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### CONTENTS

Three Creeks Caldera, Southern Pavant Range, Utah .....	Thomas A. Steven
Biostratigraphy of the Great Blue Formation .....	Alan K. Chamberlain
Carbonate Petrology and Depositional Environments of the Sinbad Limestone Member of the Moenkopi Formation in the Teasdale Dome Area, Wayne and Garfield Counties, Utah .....	James Scott Dean
Geology of the Antelope Peak Area of the Southern San Francisco Mountains, Beaver County, Utah .....	Vince L. Felt
The Tintic Quartzite in Rock Canyon, Utah County, Utah: A Model for Shallow-shelf Sedimentation .....	Craig D. Hall
Geology of the Longlick and White Mountain Area, Southern San Francisco Mountains .....	Dan E. Haymond
Geology of the Auburn 7½' Quadrangle, Caribou County, Idaho, and Lincoln County, Wyoming .....	David E. Jenkins
Carbonate Petrology and Depositional Environments of the Limestone Member of the Carmel Formation, near Carmel Junction, Kane County, Utah .....	Douglas W. Taylor



*Cover: Slab of bivalves showing Myalina-Pleuroma suite, from Torrey section, Sinbad Limestone Member, Moenkopi Formation in the Teasdale Dome Area, Wayne County, Utah. Photo courtesy James Scott Dean.*

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## CONTENTS

Three Creeks Caldera, Southern Pavant Range, Utah, by Thomas A. Steven .....	1	Carbonate Petrology and Depositional Environments of the Sinbad Limestone Member of the Moenkopi Formation in the Teasdale Dome Area, Wayne and Garfield Counties, Utah, by James Scott Dean .....	19
Abstract .....	1	Abstract .....	19
Introduction .....	1	Introduction .....	19
Regional setting .....	2	Location .....	19
Three Creeks Tuff Member .....	2	Methods and terminology .....	20
Evolution of the Three Creeks Caldera .....	4	Field methods .....	20
Comparisons .....	5	Laboratory methods .....	20
References .....	7	Terminology .....	20
Figures .....		Previous work .....	22
1. Geologic map .....	1	Geologic setting .....	22
2. Distribution of Three Creeks Tuff Member .....	2	Acknowledgments .....	23
3. View into subsided block of caldera .....	3	Geometry and petrology of carbonate lithofacies .....	23
4. View of topographic wall .....	4	Lithofacies A .....	23
5. Interpreted relations .....	4	Stromatolitic boundstone subfacies .....	24
6. Talus-landslide breccia .....	5	Oolite-peloid packstone subfacies .....	25
7. Talus breccia along topographic wall of caldera .....	6	Dolomicrite subfacies .....	26
8. Grooves on topographic wall of caldera .....	6	Channel conglomerate subfacies .....	26
9. Ternary diagram .....	7	Evaporite subfacies .....	26
Biostratigraphy of the Great Blue Formation, by Alan K. Chamberlain .....	9	Lithofacies B .....	28
Introduction .....	9	Skeletal packstone subfacies .....	28
Location and purpose .....	9	Pelletal wackestone subfacies .....	30
Previous work .....	9	Lithofacies C .....	30
Fieldwork .....	9	Lithofacies D .....	33
Laboratory work .....	9	Oolite-mollusk packstone subfacies .....	33
Depositional environment of the Great Blue Formation .....	9	Peloidal mudstone-wackestone subfacies .....	34
Acknowledgments .....	10	Lithofacies E .....	34
Stratigraphic sections .....	10	Lithofacies F .....	36
Oquirrh Mountain section (1) .....	10	Correlation of lithofacies .....	36
Onaqui Mountain section (2) .....	10	Paleontology .....	37
Ochre Mountain section (3) .....	11	Ichnology .....	37
Boulter Peak (4) .....	11	Diagenesis .....	37
Wasatch Mountain section (5) .....	12	Recrystallization .....	38
Wellsville Mountain section (6) .....	12	Dolomitization .....	38
Fossils .....	14	Homogeneous dolomites .....	38
Conodonts .....	14	Heterogeneous dolomites .....	38
Corals .....	14	Depositional environments of carbonate lithofacies .....	39
Brachiopods .....	14	Lithofacies A .....	39
Bryozoans .....	14	Stromatolitic boundstone subfacies .....	39
Sponge .....	14	Oolite-peloid packstone subfacies .....	40
Cephalopods .....	16	Dolomicrite subfacies .....	41
Plants .....	16	Channel conglomerate subfacies .....	41
Other fossils .....	16	Evaporite subfacies .....	41
Conclusion .....	16	Lithofacies B .....	41
References cited .....	17	Lithofacies C .....	42
Figures .....		Lithofacies D .....	42
1. Index map .....	9	Lithofacies E .....	42
2. Oquirrh Mountain (section 1) .....	10	Lithofacies F .....	43
3. Onaqui Mountain (section 2) .....	11	Depositional summary .....	43
4. Ochre Mountain (section 3) .....	12	Petroleum potential .....	44
5. Boulter Peak (section 4) .....	13	Potential of lithofacies .....	45
6. Wasatch Mountains (section 5) .....	13	Appendix .....	45
7. Wellsville Mountain (section 6) .....	14	References cited .....	45
8. East-west correlation .....	16	Figures .....	
Table .....		1. Index map .....	19
1. First and last occurrences of organisms in the Great Blue Formation .....	15	2. Outcrop of Sinbad Limestone Member .....	20
		3. Fence diagram: stratigraphic relationships .....	21

