A Chronology of the Life of Pierson Barton Reading

Compiled by Gertrude A. Steger

The Fortnight from October 19 to November 2 marked the one hundredth anniversary of Pierson B. Reading’s journey through Shasta County. As a tribute to this outstanding pioneer, who was so intensely interested in the growth and development of our state and who accomplished so much in the twenty-five years he spent in Shasta County, the following brief outline of his life was prepared by the Shasta Historical Society and distributed to the schools of the county, a series of articles was published in the Redding Record-Searchlight, a “Reading display” was arranged in the window of the J. C. Penney store, in Redding, and on October 19, the United States Board on Geographical Names officially renamed White Mountain, two miles southeast of Lassen Peak, Reading Peak, in honor of P. B. Reading. The telegram announcing the renaming formally opened the centennial anniversary observances.

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1816-1830 — Pierson Barton Reading (pronounced red-ing) was born in New Jersey, on November 26, 1816. He was the son of Pierson and Charity (Guild) Reading and a descendant of the Reading pioneer family of New Jersey (1684). His grandfather was Joseph Reading, a judge of Hunterdon County and a captain in the American Revolution, and his great-grandfather was John Reading, governor of New Jersey and one of the first trustees of Princeton University.

P. B. Reading spent his boyhood in New Jersey. There he attended a Presbyterian Sunday school. A copybook in which he wrote at the age of ten (now at Sutter’s Fort Historical Museum, Sacramento), is an example of the neatness and accuracy which characterized Reading’s whole life.

1830-1843 — Desiring to become self-supporting, Reading went to Vicksburg, Mississippi, in 1830 at the age of fourteen, and there became a cotton broker. After the panic of 1837, in which he was a heavy loser, he moved to the larger cotton market of New Orleans, Louisiana. All went well until his partner absconded with the firm’s strong box, leaving $60,000 worth of debts and forcing the young broker into bankruptcy again.

1843 — After his failure and the death of his young wife, Reading started west. In May he joined a large party of emigrants on their way to Oregon and California, of whom Peter H. Burnett (later the first American governor of California) was commander-in-chief. At Fort Hall, the Oregon
party moved on. Those going to California organized the Chiles-Walker party, with John Gantt as guide. Walker was placed in charge of the wagons, which were loaded with machinery and furniture. He took a southern route through Walker's Pass into California, reaching Sutter's Fort in December. The Joseph B. Chiles' party, consisting of thirteen men and twenty-six horses and mules, left Fort Hall on September 16, 1843, blazing from Fort Boise, Idaho, a new emigrant route to California. This route from Fall River Mills to Idaho City, a distance of 350 miles, was developed in 1864 by the Idaho, Oregon and California Wagon Road Company, of which P. B. Reading was a member, and designated as the "Reading Route." Today this road is a part of the Yellowstone Cut-Off. Leaving the Pit River, the Chiles party soon struck the old Hudson's Bay traders' trail of 1832 again and passed through Shasta County, reaching Sutter's Fort on November 10, 1843. A letter from Reading to his brother tells the story of the hardships and trials encountered on this trip through the unknown wilderness and of days of fatigue and suffering in which starvation was avoided by eating the flesh of their horses and mules. (See Quarterly of the Society of California Pioneers, VII, September 1930, p. 143.)

Reading and Samuel J. Hensley were employed by Captain John A. Sutter, Hensley to raft logs down the Sacramento River and Reading as clerk and chief trapper.

1844 — In February 1844, P. B. Reading, with John Bidwell, visited the land on the Sacramento River which had been selected for him by Samuel J. Hensley. Other members of the Bidwell party were Job Francis Dye, William George Chard, Robert Hasty Thomas, and Albert G. Toomes, who, with Peter Lassen and William C. Moon, were the first settlers of the upper Sacramento Valley. In May, Indians were hired to make adobe bricks for Reading. In December the Buena Ventura Rancho, of over 26,000 acres, was granted to him by Governor Micheltorena. This, the most northerly grant in California, extended along the west bank of the Sacramento River from the mouth of Cottonwood Creek to Salt Creek.

