

History of Mining on Spring Creek and Shady Creek

San Juan Ridge is between the Middle Yuba River and the South Yuba River. Fifty million years ago there were a series of gold bearing (auriferous) streams here in what geologists call the Tertiary Period. This was prior to the formation of the Sierra Nevada. Possibly 20 million but certainly by 10 million years ago the northern Sierra was uplifted and tilted to the west. This was a gradual process that caused the Yuba and other streams to flow generally westward. In the process the westerly flowing streams eroded portions of the tertiary streams releasing gold into the Feather, Yuba, Bear, and American River drainages. The streamside gold that was the impetus for the gold rush was, in large part, eroded from the ancient streams beds.

Meanwhile segments of the tertiary channels were left intact as gravel beds on present-day ridges. In many places there is a volcanic lava cap covering the tertiary gravels but on the lower San Juan Ridge, between North Columbia and French Corral, the lava cap has eroded away. Easy access to tertiary gravels combined with sufficient water to mine them facilitated mining in the area. The headwaters of Spring Creek and Shady Creek are near the junction of two large tertiary streams “where the auriferous gravel deposits are extensive” (Mac Boyle 1919:100, Lawler:1989).

1849 – 1853

The first recorded placer gold mining on Shady Creek was in 1850. The miners were Cherokee Indians who had their own homeland overrun and mined for placer gold beginning in 1829. Andrew Jackson, a well-know land speculator with overt hostility towards indigenous people, was elected President in 1820. By May of 1830 he pushed the Indian Removal Act through Congress. (Williams 1993:37-38). But, before being forced off their homeland the Cherokee had learned how to mine placer gold, which gave them a serious advantage over the predominantly novice prospectors who were pouring into the foothills. In the early days of the California gold rush the only miners with any experience were Hispanics and Southerners (including Cherokees) from Georgia who introduced the American pan, the rocker and the long-tom.

In 1851 the long-toms at Cherokee were supplied by the fourteen-mile long Grizzly Ditch, which originated on Bloody Run Creek. Prior to the invention of hydraulic mining in 1853, Cherokee was the mining center of the San Juan Ridge. (Dornin 1867:341,345).

In October of 1853 W.L. Tisdale took out mining claims and built a log cabin near Columbia Hill. He and his partners subsequently “cut a ditch” which was later sold to the Middle Yuba Consolidated Canal Company (Bean 1867:396). They were obviously hydraulic mining.

Later that year the Grizzly Ditch was extended to serve San Juan while the Poorman Creek Ditch was under construction to serve “the flats” (Woolseys Flat, Moores Flat, Orleans Flat and Snow Point) on the north slope of the ridge. On the south side the ditches belonging to Captain Irwin were being enlarged to serve the Relief Hill, Humbug Creek, Columbia Hill and Montezuma Hill mines.

1853 – 1865

Hydraulic mining was simultaneously discovered in Nevada City and Yankee Jim’s in Placer County in 1853. It was a major advancement in placer mining. By using pressurized water, gold bearing gravels in “hill diggings” (tertiary gravels) were reduced to slurry. The muddy mess was then run through sluices where gold was recovered by using the principal of gravity. In hydraulic mining water was used as a direct power source, as a transporter of waste, and as an element in gravity separation. It was valued for its physical properties and not for its chemical or aesthetic ones.

A hydraulic mine is more than an open pit or a “moonscape”, as in the case of the mines near Columbia Hill. Typically there is an elaborate water conveyance system that includes

upcountry dams, ditches, flumes, reservoirs, etc. Below the workings are sluices and, in a large operation, drain tunnels. Water was absolutely essential to the process.

Hydraulic mining was wildly successful and was used wherever possible. Water rights became as valuable as mining claims with water companies selling water to claim holders. The Eureka Lake Company originated in 1855 when a group of French miners led by inventor and entrepreneur Benoit Faucherie teamed with San Francisco investors to buy water rights to the lakes and streams in the upper reaches of Canyon Creek, a major tributary of the South Yuba. They also improved dams and doubled the capacity of reservoirs at French (Eureka) Lake and Lake Faucherie.