4. Stratigraphic sections ..... in pocket	Needles Range Formation .....	54
5. Classification of carbonate rocks .....	Wah Wah Springs Tuff Member .....	55
6. A.—Paleotectonic features .....	Lund Tuff Member .....	55
B.—Paleogeography and sedimentary facies .....	Wallaces Peak Tuff Member .....	55
7. Photomicrograph: stromatolitic boundstone .....	Isom Formation .....	55
8. Slab showing cryptalgal dolomicrite .....	Formation of Blawn Wash .....	55
9. Photomicrograph: recrystallized packstone fabric .....	Tuff Member of Sevey's Well .....	55
10. Photomicrograph: packstone from Torrey section .....	Quartz Latite Member of Squaw Peak .....	56
11. Photomicrograph: cryptalgal dolomicrite .....	Lower tuff member .....	56
12. A.—High-angle cross-bedding .....	Sandstone member .....	57
B.—Carbonate flaser bedding .....	Upper tuff member .....	57
C.—Channel conglomerate .....	Rhyolite flow member .....	57
D.—Cryptalgal dolomicrite .....	Lava flow member .....	57
E.—Herringbone cross-bedding .....	Basaltic conglomerate .....	57
F.—Herringbone cross-sets .....	Basalt flow .....	57
13. Flat-pebble and subrounded intraclasts .....	Lower conglomerate .....	58
14. Rippled and gypsiferous dolomicrite .....	Upper conglomerate .....	58
15. A.—Cyclic bioturbation .....	Alluvium .....	58
B.—Tidal channel .....	Structure .....	58
C.—Skeletal packstone .....	General statement .....	58
D.—Tidal channel .....	Northeast-trending faults .....	58
E.—Planar cross-bedding .....	Northwest-trending faults .....	58
F.—Massive pygmytic gypsum .....	East-trending faults .....	59
16. Photomicrograph: massive gypsum .....	Eruptive centers .....	59
17. Photomicrograph: pelletal wackestone .....	Age of faulting .....	59
18. Photomicrograph: grainstone layer .....	Oligocene to early Miocene faulting .....	59
19. Photomicrograph: umbrella structure .....	Mid-Miocene faulting .....	59
20. Photomicrograph: <i>Skolithos</i> burrow filled with debris .....	Post mid-Miocene basin-and-range faulting .....	60
21. Photomicrograph: mollusk wackestone .....	Summary .....	60
22. A.—View of Grand Wash section .....	Geologic history .....	60
B.—Contact between claystone and shales .....	Early Tertiary to middle Oligocene .....	60
C.—Teepee ridges .....	Middle Oligocene to late Oligocene .....	60
D.—Ripple marks .....	Early Miocene to Recent .....	60
E.—Limestones held up by channeled dolomites .....	Miocene depression .....	62
23. Photomicrograph: remnant lamination in dolomite ..	Alteration .....	63
24. Photomicrograph: recrystallized skeletal packstone ..	Conclusions .....	64
25. Photomicrograph: dissolution surface, packstone and	References .....	65
wackestone .....	Figures .....	
26. Sinbad Limestone Member .....	1. Index map of the Antelope Peak area .....	53
27. Photomicrograph: heterogeneous dolomite .....	2. Correlation of map units .....	55
28. Photomicrograph: dolomitized oolite grainstone .....	3. Tuff Member of Sevey's Well .....	56
29. Photomicrograph: dolomite fabric .....	4. Quartz Latite Member of Squaw Peak showing typical	
30. Photomicrograph: dolomitized peloids .....	spheroidal weathering and popcorn texture .....	56
31. View of tidal channel .....	5. Photomicrograph (crossed nicols): Quartz Latite	
32. Diagram: relationships of depositional environments ..	Member of Squaw Peak .....	56
33. A.—Transgressing tidal flat-sabka .....	6. Photomicrograph (crossed nicols): xenocrysts of sub-	
B.—Subtidal deposition of second phase .....	hedral plagioclase enclosed in a reaction rim .....	57
C.—Final phase of deposition .....	7. Photomicrograph (crossed nicols): felted matrix of	
Plates	plagioclase microlites in the basalt flow unit .....	58
1. Ammonoids, gastropods, bivalves .....	8. Map of fault patterns and intensely altered rocks .....	59
2. Bioturbation, sponge, spicule net .....	9. Diagrammatic cross section, illustrating the concept	
Geology of the Antelope Peak Area of the Southern	of northeast-striking subordinate listric faults .....	59
San Francisco Mountains, Beaver County, Utah, by	10. Regional geologic map .....	61
Vince L. Felt .....	11. Gravity map, southern San Francisco Mountains .....	62
Introduction .....	12. Autoclastic breccia unit, Quartz Latite Member of	
Objectives .....	Squaw Peak .....	63
Location .....	13. Approximate location of Miocene depression .....	63
Previous work .....	14. Magnetic map .....	64
Geologic setting .....	Plate .....	
Acknowledgments .....	1. Geologic map of the Antelope Peak area .....	in pocket
Stratigraphy .....	The Tintic Quartzite in Rock Canyon, Utah County,	
General statement .....	Utah: A Model for Shallow-shelf Sedimentation, by	
Dacite of Shauntie Hills .....	Craig D. Hall .....	67

Introduction .....	67	Toroweap Formation .....	86
Location of study area .....	67	Kaibab Limestone .....	87
Methods of study .....	67	Jurassic System .....	87
Previous work .....	68	Navajo Sandstone .....	87
Acknowledgments .....	68	Tertiary System .....	87
Lithology .....	68	Dacite of Shauntie Hills .....	87
Sedimentary structures .....	69	Needles Range Formation .....	87
Biogenic sedimentary structures .....	69	Wah Wah Springs Tuff Member .....	88
Interpretation .....	69	Lund Tuff Member .....	88
Cross-bedding analysis .....	71	Wallaces Peak Tuff Member .....	88
Vertical successions .....	72	Isom Formation .....	88
Deposition of the Tintic Quartzite .....	75	Hole-in-the-Wall Tuff Member .....	88
Other examples of clastic sedimentation .....	75	Formation of Blawn Wash .....	88
Shallow-shelf sedimentation .....	76	Tuff of Sevey's Well Member .....	88
Summary .....	77	Quartz Latite of Squaw Peak Member .....	88
References cited .....	79	Lower tuff member .....	88
Figures		Mafic flow member .....	89
1. Index map of study sections .....	67	Upper tuff member .....	89
2. Block diagram of planar cross-bedding .....	69	Rhyolite flow member .....	89
3. Block diagram of trough cross-bedding .....	70	Formation of Brimstone Reservoir .....	89
4. Block diagram of channel features .....	71	Alluvial cover .....	89
5. Steampower graph .....	71	Structure .....	89
6. Velocity vs. grain size graph .....	72	General statement .....	89
7. Average current directions in the formation .....	73	Thrust faults .....	89
8. Columnar sections of the Tintic Quartzite .....	74	East-west-trending faults .....	89
9. Columnar sections of the Flathead Sandstone .....	76	North-south-trending faults .....	90
10. Columnar section of the Duolbasgaissa Formation, Norway .....	77	Northeast-southwest-trending faults .....	90
11. Idealized vertical sequence of shallow-shelf, transgressive deposits .....	79	Northwest-southeast-trending faults .....	90
Table		Folds .....	90
1. Special fluid depth-velocity quantities and their respective Froude Numbers .....	70	Alteration .....	90
		Mineralization .....	91
		Geologic history .....	91
		Economic potential .....	94
		Appendix .....	94
		References cited .....	99
		Figures	
		1. Index map .....	81
		2. Composite Paleozoic section .....	82
		3. Paleozoic correlation diagram .....	84
		4. Great Blue Limestone at White Mountain .....	85
		5. Overturned section of Pakoon Formation and Callville Limestone .....	86
		6. Toroweap and Kaibab Limestone at Miners Hill .....	87
		7. Aerial view of the Brimstone Lineament .....	90
		8. Monocline in the Humbug Formation .....	91
		9. Hydrothermal bleaching along a joint .....	92
		10. Silicified upper tuff member .....	92
		11. Brimstone sinter mound .....	93
		12. Fumarole lined with native sulfur .....	93
		Plate	
		1. Geology of the Longlick and White Mountain area ..	in pocket
<b>Geology of the Longlick and White Mountain Area, Southern San Francisco Mountains, by Dan E. Haymond</b> .....	81		
Abstract .....	81		
Introduction .....	81		
Location .....	81		
Previous work .....	81		
Acknowledgments .....	81		
Stratigraphy .....	82		
General statement .....	82		
Devonian System .....	83		
Sevy Dolomite .....	83		
Guilmette-Simonson Dolomite .....	83		
Cove Fort Quartzite .....	83		
Crystal Pass Limestone .....	83		
Pinyon Peak Limestone .....	83		
Mississippian System .....	83		
Monte Cristo Limestone .....	83		
Dawn-Whitmore Wash Limestone Member ..	83		
Anchor-Thunder Springs Limestone Member .....	83		
Deseret Limestone .....	85		
Humbug Formation .....	85		
Great Blue Limestone .....	85		
Chainman Shale .....	86		
Pennsylvanian System .....	86		
Callville Limestone .....	86		
Permian System .....	86		
Pakoon Limestone .....	86		
Queantoweap Sandstone .....	86		
		<b>Geology of the Auburn 7½' Quadrangle, Caribou County, Idaho, and Lincoln County, Wyoming, by David E. Jenkins</b> .....	101
		Introduction .....	101
		Previous work .....	101
		Method of study .....	101
		Acknowledgments .....	101
		Stratigraphy .....	102
		General statement .....	102
		Permian System .....	102
		Phosphoria Formation .....	102
		Rex Chert Member .....	102

