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VOLCANO and BUILDINGS

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VOLCANO AND BUILDINGS

The mining towns and boom towns of California's Mother Lode - each epitomizes the history of the gold rush, and together they make up a more amazing story of human activity than ever has been evolved in thought or literature. Typical of the "diggings" was Volcano in Amador County, located about twelve miles northeast of Jackson.

Gold was first discovered at Volcano in 1848 by a party of discharged soldiers from Colonel Jonathan D. Stevenson's regiment of New York Volunteers. The group erected two huts in Soldiers' Gulch, thus giving that place its name. Evidently they did not last through the first winter, for, early in the spring of 1849, a party of Mexicans arrived at the location and found two dead bodies in the deserted huts. The corpses were buried on what afterwards became known as Graveyard Hill.

The real growth of Volcano began in 1849. The first arrivals were the Mexicans, who were followed by a party of eight men from Illinois led by John Green and William Wiley. Close on their heels came Jacob Cook and party. By the end of its first year the settlement numbered about one hundred miners.¹

1. J. D. Mason, History of Amador County, California, 202-203.

When the town acquired its name is uncertain. It seems to have been called Soldiers' Gulch for a time but that was subsequently changed by miners on account of the black limestone boulders, the conical hills, and the prevalence of a heavy clay stratum called by the miners, "lava." The general appearance of the country-side confirmed the belief that the place had been a crater.²

Volcano justified its name; and in much the same way many another mining town could have used it. Just as the rumbling of an active crater precedes the eventual eruption, so in the case of this Volcano the first years of placer mining produced only scattered instances of great wealth. For about three years, Volcano was a placer camp. Hydraulic and quartz mining were not used in the mining country until 1851 and 1852. Gold bearing gravel sporadically yielded great nuggets, but as in the case of most of the Southern Mines below Weber's Creek, the gold was not scattered as evenly as in the Northern Mines. With the development of hydraulic and quartz mining, however, the great riches of Volcano were yielded.

A graphic example is furnished in the workings which became known as the Georgia Claim. Green's Illinois

2. Evening Bulletin, San Francisco, October 7, 1857;
T. H. Hittell, History of California, III, 113.

party staked a claim about two hundred yards from Sutter Creek. A reddish clay, about eight feet deep, covered the surface of the ground. Below was a rich pay gravel from which gold could be picked by hand. (More ordinarily, the dirt was carried to the creek in buckets and there washed in a rocker.) This gravel yielded about a hundred dollars a day to the man, and occasionally a large nugget of coarse gold was uncovered. At a depth of about fifteen feet, the miners struck a yellow clay so tough that it could not be washed. The claim was abandoned as exhausted, but means were found later to soften the tough clay. The claim was worked continually for some thirty years, during which time about one million dollars worth of gold was extracted. ³

Placer mining in the early years, however, yielded enough to make Volcano boom and roar with the noisy turbulence consequent upon mushroom growth. Saloons, gambling halls, gun and knife fights, lynching, bad men - the color of the mining town tinted the history of every settlement on the Mother Lode.

The town bad man at Volcano was Rod Stowell, formerly a Texas Ranger. Knife or gun, it made little difference to Stowell which he used, he being proficient in

3. Mason, Amador County, 203.

handling both. He finally faded from sight after being wounded in a gun fight which left him crippled for life.

Lawlessness, however, was but a passing phase of the story of a mining camp. It was generally the result of the influx of transients who rallied around rich diggings during the rainy season when the pickings were easy. Not as spectacular, but certainly more stable and important, were those who became permanent residents of the camps. They organized the town governments, established businesses, and built churches and schools. The first store in Volcano was started in 1849 by Cook and Company, whose original stock consisted of a barrel each of syrup, whisky, and vinegar. Syrup sold for five dollars a gallon, vinegar the same, and whisky for fifty cents a drink. The company also provided accommodations for a few boarders at twenty-one dollars a week. The following year brought a restaurant, more stores, and, of course, saloons.

Mining was not the only source of the town's economic strength. The Volcano flat at the junction of Soldiers' Gulch and Sutter Creek was occupied by ranchers as early as 1851. The soil produced well, one witness testifying that it yielded 750 bushels of potatoes to the acre. Tomatoes, beans, corn, and other vegetables "flourished with unknown luxuriance," and sold at high prices.

In the early years, it is reported, green corn sold for one dollar per dozen; cucumbers, fifty cents; tomatoes, carrots, beans, cabbage, and other vegetables brought ten cents per pound. As late as 1857, an Oregon apple was⁴ worth one dollar in the winter.

