiked down to the river and back in one day. Shirley was 18 and I was 20 years old and that hike almost killed us.

In late July, 1955 I had visited with Bill Watson, Forest Service lookout at Big Valley Bluff lookout, who told me of seeing several Golden Eagles flying below his lookout on some days. The old trail to the lookout was rough back in the 1950's, and I had to hike a mile from my car to get to this outstanding view. Parts of the old trail to the lookout are still visible to this day. The lookout of course is long gone.

On this recent trip to the lookout the weather was perfect. Not a breath of air was stirring, and a few clouds made the scene special. We photographed the Royal Gorge and the river canyon below from a number of promontories to the east of the lookout, always looking below, hoping to see an Eagle. After a couple of hours it was time to go and we reluctantly headed the jeep up along the sharp ridge out with one glance back down the canyon. And there they were, two Golden Eagles, with fixed wings, gliding below us. I let out a yell, stopped the jeep, grabbed the camera with the long lens, and drew down on the birds below. The auto focus lens would not focus! The target was too small, the lens was not fast enough to focus, who knows what went wrong? We missed the shot. The birds apparently landed below the point of the cliff where we could not see them. We were to photograph no eagles today.

Ranger Bigelow rode his horse down into the American River canyon 2000 feet below Government Springs and then back up to the Foresthill road at Westville where he ate dinner. After dinner he received a message that the fire had jumped over Deadwood Ridge. He saddled back up and was on the fire line by 4 PM. He supervised the fire fight till midnight, slept on the line waiting for daylight. He then worked on the fire line the next 3 days and established a camp to feed the fire fighters. After this fire was out Ranger Bigelow rode his horse up Ralston Ridge, to French Meadows and three days later arrived

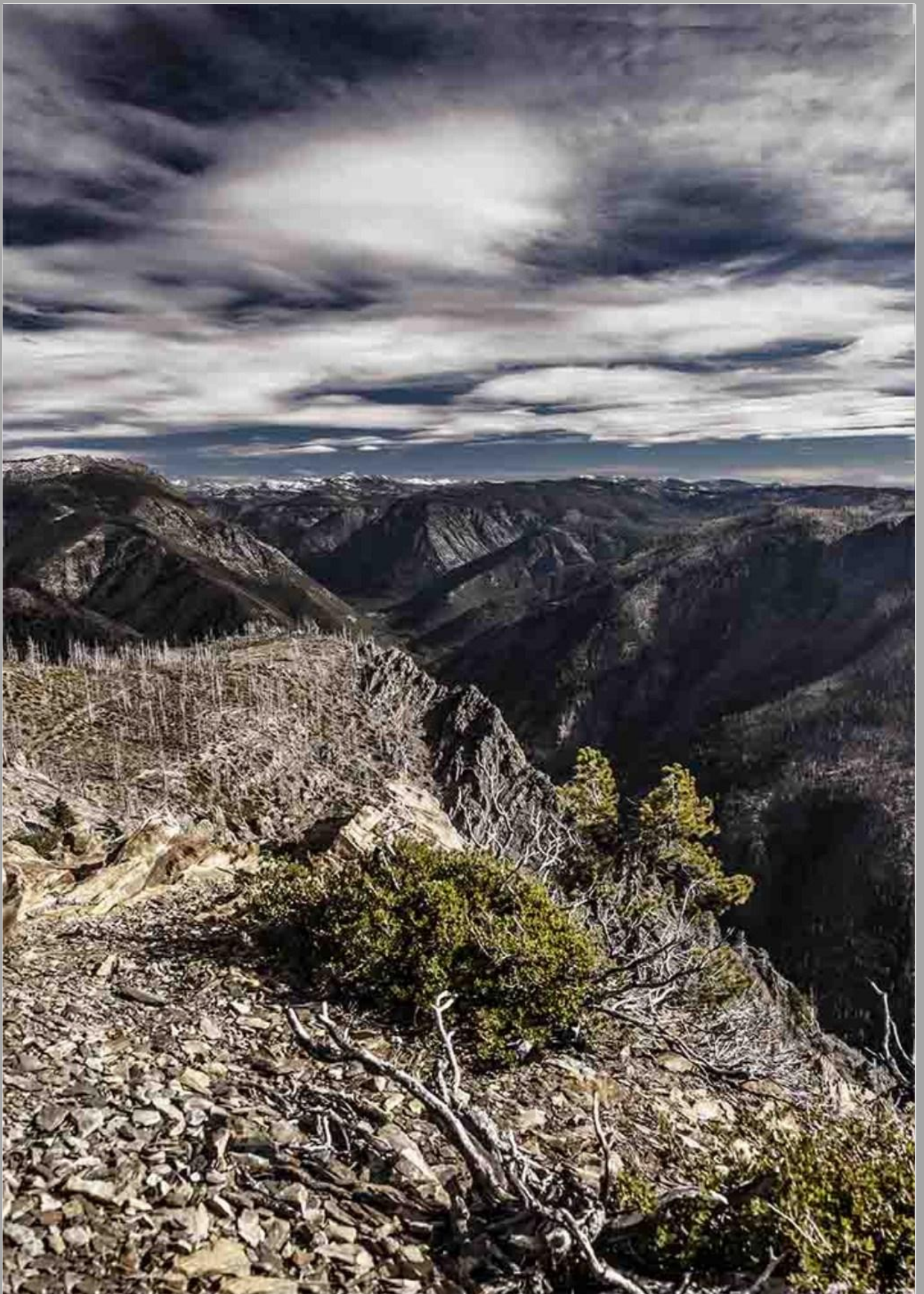
back home in Nevada City.

While sitting on the cliff at Big Valley Bluff and looking down on Mumford's Bar, we talked about Ranger Bigelow and his epic horse trips throughout the Tahoe National Forest. I have a copy of his diary, but I really wish he had had a camera. The Royal Gorge must have been even more royal those many years ago.

How to get to Big Valley Bluff: Go east above Auburn on I80 to the first off-ramp to your right after Nyack. Turn to the right and then right again, heading back in the direction you have just come. You will pass the Emigrant Gap School on your left and then enter into old Emigrant Gap, with buildings on your left. Just to the right of the last cabin is the Forest Service road that leads to the Forest Service campground on the N.F. of the N.F. of the American River. Cross the river and pass the campground on your right, up the hill and find Onion Valley on your left. Continue on to the East fork of the North Fork, cross this river and go up Texas Hill to the next fork in the road. This dirt road goes to the left and is Forest road 19. Follow this road avoiding going to your right down any roads going downhill. After a mile or two, the road will be level and you will come to an un-marked road to your right. There are two turnoffs to this road. They come together and go up a slight hill. Following this road you will find it curves to the right and soon you are on a ridgeline with views to the left down into the river canyon. There are a number of turnoffs to the left you can take to photograph the river canyon. Following this road to the end and you will end up on a point, with huge drop-offs and cliffs going down to the river. Careful here! There is very little room to turn around at the end of this road, with huge drop-offs. Better still, park and walk the last few hundred yards, or sign up for a PCC group trip. It is always safer in the backcountry in a group.

Shirley and I drove this road on May 12, 2018 and found the road had deep gutters in it on several steep up-hill places. We had no trouble in our jeep, but we recommend 4x4 high clearance vehicles only. If you slip down into one of the gutters you may high-center and be stuck. One snag hangs over the road and would hit the cab of a pick-up. I hope to cut it out of the way soon.

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Snow Mt. & The Royal Gorge







