

Quicksilver dominated Solano mining

By Jerry Bowen

Saturday, March 13, 2004

For some of us lucky enough to navigate our way through the complexities and dangers of living and able to dodge the grim reaper for six decades or more, we have been able to experience many things. For me, it was a long circuitous route before I became genuinely interested in history.

The first thing that brought me to this point was when I retired and took up recreational gold and silver mining. The second was when I met Bert Hughes and Bob Allen at the Vacaville Heritage Council. The first got me interested, and the second got me hooked - completely.

As for the subject of this article, I'll deliberate a little on the history of some of Solano County's mines. Yes, I said mines, although they may not have been as titillating and romantic as the California Gold Rush. Yes, we have had some gold mining in the county, but it didn't amount to much.

Mining comes in other forms too, such as the early mining of rock in Cordelia on Nelson's Hill, as it is known today. Rock from there supplied much of early San Francisco's cobbles for the town's streets. Crushed rock surfaced many of Solano County's early roads. Sand, gravel, cement and decorative rock all have been a part of Solano County's contribution to the mining economy. Other quarries also provided many of the same materials and a few still do in a small way.

Now, I'm sure many of you with a few years under your hat might just remember your first experience with "quicksilver," more commonly known as mercury. It was that liquid metal that we used to get from broken thermometers, or it was sometimes provided by early school science teachers. We would rub the magic metal on pennies to turn them silver and on dimes to make them shine, and we did it with our bare fingers.

Today that would never be allowed because we know more about the very real dangers of mercury. Mercury vapors can make you lose your teeth and hair and eventually kill you with enough exposure. Hmm, now I have to wonder if that's why I'm getting a little thin on top.

It may come as a surprise to many of you, but one of Solano County's more successful mining industries was mercury mining. It was done mostly around Sulphur Springs Mountain. The mountain received its name from the White Sulphur Springs, which is

now called Blue Rock Springs. Many years ago local residents called a part of the mountain "Hunter's Hill," because James and Andrew Hunter owned a ranch in the area and the name is still used.

About 70 million years ago, intense heat and pressure from volcanic action formed an ore called cinnabar, which quicksilver comes from. Quicksilver is found in large quantities in the Sulphur Springs Mountain.

Mercury from the area was used heavily in the Comstock milling plants to aid recovering gold and silver.

John Neate, an Englishman from Benicia, first discovered quicksilver on Sulphur Springs Mountain in 1852. But his discovery led to no known mining on the mountain itself.

In 1863, Neate discovered cinnabar on Brownlie Ranch, about a half mile east of the springs. He kept the discovery secret until 1868 because of squatter problems with the Suscol Rancho.

When the land claims finally were settled, Neate arranged with John Brownlie to mine for cinnabar on a profit-sharing basis. Unfortunately, they had little success due to inexperience. Then in 1869, William Baron and Company, owners of the New Idria, Chapman and New Almaden Quicksilver Mines, offered to take over the site and were refused.

A second offer was accepted, and at the end of 1870 they dug two tunnels and one shaft, eventually proving the ore was worth mining. Before 1873, when the mine was closed, it produced quicksilver worth \$30,000. There has been no known mining at the Brownlie Ranch since the mine was closed.

Not one to be discouraged easily, Neate continued prospecting and made a major discovery in the western part of the Sulphur Springs Mountain between two peaks called Mt. St. John and Mt. Luffman on a ranch owned by Joseph Wilson.

A mining company, The St. John's Quicksilver Mining Company, was incorporated on April 28, 1873. The directors were Neate, E.J. Wilson, S.G. Hilborn, S.C. Fowler and J.W. Batcheller.

In 1874, 60 men were employed at the mine. By 1880, the mine yielded 11,530 flasks of quicksilver. One flask held 70 pounds of mercury.

The mine was valued at between \$200,000 and \$300,000 just before it closed in 1880.

Neate had borrowed \$40,000 from Felton to build a furnace, but it failed to process the ore properly. Neate could not settle his debt, so the property was sold.

Neate went to London, hoping to raise money to resume mining at the St. John Mine, but he failed. He ended his days selling a pamphlet of poetry he wrote throughout California.

The St. John Mine was reopened in 1899 and continued producing quicksilver until 1909, then closed down again.

The mine reopened in 1914 and was operated with three principal ore-bearing areas. The main shaft reached a depth of 600 feet. In September 1917 the cost of producing each flask of quicksilver was

\$15 more than it had been in September 1916, and 33 percent more than in 1914. The increase was due to the rise in cost of materials and labor, and to lower labor efficiency. By 1923 the mine closed due to failing profits.

The total production of St. John's Mine by the end of 1917 was 16,483 flasks of quicksilver. The high point of production was in 1875, when 2,100 flasks were produced. From 1904 to 1908 and 1914 to 1919 the mine produced 500 flasks annually. At the time the mine closed in 1923, it extended over 713 acres.

A small amount of quicksilver was mined at St. John's Mine during World War II. The mine is now flooded.

St. John's Mine had other uses as well. Prior to the use of macadam for paving Vallejo streets, which began on a large scale in 1912, various means were used for paving. Some streets were paved with red rock tailings from St. John's Mine, which was considered superior to other types of rock. The rock was hauled to the corner of Sutter and Ohio streets and from there hauled to Vallejo streets as needed.

One other mine of note that had some success was the Hastings Quicksilver Mine, located two miles southeast of St. John's Mine on the opposite side of the mountain from Blue Rock Springs. It operated sporadically until 1930. A tunnel was dug into the mountain more than 900 feet deep, cutting a vein of cinnabar more than 30 feet wide. The tunnel was extended into the source of Blue Rock Springs, diverting water through the tunnel into Lake Herman. The diversion of water away from Blue Rock Springs caused shrubs and more than 500 trees to die. A court order in 1930 ordered the mine closed and the entrance blocked. The spring water then reverted back to its original outlet at Blue Rock.

There is still profitable ore that could be mined in the area, but with new housing developments in and tough environmental laws, it will remain untouched.

Downloaded from the Solano History Database

<http://www.solanohistory.org/207>

<http://articles.solanohistory.net/207/>