MINING IN TRUCKEE???

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In 1863, quartz ledges were discovered in Truckee's Red, White, and Blue Mining District. The strike was short-lived, and mining towns and diggings were deserted within several months. Within a decade, Truckee's strategic position in relation to the transcontinental railroad and to wood and water resources assured its place in history as a major lumbering center. While archaeological evidence of mining and miners is sparse and rudimentary, it is the historic context that is of interest, and the recent and unanticipated discovery that the axis of the region's logging industry also has roots in a mining past.

In their quest for gold, many forty-niners followed up the Truckee River along the Emigrant Trail, passed through the Truckee Basin, and crossed the Sierra over Donner Pass. The discovery of silver in Nevada in 1859 prompted a reverse migration, with many eastbound miners heading back through the Truckee Basin from the gold fields of the Mother Lode to the silver mines of the Comstock. Despite all this movement, the Truckee Basin remained unsettled.

In May 1863, General J. F. Houghton and Butler Ives began their survey of the California-Nevada state line, which took them through Martis Valley in the Truckee Basin. Two members of the survey party found promising ore ledges, deserted the survey party, and were the first to start mining operations. There was silver and gold, but mining was carried out on an exploratory basis, and no ore bodies of any economic importance were found. While the focus was on hard-rock mining and silver ore, we now know that industrious miners in a search of free gold washed down from these ore deposits also engaged in limited placer mining. The diggings were worked by hydraulicking, ground sluicing, and shallow placering, as evidenced by the archaeological end-product of this water-driven mining process—the tailings.

MINING CAMPS

Two mining districts were organized: the Red, White and Blue Mining District in Martis Valley, staged by miners coming from the east, and one in Squaw Valley, populated by miners from the west (Figure 1). William H. Brewer, a member of J. D. Whitney's government geological survey, visited the camps in August 1863.

We struck over a ridge...sinking into a new mining district which is just starting...people are pouring in. As we went down a canyon we passed numerous prospecting holes, where more or less search has been made for silver ore. Since the immense wealth of the Washoe mines has been demonstrated, people are crazy on the subject of silver.... The miners have camps—generally some brush to keep off the sun and dew; but as often nothing. Some blankets lying beside the brook, a tin kettle, a tin cup, and a bag of provisions tell of the home of some adventurous wandering man.... The crowd—only men (neither women nor children are here yet).... Six weeks ago...there were but two miners here; now there are six hundred in this district...[Brewer 1966:444].

Elizabethtown became the Martis Valley hub, "boasting of two or three [houses]...the main store, a shanty twelve feet square, made by driving stakes into the ground, siding two sides with split boards, and then covering with brush. Bacon, salt, pepper, tobacco, flour, and more than all, poor whiskey, are kept" (Brewer 1966:445). The twin camps of Knoxville and Claraville were central to mining around Squaw Valley:

Here I have been examining the "indications" today.... A town is laid off, the place boasts of one or two "hotels" [Figures 2 and 3], several saloons, a butcher shop, a bakery, clothing
Figure 1. Topographical map of Lake Tahoe, 1874.
stores, hardware and mining tools, etc.—all in about four weeks. I would give twenty-five dollars for a good photograph of that "street." A trail runs through it, for as yet a wagon has not visited these parts. The buildings spoken of are not four-story brick or granite edifices—not one has a floor, not one has a chair or table, except such as could be made on the spot. This shanty, in the shade of a tree, with roof of brush, has a sign out, "Union Clothing Store." I dined today at the "Union Hotel"—a part of the roof was covered with canvas, but most of it with bushes [Brewer 1966:445].

Several problematic rock "mounds" and dug-in stone constructions aligned along Knoxville's former main street have been the focus of archaeological excavations, but none of the features contained charcoal, ash, or other evidence of use as hearths (Figure 4).

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> From the outset, Brewer questioned the productivity of the mines in Martis and Squaw valleys: There is great excitement here—and many think it a second Washoe. Some money will be sunk here before it can be known what the value will be. I have but little faith in it myself. I surely would not invest money in any mine I have seen today, and I have visited eight or nine of the best [Brewer 1966:446].

While copious amounts of whiskey assured the miners that there were bound to be higher-grade ores deeper down (Figure 5), Brewer's premonitions proved true. Mining excitement was short-lived, and the anticipated boom was a bust, lasting one or maybe two seasons. Camps were deserted and miners moved on.

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About five miles from Truckee, on the Hot Springs road to Tahoe, may still be seen the ruins of abandoned log houses, many of them apparently, having been built of hewn logs, and put up in good style. These houses once constituted the bustling and flourishing city of Elizabethtown, in the Red, White and Blue Mining District...[Edwards 1883:100].

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Figure 2. Brewer's hotel or store, as it appeared 60 or 70 years after Knoxville was abandoned. Photograph is captioned: "Nothing remained of the cabins on the main street but the mounds of rock which at one time were fireplaces of the cabins."
Figure 3. Recent archaeological excavations by Far Western Anthropological Research Group confirmed Brewer's hotel or store 150 years after the building was constructed.