1845-1846 — Accompanied by 30 men and 100 horses, in May 1845, Reading left Sutter's Fort on his last recorded trapping expedition on the Sacramento River. Leaving the Sacramento in the vicinity of Kennet, he crossed into Trinity County and discovered and named the Trinity River. After a few weeks he returned to the Sacramento, striking the Oregon-California Hudson's Bay Company trail about ten miles below Soda Springs. He continued northward to the Klamath and Shasta rivers. (See Isaac Cox, The Annals of Trinity County, Eugene, Oregon: Printed for Harold C. Holmes by John Henry Nash, 1940, p. 2.) On his return trip in August he visited his rancho, located building sites, etc. He left Julian, a French Canadian, in charge and reached Sutter's Fort in October. In 1846 the first dwelling was
burned by hostile Indians, the caretaker was killed, and the stock was driven off.

1846-1847 — In June 1846, P. B. Reading participated in the Bear Flag Revolt at Sonoma. On June 25, he, Hensley, and others joined John C. Frémont at Sonoma. In July Reading enlisted in Frémont’s battalion, serving first as lieutenant of artillery, but was soon appointed paymaster for the United States troops with the rank of major. Reading was a member of the peace commission that signed the articles of capitulation at Cahuenga, on January 13, 1847. He was discharged from Frémont’s battalion on May 31, 1847, with high honors, and in June he resumed possession of his rancho, built the historical adobe, restocked his farm, and in due season planted cotton, grapes, olives, pears, grain, vegetables and shade trees.

1848-1849 — The story of the beginning of Shasta County and the extension of the Gold Rush into the rich diggings of northwestern California centers around the story of P. B. Reading. After the discovery of gold at Coloma, he was among the first to visit the scene with Sutter. He returned home and in March 1848 discovered gold at Reading’s Bar on Clear Creek. This bar was originally three hundred feet long and fifty feet wide, but has been entirely washed away. In July 1848, he discovered gold at Reading’s Bar, Trinity County. (See Cox, op. cit., p. 2.) In August, returning to Trinity River with a force of sixty-five men, he is credited with having taken out $80,000 worth of gold within six weeks.

Dr. John Edmonston Stockton states that Reading prospected for gold in “the Sierra foothills [Cascades] without success . . . but brought trout in buckets of water from Lost or Hat creeks and stocked one of the Manzanita Lakes with the fierce-eyed, silver-sided trout.” (B. F. Frank and H. W. Chappell, comps., The History and Business Directory of Shasta County, Redding, 1881, pp. 140-42.) “In the fall of 1849, Maj. Reading fitted out an expedition to discover the bay into which he supposed the Trinity and Klamath rivers must empty. The bark ‘Josephine,’ in which the party sailed, was driven by a storm far out of her course to the northwest of Vancouver’s Island and had to return. Others subsequently acting on the idea, discovered and called the bay Humboldt, by which name it is now known.” (Obituary prepared by members of the Society of California Pioneers, Shasta Courier, July 25, 1868.) The news of the discovery of gold at Reading’s Springs in the fall of 1849 marks the beginning of the rapid growth of Shasta City. (See May Hazel Southern, Our Storied Landmarks, Shasta County, California [San Francisco: privately printed, 1942], p. 32.)

1850 — On February 10, 1850, the firm of Hensley, Reading & Co., which had conducted a trading post at Sutterville since the fall of 1848, was dissolved.

On February 18, 1850, the governor signed the bill creating the original
twenty-seven counties of California, of which Shasta was one. Reading’s Ranch was designated the county seat. (Cal. Stats., 1850, 58-63.)

It was in this year that P. B. Reading went to Washington, D. C., to settle his accounts as paymaster of the California Battalion: his disbursements had exceeded $166,000. On his trip to Washington, he stopped off at Vicksburg to pay in gold the principal and interest (amounting to $60,000) of his long-standing financial obligations. “Pierson B. Reading,” Quarterly of the Society of California Pioneers, op. cit., p. 137.

1851 — On February 10, 1851, the Court of Sessions of Shasta County was organized by Judge Harrison, and the county seat was moved from Reading’s Ranch to Shasta City, much to Major Reading’s satisfaction. (See Frank and Chappell, op. cit., pp. 20-21.)

