

Expedition commemorates history of Divide mine town

By Norman McLeod

On Dec. 10, an auto caravan from Auburn arrived in Foresthill, representing the Sierra Nevada hiking class under Gene Markley. They brought with them a historic marker to be installed on the site of the old gold mining settlement of Damascus. They were met by several members of the Foresthill Divide Historical Society who joined the group.

The motor caravan drove to the site of Forks House, turned left on the old Elliot Ranch Road, drove past the turnoff to the Red Point Mine and after a few miles arrived at the main road into Humbug Canyon, barricaded as usual by a husky locked gate.

But we were not interested in Humbug this trip. Gene Markley led us into a forest of pines over the old wagon road into Damascus, leading south about a mile from where we parked our vehicles.

Damascus was founded in 1852 by Dr. D.W. Strong, a prospector who discovered gold in a surface stratum of quartz gravel. Placer and hydraulic mining were attempted first and in 1854 the original tunnel mine — the Golden Gate — was established. Another operation, the Mountain Tunnel Co., commenced digging west of the former and in 1863 the two companies were consolidated under the name of Mountain Gate Mining Co.

The Mountain Gate probed to a depth of 7,000 feet and was eventually connected with the rich Hidden Treasure Mine of Sunny South in a remarkable feat of engineering. The Mountain Gate produced well over a million dollars in gold.

The population of Damascus probably never exceeded 150. The town contained a post office, schoolhouse, a large hotel and store and numerous comfortable cottages with garden plots and orchards. It also boasted a brass band.

The road we followed led us into a large clearing in which stood several ancient fruit trees over 100 years old. Dominating the scene was a giant black oak tree that John Smith of Foresthill estimated to be at least 400 years old. Markley explained the clearing was not the townsite, but the location of the main orchard. The townsite itself has, during the years, been obliterated by mining operations.

The weather was warm, with a bright sun pinned to a nearly clear sky. We gathered around a large, almost flat rock near the black oak. Markley produced star drills for hammering one-inch holes into the rock, into which the historic marker was to be installed.

The hammering was slow and tedious, taking several hours. Each of us took turns in the work, slowly turning the drill with one hand while hammering with the other. It was the same method of drilling used by early miners in digging tunnels. Even the numerous female members of the party participated.

While the drilling went on, others — including Foresthill residents "Rip" Van Winkle and Mark Storey — explored the outer area.

At noon, the work stopped for lunch. The Foresthill group had not brought food, so most of us departed, with the plaque installation still unfinished.

Markley advised that he and his class plan to install additional markers in the future on the Divide, including Red Point and Sunny South.

Undoubtedly members of the local historical society will want to organize a group hike into the Damascus site at some time in the near future. Anyone else interested can contact the writer at 367-2804. It is an easy walk, about two miles round trip.

Damascus marker
metal plaque
Placed on a basset
boulder S.E. corner
near a large black
oak

1-4-89 (Messenger)