

Humbug Hues

By Gene Markley

It was one of those beautiful calm autumn days of Indian summer, being after the last of the dry September heat and before the slush of the early winter. I had my fill of just about everything, you know what I mean, when it all seems much too complicated and you say "to hell with it!" and head off into the hills. As often in the past, I found myself working the curves of the Foresthill Road.

I decided to wander among the old hamlet sites and mines of Humbug Canyon. I knew these early immigrants exhibited some of the traits that sent me up into the hills and wilderness country. They fled fixed societies from all over the world to reclaim man's inherited right of free will. This restless, independent group of individuals had, as in other Mother Lode areas, developed the hamlets, roads and mines of the Humbug Canyon region in Placer County.

Humbug Canyon heads up near the main Foresthill Divide Ridge line just north of the old Forks House Way Station. This magnificent canyon descends in rapid fashion, cutting through the ancient lava flows and later tears at the tertiary gravels deposited by meandering rivers that flowed at low gradients during the Cenozoic Era fifty million years ago. At its lowest ebb, Humbug Canyon meets the swirling waters of the North Fork of the American River at Dorer Ranch. The lower part of the canyon is indeed a valley providing protection for man for several thousands of years. Here in this secluded vale, the ancient ancestors of the Tahoe Basin Washoe Indians once lived. They resided here when great animals roamed the northern Sierra region. Their occupation of life was that of the hunter, relying on their small weapons and ingenuity to slay those great animals of another era. These ancient people were displaced by the Maidu who gradually filtered in from the north forcing the early inhabitants to the west and east. The peaceful newcomers were food gatherers and fishermen. With the rush for gold, the Maidu culture was destroyed by the white man. A few Maidu still survive in the Divide area, but generally they have been assimilated in the white society.

I parked my old faithful Chevy where Forks House once stood. Forks House was the terminus of the Washoe Road that started at Gold Hill, Nevada, ran along the eastern side of Lake Tahoe, then followed the Truckee River to Squaw Creek, and up over the Sierra Crest north of Squaw Peak, through the American River Basin, on to Robinson Flat and down the upper Divide. Early roads running north from Michigan Bluff, west from Deadwood, south from Damascus and east from Forest Hill gathered here. Thus, Forks House formed the hub of a network of roads that served the wilderness hamlets and mines for several decades.

From Forks House, I sauntered left to a road running to the north and then I took the first right that put me on the old road to the town site of Red Point. I once took a class in to Red Point, noting to them that as many as 200 souls once inhabited this hamlet. It was a beautiful village with a couple of rich drift mines working in the area. The forest fires of 1936 and 1960 took a heavy toll here and the vegetation is just starting to reclaim the land with its pioneer species of deer brush, wild cherry and oak sprouts.

I strode down the trail to the Golden River Mine, which had been owned by a French mining company located in Paris. The tunnel was started in the summer of 1886 and eventually reached a length of four miles. The drift followed an ancient stream channel which was in spots 500 feet wide. The pay was \$3.70 per carload on the richer east side and \$2.35 per carload on the west. This mine carried a crew of from 20 to 40 white men and at times up to 60 Chinamen. Fresh air was pumped into this one-opening mine by a compressor plant. The ore was shoveled into the ore cars and pushed by hand to the chute. Cars having a capacity of one

ton were loaded at the chute and hauled by horses to the mouth of the tunnel. Later an ultra modern compressed-air locomotive pulled the ore cars from the chute to the washing area. This fascinating air-driven engine can now be viewed at the Memorial Hall in Foresthill. At the washing floor, the gravels were hydrauliced and run through hundreds and hundreds of feet of sluice. The gold was packed out by mules to the rail station at Towle via the Euchre Bar Pack Trail. The mine worked for about thirty years and into this century.

From Red Point, I took the old trail down to the Jarvis Tunnel which is in a draw about one-half mile west of Red Point. This mine drifted back into the ridge approximately 1200 feet. A few fir trees and pine still line this miniature vale where the 1960 forest fire skipped across the moist haven. There is a nice spring here and the remains of a couple of buildings. The people who worked the Jarvis Tunnel generally lived up at Red Point where there was a school, a saloon and a grocery store.

I wandered further on down the hill, trespassing on the old Damascus Road that has been there for over a hundred years. Damascus, once known as Strong Diggins, is one of my favorite little hamlets. To this day, even absent of structure, there is a quaintness about it. The apple trees are still producing in a casual manner, and the Eastern Chestnut tree is alive and producing. In the old days, Damascus was known for its gardens, pure spring water and cold winters. In 1856, it had a post office and polled about 50 votes. Damascus is the home of the famed Mountain Gate Mine, a cooperative venture. The mill had 10 stamps, and its total production was 1.5 million dollars.

Afternoon shadows fell upon me as I drifted with the fall colors down the Pioneer Mine Road that runs along the west side of Humbug Canyon. Here and there a few trees had been missed by the loggers giving the scene a primeval mood. I tried to imagine the canyon when the first miners arrived here. Even with man's pillage of the area for over 100 years, it was a marvelous sight. On this fine October day, the canyon was aglow with varying hues of dark greens, light greens, yellows and reds. The great canyon was entirely at peace on this day; even the normal down-canyon breeze was still. A few Band-tailed pigeons flapped occasionally and now and then a gray squirrel shot across dry, fallen Black oak leaves. A couple of deer sprang up the slope above the little-traveled Pioneer Mine Trail. In late afternoon, I arrived at the Pioneer Mine, a large producer of approximately one million in lode gold. The Pioneer lode was first discovered in 1853. After several attempts to develop this quartz mine, two tunnels were driven, one 180 feet below the old works, and the other 400 feet below the old tunnel. Both exposed quartz bearing gold in sufficient quantity to pay well. The stamp mill was down near Humbug Creek. When the mine was active, they had a tramway with ore cars being run by an endless cable. The weight of the loaded car pulled up the empty one. The mill had twenty stamps. The mine at its peak employed from 30 to 40 men.

Evening was upon me as I settled back dreaming against a large Douglas fir. It was pitch black when I stumbled reluctantly up the Pioneer Mine trail to the Damascus road and on back to my faithful old Chevy.