

Nuggets from the Past

By Norman McLeod

Red Point

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Caravan to Red Point makes a hefty investment in history

A gathering of Forest Hill residents met Gene Markley's California Preservation Group in front of the post office on Saturday, April 21. They were an assorted lot, men and women of varying ages, including Ernie, the oldest, who once told me he attended school with the late John DeMaria at the old Spring Garden schoolhouse. I first met Ernie in 1978 when we hiked together in Markley's Gold Camps Class out of Auburn. He is still hiking regularly with Gene.

One pickup truck carried an old Red Point safe that Gene recently found at the townsite, that was to be installed as a historic marker at Red Point. With this truck in the lead we headed east out of town on the Soda Springs Road in a long motor caravan, close to 50 of us.

We drove as far as the Forks House site, turned left on a dirt road and halted after about a quarter mile. Because of the poor condition of the road into Red Point, Markley permitted only two four-wheel-drive vehicles to use it — one carrying the safe and second carrying me (I was unable to hike because of recent hip surgery.) My chauffeur was Virginia Baron, of Markley's group.

All the others walked in, downhill, over a rocky road that must have been uncomfortable to those in tennis shoes. The lead truck measured the distance to the mine as 2.1 miles.

The view from the old road was spectacular, overlooking the North Fork and Humbug canyons.

At the townsite we disembarked from our vehicles and awaited the others. The town had been correctly named. It stood on a narrow point of land adjoining the upper reach of Humbug Canyon, with the mine located below at the head of a gorge.

Nothing was left of the town; the site was heavily overgrown with manzanita bushes and pine trees, but with its narrow ridgetop still open.

Surprisingly, Myron Angel's Placer County History makes no mention of Red Point, although the mine is listed on Page 216. Its owner is identified as Gilespe & Co., but no amount in dollars is given as a production figure. This indicates the mine had not begun paying off by 1882, the history's publication date. Nor had the town been founded by that date.

According to Markley, the town's population was around 200 at its peak. The Red Point Mine became the deepest single drift tunnel on the Forest Hill Divide, about four miles long, with a crew of 20 whites and 60 Chinamen. Instead of mules to haul out the ore it employed the use of a narrow-gauge train with open cars, powered by an air compressor located deep within Humbug Canyon. This same train can be seen today in front of the Memorial Hall in Forest Hill.

About 10 years ago the late Lutie Dorer informed me that an old saloon building years ago was moved from Damascus to Red Point, where it was put to use as a school. For a while, Lutie attended this school by hiking up the side of the steep canyon from his home deep in Humbug Canyon. This same building later was taken apart, piece by piece, and carried on mules into Humbug, where it was assembled and again used as a schoolhouse.

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Markley supervised the business at hand. The old safe was planted on a bare spot almost at the end of the point where it immediately became the target for rocks and cement that were mixed with hauled-in water. Gene's theory was the empty safe filled with rocks and concrete would make it an unlikely prize for vandals.

An appropriate plaque had been installed on the lid of the safe, relating a brief history of the town and mine. The mine closed in 1906.

After leading us in three cheers for those who fashioned the old safe into a historic marker, Gene guided most of the group down the point's steep side to the mine. I, and a few others, did not follow. We were told the tunnel was open, with a small stream gushing from its mouth.

We understood from Markley that the Red Point Mine was recently reopened and renamed, its present owner an attorney named Fraley. A small crew is now working it.

Our visit to Red Point lasted several hours. We ate our bag lunches on the ground; pictures were taken and those bent on exploration found another abandoned safe on the site.

Luckily I was able to ride back to the main road. The odometer on this truck measured the distance as 1.1 miles, although none of the hikers believed it. They were all inclined to agree with the first measurement. The hike back was up a rather steep grade.

I must make mention of the fact that four Forest Hill men actively participated in the work party involved in mixing cement and pouring it into the safe. There may have been others, but these four I saw: Mark Storey, Stu Morris, Marvin Monk and Dan Hurlbut.

The Forest Hill contingent parted with Markley's group at the main road. He and his party planned to continue on to inspect their marker installed in 1989 at Damascus.

The day's sojourn was an interesting one. We all felt satisfaction from our contribution toward a history-making event.