Between 1855 and 1860 the Eureka Lake Company consolidated all of the smaller ditches on the San Juan Ridge with the exception of the Middle Yuba Canal and the Shady Creek Ditch (1851), which latter evolved into the Milton Mining and Water Company.

In 1859 the Eureka Lake Company enlarged its capacity by building a seventy-foot high dam on Canyon Creek. Their canal was five feet nine inches wide by three feet deep and delivered ninety-six cubic feet per second, or 3,485 miners' inches (Black 1864:23-24). At Cherry Hill Gap, west of Graniteville, the former Irwin Ditch entered the south slope of San Juan Ridge and traveled a contour for 27 miles past the Relief Hill and North Bloomfield diggings and on to the Lake City Reservoir where extensions ran to Kennebec Hill and Grizzly Hill. The main canal continued to the large Columbia Hill reservoir where water was routed to mines on either side of the ridge. The Junction Reservoir was one of three reservoirs in the vicinity Columbia Hill (Black 1864:26,28).

The 1860 Census shows 237 adults at Columbia Hill (185 men and 52 women). In the same year a Post Office was established under the name North Columbia (there was already a Columbia Post Office in Tuolumne County).

Prior to 1862 many of the local hydraulic mining claims were small and lacked adequate water storage capabilities. Therefore they bought water based on anticipated production. Before long most were so in debt to the Eureka Lake Company that they relinquished their claims in lieu of payment. The *Nevada Transcript* of May 19, 1864, reported that the Eureka Lake Company (McDonald Claims) was "working six or seven sets of diggings", and they "were paying exceedingly well, with more money out than for the past six years."

Gold was discovered on the Frazer River in British Columbia in 1858 and silver was found on the Comstock Lode in 1859. Here in Nevada County the easy to find streamside placer gold was gone, the shallow gravels were exhausted, and river mining claims were covered by tailings from hydraulic mining leaving the mining population disillusioned. About a third of them left to pursue the new discoveries leaving Nevada County drained of capital, expertise and manpower (Bean 1867:15)

Those who travelled to the Comstock found themselves working as wage earners in large, well-financed operations where they learned how to mine underground. In September of 1862 those same financiers formed the San Francisco Stock and Exchange Board, the first mining exchange in the United States. This led to a frenzy of speculation.

Meanwhile some Comstock returnees had acquired a taste for investment opportunities and most workingmen were comfortable with the prospect of long-range employment with large companies.

1865 – 1884

Before 1865 mining companies were technically trespassing on government land. Investors were reluctant to take risks because of potentially costly litigation. In the "Practice Act" of 1851 California already adopted "the regulations and customs" of California as mining law. Predictably, The Congressional Act of July 26, 1866 recognized California mining customs and rules as long as they were not in conflict with Federal Law. The new law recognized water rights

and rights-of-way for ditches, and it established procedures for obtaining patented mining ground.

On January 1, 1866 the Eureka Lake Water Company merged with the Middle Yuba Canal and Water Company to become the Eureka Lake and Yuba Canal Company Consolidated with offices in New York. The new company incorporated with \$500,000 in capital and sold 15,000 shares at \$100 each (Black 1864:27). At the same time the company acquired a considerable amount of mining ground in the Shady Creek and Spring Creek drainages where smaller claimants were in default for water payments. Water was sold by the miner's inch, but it was not standardized. Some mines used water for 10 or 12 hours a day, while others operated for 24 hours. A "Smartsville inch" was not the same as a "Bloomfield inch". In 1905 the State standardized the Miner's Inch as 11.22 gallons per minute or 16,158 gallons per day.

