

THE MINING ERA

If one event can be termed the most important happening in California history, the discovery of gold near Sutter's Mill in 1848 would probably qualify as that event. The initial discovery of gold, which brought a rush of settlement into California, was followed by the detection of the precious metal in other areas in what would be called the Golden State. This avalanche of humanity into the region beyond the Sierra Nevadas prompted the following exasperated commentary by the *Daily Alta California* (San Francisco) in April, 1849:

We were prepared for a large immigration, but we were not prepared for such a sweeping wave of desire as seems to have rolled over the length and breadth of the nation. We had calculated upon an excitement, but we had thought that the Mexican War and Presidential election would have exhausted for a time the mercurial portion of our national character . . . But no, the thrust for gold has rode the public mind like a Gorgon or a nightmare. One impulse seems to have actuated the whole nation and had the mines been within "a few minutes walk of any railroad station." there is not the slightest doubt that twenty out of the twenty-four millions of inhabitants would have been digging long ago.

The first locating of gold in the area under study took place in 1848 by Major Pierson Reading. Within a matter of months, camps sprang up all along the creeks. These "boom towns" flourished for a few years and then regressed either into the status of "ghost towns" or into small agricultural communities. Shasta, Horsetown, Texas Springs, Whiskytown, French Gulch and Gas Point were among the most well known mining towns of the 1850's, 60's and 70's in Shasta County. The ultimately larger communities of Redding and Anderson cannot be described correctly as "gold rush" towns. Their population and importance were certainly indirectly affected by the influx of miners into the area; however, the main bulk of their growth came during the post gold rush era which emphasized the development of lumber and agriculture as principal industries.

Actually only the western part of Shasta County was truly "gold" country. The main fields of mining enterprise lay between Clear Creek and Soda Creek, the latter a stream coming from the Coast mountain range. These creeks, with their numerous tributaries, gave rise to the above mentioned short-lived districts, and in 1855 lifted Shasta City into a city of 2,000 or more inhabitants.

The discovery of gold prompted drastic economic changes in the region. A rise in the cost of living is shown in this price list from a Shasta *Courier* of the 1850's:

Flour per barrel, \$60; corn meal per barrel, \$40; barley per 100 pounds, \$11; corn, \$10 per 100 pounds; oats, \$12 per 100; potatoes, \$15 per 100; a firkin of butter, \$.65.

Those who were fortunate enough to have surplus capital to invest in a business made enormous profits during the gold rush era. This profit was aided by the remoteness of the area; however, some customers could afford to pay exorbitant prices. Those who accompanied Major Reading on the initial digging for gold in 1849 reported a yield of \$100 to \$200 per day, while \$15,000 to \$20,000 in two or three months was known to occur during the height of the mining in the early 1850's.

Not all was success and wealth, however. Many could not find satisfactory diggings at all. Others were discouraged by the rainy seasons which filled the creeks and gulches to overflowing, while trouble from Indians served to deter other gold seekers.

After the initial discovery of gold by Major Reading in 1848, several obvious periods in the development of local gold mining occurred. For several months, Reading and his Indians were able to mine almost unmolested in Shasta County. However, with the spreading of the word that gold had been found in the north, a horde of gold seekers advanced into the area. The success of these early Shasta County mines lasted for about a decade, from 1850 to 1860.

The mining towns which began with the 49'ers were first of all small camps of tents along a creek, and later developed into the early "boom towns" mentioned previously. These towns

typically included a store, some few dwellings which had been hurriedly constructed, and several saloons and gambling houses. Only men lived in these makeshift villages, and each was equipped with the usual miner's regalia—a pick, shovel, and large gold pan. These men were a nomadic breed, moving from place to place in hope of a large strike. The first group of miners were men of remarkably law-abiding character, probably because they were local Californians well disposed toward each other. Commenting on these early gold seekers, an old miner later declared:

There was not much elegance in our society, but much honesty. There was not a grog-shop in our vicinity. Drunken men were never seen unless they came from the Springs (Reading's Springs, later Shasta City). Fighting, gambling and stealing were offenses unknown in our neighborhood. Everyone had gold dust in abundance; many made no secret of the places that they kept it and often an ounce or two might be seen in a pan with no one near it, and yet there was no stealing.

However, many of the men who came after the immediate invasion of 1849 and 1850 were characterized by vice and dissipation. Gambling and drinking were the most prominent of these miners' weaknesses.

As to the appearance of the Shasta County argonaut, a picturesque description is presented in the *Shasta Courier* of September 11, 1858, by an old miner who had just encountered a former gold seeking companion of some eight years past. Shocked by the civilized appearance of his friend who had "gone to the States and got a wife," which action changed his mien considerably, the old man began to reflect on his friend of "pick and pan days:"

... he wore a long uncombed beard, a profusion of hair on his shoulders, a many patched pair of pants and an old dirty red woolen shirt. A short pipe, making at times a very close acquaintance with the handle of his face, a sheath knife and pistol completed his every-day-Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes at that period.

