



Bee/Randy Pench

Construction workers, above, build a home in the mountains at Tahoe Donner near the ski area. Below, a manufactured housing development between Auburn and Grass Valley along Highway 49.

# GROWTH

## Like gold rush of '49, people pour into hills

By Tom Knudson  
 Bee Sierra Bureau

**T**RUCKEE — Not since the California gold rush of 1849 has the Sierra Nevada seen such an influx of people. They are coming from Sacramento, Los Angeles, San Francisco and other places — a surge of contemporary emigrants settling into many of the same regions that lured early gold-seekers and pioneers.

Today's emigrants, though, are not looking for gold. They are searching for a commodity even more precious, something that no longer can be found in much of California: peace and quiet.

"I love the Sierra and I want to stay here," said Jeff Schloss, a ski instructor and substitute teacher in Truckee.

"But it's so close to the Bay Area and the Valley, I'm worried the quality of life is going to deteriorate. The very things people are trying to get away from — like air pollution and traffic congestion — they're bringing up here."

Surprisingly, government has offered little protection. Often, in fact, county governments have overlooked the Sierra's natural resources in favor of economic considerations — in particular the lure of more jobs and property tax revenues.

"The basic issue becomes, 'Is there a market for the project?'" said Tom Albright, former chairman of the Nevada County Planning Commission.

"Now, as California's population nudges past 30 million, the push is on in the Sierra — a region long considered too rugged and remote for raw mass development pressure."

Today, the Range of Light is looking more like the Range of Real Estate. Almost everywhere it seems, people are pouring in. They are a diverse group: retirees fleeing urban California for wooded, foothill escarpments; baby-boomers commuting to jobs in the Central Valley; business people weary



Bee/Jay Mather

At the new Gateway shopping center in Truckee, a company called **Trees to Go** reintroduces coniferous trees into a parking lot where a forest once stood.

of big-city pressures, and young men and women drawn to the ski slopes.

With them has come an army of builders, pavers, plumbers, mortgage bankers and real estate agents.

Together, they have wrought a remarkable change. The Sierra Nevada — known around the world for its scenic grandeur — is now one of the fastest-growing areas in the state.

Statistics help tell the story. During the 1980s, six of the state's 10 fastest-growing counties were Sierra counties, U.S. Census Bureau figures show. Amador County, east of Sacramento, led the region with a population jump of 55.5 percent, third in the state behind Riverside and San Bernardino counties.

Nevada County saw its population swell from 51,645 to 78,510 — a jump of 52 percent. Next door, Placer County grew from 117,246 people to 172,796 — up 47.4 percent.

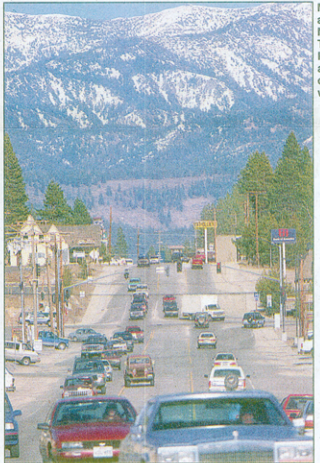
But statistics are dry, unfriendly things. A better gauge of change is the lens of time. "I remember in the early days flying over the Sierra at night and finally seeing Sacramento — a discrete point of light," said David Brower, a 78-year-old veteran conservationist and former executive director of the Sierra Club.

"Now, it's just lights, lights, lights and lights."

Other changes are more subtle. "The hierarchy of values is changing," said Chris Bowen, a spokesman for the U.S.



Bee/Jay Mather



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Mount Rose and the Sierra Nevada overlook Truckee's Donner Pass Road, which, as is often the case, is heavy with traffic.

California's most scenic, historical and off-beat communities: more rural than urban, more old than new, more blue-collar than button-down.

In Truckee, location is everything. For more than a century, its vital statistics — 6,000 feet above sea level, second-coldest spot in the United States, except for Alaska, 100 miles from Sacramento — have kept all but the hardest Californians at bay.

Over the years, plucky Truckee has survived forest fires, mega-snowstorms and long winters of isolation. But today, Truckee is locked in a battle it may not win — with development.

An avalanche of building is rolling through town, turning forests into shopping centers, offices and three-bedroom homes. Every month, Truckee looks a little less like Truckee — and a lot more like everywhere else in California.

And in that, it is much like scores of other Sierra towns now facing a surge of development with limited resources, inadequate roads, insufficient room to expand — and a tradition on the line.

"Truckee is a town with a character," Schloss said. "But they're making it look like Evesytown USA. There's simply no reason for that to happen."

In Truckee, one project in particular stunned many townspeople recently: the Gateway shopping center.

It began in dramatic fashion. Just after Earth Day in 1990 a large stand of pine trees came crashing to the ground along Truckee's main street, Donner Pass Road.

One year later, the \$12 million, 108,000-square-foot Gateway shopping center has taken root on the site.

"I was born in Orange County and remember when they tore down the first

orange trees for the first tract," said Truckee resident Nancy Richards.

"When they took those trees down for Gateway, I just came unglued. It was deja vu."

But Gateway's developer sees things differently.

"Traffic problems, already legendary, are growing worse. And a once-brilliant blue sky is now smeared with wood smoke and automobile exhaust."

"Air quality is getting to be a serious problem," said Judd Dygert, a retired oil company engineer. "If you stand up on Rainbow Bridge and look out over town, it kind of reminds you of looking out over Los Angeles."

"But if the problems are many, so too, are the ideas for change: better traffic control, a ban on woodstoves, more bicycle trails, tougher controls on development, and so on."

Not long ago, a local group was formed to chart Truckee's future by updating the general plan for eastern Nevada County. The decisions are sure to be difficult, involving a delicate balancing of economic and quality-of-life factors. But at least they are being considered.

"Ten to 15 years ago, people weren't worried about these sorts of things," said former Planning Commissioner Albright.

"But now, they're seeing the traffic increase and the trees come down. And they're starting to get concerned. The pendulum is swinging."

## The Sacramento Bee

## MAJESTY AND TRAGEDY:

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From sequoia forest to scarred landscape, left — the aftermath of federal timber management in the Sequoia National Forest. Below, smoke from woodstoves in the Truckee area fills the once-clean sky above Donner Lake with a brown, foul-smelling and unhealthy haze.



Don Jay Miller

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