"Nothing save the wrecks and shells of the cabins stood...by the time the winter of '64 had fairly set in, Knoxville was remembered among the places that might have been...and Knoxville, Elizabethtown and Claraville forgotten to the world" (Edwards 1883:102).

MINING IN THE 1870s

In 1873, there was talk of reopening the mines. The transcontinental railroad was now complete, and mines could be more profitably worked. Ore was already being railed from Nevada to Truckee for processing at the local smelter, which was fueled by charcoal produced locally by a large work force of Chinese colliers. Truckee's Tecoma Smelter operated from 1872 until 1875 as the westernmost smelter on the transcontinental line (Figure 6). Truckee's abundant wood (i.e., charcoal) and water resources made it more profitable to ship ore to Truckee for processing than to ship charcoal from Truckee to the drier mining regions to the east. For 1878 and 1879, there are a few reports of placer claims and hydraulic mining for free gold, with "two sets of pipes" in use at nearby Prosser Creek, 1 mi. east of Martis Creek. Overall, no real mining investment was ever made.

MINING SITES

Even though mining events at Truckee were brief, they still left a lasting mark on the landscape. A few mine exploration pits, adits, and tunnels have been recorded in the hills surrounding Martis and Squaw
Figure 4. One of several problematical rock mounds remaining at the Knoxville mining camp.

valleys, but until recently, no placers have ever been inventoried. Tailings have either gone totally unrecognized in prior archaeological surveys or have been mistakenly inventoried as "problematic rock alignments" or "enigmatic rock-filled depressions." Yet these features exhibit the classic appearance of surface hand workings and/or ground sluicing operations with tailings aligned in parallel or herringbone pattern. These diggings likely date from the Red, White, and Blue Mining District of 1863, not from the minor resurgence of placer mining during the 1870s. The reason is that miners who would have needed water to work the diggings later would have been in direct conflict with established ranching, fluming, and logging interests, at a time when water rights along Martis Creek and the Truckee River were highly contested.

To date, three main sets of placer tailings have been inventoried in the Truckee Basin. The initial set (CA-NEV-182/H) occurs near the confluence of Martis Creek and the Truckee River. (Another smaller placer mining locale occurs about 1 mi. upstream on the Truckee River.) The overall complex of pits and washed and organized cobbles at NEV-182/H is interconnected by a main rock-lined creek diversion channel (Figure 7). Noteworthy is the adaptive reuse of these early mine features in the later production of ice. The mining ditch was subsequently used as a means to divert water away from an ice pond that was constructed within the Martis Creek channel. Furthermore, the water-washed cobbles served as a ready rock source and were incorporated into the construction of the ice dam and retaining walls of the ice pond (Figure 8).

A second placer mining complex (PLA-2442H) exhibits surface hand mining and rudimentary ground sluicing techniques, where worked ground is marked by tailings piles, pits, and low, sluice-cut banks or scarp (Figure 9). Tailings walls are up to 5 ft. high. The upper bench tailings are level and marked by
depressions. These diggings are strategically located near the confluence of main Martis Creek and West Martis Creek, at a point where the main creek cuts around a raised bench above the adjoining floodplain (Figure 10).

The placer mining landscape at the third site (PLA-476H) contains pockets of large and small piles of waterworn cobbles and boulders concentrated in a shallow, dry ravine that was the channel of Middle Martis Creek (Figure 11). Some tailings are aligned in the classic parallel pattern, but most tailings are unorganized (Figure 12).

**CONCLUSIONS**

The tailings sets just described represent the only evidence of placer mining recorded in the Truckee Basin, where mining features are extremely rare or until recently have been overlooked. Although rudimentary, they typify placer hand workings and classic ground sluicing, and afford an opportunity for comparative study of the early mining methods employed in the Truckee Basin with mining techniques documented elsewhere in the Mother Lode and Comstock regions. Mining events played an initial role in the development of the Truckee and Tahoe basins. The mining fiasco brought a significant influx of people into the area, and in its aftermath, disenchanted miners ushered in the settlement of Tahoe's north and west shores. Given their early period of significance, these features join the ranks of some of the first archaeological finds associated with Euro-American occupation of the Truckee Basin.
REFERENCES CITED

Brewer, William H.  

Edwards, W. F.  
1883 *Tourists' Guide and Directory of the Truckee Basin*. Republican Job Print, Truckee, California.
Figure 7. A 1860s mining ditch later used to divert water away from an 1880s ice works.
Figure 8. Water-washed mine cobbles were incorporated into the construction of the ice dam and retaining walls of the ice pond (shown in back).
Figure 9. Tailings along low sluice cut-bank.
Figure 10. Tailings along Martis Creek.
Figure 11. Tailings in shallow, dry ravine and former bed of East Martis Creek.
Figure 12. Tailings in parallel alignment.