Triassic System .....	102	Plate	
Dinwoody Formation .....	102	1. Geologic map of the Auburn Quadrangle .....	in pocket
Woodside Formation .....	103		
Thaynes Formation .....	103	<b>Carbonate Petrology and Depositional Environments</b>	
A member .....	103	<b>of the Limestone Member of the Carmel Formation,</b>	
B member .....	104	<b>near Carmel Junction, Kane County, Utah, by</b>	
Portneuf Limestone Member .....	104	<b>Douglas W. Taylor .....</b>	117
Lower member of the Thaynes Formation .....	104	Abstract .....	117
Upper member of the Thaynes Formation .....	104	Introduction and geologic setting .....	117
Ankareh Formation .....	104	Location .....	118
Lanes Tongue of the Ankareh Formation .....	104	Methods of study and nomenclature .....	118
Wood Shale Tongue of the Ankareh		Previous work .....	118
Formation .....	104	Acknowledgments .....	119
Ankareh Formation of the Absaroka Plate .....	104	Geometry and petrology of lithofacies .....	119
Higham Grit .....	104	Lithofacies A .....	119
Jurassic System .....	105	Lithofacies B .....	119
Nugget Sandstone .....	105	Siltstone subfacies .....	119
Twin Creek Limestone .....	105	Dolomicrite subfacies .....	119
Preuss Sandstone .....	105	Stromatolitic boundstone subfacies .....	119
Stump Sandstone .....	106	Evaporite dolomicrite subfacies .....	120
Cretaceous System .....	106	Lithofacies C .....	121
Ephraim Conglomerate .....	107	Oolite skeletal packstone and grainstone	
Peterson Limestone .....	107	subfacies .....	121
Bechler Conglomerate .....	107	Bivalve wackestone subfacies .....	121
Draney Limestone .....	107	Lithofacies D .....	122
Tygee Member of the Bear River Formation .....	107	Lithofacies E .....	122
Wayan Formation .....	108	Lithofacies F .....	123
Tertiary System .....	108	Peloidal grainstone subfacies .....	124
Salt Lake Formation .....	108	Stromatolitic boundstone subfacies .....	124
Quaternary System .....	108	Correlation .....	125
Structure .....	108	Paleontology .....	125
General statement .....	108	Ichnology .....	126
Meade Thrust Fault .....	109	Diagenesis .....	126
Faults .....	109	Recrystallization .....	126
Tear faults .....	109	Dolomitization .....	127
Transverse faults .....	109	Depositional environments of lithofacies .....	127
North-south high-angle faults .....	109	Lithofacies A .....	127
Folds .....	109	Lithofacies B .....	128
Economic geology .....	111	Dolomicrite subfacies .....	128
Petroleum .....	111	Stromatolitic boundstone subfacies .....	128
Phosphate .....	112	Evaporite subfacies .....	129
Hot springs .....	112	Lithofacies C .....	129
Other deposits .....	112	Lithofacies D .....	129
Summary .....	112	Lithofacies E .....	129
Appendix .....	112	Lithofacies F .....	129
References .....	116	Depositional summary .....	129
Figures		Petroleum potential .....	131
1. Index map .....	101	Appendix .....	131
2. Generalized stratigraphic column .....	102	References cited .....	133
3. Rex Chert Member of the Phosphoria Formation .....	103	Figures	
4. Member divisions Thaynes-Ankareh Formations .....	103	1. Index map .....	117
5. Ammonites of the Thaynes Formation .....	104	2. Paleogeographic map .....	118
6. Twin Creek Limestone .....	105	3. Carmel Limestone Member .....	118
7. Twin Creek Limestone .....	106	4. Nine measured sections .....	in pocket
8. Ripple marks, Stump Sandstone .....	106	5. Photomicrograph: dolomitic siltstone subfacies .....	120
9. Ripple marks, Stump Sandstone .....	107	6. Photomicrograph: thinly bedded dolomicrite .....	120
10. Slickensides, Ephraim Conglomerate .....	107	7. Cryptalgal bedding .....	120
11. Tygee Member of the Bear River Formation .....	108	8. Photomicrograph: stromatolitic boundstone .....	120
12. Salt Lake Formation .....	108	9. Photomicrograph: nodular anhydrite and dolomi-	
13. Salt Springs Stump Valley .....	108	cite .....	121
14. Thrust fault zones, Idaho-Wyoming .....	110	10. Cross-bedded oolite-skeletal packstone .....	121
15. Imbrication of footwall .....	111	11. Drawing: possible bryozoan colony .....	121
16. Spring Creek Syncline .....	112	12. Photomicrograph: oolite-skeletal packstone .....	122
17. Active hot springs .....	112	13. Encrinal grainstone .....	122



14. Weathered surface of packstone .....	122	22. Photomicrograph: peloidal grainstone .....	126
15. Echinoid spines .....	122	23. Ripple marks in dolomicrite .....	126
16. (A) <i>Diademopsis</i> , (B) <i>Ostrea (Liostrea) strigulecula</i> , (C) <i>Gryphaea</i> valve, (D) <i>Cossmannia imlayi</i> , (E) <i>Lima (Plagiostoma) zonia</i> valve, (F) possible cyclostome bryozoan colony, (G) coelenterate ? colony, (H) <i>Lima (Plagiostoma) occidentalis</i> valve, (I) <i>Mesenteripora</i> encrusting <i>Ostrea</i> shell .....	123	24. Photomicrograph: packstone .....	126
17. Photomicrograph: wackestone subfacies .....	124	25. Photomicrograph: partially recrystallized oolites .....	127
18. Wackestone subfacies .....	124	26. Depositional model for the Carmel Limestone Member .....	128
19. Units exposed in roadcut .....	124	27. Ripple marks .....	130
20. Photomicrographs: (A) argillaceous mudstone and (B) micro-cross-bedding .....	125	28. Bivalve coquina .....	130
21. Photomicrograph: peloidal grainstone .....	126	29. Transgressive oolite shoals, phase I; regression of sea and prograding shale, phase II; minor transgression of peloidal grainstones, phase III .....	130
		30. Generalized stratigraphic column .....	131
		Publications and maps of the Geology Department .....	135



# Three Creeks Caldera, Southern Pavant Range, Utah

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**ABSTRACT.**—The Three Creeks Tuff Member of the Bullion Canyon Volcanics had its source in an obscure subsidence structure (caldera) in the southern Pavant Range, Utah. Subsidence apparently began after the lower part of the member had been deposited and proceeded concurrently with eruption of the middle part of the member. A shallow sag, 5–8 km across and faulted along the southeastern side, was produced; ash flows deposited within the subsiding block are at least twice as thick as those deposited concurrently outside the block. The fault scarp on the southeastern side of the caldera was extensively modified by landsliding and erosion before renewed eruptions filled the depression to overflowing with ash flows identical in lithology with those deposited during earlier Three Creeks eruptions. Minor subsidence along earlier structural trends accompanied the late Three Creeks eruptions.

Minor late resurgence reelevated the subsided block so that units within the caldera are now at approximately the same stratigraphic and structural levels as equivalent rocks outside the caldera. Deformation accompanying the resurgence was limited to caldera-fill tuffs along the trend of the fault zone bounding the southeastern side of the caldera where the upper part of the Three Creeks Member dips as much as 30° southeastward into the topographic wall of the caldera. The resurgence may have taken place while some of the caldera-filling tuffs were still hot and plastic.

The broad, relatively diffuse subsidence that formed the Three Creeks caldera may have resulted from episodic eruptions from a relatively deep magma chamber, so that roof support was lost gradually, rather than catastrophically, as in the case of many well-formed calderas. The size and shape of the magma chamber may also have been factors contributing to the mode of subsidence.