With the introduction of quartz and hydraulic mining in the early 1850's, Volcano came into its full growth. The town boasted its largest population in 1855, when twelve hundred votes were cast. That, however, was the peak. Many were drawn away in the latter half of the decade by the Table Mountain excitement in 1856 and the Frazer River Boom a year or so later. Despite the continued high yield of many claims, population decreased steadily for some twenty years until, in 1876, some important quartz discoveries created another small rush. Volcano was thereupon again "reckoned as a promising town," but not for long.

Throughout its history, as was typical of any mining town, the dry season of the year was often marked by disastrous, widespread fires. The first large fire occurred on an August night in 1853. It started in the Eureka Hotel, a recently constructed two-story frame build-

4. Mason, Amador County, 206.

ing. There was as yet no fire bell or any other means of arousing the people, so that the alarm was spread by shooting off revolvers, "like firecrackers." The whole town would have been destroyed had there not been a deep water hole in the vicinity; to it a bucket brigade was formed and the course of the conflagration was arrested.

That was but the first of many fires. The most disastrous occurred in November, 1859, when twenty-five buildings were wholly or partially consumed, with an aggregate loss of about sixty thousand dollars. In the following decade there were large fires in 1862 and 1865. The year 1868 was called the year of fires because during that time there were at least five. Most of the buildings burned had been insured at a time when property values were high and the town prosperous. There was a strong suspicion that the fires were not entirely accidental; by the late 1860's insurance often amounted to more than the buildings would have sold for in the market.⁵

Thus a characteristically checkered story forms the history of Volcano. A good description of the town in its declining days was furnished by a correspondent for the Alta California in 1873. He reported that, despite

5. Mason, Amador County, 210-211.

its lively and eruptive name, Volcano was very dull and quiet. Its business was placer and a little quartz mining, supplemented by whisky drinking, card playing, and an occasional dance. Its population - Americans, Chinese, and "scores of the dark-browed sons of Italy" - merely grubbed for a stake, for gold dust was "as scarce as an honest Congressman." The fun and frolic of the carefree early days had vanished with the gold.

Physically, also, the town had degenerated. Many of the buildings destroyed by fire had not been rebuilt, thus leaving unsightly gaps. "Through the chinks and crevices of deserted shanties, the sunlight penetrates, and the mountain breeze sings mournfully." There was only one hotel, frequented almost entirely by miners whose "... costumes and conversation are irksomely similar...."⁶

Our correspondent took up the cudgels in behalf of Volcano in the case of one accusation against the morals of the town. For a while Volcano had a bad reputation as a haven for highwaymen, many stage coach robberies having occurred in the vicinity. The largest haul made by the bandits was on the morning of May 1, 1872, when they held up the Wells Fargo stage and got away with ten thousand

6. Alta California, San Francisco, April 20, 1873.

dollars worth of bullion. Several prominent men in town were suspected of complicity in the hold-up, but no arrests were made except in the case of John N. Boardman, who was tried and acquitted. As a result of the great loss, the express company closed its agency in Volcano.⁷

Thereafter, the town was generally accorded a bad reputation. The Daily Alta correspondent in 1873 found that:

... this bad name is not deserved. The bulk of the population are good fellows in the main, and honest Perhaps Wells, Fargo and Co., are to blame for the unjust stigma attached to the place. You may remember ... that in their Express Office in San Francisco, a handbill used to be displayed occasionally relating to a stage robbery, with the word 'Volcano' printed therein in black six-line pica type There are no stage robberies now But the Paul Cliffords and Dick Turpins of the mountain roads have certainly shadowed Volcano with undeserved suspicion.

A stage driver might have pointed out with some justification that the highwaymen had left the vicinity of Volcano about the time that the value of the gold shipments had fallen off.

Nearly everywhere an observer could see evidences

7. Mason, Amador County, 214.

of placer mining operations which had yielded large profits in former years. In 1873, a few miners were still working over the ground, but they were barely making wages. In all, the "flat" within the area of a mile square had yielded about ten millions of dollars in gold, but the richest days had passed. Besides the placers, some hydraulic claims were still worked with profit, but there, also, the yield was not very attractive.⁸

A mere fragment of the "Crater City of '49" remains today. Even that soon may be entirely sunk beneath the reservoir of a proposed hydro-electric power system. "Thus will be quenched Volcano, an inferno of activity in its hot time, when fifty saloons were agog with clamor and excitement."⁹

8. Alta California, San Francisco, April 20, 1873.
9. A. Drury, California: an intimate guide, 440.

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