

The lasting impact of mercury mining

Gaye LeBaron, Santa Rosa Press Democrat, 7-10-10

Would California be a better place today if gold had not been discovered in the foothills of its boundary mountains 162 years ago?

There are historians who think so. They believe our settlement would have been slower, more deliberate and less chaotic; that the rush to statehood would not have been granted so precipitously to fill the national coffers.

These are interesting thoughts, big, broad ramifications of the Gold Rush, but there is other fallout that isn't so sweeping, with continuing malevolent effects. What comes up frequently in this area — what, in fact, has Bureau of Land Management officials hard at work right now — concerns a byproduct of gold processing, a silver-white metallic substance called mercury.

When gold miners realized they could no longer pick up nuggets in the stream and the excitement of the '49er migration faded, gold mining became just another extractive industry, albeit a profitable one. Hydraulic mining engineers knew that the way to recover gold from low-grade ore was by a process called amalgamation, the treatment of the ore with mercury to extract gold.

THERE WAS NO GOLD worth mentioning in Sonoma, Lake or Napa counties, but there was a wealth — if you can put it that way — of cinnabar, the mineral that contains mercury, or quicksilver, as some know it.

Californians had been mining mercury since Mexican days. After statehood, the large New Almaden Mine, south of San Juan Bautista, supplied most of what was needed for the many and varied uses of mercury — medical, wood-processing, early photography (Daguerreotypes) and even hat-making where the toxic fumes from the substance caused a form of insanity.

(This gave rise to the descriptive phrase “mad as a hatter,” and, of course, to the name of the Mad Hatter in “Alice in Wonderland,” although his “madness” did not have the same symptoms as true mercury victims.)

The gold amalgamation demand doubled the price of mercury in the 1870s and set prospectors on the march through the Mayacmas where the owner of the Geysers resort, Col. A.C. Godwin, had filed the first local claim in 1859.

What was known as the “Quicksilver Rush” resulted in hundreds of mining claims filed in the corners of the three counties in the 1870s with colorful names like the Rattlesnake, the Blue Jacket, the Red Cloud, the Flaming Star and Robert Louis Stevenson's hideaway, the Silverado. Miners named them for women — Edith, Emma, Georgia, and for their homes — Illinois, Missouri, Chicago.

Half a dozen “towns” came and went. Only the stories of these communities remain, along with the environmental hazards created by the mercury/quicksilver mines.

THE LARGEST WAS PINE FLAT, which grew up around a claim by twin brothers Granville and Greenville Thompson in 1873. The community grew as quickly as the price of mercury had risen and, within months, had three hotels, 60 houses, two dry goods stores, a fruit vendor, a bakery, a lumber yard, two shoe shops, two laundries and, of course, six saloons and a dance hall. But no schoolhouse.

Sebastopol writer Bob Evans titled his 2005 book about the town “A Quicksilver Boom Town.” Local lore sets the population somewhere between 500 and 1,000 people. Only for a short while.

By 1875, the worldwide financial Depression was affecting the price of gold and the price of mercury dropped. The town of Pine Flat was abandoned.

The site at the end of Pine Flat Road, beyond the Madrone Audubon Society's Preserve and the Modini Ranch, shows little or no sign of the “metropolis.” Time and forest fires have taken their toll on history.

THE ONLY MINING TOWN with anything left to see is Mercury, the company town of the Great Eastern Quicksilver Company's Mount Jackson Mine. It's on the opposite side of the county from the Mayacmas cluster, on Sweetwater Springs Road, north of Rio Nido, a few miles uphill from Guerneville.

The mine buildings are still there and some of the houses may even be occupied. It isn't exactly a ghost town. And it's certainly the most visible since it is on a through road.

Remarkably, the Mount Jackson Mine continued to operate, off and on, producing mercury, from 1889 until 1972, fully 100 years after the first “finds.”

Years ago, I had the opportunity to talk to a Sonoma County sheriff's deputy by the name of A.V. “Pete” Bever.

Pete was born in Mercury in 1896. He remembered a community with a post office, a church, a community hall for meetings and dances, a school (Mount Jackson School, now a private residence) and 57 homes occupied by families like his, whose fathers worked in the mine.

In 1977, two years before he died, Pete took a class of schoolteachers on a tour of his hometown. He showed them where the saloon had been, but only for a short while. The company closed it, he said, because it interfered with production.

Santa Rosa teacher Chuck Dowdle interviewed Bever for a Sonoma State class.

His notes include Pete's stories about the dangers of working with mercury. He recounted a time when the toxic gas escaped through the water in the mine and his father's eyes swelled shut.

“It was 11 or 12 days before he could see,” he remembered. He also told of a condition called “salivation,” which caused workers' gums to pull back from the teeth. He knew, he told Dowdle, of men who had lost all their teeth that way.

The toxic after-effects of mercury are what concerns environmentalists now. The Bureau of Land Management's Ukiah office has been holding hearings and inviting public input on proposed clean-up methods.

BLM's Gary Sharpe pointed out last week that officials are on “a very short leash” to make a decision before the deadline for stimulus money passes this week.

But the BLM cleanup, if it happens, will not affect the Mount Jackson Mine.

The Guerneville-area mine is not on BLM land. Cleanup there would be the province of the Environmental Protection Agency, which has no announced plans for the site.

This doesn't mean there isn't a need. Not only does a creek run through the site, but many can describe the pile of tailings, known as "hot rocks" outside the mine and the mill, that were used liberally in road construction.

There is fence with warning signs around the shaft and the mill site now. The town of Mercury may be a memory, but there's no question that the mining left its mark.