## Introduction

An obscure subsidence structure related to eruptions of the Three Creeks Tuff Member of the Bullion Canyon Volcanics has been identified in the southern Pavant Range, Utah, along the northern flank of the Marysville volcanic field (fig. 1). The Three Creeks Tuff Member is a single ash-flow tuff sheet whose original volume probably was on the order of 100–200 km<sup>3</sup>, sufficiently large to suggest that subsidence related to eruption probably took place at its source (Smith 1960, p. 819). Thickness and welding relations suggested, early in the course of

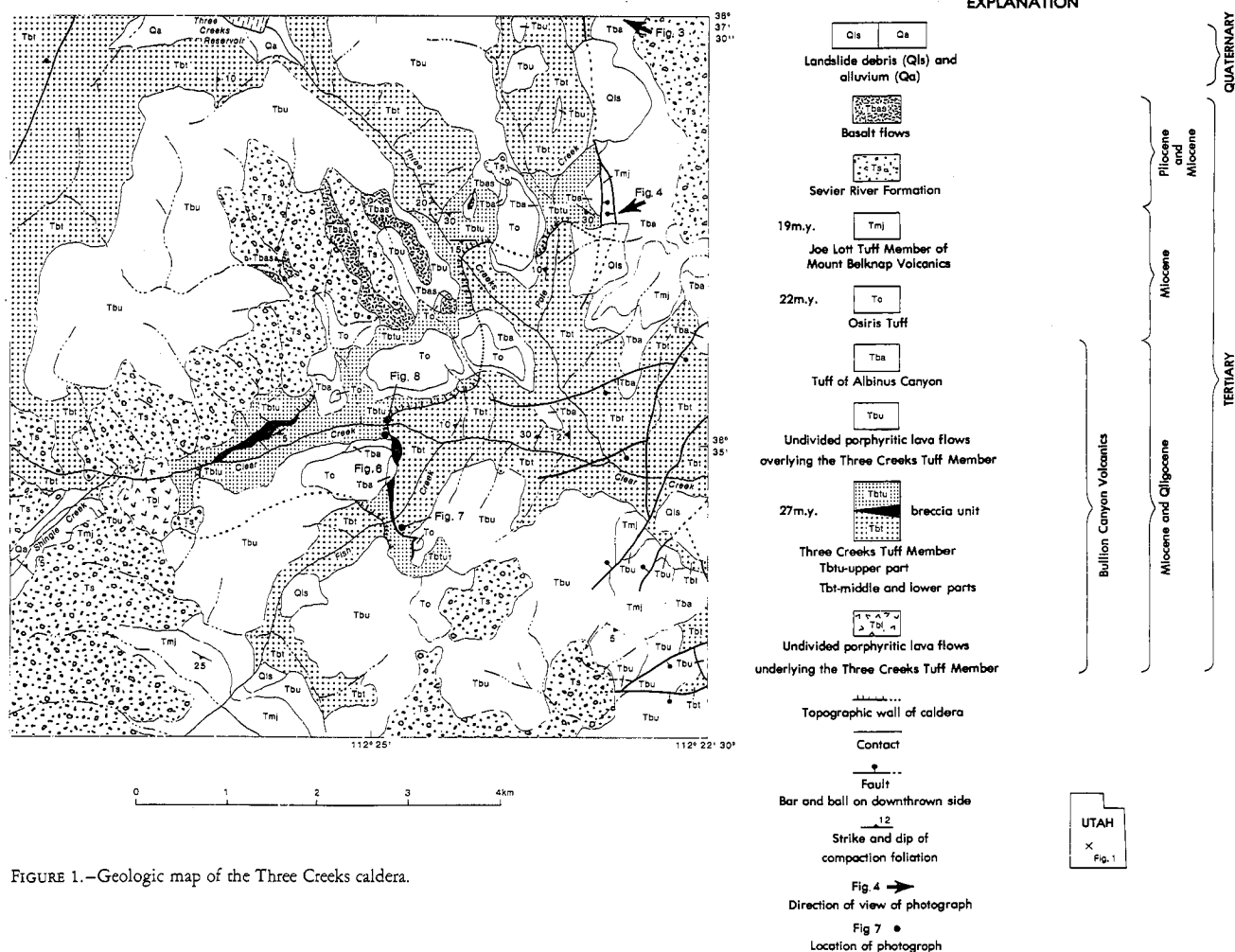


FIGURE 1.—Geologic map of the Three Creeks caldera.

field studies in the Marysvale area (Steven and others 1979), that the sheet probably originated in the Clear Creek drainage between the Tushar Mountains and the Pavant Range.

Geologic mapping by Callaghan and Parker (1962) and by Caskey and Shuey (1975) did not indicate any subsidence feature in the Clear Creek area, but subsequent careful mapping has disclosed evidence of a largely buried caldera. The very obscurity of this feature and the many bits of subtle evidence for its existence are the main subjects discussed in this paper. Many other seemingly homeless ash-flow tuff sheets may have been derived from similarly obscure sources.

#### Regional Setting

The Three Creeks Tuff Member of the Bullion Canyon Volcanics was erupted about 27 m.y. ago (Steven and others 1979) from a source along the northern flank of the Marysvale volcanic field. At this time, a large stratovolcano centered in the northern Tushar Mountains dominated the Marysvale field (fig. 2); this volcano formed primarily before 30 m.y. ago, and influenced the distribution of most later volcanic units. A large volcanic dome of porphyritic quartz latite, in the southern Pavant Range east of the Three Creeks source (fig. 2), formed a barrier that blocked the spread of Three Creeks ash flows eastward along the northern flank of the Marysvale volcanic field. Smaller flank volcanoes near present-day Cove Fort (fig. 2) were largely covered by younger lava flows and ash-flow tuffs beneath the Three Creeks Member (fig. 1) by the time the Three Creeks was erupted.

The Three Creeks Tuff Member thus was erupted onto an irregular volcanic plain flanking the northern side of a major stratovolcano. Incandescent ash was erupted episodically to form many successive ash flows that spread widely except where constrained by preexisting volcanoes. Figure 2 shows the presently known distribution of the Three Creeks Tuff Member. The unit is thick and densely welded all around the eroded northern and northwestern peripheries shown, and the unit clearly was emplaced well beyond the present area of distribution in these directions. The approximately 1,100 km<sup>2</sup> of Three Creeks Tuff Member shown on figure 2 is probably only about half the original extent of the unit. Assuming an average thickness of 100 m (an order of magnitude figure only), about 100 km<sup>3</sup> of the Three Creeks Member still exists; the original volume may have been as much as twice this. This volume is sufficient to support an assumption that subsidence at the source probably took place as a consequence of eruption (Smith 1960, p. 819; Steven and Lipman 1976, p. 31), but that a large, well-formed caldera need not have formed.

The Three Creeks Tuff Member was covered by a sequence of lava flows and ash-flow tuffs, no more than 500 m thick, erupted over an 8 m.y. span of time (fig. 1). Locally derived lava flows of porphyritic quartz latite (fig. 1) formed a discontinuous cover over the Three Creeks; these flows range from a single viscous domal flow in the northwestern part of figure 1, to several thinner flows in the southern part of the map area. The low area between these lava accumulations was widened and deepened by stream erosion before ash flows from distant sources deposited tongues of both the tuff of Albinus Canyon and the 22-m.y.-old Osiris Tuff (Fleck and others 1975) in the valleys. Still younger deposits consist of the Joe Lott Tuff Member of the Mount Belknap Volcanics, deposited 19 m.y. ago (Steven and others 1979, p. 25), and overlying fluvial sediments of the Sevier River Formation with local interlayered basalt lava flows. The Joe Lott shows no thickening

along the Three Creeks caldera margin, and the Sevier River Formation appears to have filled a stream valley.

