

Nuggets from the Past

By Norman McLeod

Hiking on The Divide

This past Aug. 20, 10 members of the Foresthill Historical Society hiked into the site of Damascus, an old gold mining town located on the southern rim of Humbug Canyon on the Foresthill Divide.

Damascus was founded in 1852 by prospector Dr. D.W. Strong, who discovered an outcropping of gold quartz. It was originally named Strong's Diggings.

A post office was later established in the new settlement that accompanied a school, large hotel and general store. But, Damascus never grew to more than 150 residents.

Its first mine, the Golden Gate, later merged with the Mountain Tunnel Co. in 1863, under the name Mountain Gate Mining Co. The 21 owners drilled to a depth of 7,000 feet into the north slope of the Foresthill Divide. In 1876, this adit was connected to the Hidden Treasure Mine tunnel, boring in from the south slope at Sunny South. At first, this connection proved very profitable for both companies.

While summer temperatures in Damascus were pleasing, its winters were subject to deep snows. To survive them, one had to remain healthy, as the nearest doctor was located in Iowa Hill, 10 miles away.

This circumstance gave birth to a tale of true heroism in Damascus. During one of its severest winters, with many feet of snow on the ground, a miner's wife was stricken with a serious case of pneumonia. To try to save her life, 20 men - under the leadership of Gould Coker - set out in the gloom of night in a blinding storm, to break a trail to Iowa Hill for a physician.

They trudged in single file, each man in turn taking the lead, thereby breaking the trail until exhausted - through waist-deep drifts.

At some time the following day, this heroic group staggered into Iowa Hill, where they persuaded Dr. O.H. Petterson to accompany them back to Damascus through the still-raging storm. Their original struggle was renewed, as the heavy-falling snow had all but obliterated their first passage.

With dogged determination, this party of life-savers returned to Damascus, 36 hours later, where the brave doctor administered his remedies to the suffering woman - and saved her life. With the patient rescued from death's door, the stalwart 20 were obliged to again brave the winter onslaught to escort the doctor home, necessitating another 36-hour round trip.

Who were these heroes? With the exception of Coker, their names were not preserved.

On this day, our little party experienced difficulty in locating the Damascus historic marker installed several years ago by Gene Markley's group from Auburn. Roy Turner, the society president, found it imbedded in a large, flat rock near a giant oak tree. By this time, it was the lunch hour, so we gathered on and around the rock, where we ate.

The nearly-level one-mile trail into Damascus was easy, except for heavy outgrowth of brush covering it in spots. It is the intent of some of us next spring to return to this trail, clearing it of the smothering brush.

The actual townsite of Damascus has been obliterated by the adjoining Mountain Gate Quarry. The early town had its private orchard, and this is where we ate our lunch. Several fruit trees are still alive and bearing fruit, including a pear and a mulberry tree. The mulberry was loaded with delicious and juicy red berries.

We remained until 1 p.m. when - with Pat Morris in the lead - we left Damascus with warm feelings of satisfaction and accomplishment.

On a second outing on Aug. 22, three of us from the historical society followed the Mosquito Ridge Road from Foresthill as far as the Last Chance Turnoff. From there, nine miles of good dirt highway ushered Roy Turner, Ron Dierlam and myself

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to the Home Ticket Mine Road.

After a steep descent in Dierlam's Cherokee, we found ourselves in the center of a clearing surrounded by trailers and odd lots of camping paraphernalia. We were greeted by a man expecting us, Butch Narran. A heavy-set, jovial type, he almost immediately opened the camp for our perusal. Butch was about 52-years-old. He confessed to a marriage and seven children, and that his family often visited him at the camp.

He also confided he was a diabetic and had recently suffered a heart attack. "I still scramble up and down these canyons," he said. "My trailer is loaded with pills."

Butch (his real name is Henry that he dislikes) is an ex-Marine who later became

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a mining engineer. In this capacity, he has worked all over the world. Today, he is happy living on The Divide as a more or less casual gold miner.

"I work the streams around here, and one day I hope to expand operations in the Home Ticket," he said.

Our first impulse was to view the Home Ticket tunnel. It lay close to the camp, a large, stand-up adit penetrating a steep ridge. This mine is temporarily incapacitated by a cave-in deep within its bowels.

We next descended a steep footpath down the side of the canyon wall to the bed of Grouse Creek, the same stream that provides water for spectacular Grouse Creek Falls. We enjoyed this quiet, remote spot and ate our lunches along its rippling current. Our climb back to camp was a strenuous one, at least for me.

There are only two small sheds remaining from the original mine. The camp has electricity, even an outdoor television.

Our next point of interest was the nearby Eldorado Mine, where we were met by Eldorado Bob - a 35-year-old bachelor, barefoot and topless. The mine's caretaker, he was in the middle of a truck repair job when we arrived.

Bob escorted us to the nearby Eldorado Mine tunnel, about the same size as Home Ticket - but with a difference. In approaching, we felt cold air emitting from its mouth - like a door opening to an ice factory. Bob explained that the temperature inside was a steady 46 degrees, caused by its four miles of tunnel and deep air shafts.

Bob is something of a recluse, living at the mine year around. "I get some bad winters up here when it's necessary to hike out on showshoes to my truck," he said. He parks his supply truck outside on the highway.

He is also a volunteer firefighter, who barely missed being called to help fight the disastrous Cottonwood fire.

Our third - and final - stop was the Last Chance Cemetery. Here we observed that a good portion of its perimeter rail fence was down, the result of post rot.

In leaving Last Chance, we paused briefly to look for the trailhead to Startown - without success. "Get it next time," was Dierlam's comment.