

No Stage to Bullion

by Norman McLeod

Most Americans can return to a recognizable locale seen — and felt — as their birthplace. It can be a city or town, a crossroads or lakeside cabin, an existing landmark that a person of any age can return to and say "This was my first home."

Mark Collins of Auburn cannot do that. Not that he is physically unable to do so — at age eighty-four he

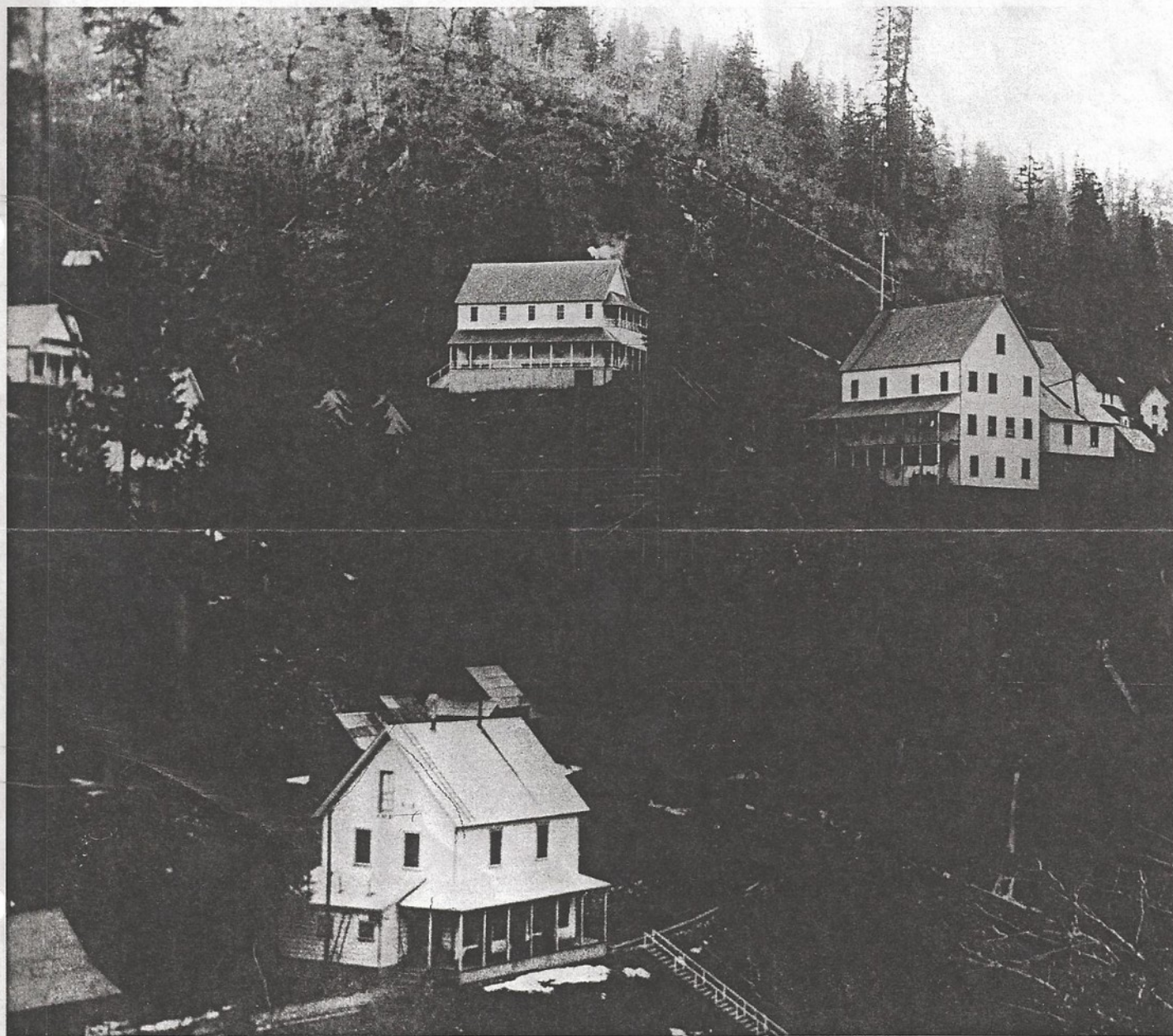
still gets around. Mark's problem is there is nothing to go back to — no town, no house — just an unmarked spot on the Foresthill Divide where a town once stood, a town that has disappeared forever.

That town was Bullion, situated about nine miles east of Foresthill.

Bullion, first called Centerville, was more of a settlement than a town, built around the operations of the

Hidden Treasure Gold Mine that once supported 300 miners.

Mark was born there on October 12, 1907. His mother, Annie Devlin, came to Bullion from the San Francisco Bay Area to live with her husband. There she gave birth to her third child, Mark. The nearest medic was in Foresthill, so Annie made arrangements with a local midwife to assist when Mark was born.



Mark recalls that to get to Bullion, his mother took a train from San Francisco to Colfax, then a horse and surrey over a dusty, stagecoach road through the deep canyon of the North Fork to Foresthill and beyond.