The modern drainage, superimposed through a cover of soft Sevier River Formation, shows no influence by the older structures that it exhumed.

#### Three Creeks Tuff Member

As detailed by Steven and others (1979, p. 13–17), the Three Creeks Tuff Member is a crystal-rich quartz-latite ash-flow tuff consisting of about 50 percent phenocrysts in a variably welded matrix of devitrified glass shards and collapsed pumice fragments. The phenocrysts consist typically of andesine (35 percent), amphibole (9 percent), biotite (3 percent), quartz (2 percent), and a percent or less each of sanidine and Fe-Ti oxides. Apatite, sphene, and zircon comprise minor accessory minerals. These percentages vary both laterally and vertically, but not in any seemingly systematic manner.

The Three Creeks Tuff Member is a multiple-flow compound-cooling unit. Near its source in Clear Creek, cooling and welding variations define a rude stratigraphy that, although not recognized in the outflow sheet remote from the source area, is critical in establishing the history of subsidence at the source.

The lower part of the Three Creeks Tuff Member is generally densely welded, with minor less-welded partings. A thickness of about 200 m of this densely welded rock is exposed in the canyon of Clear Creek near the eastern border of figure 1, and a somewhat thinner section is widely exposed in the headwaters of Clear Creek, Three Creeks, and Pole Creek, west and north of figure 1. The base is widely exposed along the western and northern flanks of the Pavant Range (fig. 2), but nowhere within the area of fig. 1. The lower densely welded rock grades upward into a ledgy sequence of soft, slightly to moderately

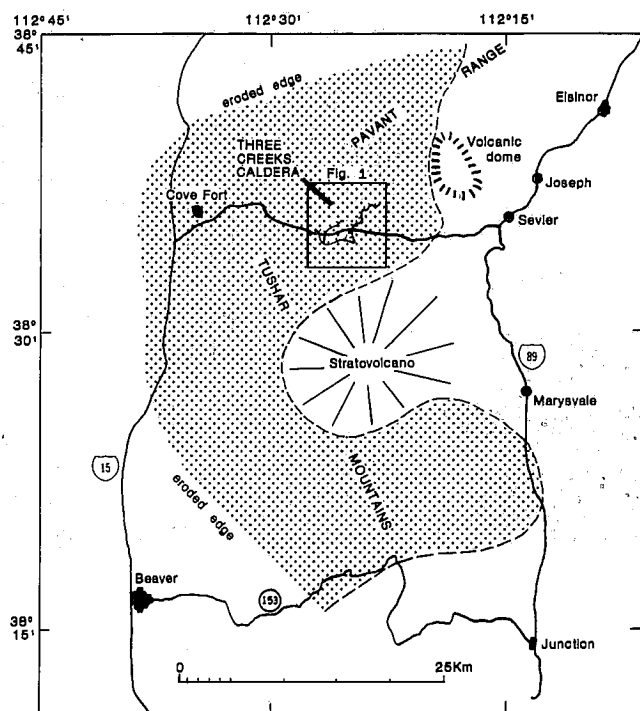


FIGURE 2.—Distribution of the Three Creeks Tuff Member of the Bullion Canyon Volcanics (stippled pattern).

welded tuff containing some layers of more densely welded tuff. Except for differences in welding, the lithology and phenocryst content remain similar across the transition. The middle sequence is 200 to 250 m thick in Clear Creek Canyon, outside the subsided area, but is more than 500 m thick along Three Creeks and Pole Creek within the caldera (fig. 3).

The upper part of the Three Creeks Tuff Member consists of densely welded ash-flow tuff similar to that in the lower part. It caps hills near the outer perimeter of the Clear Creek drainage basin north and west of the area of figure 1, and forms a band of densely welded tuff that extends diagonally across the center of figure 1 adjacent to the topographic wall on the Three Creeks caldera. To the north and west, the upper part of the member appears to parallel layering in the lower and middle parts, but near the center of figure 1 it abuts and wedges out in depositional contact against these units on the topographic wall of the caldera (fig. 4).

The topographic wall of the Three Creeks caldera is marked locally by discontinuous zones of breccia, largely of talus and landslide debris with predominant Three Creeks fragments and minor mudflow breccia with fragments from mixed sources. A subsidiary topographic wall about a kilometer inside the main wall is exposed north of Clear Creek in the west central part of figure 1, perhaps over the buried structural margin. This subsidiary wall is marked by a prominent zone of breccia consisting of locally derived talus and landslide debris in its lower part, overlain in turn by rudely bedded mudflow deposits and by typical ash-flow tuff deposits of the Three Creeks Tuff Member.

The differentially welded layers of Three Creeks form a broad downwarp whose ill-defined axis plunges gently south-eastward across the north central part of figure 1. North of the confluence of Pole and Three Creeks, the dips of compaction foliation in the upper part of the Three Creeks Tuff Member increase sharply to  $30^{\circ}$  south. The underlying layers in the middle part of the member appear to dip about as steeply, whereas the same layers forming the topographic wall of the caldera just to the south are relatively flat lying (fig. 4). Figure 5 is a sketch cross section showing the interpreted relations in this area.

The topographic wall of the Three Creeks caldera cuts sharply across the middle part of the member (figs. 4, 6, 7A) and is sinuous in plan (fig. 1). The talus and landslide breccia form rude layers that tend to parallel the immediately underlying wall (figs. 6, 7A, 7B), requiring subaerial accumulation between episodes of pyroclastic eruption. In one place where the actual wall was exposed (fig. 8), the wall is strikingly grooved, probably because of grinding along the sole of a landslide. The breccias are especially well displayed along the topographic wall west and south of the confluence of Fish and Clear Creeks where they abruptly truncate the flat-lying ledges of the middle part of the Three Creeks Member. In the area illustrated by figure 7, a spoon-shaped mass of the upper part of the member is plastered against the middle part of the member east of Fish Creek, and the intervening talus breccias stand in cliff exposures.