By 1866 one large corporation based in New York controlled water and hydraulic mining on the San Juan Ridge. They had capital, the best hydraulic and mining engineers, rich gravel land, control of the water, business-like resolve, and no local concerns. Within a few years the North Bloomfield Mining and Gravel Company, with backing from San Francisco investors, began constructing their own water conveyance system on the south side of the ridge.

Life was good – there was general prosperity on The Ridge. Every settlement on the San Juan Ridge was directly or indirectly involved with the hydraulic mining economy. There were Post Offices in French Corral, Sweetland, North San Juan, Patterson (Cherokee), North Columbia (Columbia Hill), Moores Flat, Painsville (Lake City), North Bloomfield, Relief Hill and Graniteville. Smaller communities like Birchville, Sebastopol, Montezuma Hill, Orleans Flat and others were also dependent on hydraulic mining. North San Juan was the undisputed hub of culture on the ridge with five different newspapers published there between 1858 and 1873.

Voracious hydraulic mining forced Columbia Hill residents to relocate. *The San Juan Times* of August 8, 1874 reported, "The town of Columbia Hill is nearly mined away ... the house owners are stubborn and won't yield". The new town was located close to the Upper Reservoir, near Lake City Road. In 1876 the town consisted of "a store, three saloons, a number of dwellings, a Post Office and a school" (Wells 1880:60). The local community built the North Columbia schoolhouse in 1875. It's the same schoolhouse that serves as a community cultural center today.

Hydraulic mining was devastating to the environment. Water below the workings was muddy, choked with tailings, and contaminated with quicksilver (mercury). There was also a tremendous demand on the nearby forests. *The San Juan Times* of August 8, 1874, reported that, "Brodrick's mill near Columbia Hill is in full blast." Nearby, Crawford operated a sawmill near Spring Creek. Hydraulic mining used enormous amounts of timber for flumes, sluices, structures and fuel wood. For example, in 1875 when the Eureka Lake Company was working the eastern portion of their holdings to a deeper level, Spring Creek was their outlet. They used an eight-foot wide sluice that was over 6,200 feet long (Hague 1876:46).

Beginning in 1874 the Eureka Lake Company consolidated formerly independent claims into the Western and Central Gravel mines on Shady Creek and the Consolidated Claim on Spring Creek. The combined claims totaled 1445 acres – nearly all of it was mining ground. According to *The San Juan Times* of October 6, 1877 the Eureka Lake Company, while mining the McCarthy diggings on Spring Creek, found a quantity of gold. "The yield is said to have been immense ... proceeds in confidence ... high up in the thousands."

The Debris Controversy

Tailings from hydraulic mines consisted of boulders, cobbles, gravel and mud. From the miners perspective tailings were in the way and needed to be eliminated from the mining site by dumping them into the nearest drainage. This was accomplished by creating deep cuts, or drain tunnels. Mines on San Juan Ridge created the largest and most expensive drain tunnels in the

Sierra Nevada. Among them were the North Bloomfield (7,874'), the French Corral (5,048'), the Farrell at Columbia Hill (2,200'), and the English at Badger Hill (2,000').

The tailings, or debris as it was called in the valley, choked streams, impeded navigability of the waterways, caused flooding and covered agricultural holdings in the Sacramento Valley. As early as 1868 levees were created in Marysville to prevent flooding. Nevertheless Marysville was flooded in the winter of 1875-1876, and Sacramento was flooded in the following winter.

In August of 1878 farmers, businessmen and townspeople met in Yuba City to form The Anti Debris Association of the Sacramento Valley. Their objective was to prosecute to a final decision a legal case that tested the right of miners to use rivers as hydraulic mine dumps. An initial injunction was issued in 1879, but it was reversed by a technicality. Legal battles continued for the next few years culminating with the *Woodruff vs. North Bloomfield Gravel Mining Company*.

After reviewing testimony from 2,000 witnesses and 20,000 pages of text, Judge Lorenzo Sawyer issued his final decision on January 7, 1884. In it the defendant was perpetually enjoined from discharging tailings of any size or type into the Yuba River. This ruling affected all hydraulic miners in the Sierra Nevada foothills and effectively ended large-scale hydraulic mining. Sawyer's Decision is sometimes referred to as environmental legislation, but it was actually nothing more than establishing the primacy of one kind of land use over another – agriculture over mining.