In 1851, P. B. Reading became interested in the navigation of the upper Sacramento. The Sacramento Union of January 3, 1852, gives Captain James A. Grant’s account of a trip made by the Comanche, owned by Major Reading — the longest trip ever made by steamboat from San Francisco to Tehama, a distance of 485 miles. The run down was made in 15 hours. (Mae Helene Bacon Boggs, My Playhouse Was a Concord Coach [Oakland: privately printed, 1942], p. 109.) Later he purchased the steamer McClelland for $18,000, and a part interest in the Banner which had been built by Captain William Pierce and John Bidwell. (Rockwell D. Hunt, John Bidwell, Caldwell, Idaho: The Caxton Printers, 1942, pp. 352-53.)

In June 1851, P. B. Reading was nominated on the Whig ticket for governor, but due probably to the fact that the disputed ballots were not counted, Reading was defeated. (Quarterly of the Society of California Pioneers, op. cit., p. 138.) He definitely declined the nomination for the governorship when it was again offered to him in 1861, and in 1867.

On August 16, 1851, a treaty of peace and friendship between the United States Indian agent, O. M. Wozencraft, and the Indians was made at Reading’s Ranch — this treaty, which set aside about one-third of Shasta County as an Indian reservation, was never ratified by the United States Senate. (Southern, op. cit., pp. 16-19.)

In the fall of 1851, the first stage route to Shasta was established — the first public road of Shasta County. The route passed Reading’s Ranch. (Minutes of the Court of Sessions, Shasta County, p. 9, in Hall of Records, Redding.)

1852 — In June 1852, William Magee completed the survey of Reading’s Ranch and was appointed agent to sell or lease tracts of the land. Among the early sales made were the Canyon House, the American Ranch, Joseph Jones Bell’s ranch on Clear Creek (Grover Oak’s), and the Twin Oaks Ranch.

In 1852 a military post was established on Cow Creek and named Fort Reading in honor of Major Reading. (See Southern, op. cit., pp. 60-63.)
On September 15, 1852, P. B. Reading was appointed by President Fillmore special Indian agent for California, with a cash fund of $25,000 to be spent for the benefit of the Indians.

1853-1854 — Major Reading headed a committee which was appointed to survey the Noble Pass route for a railroad. (See Boggs, op. cit., p. 183.) Previously he had surveyed Sutterville, and the Capay Rancho, and was one of three surveyors that laid out Yuba City.

1854-1855 — A nine-room addition to his adobe home was built, and it became known as “Reading’s Mansion.” (See Quarterly of the Society of California Pioneers, op. cit., p. 139.)

1855-1861 — On September 19, 1855, P. B. Reading was appointed special Indian agent of the Cow Creek and Cottonwood Indians and those in the vicinity of Shasta City.

In October 1855, he returned to Washington, D. C., to quiet the title to his grant. This grant was approved by the United States Supreme Court on January 11, 1856.

On this trip Reading carried a letter of introduction to Fannie Wallace Washington, a niece of Richard Lee, whom Reading had met while Lee was stationed at Fort Reading. She became his bride on March 13, 1856. They reached Rancho Buena Ventura, via Havana and Panama, in May.

Mrs. Reading’s letters to her relatives in the East tell of the busy days at the rancho, of the malaria, camping trips to the Mount Lassen area, the first harvest in which a header and harvester were used, the entertainment of guests, the celebration of holidays, the floods of ’61, and many other interesting items. (Fannie W. Reading to Mrs. A. W. Washington and Mrs. R. B. Lee, originals in the possession of Eleanor Lee Templeman, Arlington, Virginia; copies in files of the Shasta Historical Society, Redding.)

In 1861, Reading was unanimously elected commissioner to represent the Pacific Coast at the World’s Fair in London, but he declined the honor.

1861-1863 — The Rainbow, rebuilt from the McClelland, reached Sacramento in late December 1861, and Latona, or Reading, on January 1, 1862.

In February 1862, Reading entered into a contract with William Magee to lay out the town of Reading near the mouth of Clear Creek. Lots were sold, a ferry franchise granted, and other improvements made. The warehouse, hotel, and other buildings were destroyed by fire in the early part of 1863.

In 1862 Reading was awarded a prize for the best “stock farm” in the state of California.

In the later part of 1862, the “Original Williams and Kellinger Gold, Silver and Copper Mining Company of Copper City” was incorporated, with P. B. Reading and J. J. Bell as principal stockholders. The cost of extracting the metal from the ore being too great, the first boom lasted but a short time.
1864 — Kendall Vanhook Bumpass and P. B. Reading filed a mining claim on what is now known as Bumpass Hell in Lassen Volcanic National Park.

