

Historic homesteads in Sulphur Creek offer insights into the past

Andrew Fulks, Woodland Daily Democrat, 10-5-10

When most people think of Gold Rush-era mines, they think of the Sierra foothills. Historic Sierra mines have been turned into state parks, visited by tourists and school children, and populated with interpretive signs, boardwalks, and tours.

Sulphur Creek, in Colusa County, also has a rich, if less well-known, mining history. Sulphur Creek is within the Cache Creek watershed and located north of Highway 20, off of Bear Creek Road. It drains the southeastern side of Walker Ridge, passing next to historic mine sites that are mostly forgotten.

Unlike its Sierra siblings, the Sulphur Creek Mining District has no gift shops, park rangers, or special status as a State Park. Wilbur Hot Springs, a cozy hotel located near Bear Creek, is the only remaining business and hot springs resort in the District.

During the mid to late 1800s, the Sulphur Creek Mining District was home to numerous mines located along the length of Sulphur Creek. Mines, with names like Wide Awake, Empire, Manzanita, and Elgin, produced extensive quantities of quicksilver (mercury), sulfur, copper, and small amounts of gold.

Even oil was produced, though in small quantities mostly used for lubricating the mining equipment. The area was settled by miners and their families, with the main village of Sulphur Creek located about a mile upstream from Wilbur Springs. According to an 1891 book on Colusa County history by Justus H. Rogers, the village had a saloon, general store, first-class hotel, sulfur springs for soaking, and croquet grounds, all within a manicured park-like setting.

One fascinating aspect of the Sulphur Creek Mining District was the superimposing of recreation with active mining operations. Imagine taking the train from San Francisco to Williams, then riding a stagecoach up to the resorts along Sulphur Creek. There you would spend a week or two in a hotel or tent cabin, soak in the hot springs, drink the mineral water, and go for walks in the hills.

Meanwhile, dynamite blasts would be heard not more than a few hundred feet away, machinery would be crushing the rock, and smelters would be belching exhaust from the ore processing. It must have been quite a vacation!

Today, little remains of the settlements near Sulphur Creek Village other than a few foundations and pieces of rusty equipment. Fires frequently occur in the area and, like most of the old resorts in the coast range, repeated fires destroyed the buildings.

The end of the mining era was from about 1900 to the early 1940's, as demand for the mercury and other minerals waned or were found in other areas in greater quantities.

For those who wish to visit the old Sulphur Creek Mining District, there are two avenues for exploration. The valley along Sulphur Creek is privately owned, predominantly by Wilbur Hot Springs Resort. Wilbur Hot Springs offers hotel rooms as well as camping platforms for those that wish to bring their own tents.

Visitors staying at Wilbur have access to the 1,800-acre private nature preserve that is part of the resort, and can hike along the creek to see many of the old mine and settlement locations.

At the top of Walker Ridge within the public lands, hikers, bikers, and horseback riders can travel the many trails that crisscross the hills. On Tuleyome's YoloHiker website, the route map and GPS data for the Signal Rock/Eagle Rock loop are provided.

Elgin is identifiable by the massive sulfur deposits that coat the side of the hill, next to the mine workings. Elgin is on private property, so don't visit the mine proper. The view from Signal Rock is more dramatic and much safer. The loop takes visitors past the old Clyde Mine, which was one of the few mines in the district that was primarily mined for gold.

Near the creek at the Clyde Mine, there is a hidden tunnel which is partially flooded and burrows about 50-feet into the mountain. These old tunnels can be dangerous, so peek in but keep out!

This area is not like the Sierra mines. There are no trail markers, signs, or other user-friendly features. Visitors will need to bring maps, GPS, food, water, first aid, and a sense of adventure. Remember to never go inside old mine shafts. The best times to visit are during the cooler months or spring wildflower season.

For those that don't want to be too far from civilization, visiting Wilbur Hot Springs is the best option. While visiting, think about how life might have been in the late 1800's as a visitor and resident. Contrast the historic industrial use of the area with the current status as a nature preserve. History is rich within the Sulphur Creek watershed, and it is still being written.