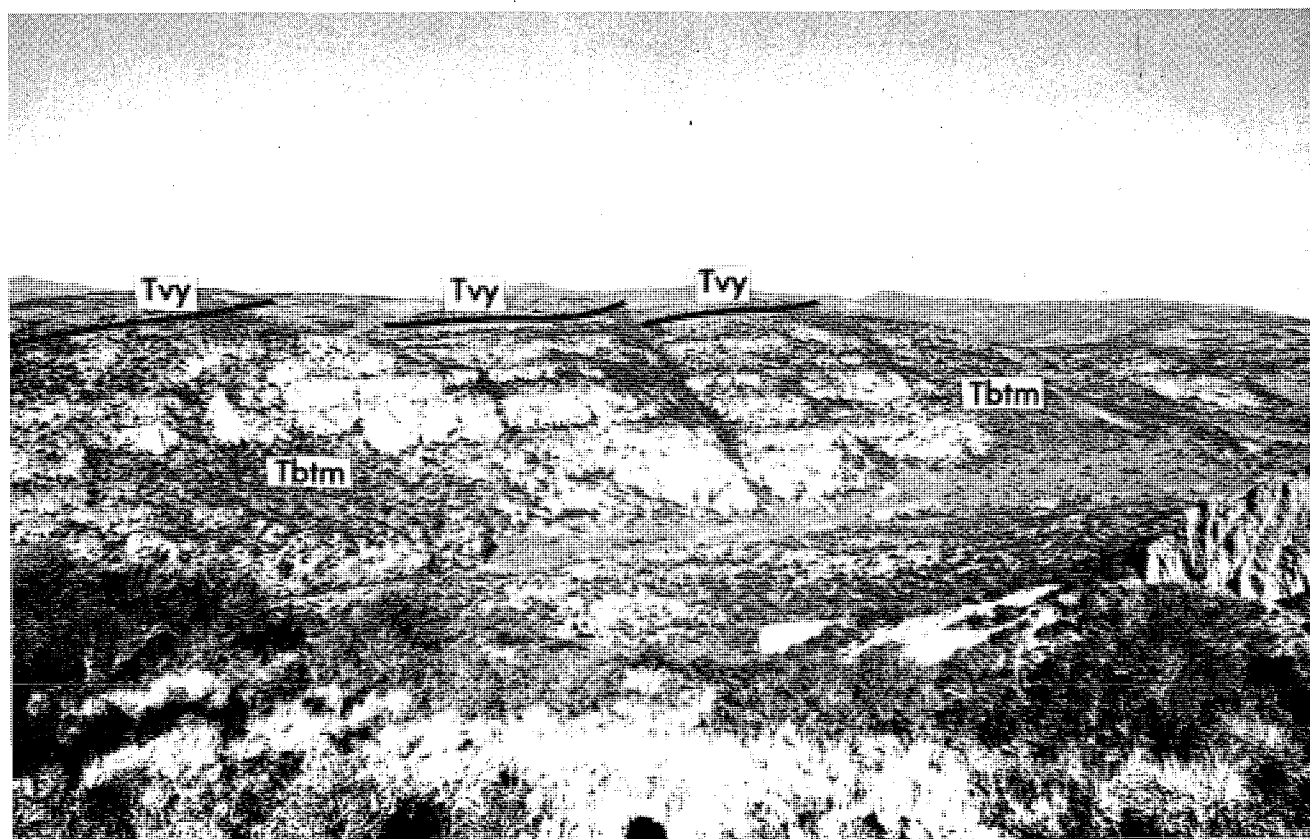


FIGURE 3.—View looking west across Pole Creek (see fig. 1) into the subsided block of the Three Creeks caldera. Tvy, volcanic rocks younger than the Three Creeks Tuff Member; Tbtm, middle part of the Three Creeks Tuff Member.

## Evolution of the Three Creeks Caldera

Stratigraphic and structural relations in the Clear Creek drainage basin indicate an extended sequence of events that took place in the source area during and shortly after eruption of the Three Creeks Tuff Member. Early eruptions spread hot ash in a rapid sequence of ash flows that welded into a dense sheet showing only local evidence of compound cooling. With time, the eruptions became more episodic, and perhaps the erupted ash was somewhat cooler so that the middle part of the member accumulated as a sequence of distinct layers with well-defined partial to complete cooling breaks between them (figs. 3, 4).

Broad subsidence may have begun in the source area during the earlier and hotter eruptions, but the actual beginning has not been documented. Subsidence was clearly under way during accumulation of the softer and more-layered middle part of the member, which is more than twice as thick within as it is outside the subsided area. Subsidence formed a broad down-warp, faulted along the southeastern side, in the Three Creeks-Pole Creek area. The fault scarp exposed chiefly the softer tuffs in the middle part of the Three Creeks Tuff Member, and landsliding and erosion of these weak rocks resulted in a sinuous topographic wall that flared southeastward from the faulted margin of the subsided block. This topographic wall was partly veneered by talus and landslide debris and local mudflow deposits (figs. 6, 7A, 7B), whose rude layering generally parallels the underlying wall. These steeply dipping fragmental units have

little or no interlayered primary pyroclastic material, and apparently were deposited during an extended period of volcanic quiescence during which the caldera scarp was extensively modified by slumping and erosion.

Renewed eruptions from the Three Creeks magma chamber again spread hot ash flows across the source area, where they were trapped against the older topographic wall on the south,

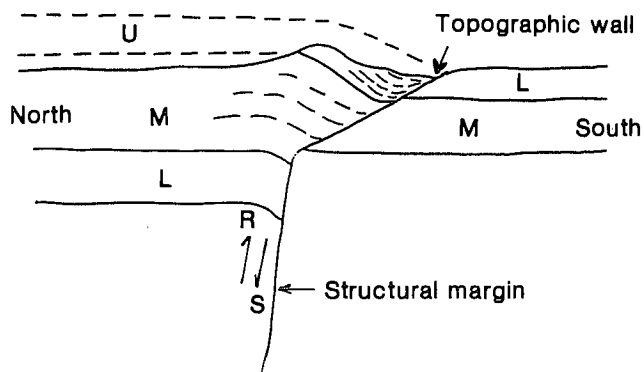


FIGURE 5.—Interpreted relations along the topographic wall of the Three Creeks caldera. L, M, and U represent lower, middle, and upper parts of the Three Creeks Tuff Member of the Bullion Canyon Volcanics. Arrows indicate direction and relative amount of subsidence (S) followed by resurgence (R).