It was in the summer of 1864 that Major Reading, accompanied by Helen Tanner Brodt and her husband, climbed Lassen Peak. Because Mrs. Brodt was the first woman to make the ascent of the mountain, Reading named Lake Helen in her honor. (See Southern, op. cit., p. 89.)

1868 — On May 29, 1868, death claimed the earliest settler of Shasta County at the age of 51 years. He left to mourn his loss his wife and six children, two of whom, Robert and Alice M., became prominent citizens of the county. The late Leslie Simson, the famous African hunter, was his grandson.

1869 — Twelve magnificent deodars (cedars of India) which adorn the state capitol grounds at Sacramento were grown from seeds donated by P. B. Reading and planted seventy-five years ago. (See H. E. & E. G. Rensch and Mildred Brooke Hoover, Historic Spots in California—Valley and Sierra Counties, Stanford University, 1933, p. 323.)

1871 — Mrs. P. B. Reading returned to Washington with her children in order to give them better educational advantages.

1874 — A bill was introduced in the state legislature in 1874 by Rudolph Klotz, which changed the spelling of the railroad town Redding, which had been named for B. B. Redding, the first land agent of the Central Pacific Railroad Company, to “Reading,” in honor of our first pioneer settler. But since 1880 the town has been called “Redding.”

1881 — The History and Business Directory of Shasta County, edited by B. F. Frank and H. W. Chappell, and dedicated to Major P. B. Reading, was published in 1881. This is the only history ever written of Shasta County.

1902 — Robert Reading, son of P. B. Reading, was elected surveyor of Shasta County in 1902. He served three terms. His daughter, Eleanor Lee Templeman, who spent her girlhood in Redding, is the only living direct descendant of Major Reading.

1905 — Next to General Bidwell’s stone in the Sloat Memorial Monument at Monterey is one in honor of Major Pierson B. Reading, a filial tribute from his son, Robert.

1914 — The Reading homestead was sold to Charles C. Moore in 1914, and this remaining tract of nearly 3,000 acres took the name of the original grant, Buena Ventura Rancho. In 1938, this ranch, which had been reduced to about 1,000 acres, was purchased by V. C. Bryant, of Redding.

1920 — A bronze memorial tablet, made in Baltimore, was erected over Major Reading’s grave (a short distance from the old adobe) by his daughter, Alice M. Reading. The Shasta County parlor of Native Daughters of the Golden West plan to improve and fence this plot when materials are available.

1929 — The Ball’s Ferry Farm Center built a drinking fountain at the An-
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Anderson Fair grounds at a cost of $300.00 and dedicated it to Pierson B. Reading, founder of the oldest settlement north of Sutter's Fort.

1930 — In their Quarterly for September 1930, the Society of California Pioneers published P. B. Reading's diary of his trip to California with the Chiles-Walker party. (The original is now in the possession of the Society of California Pioneers.) It had previously been published in the Grizzly Bear in May 1928.

1931 — An effort was made by Alice Reading and the late Harry C. Peterson, curator of the Sutter's Fort Historical Museum, to have the State Park Commission repair the historic Reading adobe. Rolla Arbuckle estimated the cost at $3,475.00, which included the installation of a deep-well system and the fencing of about seven acres.

1932 — Several historical markers have been erected in Shasta County commemorating P. B. Reading's activities, viz., at Reading's Bar, the Reading adobe, at Clear Creek, and at Fort Reading. (See Southern, op. cit., pp. 22, 31, and 64-65.)

1941-43 — Deeds to the old adobe site from Alice Reading, and to approximately fifteen acres secured by the Shasta Historical Society from the Cottonwood-Anderson irrigation District, were offered to the State Park Commission, but as yet they have not been accepted.

The Shasta Historical Society deeded to the county the “right of way” leading from the Cottonwood-Balls Ferry road to the old adobe.

On October 2, 1943, the Board of Supervisors of Shasta County designated the road leading to the old adobe as the “Reading Adobe Way.”

On October 19, the United States Board on Geographical Names officially changed the name of White Mountain to Reading Peak. The spelling of Reading Creek, Trinity County, has also been corrected by the Board on Geographical Names, and the name of Reading Bar has been restored on the new Shasta County map.

A biography of P. B. Reading is being compiled by the Reverend John W. Winkley of Hayward and Eleanor Lee Templeman, of Arlington, Virginia.