"That trip must have been quite an experience for her," Mark says. "She'd never before been out of the Bay Area."

Bullion was erected on the steep side of a canyon, at the bottom of which gurgled Bullion Creek. An old photograph reveals its buildings in good condition, painted and clean.

The town sprang up when the headquarters and main tunnel entrance of the Hidden Treasure Mine

were moved to Bullion from Sunny South, a few miles west. The Hidden Treasure was a free gold mine, meaning it was not a quartz mine where the rocks needed to be crushed. It was more of a placer mine, a buried ancient river channel that had to be dug into, its nuggets exposed through a process of washing. The Hidden Treasure was a fabulously rich mine.

Harold T. Power was the mine's superintendent, later its owner. This man was the same Power who constructed a mansion in Auburn, known today as the Powers Mansion, a bed and breakfast inn.

Mark's father, John, first met Power in San Francisco when he worked as a motorman for the Market Street Railway, earning \$820 yearly. Power rode the same trolley several times, enough for the two men to become acquainted. Power invited the elder Collins to have dinner with him in the Palace Hotel, when the motive for Power's overt friendliness surfaced.

Power's dialogue with Collins probably went something like this: "Look, I have a gold mine in the foothills behind Auburn. How'd you like to take a chance with me as an electrician in the mine? I can offer you a little over \$1,000 a year in wages."

This was 1897 — a time when that sum was considered big money. Power's offer was accepted, and Mark's dad found himself the engineer on the Hidden Treasure's electric locomotive, a job he loved.

Mark Collins lived in Bullion until he was four years old, and has fond memories of his early childhood there. One of his dad's pet hobbies was the making of root beer in the basement, where Mark once entered alone for a glass of the beverage.

"I knew how to open the spit but not how to close it," he remembers. "So I ran all the root beer out of its drum onto the ground." John Collins didn't spank Mark, to his son's surprise, but simply advised Mark "to learn how to close the spit."

Mark recalls the rather severe

In 1905 the town of Bullion, east of Foresthill, was still recognizable. Today, nothing remains.



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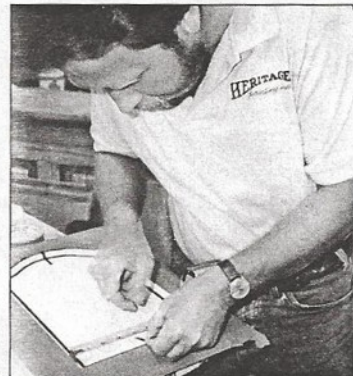
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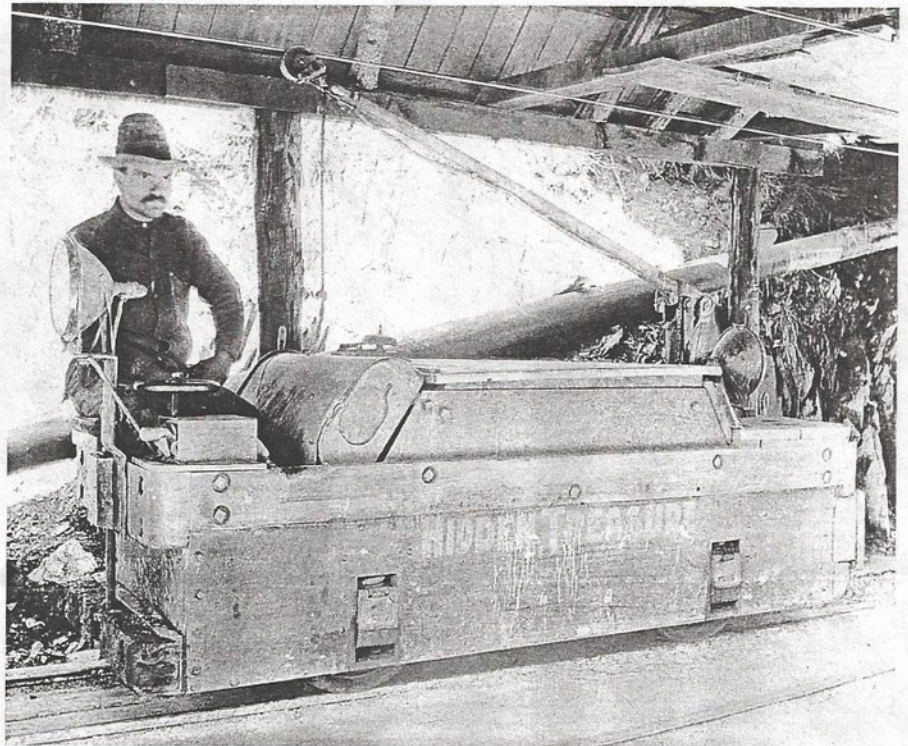


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John Collins was the electric locomotive engineer for Bullion's Hidden Treasure Mine, a job that in 1899 paid \$1,000 yearly.

winters in Bullion, with deep snow drifts. His father owned a sled that he pulled up the side of the canyon to cut firewood. His children usually tagged along, not to assist with the cutting, but to enjoy the ride back down. They would sit on the load with dad holding the sled back with the rope, and if that force wasn't enough, he'd apply the sled's mechanical brake that dug into the snow.