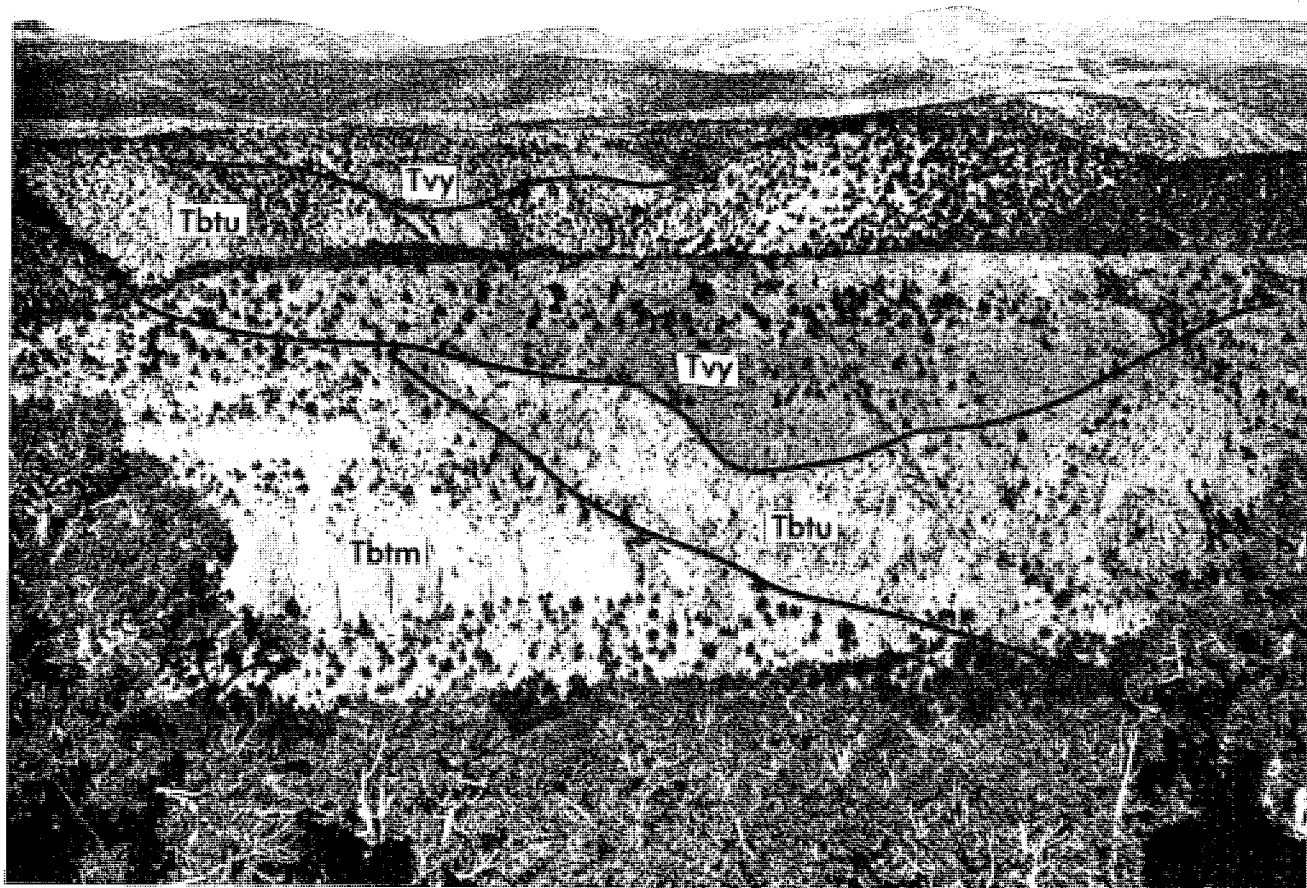


FIGURE 4.—View looking west across Pole Creek (see fig. 1) at the topographic wall of the Three Creeks caldera. Tvy, volcanic rocks younger than the Three Creeks Tuff Member; Tbtu, upper part, and Tbtm, middle part of the Three Creeks Tuff Member.

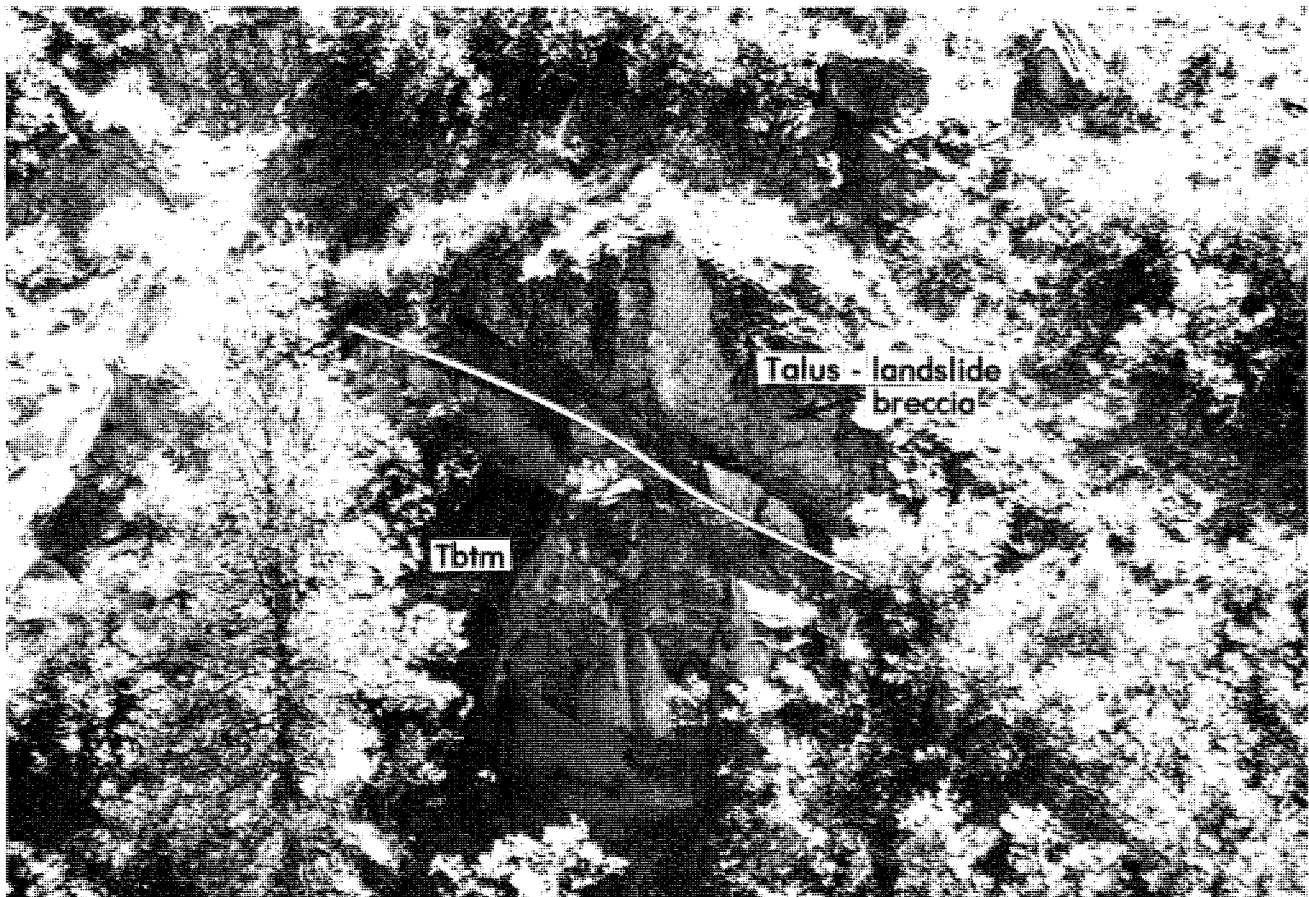


FIGURE 6.—Talus-landslide breccia on the topographic wall of the Three Creeks caldera. Tb1m, middle part of the Three Creeks Tuff Member. Location of photo shown in figure 1.

but spread more widely to the north. These ash flows were sufficiently hot to weld into a dense sheet containing relatively few less-welded partings. Some additional subsidence took place concurrently with these eruptions so that a subsidiary scarp within the upper part of the member formed along the reactivated fault; talus, landslide, and mudflow debris accumulated along this new scarp, only to be covered by more ash flows of the same type.

Shortly after the final Three Creeks eruptions ceased, and possibly while some of the upper part of the member was still hot and plastic, part of the subsided block was resurgently uplifted by reversed movement on the buried fault (fig. 5). Uplift was largely in the Pole Creek-Three Creeks area, where the densely welded rocks in the upper part of the member dip steeply against flat-lying rocks of the topographic wall of the caldera (fig. 4). The tilting was confined to caldera-fill rocks, which virtually requires that they were still plastic so that the soft but cool layers in the outer wall were not deformed in any way.

Resurgence was only sufficient to lift the soft middle part of the member within the caldera to a structural position approximately equivalent to that of the same rocks outside the caldera. Subsequent erosion has removed most of the hard upper part of the member, leaving only an elongate mass with triangular cross section along the caldera margin. Thus, resurgence almost exactly erased the effects of earlier subsidence in

this area, and were it not for aberrant relations along the caldera boundary, would have obscured most of the evidence that subsidence ever took place.

Subsequent erosion cut stream channels along the earlier caldera boundary (fig. 4), and left an elongate ridge of densely welded tuff in the upper part of the Three Creeks Member that protruded up into younger lava flows and ash-flow tuff sheets (fig. 1). For the most part, however, the flat-lying younger rocks show virtually no evidence that they cover a caldera marking the source area of an important ash-flow tuff unit.