That life in the mines was often a rather bare existence was evident in a statement made by John S. Hittell in a speech given in 1887 on the subject "Pioneer Times." This former Shasta argonaut, who had subsequently become a well-known Californian, declared:

The bill of fare in the mines was about the same as it had been on the plains. The staples were beans, bread, rice, bacon, salt pork, dried apples, coffee, sugar and occasionally fresh meat. Fresh fruit, milk, butter and eggs could not be had at any price. Dried apples protected the miners against scurvy. Domestic life was simple. The general rule was that wood chopping, cooking, fire-making, water-carrying and other kinds of housework should be divided around and each have an equal share. The cabins were left unguarded and unlocked. Everyone washed his own clothes. The undergarments were, of course, cotton or wool, and hid the dirt easily and were easily washed. Sunday was a day of rest. The pious spent it in reading, writing letters, conversation and walking; the worldly went out prospecting and hunting. There was no gathering for religious purposes. The routine of the weekdays was to rise, cook and eat before day by the light of the fire and then all started off for work carrying materials for their noon meal. At dark they quit work and cooked and ate their supper . . . The speaker's share of the labor in the mines never exceeded \$50 per day, except during the first day in the Cottonwood diggings.

The fact that "pick and pan" mining in the early days was not as lucrative as might have been supposed is further substantiated by an inspection of Joaquin Miller's diary, written during the 1850's. The renowned "Poet of the Sierras," a familiar figure about the county during the early days, reported the following week's wages:

Saturday - made	\$1.00
Sunday - rested	
Monday - made	\$4.50
Tuesday - made	\$.50
Wednesday - made	\$1.25
Thursday - made	\$2.00
Friday - made	\$4.50

On many days Miller rejectedly acknowledged that he had accomplished nothing, complaining in the spring of 1856 that after a winter of mining in Shasta County: "I have dug and tugged, starved and economized the winter through and I could not this day raise the miserable sum of \$25."

The influx of diligent Chinese miners also presented problems to the early American gold seekers. In February, 1858, miners from the Horsetown, Middletown and Texas Springs regions assembled to determine some plan of action against the Orientals mining in their sections. What they came up with was certainly not democratic, but it did evidence the westerner's ability to arrive at a decision that was both curt and effective. They proclaimed:

That the time has come when some definite and determined action should be had in relation to the Chinese, who, from their immense number, now in the mines of this county, have become an evil too great to be borne, and hence it behooves American miners to take prompt and decisive measures to stop this evil that overwhelms them.

That we will give the Chinese until the first of March next to wind up their business in such mining districts as are represented in this convention. That on or after the date stated above, if any Chinese are found working our mines, we will...assemble and expel such Chinese, peaceably, if we can; forcibly, if we must.

The Chinese apparently took them at their word, for on March 5 the *Shasta Courier* reported that: "The Chinese very promptly packed up their goods, dug up their purses of gold dust, many of them containing thousands of dollars, and obeyed marching orders."

Independence was an outstanding feature of these men; as one of their number asserted: "The miners were the most independent men in the world." In addition, early mining society was characterized by a lack of the feminine touch as illustrated by this comment by a Shasta County miner:

Besides the market for provisions, there was another attraction at the Springs, (Reading's Springs, later Shasta City) a white woman and the only one within fifty miles. She was neither youthful, beautiful or elegant in her mode of dress, nor single; her attractions seriously diminished by a husband, a number of children and the lack of those surroundings of a comfortable home and beautiful clothing—which add vastly to the influence of the fair sex; but with all that she was a woman; she was *the* woman.

As mining in Shasta County waned, the main body of miners turned to more lucrative gold areas in the early 1860's. It was during this period that the advance of the mining company into this part of California took place. In contrast to the previous effort of the individual with his pick and pan, these groups resulted from an investment of capital by several partners. Mining companies used various methods to facilitate their efforts. One such method was known as ground sluicing. This practice involved the transportation of water by ditch to the scene of mining activity, where the channel or "ground sluice" was terminated by a wooden runway or sluice, containing riffles. Large amounts of "pay dirt" were shoveled into this sluice. The dirt was moved forward by the action of the water and separated into gold or metallic remains by the action of the riffles while the dirt went on through the sluice. Probably the most prominent of these ditches extended to Piety Hill or Igo from the north fork of Cottonwood Creek. This series of flumes and ditches covered over 22 miles and was dug by some 600 Chinese laborers.

Another efficient mode of operation used by the mining company was hydraulic mining. In this process, a heavy current of water was poured against a side hill, and the loosened dirt was directed through a sluicing device. By this method a bank of earth could be washed away like a haystack, thus allowing for a much faster operation than by the old-fashioned sluicing method. However, hydraulic mining, because of its contamination of creeks and rivers, was outlawed by federal court order in 1884.

Dredging also played an important part in the gold mining picture down through the years. The dredger bit into the earth with its steel bucket, placed the "pay dirt" onto an endless belt which carried it to a "hopper." Here the stones were sifted out and water carried the dirt over "riffles" where the gold was caught. The objection voiced against hydraulic mining was avoided by damming up the space occupied by the dredger to prevent tailings from reaching a stream or river. This method of mining continued to some degree in southern Shasta County until the 1940's.