About half the mine crew at the Hidden Treasure were Chinamen who lived separately across the creek. Usually they were peace-loving but occasionally an eruption occurred, making it necessary to call in the law. By the time a deputy sheriff on his pack horse arrived from Auburn, at least three days would have elapsed. There was no stage to Bullion.

When Mark was four (1911) the family moved to Foresthill. "We moved into a house just outside of town, on the Colfax Road, about 500 feet north of the little Foresthill Chapel," Mark relates. "I remember a Chinaman named Gin, a peddler who walked the streets with a pole across his shoulders and baskets hanging from it. He sold fruit and vegetables grown in his own garden. A bunch of

fresh carrots cost a penny and every other item he sold was under a nickel. He'd walk right up to our house and knock on the door.

"One time the circus came to Colfax. My dad loved the circus. He rented a surrey with two big, beautiful black horses and we all packed in. I remember it as though it were yesterday. We descended that winding dirt road to the river, crossed the bridge and climbed up the other side with the fringe on the surrey dancing in the breeze. In Colfax we rented a room at the Marvin Inn and that's where we first noticed the two monster steam locomotives on the railroad track hissing and blowing, warming up for the climb over Donner Summit. It was my first sight of a locomotive, one of the most memorable events that's happened to me and there they were, two of 'em."

The circus was also memorable with many breath-taking acts. Mark's older brother was most impressed by a male performer who climbed to the top of a high pole, then slid down to the ground on a tightrope, hanging on the pulley by only his teeth. Back home Mark's brother determined he could put on a circus act of his own.

Using the rope and pulley from the well, he tied one end to the rear porch railing, then climbed a tall pine tree in the backyard. Near the top he secured the other end of the rope to the tree, then stretched it tight with the pulley hanging from it.

Whish! Holding onto the pulley with his hands, he flew down the rope to the porch, where he crashed through the railing, landing roughly on the deck. Luckily, he wasn't hurt much. But that was the end of the Collins aerial act.

When the Hidden Treasure Mine closed, Mark's dad worked for a while at the Baltimore Mine in Foresthill. For timbering the mine's tunnel, the saw cut trees on the hillside above. They stripped all the limbs and bark from the trunks, leaving them smooth for timbering.



Born in 1907 in Bullion, Mark Collins may be the only person who has memories of the now vanished mining town.

Mark recalls: "As kids liked to use large pieces of that slippery, smooth bark for sliding down the hill. But this sometimes resulted in some rather bruised bodies."

When Mark grew to a young adult he found a job at the rich Three Queens Mine, near the Middle Fork of the American River. One of his fellow workers was Shorty Swift, who approached him one evening after dinner in the boarding house with a strange, mysterious look on his usually cheerful features. He suggested in an urgent but quiet voice that he and Mark return to the mine to look for something Shorty wanted to see. They arranged with Andy Walker, the millwright, to furnish them with fresh air.

Then Shorty descended down into a slanting hoist shaft while Mark held him securely with a rope. Shorty was down in the shaft from twenty minutes to a half hour when Mark pulled him up. Shorty's eyes were sparkling. By the look on his face Mark knew his friend had undergone an exhilarating experience.

"I'd never seen anything like it," explained Mark. "He was in a . . . a

state of rapture, I guess is the best way I can explain it.

"Shorty insisted I go down into the shaft. But he wouldn't tell me what was down there. Naturally, I was curious. I had one of those miner's carbide lamps on my cap plus a flashlight. He let me down with the rope and my two lights were shining. The scene was like one of those discos you've seen on television, with lights flashing all around.

The miners that day had blasted and uncovered a fabulous pocket of gold — raw, glittering gold — gold along each side of the tunnel and the face was all full of gold at the end of the track. It was an overpowering sight. I knew I was enjoying a very rare experience, a sight perhaps only one person in ten million would ever see."

At the time gold was worth only \$16 an ounce. Mark estimated that pocket must have been worth \$60,000, a sizeable fortune in those days.

After living for four years in Foresthill the Collins family moved to Auburn. The elder Collins and Mark continued to work at various jobs on the Foresthill Divide. One day Mark's father found Harold Power wandering over a hillside, broken-hearted. He had been forced by dangerous underground earth movements to shut down his Hidden Treasure Mine. That marked the beginning of the end for the town of Bullion.

Today, the only trace left of the town is the old vault that was part of the Hidden Treasure's main office. The mine's tunnel entrance is still open but Bullion Creek gushes out of it. Don't attempt to look for the site. It is on private property and the road to it is made non-passable by two locked metal gates.

But memories of life in Bullion linger in the minds of a select few — or perhaps Mark Collins is the sole owner of such remembrances. ❖

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