The Gold Rush

On March 20, 1849, Leone’s great, great grandfather Chauncey Clement Tinker left his home in Kingsville, Ohio to make the cross country trip to California in search of gold. He came across the country with two of his brothers, Charles and Horace, in a party of 12 men. It was quite an adventure -- and luckily Charles chronicled the main events of their trip in a journal.

The Tinker family can be traced all the way back to the Mayflower and Pilgrim days. We’ll write about the basic genealogy in the next chapter of this book. Chauncey’s grandfather, Silas Tinker, came to northeastern Ohio from New England in 1806 and established the family in Kingsville, which is near Lake Erie. Chauncey’s father, also named Chauncey, was born in Chester, MA, but came with his family to Ohio as a boy.

The Gold Rush expedition is a real highlight of Leone’s family history. It traversed difficult terrain that necessitated crossing dangerous rivers, over the Rocky and Sierra Nevada Mountains and through a terrible desert along the way. There was the danger of bears, mountain lions and rattlesnakes, not to mention Indians. We felt the trip was worth a chapter in our book.

Chauncey Clement Tinker was 34 years old when news of the Gold Rush motivated him and his brothers to leave their families and rush across the country in pursuit of gold. Their party was almost entirely from Kingsville. It was their aim to take the famous Santa Fe Trail, although none of the party had ever traveled on it. They would officially begin the trail at Independence, MO. The journey took 114 days. They left in March right after the spring thaw to avoid having to cross the Rockies in winter.

The Kingsville party made its way to St. Louis, MO, to buy supplies for their trip. It was a major departure point for excursions west. They purchased 10 oxen (at an average of $50 each) to carry their supplies, plus one extra horse and saddle ($10) and three cows ($10 each) for milk. They also bought 500 pounds of bacon, 300 pounds of mutton hams, meal, beans, flour, sugar and various medicines. They intended to hunt and fish for most of their meals along the way. The men and provisions would be carried in three wagons.

The Kingsville party joined forces in St. Louis with an expedition of 18 men from Missouri to begin the journey, with the intention of crossing the dangerous North Platte and Green rivers with a larger group for safety. After that they would likely split apart to go their own ways.

The scenery was beautiful and varied. The men traversed past streams and rivers, lush forests and huge, colorful rock outcroppings they had never seen before. Hunting was productive in the early stage and they feasted on antelope, deer and buffalo most nights. Rattlesnakes were a constant threat. The Ohio group killed dozens along the way (including seven on May 28th alone). They were especially wary after a rattlesnake killed one of their horses in the Black Hills of Wyoming.

Rivers were a huge challenge since they could be too wide and fast to cross on foot, presenting a grave danger to both men and livestock. Twice they build their own barges and two other times were able to pay to be ferried across. They attempted to buy barges from one troop of men crossing the North Platte just ahead of them, but were denied by the captain of the other party, who explained his group would destroy them on the far side as they did not want to be beaten to the gold fields.

However, when one of the barges broke loose and tipped over in the current, two men were swept downstream. The Kingsville party rescued these men and afterward the other troop allowed them to use their barges in gratitude.

Indians were on ongoing concern as they were known to steal livestock and occasionally attack would be prospectors who passed through their homelands. The Kingsville party was fortunate to encounter Indians just once, but in that instance three cattle were stolen in the night.

They arrived at the south pass of the Rocky Mountains on June 19. The men had heard how imposing this range was (it is the highest in North America), but could not help but marvel in its presence. They ascended well enough, encountering a few small snow flurries, but arriving at the summit in just three days. Unfortunately some of the men got mountain fever and were quite sick for several days.

“I was sick all the way and had to ride it out,” Charles Tinker observed in his journal. “It seemed as though the wagon hit all the stones in the road. Every bone in me was aching. It made me think of home.”

The worst duress was crossing the desert in Utah. There was no water for many days and temperatures hit above 110 degrees. There were almost no trees and no forage or water for the livestock. Two oxen, most of the cattle and several horses died -- and joined the sad pile of decaying bones alongside the trail. It was heartbreaking to watch, but the men were equally concerned about themselves.

“We were parched almost to death,” Charles wrote. “We trudged on endlessly, wonder if we would ever find it (water). I would have given all my possessions for one drink of cold water. Water was my one and only want. We were overjoyed to come to a stream near the base of the Sierra Nevada range. My tongue and lips were so parched and dried out that it took over an hour to soak them off.”

There was grass and trees, finally, and the remaining livestock were saved.

Once over the Sierras, the Kingsville party arrived at the outskirts of gold country in California. They were eager to try their luck prospecting and the three Tinker brothers panned 1 ½ ounces of gold dust in two days, which had a worth of $150. Unfortunately those turned out to be the glory days because no significant gold was found after that.

They sold the cattle and wagons, split the proceeds and remains of their “treasury” among the men, and the company scattered.

Chauncey, Charles and Horace Tinker tried their luck prospecting around Yuba City, then around Vernon, but what little gold they found barely offset the high cost of provisions in gold country. The region was crowded with gold seekers, but very few were getting rich.

Chauncey Clarence Tinker returned to Kingsville less than a year later and married his sweetheart, Annie Bridle. He stayed some 20 years and prospered in the family foundry and farm equipment business. In 1873, Chauncey, Annie and their three children came back to California by boat to San Francisco, traveling around Cape Horn (as he was not interested in repeating his overland trip).

They made their way down the coast by small boat, docked at Santa Barbara and settled there. The Tinker’s three children were Clement Chauncey (C.C.), Kelly J. and Minnie, who later became Mrs. Minnie Tinker Albin. C.C. is Leone’s maternal grandfather.

The Tinkers bought 15 acres at what is now 700 W. Mission Street, on the corner of Modoc Road. It still stands today. At the time Modoc Road was named “Goleta Road,” but it was renamed after a notorious Indian war in Oregon.

The family built a barn, enclosing a few small rooms for themselves to live in, and Chauncey opened a woodworking shop. It captured the attention of Santa Barbara’s (mayor and) premier architect and builder, Peter S. Barber. Chauncey’s woodworking supplied the ornate columns, spindles, balustrades and pillars that embellished Barber’s classic Victorian houses.

Barber built most of the distinguished buildings and mansions in Santa Barbara and Goleta, including the Upham Hotel, original Arlington Hotel and county courthouse. In 1874, Chauncey commissioned his own Barber home for his family. It was two stories tall with a handsome mahogany circular staircase and tall, mature trees all around. Leone remembers a lovely old organ in the sitting room and a sizable picture inside the front entrance composed entirely of hair. Gradually Annie filled the house with fine furniture.

Chauncey later planted a fine lemon grove on the property. He tended it and it became a source of income. Later his son Kelly oversaw the lemon crops.

(Barber also built a more spectacular house nearby on Mission for William M. Eddy of the County Bank. The Eddys and Tinkers were friends. Many events and fund raisers were held at the Eddy fine house and grounds, which took on the name “Oakwood.”)

Chauncey became well known around Santa Barbara and had many friends. 39 people attended his 90th birthday celebration. The tables were clothed in white and bountiful food was served. The party lasted all day.

Chauncey Clement Tinker died in 1911 at the age of 94. Annie and the children were at his side.