#### Comparisons

Why do some ash-flow eruptions of moderate volume result in well-formed calderas with complex histories of subsidence and filling, whereas others result only in obscure faulted downwarps like the Three Creeks caldera? This question is especially pertinent in the Marysvale volcanic field, where the large well-formed Mount Belknap caldera (Cunningham and Steven 1979) subsided in response to eruption of the Joe Lott Tuff Member of the Mount Belknap Volcanics—a somewhat less-voluminous but still comparable unit to the Three Creeks Tuff Member. Noting that the composition of the Joe Lott rocks closely approaches the Q-Or-Ab-H<sub>2</sub>O system of Tuttle and Bowen (1958), Cunningham and Steven (1979, p. 32) calculated a water pressure of  $800 \pm 200$  bars, which corresponds to a lithostatic load generated by 3–4 km of cover over the



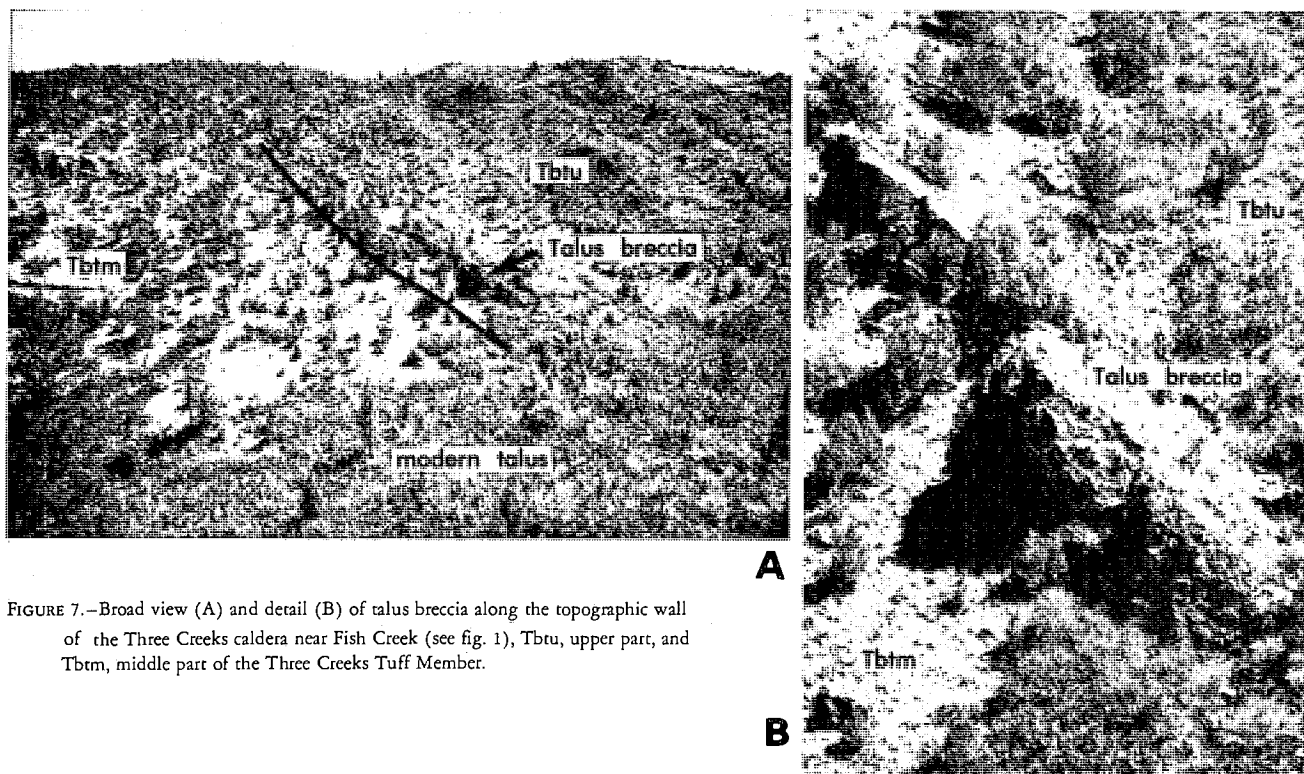


FIGURE 7.—Broad view (A) and detail (B) of talus breccia along the topographic wall of the Three Creeks caldera near Fish Creek (see fig. 1), Tbtu, upper part, and Tbtm, middle part of the Three Creeks Tuff Member.



FIGURE 8.—Grooves (see arrows) on the topographic wall of the Three Creeks caldera. Tbtm, middle part of the Three Creeks Tuff Member. Location of photo shown in figure 1.



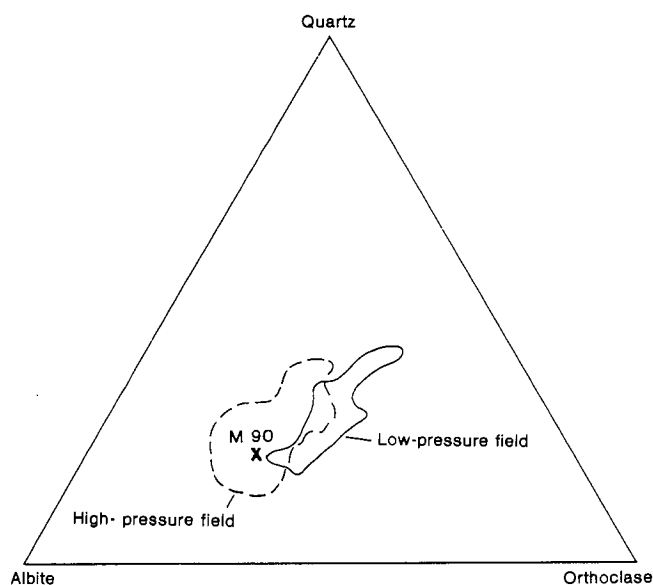


FIGURE 9.—Ternary diagram showing high-pressure and low-pressure fields for Oligocene ash-flow tuffs and postcollapse lavas in the San Juan Mountains, Colorado (modified from Lipman and others 1978, fig. 4). Position of sample M 90 (x) of the Three Creeks Tuff Member of the Bullion Canyon Volcanics shown with respect to these fields.

magma chamber. The intricate response of the Mount Belknap caldera to eruption of the Joe Lott Tuff Member seems a natural result of this shallow depth of cover.

The magma chamber beneath the Three Creeks caldera probably was much deeper than that under the Mount Belknap caldera, so that only broad subsidence of a relatively stronger cover could take place. This suggestion has some support in the lithology and phenocryst mineralogy of the Three Creeks Tuff Member, which closely resembles the Fish Canyon Tuff in the San Juan Mountains of Colorado (Steven and Ratté 1965, p. 18). Lipman and others (1978, p. 63–66) interpret the Fish Canyon as belonging to an assemblage of crystal-rich quartz latitic ash-flow tuffs whose phenocrysts crystallized in high-pressure environments considerably below shallow subcaldera levels. As shown on an Ab-Or-Q ternary diagram (fig. 9), a sample (M90) of the Three Creeks Tuff Member plots well within the high-pressure field defined by San Juan rocks. If these phenocrysts were near equilibrium with the enclosing melt at the time of eruption, they presumably should have come from a relatively deep magma chamber. Present data are too incomplete, however, to determine the extent to which equilibrium had been maintained until the time of eruption.

The time span of eruptions also may have had significant influence on the amount and character of subsidence. The layered, compound-cooling characteristics of the middle part of the Three Creeks Tuff Member suggest that intermittent eruptions extended over a significant period of time so that related subsidence probably was gradual rather than catastrophic. In addition, the size and shape of the magma chamber could have been important factors (Cunningham and Steven 1979), but the significance of these factors is difficult to evaluate.

In broad perspective, the Mount Belknap and Three Creeks calderas seem to mark widely separated points on what is probably a continuum of subsidence types, in which depth of magma chamber is only one of many interactive factors. As obscure as the Three Creeks caldera is, it is unlikely to represent an end member in this series. Subsidence so broad and diffuse as to be virtually undetectable in all but the most ideal circumstances seems a logical projection. Recognition of such obscure features in poorly exposed or structurally complex areas would be especially difficult. Had not the southern side of the subsided block broken to form a topographic scarp, it is possible that the Three Creeks caldera would not have been recognized, even in an area as well exposed as the Clear Creek drainage basin.

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