Several locations in the Shasta County gold mining record deserve recognition. As was previously mentioned, the Clear Creek mines led by the efforts at Horsetown and Shasta provided the initial impetus. The Washington Mine at French Gulch, the greatest of the early Shasta County gold producers and the first quartz effort in this section, started in 1852. Gold found in 1853 on the north side of Squaw Creek in what became known as the Pittsburg district started the Bully Hill stampede. In the next several decades many others were added. These included the Calumet Mine at Buckeye, the American mine at French Gulch, the Midas Mine at Harrison Gulch, and the early gold activity at Iron Mountain.

Although copper replaced gold as the leading mineral in Shasta County after the turn of the century, the latter metal continued to maintain its importance into the 1930's. For instance, in 1907 the county derived more than \$1,000,000 from gold producers, a figure which made up approximately one-seventh of the county's mineral output. However, by the world War II period gold mining was almost a lost art to this region. This condition was attributable principally to economic changes during the three decades following the depression. As the cost of gold mining increased, the price of gold in the United States remained static. Thus the present price of about \$35 per ounce is insufficient to guarantee profitable mining in most cases.

With the decline of gold mining in the late 1800's, those who derived their wealth from beneath the earth's surface turned to other facets of mineral exploration. In the early 60's considerable stir had resulted from the discovery of an apparently inexhaustible ore crescent located to the north, east and west of what is now Redding. Although copper formed the basis of this mineralized horseshoe, clay products, silver, iron ore, pyrite, zinc and some gold were also part of this belt. The copper period fell roughly between 1890 and 1915. During that period Shasta County led the state in copper production as well as in silver and iron ore. In fact, mineral profits from the county averaged approximately \$5,500,000 annually during this era and involved a typical employment of 2,500 men. Involved were a half dozen major smelters extending from the Iron Mountain on the west to the Afterthought Mine at Ingot on the east.

The Iron Mountain Copper Company, near the town of Keswick, was begun in 1896 under the auspices of a London business consolidation. This mine was first owned by three men—James Salee, Charles Camden and William Magee, who had mined silver in the area until they were able to interest the British firm in their claim. Copper smelting continued until 1907, bringing the town of Keswick into community status with a population of some 1,500 in its peak period around 1905-07. In 1907 the smelter at Keswick was shut down and a flotation plant installed. Between the World War I period and 1962, several ores formed the basis of the Iron Mountain operation. Interspersed in the past forty years has been the production of copper, gold, zinc and pyrite. The latter, a mineral used in the production of sulfuric acid, was taken from an open pit operation in use by the company from 1955 to 1962. Between fifty and sixty men were employed by the Mountain Copper Company until 1962, when the company was forced to cease operation because it could no longer be operated profitably.

As one moved eastward in the copper crescent, the major producers included the Delamar or Bully Hill location, the Mammoth Mine and the Balaklala operation. The former site, historically known as the Pittsburg district, boasted a smelter town of 700 and a daily ore output of 150 tons. This operation lasted until about 1910. The Mammoth Mine, which was served by the now submerged city of Kennett, was the most persistent copper producer of the lot. Its smelter, the largest on the Pacific Coast, opened for business in 1905 and lasted until 1919. This smelter caused such consternation to local farmers that it was forced to build a "baghouse" filtering plant in 1910. The Balaklala operation, adjacent to the town of Coram, was unique in that its machinery was operated by electricity. It was smelter smoke from this source that prompted a court order in 1917 restraining the company's operation.

On the far eastern tip of the mineral belt was the Furnaceville district dominated by the Afterthought Mine at Ingot. Discovered in 1872, the Afterthought was first worked for gold rather than copper. Plagued by the presence of zinc and copper sulfides, the mine was initially shut down in 1920, reopened in 1925, again terminated and reopened again in 1945. Its operation was ended with finality shortly thereafter.

Copper production in Shasta County reached its zenith in 1909. In that year this area led the state with a total output exceeding 58,000,000 pounds valued at \$7,581,115. However, by the World War I period copper mining in Shasta County was about ended. Several factors contributed to this decline. The presence of zinc with Shasta County copper was a major problem. The low price of copper combined with the cost of sending the ore to distant refining points added to the dilemma. In addition, competition had increased, and the violent protests of local citizens incensed by the discomfort brought by the smelter fumes were also factors. Complaints and law-suits from as far south as Red Bluff about dead fish in the river, obnoxious fumes, and dying fruit trees played their part in the eventual withdrawal of this Shasta County industry. In addition, labor difficulties played a part in the discontinuance of copper mining and smelting.

At the present time this once leading mineral county in California is no longer dependent upon her ores for a substantial economic base. Nevertheless, important mineral deposits including iron ore, gold, platinum, manganese and silver still exist in abundance. Of recent origin is the Calaveras Cement Company plant located north of Redding at Mountain Gate. In addition, the discovery of new refining processes indicate the possible use of the area's iron ore for steel production. Thus with the change brought by time and man's inventiveness, Shasta may again be recognized as a leading mineral county of California.