The hydraulic miners of San Juan Ridge were in a state of shock. At Columbia Hill they had been sending tailings down Spring Creek and Shady Creek to the South Yuba, and down Lairds Ravine to Grizzly Creek and the Middle Yuba. Some miners were defiant and continued mining on a smaller scale only to be hounded by agents of the Anti-Debris Association. When investors pulled out the infrastructure could no longer be maintained. The winter of 1889-1890 destroyed most of the flumes that were once maintained by the water and mining companies. Thus ended the prosperous era of hydraulic mining on San Juan Ridge.

Post 1884

Streamside placers were still intermittently mined, although many long-time owners were selling out. In 1886 John McCarthy sold a 1/3 interest in his mine to Sue Kee and Jim Yet Wah of North Bloomfield. Their claim included 1800 linear feet of "the beds and banks" of Spring Creek (*Nevada County Book of Deeds*, Book 68, pg.4).

The Daily Transcript, of Nevada City, posted a column by a Columbia Hill correspondent on February 19, 1887. In it "Joe" referred to hydraulic mining as "an industry of the past". Instead he praised the apples, peaches, plums and pears, walnuts, chestnuts and figs that were grown locally. He even mentioned "several thrifty young orange trees to be seen in this locality."

In 1891 there was some employment in nearby lode mines like the Delhi, the St. Gothard and the Enterprise. Between them they employed 47 men. With ever increasing operating costs production was erratic. The *Nevada County Mining Review* succinctly evaluated the area's situation: "Like all other Ridge towns Columbia Hill is dull and quiet since its principle industry – hydraulic mining – has been placed under the ban" (Prisk 1895:60).

A strong earthquake rocked San Francisco in 1906. Among the destroyed structures was the Pacific Stock Exchange. Investors were now focused on rebuilding the city and not on gold mines. Eureka Lake Company folded in December of the same year for failure to pay their license tax.

The *Fifteenth Report of the State Mineralogist* estimated that there were still 165,000,000 cubic yards of un-worked gravel at the diggings near North Columbia (Mac Boyle 1919:100-101)

Gold's value increased from \$20.67 to \$35 an ounce in the 1930s creating renewed interest in mining. During The Depression the *Saturday Evening Post* ran an article that described Grass Valley and Nevada City as places unaffected by hard times. Hundreds of people arrived looking for mining jobs that were already taken by locals. Homeless and broke, they lived in tents or built simple structures while panning for gold, fishing, hunting and gathering berries. Ruth Paine (1992) remembered families of "river people" at Edwards Crossing in 1933 and 1934.

When Nevada County Congressman Harry Englebright proposed a debris dam on the main trunk of the Yuba in 1934 San Juan Gold owned most of the former holdings of Eureka Lake Company. Their intent was to resume hydraulic mining by using the Narrows Dam (Englebright) for debris storage. For water they wanted to build a diversion dam at German Bar on the Middle Yuba to supplement ditch flow from Bloody Run where they owned the water rights. The water would then flow to the reservoir below the Coughlin's place (George Taylor:1997). The outbreak of World War II interrupted their plan. Small intermittent mining operations continued on San Juan Gold's property. In the 1940s there was a small dragline operation in the diggings near North Columbia where 18 men were employed "with mixed success" (Bradley 1941:436). The Dulo Mining Corporation (1969-1970) set up a concentrating plant on Spring Creek. An "air-flow" table was used to separate the gold from the heavy black sand concentrate. They were mining the lower 80 feet of gravel (Yeend 1974:36).

As you know mining is again an issue on San Juan Ridge. Attempts at gold mining are episodic because they are based on world financial markets and not on the real value of a place, which is probably best determined by the people who live there.

Hank Meals
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