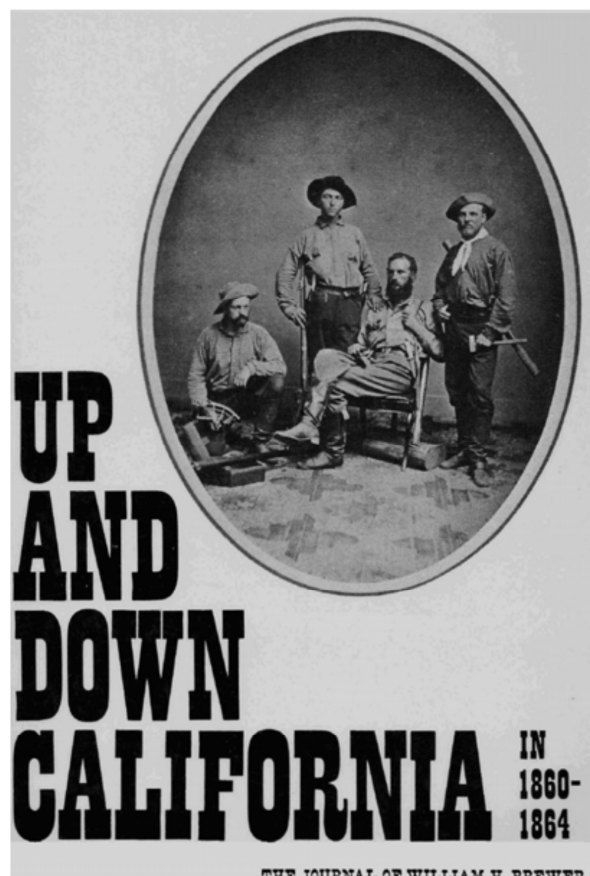


MESAS IN CALIFORNIA?

By Larry Schemel, retired USGS scientist

Chapter 1: Table Mountains

Well, they are certainly not like Mesa Verde or others in the southwest, but we do have flat-topped mountains which are commonly called "Table Mountains". They are different from southwest mesas, in part because they are erosional features that are capped with volcanic flows. The first survey of California's resources, the Whitney Expedition 1860-1864, identified three Table Mountain complexes, which were described as "peculiar" features.



William Brewer, the expedition leader, described in his journal how these mountains might have been created by ancient volcanic eruptions and subsequent erosion.

here, and before they sink to the plain curious table-lands are left. The whole surface of the country has been washed away in places, except where protected by patches of lava. A hill is thus formed, a perfect "table." This would be the profile of many hills seen, thus:



a-a and b-b, top of hill, level lava, very hard; c-c, plain; d, valley; f-f, soft strata of ashes lying under the lava.

These hills are sometimes long ridges, at others, near camp, mere round hills, the lava washed away on all sides, leaving those isolated tables. The tops are bare rock, or nearly so. They are nearly level, with a slight descent toward the valley, the same slope down which the lava once flowed. You cannot imagine what a peculiar feature these hills, or "table mountains," impart to the scenery of the landscape.

All three Table Mountain complexes, Oroville Table, Tuolumne Table, and Kennedy Table are similar in age, 9-16 MY, but different in size and in the ways they were formed. All are worth visiting, or at least a drive-by while traveling in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada. In future chapters, I will describe each Table Mountain complex and identify areas you might like to visit. All of the complexes have barren tops, looking like the surface of the moon, during most of the year. However, in spring, all of the tops are covered with vibrant blooms of wild flowers that grow in the shallow soils between the volcanic rocks of the flows.



There is much information on the internet to help you plan your trip this spring. Next month, I will describe California's largest volcanic flow, which created the Oroville and other Table Mountains across the Sacramento valley.