

Nuggets from the Past

By Norman McLeod

Of time and places past ...

Back in the 1850s, the Foresthill Divide was a busy, booming place. There were numerous toll roads, bridges, mining ditches, sawmills, quartz (stamp) mills and yes, gold mines. Also, towns that have long since disappeared.

One such town was Yorkville. It stood on a narrow ridge running down between First and Second Brushy Canyons, not far from Foresthill, located about 1-1/2 miles northeast of Yankee Jims.

It contained both tunnel and hydraulic gold mines, some of which were very rich. The town had an average voting population of around 90. The diggings were first discovered in 1853 by three prospectors - Moss, Emmens and Ewer - who sank a shaft to bedrock from the top of the ridge just below where the town later stood.

The ridge was later pierced by numerous tunnels, some of which were entirely dug through from one canyon to the other.

The business section of the town comprised a general store, a billiard saloon and a boarding house - each of which did a thriving business.

For years, capitalists attempted to reach the rich deposits on the Foresthill Divide Main Ridge by tunneling through from the Bushy Canyon area at very great expense. However, none of the tunnels ever pierced the main gravel deposits supposed to exist in the center of The Divide. A good many, however, found good pay dirt upon the rim rock, thereby losing nothing of their initial investments.

Some companies operated their tunnels for many years in hope of eventually reaching the "main lead" to become instant millionaires.

Longtime Foresthill resident Jim McMahan once showed me what he considered to be the former site of Yorkville. There were no physical traces of the town to be seen; however, he did point out several abandoned mine tunnels.

Let us now go to the town of Foresthill itself, with a few not-so-well-known facts. In 1856, the Forest House and Ranch was purchased from its original owners by Messrs. Hardy and Kennedy, who built a storehouse near where their brick block stood. The block included their general store.

In 1857, they sold to J. W. Phillips the old Forest House and the south half of the ranch, whereupon he immediately layed out the area into suitably-sized building lots - offering them for sale.

At about the same time, other individuals purchased lots and also built, and soon a considerable town sprang up with extensive trade.

The building of the town where it now stands not only drew large transferees to its business section from surrounding towns, but business people and residents in the old town of Forest Hill under the ridge ventured into the new town.

Soon a heavy trade commenced, drawn to the place from river bars and other small towns and camps surrounding it.

At that time, the new town of Forest Hill stood on the main thoroughfare leading to Michigan Bluff, Last Chance, Deadwood, Forks House, Westville and the entire upper divide.

In the summer of 1858, Hardy and Kennedy erected the first fireproof building in Forest Hill.

Until 1861, the amount of tunneling done on The Divide between Forest Hill and Michigan Bluff was 124,530 feet, at a cost of \$1.89 million. Forest Hill mining resources then were greater than any other mining district in Placer County. In addition, its extensive forests were supplying not only sufficient lumber (with numerous sawmills) for its local needs, but the mills were shipping large quantities to Auburn, Sacramento and various ranches in the agricultural districts.

In fact, lumber was so cheap on the Foresthill Divide it was sold in Sacramento at prices competitive with any other part of the country.

By 1861 there were 23 recorded sawmills in Placer County, many of which were

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located on the Foresthill Divide. The Pioneer Sawmill was situated two miles below Yankee Jims with a capacity of 1 million feet per annum; Devil's Canyon Mill, also near Yankee Jims, 200,000 feet per annum; plus the Brushy Sawmill located in the Third Brushy Canyon with 500,000 feet per annum.

There was also the Volcano Sawmill near Michigan Bluff with another 1 million feet annually; the Kings's Old Mill near the head of Shirttail Canyon, 400,000 feet; the Parkins and McCloy Mill at Last Chance, 1.5 million feet; The Todd's Valley Mill, 1 million feet; and the Forest Hill Mill, capacity 2.5 million feet per annum.

In addition there was the Forest Hill Lath and Shingle Mill owned by C. J. Garland, steam-powered, with a capacity of 100,000 laths and 500,000 shingles per year.

Apparently there was only one quartz mill on The Divide at the time - the Pioneer, near Damascus - with nine crushing stamps, 1,400 pounds each, employing 15 hands year around.

As a matter of interest, the Mile Hill Turnpike was a toll road on a portion of the road between Auburn and Yankee Jims, one-quarter mile in length, macadamized one-quarter mile, and valued at \$2,500. Today, this turnpike is part of the Foresthill Road - the steep section just east of the second Lake Clementine turnoff.

The recorded water ditches up to 1861 are as follows: Owl Creek Ditch, taking water from Devil's Canyon, three miles; Paradise Ditch, taking water from Todd's Valley to Paradise and Spanish Bar Bridge, 10 miles in length; Independent Ditch, water from Volcano Canyon, eight miles; Brown and White's Ditch, water from Volcano Canyon, a 12-miler; Miners Ditch, water from south Shirttail Canyon, 18 miles in length; El Dorado Ditch, water from El Dorado Canyon, 18 miles; Black Canyon Ditch, water from Black Canyon to Deadwood; and Parkison and McCoy's Ditch, water from Deep Canyon to Last Chance.

On the subject of mining tunnels on The Divide, there were two in Spring Garden; six in Todd's Valley; Yankee Jims, eight; Bath, 11; 19 in Yorkville; Volcano Canyon had three; five in El Dorado Canyon; four near Ford's House; 29 in or near Deadwood; 16 in Last Chance; 10 in Bird's Valley; and 30 in or near Forest Hill.

(Source material: *Placer County Directory of 1862; Myron Angel's Placer County History, 1882.*)

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