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Quarterly Bulletin of the Calaveras County Historical Society  
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## THE SOUTHWEST CORNER

When entering or leaving Calaveras today on Highway "4" one gets but the briefest glimpse of the southwest corner of our county. This modern highway, however, follows essentially the same route much traveled in the earliest gold-mining days by miners and supply teams from Stockton to the Calaveras mining camps. In those days they would come "across the plains" by way of Farmington, and then up Shirley Creek past Adam Shafer's store to the low pass (elevation 1176 feet) over Gopher Ridge, and thence down into the valley of Littlejohn Creek to "The Log Cabin" where Thomas McCarty provided shelter and supplies for the traveler and teamster. From here, one could go on to O'Byrne's Ferry, or cross the Stanislaus River at Central Ferry, or go up to Reynold's Ferry, and then on to the Tuolumne gold camps. Or if bound for Angels Camp, one might go to Reynold's Ferry, but turn left, up Carson Creek, or after leaving McCarty's, go up Salt Spring Valley to "Carmen City" and over Bear Mountain into Nassau Valley.

There was relatively little gold placering during the rush in Southwest Corner, except on the bars along the Stanislaus River, up Scorpion Gulch, on Ramsey Flat, and on portions of Johnny Creek (as Littlejohn's was called). During those years, a few pioneer families eked out a living ranching along the Littlejohn and on the rather inhospitable slopes of Gopher Ridge, and picking up what they could by catering to the gold mine traffic. A large part of the Southwest Corner was included in the Rancheria del Rio Estanislao, a Mexican land grant. There were at least two early routes across the Grant north of the Stanislaus in active use by the mine traffic. One of these was up along Littlejohn and past Smith's Flat. There was another that connected to an early bridge across the Stanislaus at Six Mile Bar, just below Scorpion Gulch. These were used mostly by travelers bound for



**THOMAS MARTIN LANE**  
1848-1926

**Tommy was manager and part owner of the Alta mine in Scorpion Gulch.      Loaned by Kathleen Supinger**

the diggings crossing the Stanislaus at Knights Ferry.

When Hiram Hughes set off the copper boom in May, 1860, with his discovery of the Quail Hill deposit, the entire region was, except for the Rancheria, overrun by the eager prospectors. A town, first called Grasshopper City, and then Telegraph City, sprang up on the Stockton Road on Shirley Creek, just past Shafer's store. The center of activity was soon transferred to Copper Canyon, some four miles to the east, where the discovery by Thomas McCarty and William Reed of the main Union-Keystone copper lode was rapidly developed into the second-most important copper district in the United States. The following year the town was named Copperopolis.

For some five or six years, Copperopolis reigned as the most active business and mining community in Calaveras County. In 1864, the Reed Turnpike Company was formed to rebuild the old Stockton Road over Gopher Ridge and down Shirley Creek into a turnpike. It was heavily traveled for the next few years and has continued

to be the main road into the southwestern part of the county. A railroad was conceived and planned to come from Stockton up to the foothills, then around the southern end of Gopher Ridge along Littlejohn Creek into Copperopolis. The ending of the copper boom in '66 and '67 cut the hopes of the Stockton & Copperopolis Railroad back to the much less ambitious project of the twelve miles of track into Milton, and this was not completed until 1871. Then the old trail up Rock Creek to Salt Spring Valley was improved, and a second road to the north was also built into the valley. For a number of years most of the freight for the Calaveras mines came up this route until the new railroad was completed in 1885 to Valley Springs.

The collapse of the copper boom and the establishment of the new route by way of Milton returned the Telegraph City region to a quiet ranching life with occasional resurgences in activity at some of the little copper mines nearby. It was not until the advent of the automobile and truck that Reed's turnpike came back into prominence as Highway "4". In our next issue we plan to record the story of some of the ranch families in this area.

In this issue we are printing the record of a trip by the late Elizabeth Smith to the Rancheria. Mrs. Smith, a professional title searcher at San Andreas, visited the Rancheria in 1970, apparently hoping to find an old-time Mexican rancho. What she found is described here. She then read the charming little book by Margaret Ruppel, daughter of George Gaylord, purchaser of the Rancheria in 1940, and added some background material on the Grant. In her book, Mrs. Ruppel vividly described two trips to the Grant in 1940, including a camping trip up to the "North End" in Calaveras County. Mrs. Smith did not get that far, but only to the "Home Ranch", just across the line in Stanislaus County, where Mr. Robert Bruncker, Mrs. Ruppel's son-in-law, resides as manager of the large ranch.

We have also compiled a brief history of the Alta Mine, the only hardrock mine on the Grant, and one that was an important employer of Calaverans and a producer of gold for a few brief years at the turn of the century.

## **EL RANCHERIA DEL RIO ESTANISLAO**

*by Elizabeth G. Smith*

Rancheria del Rio Estanislao is Calaveras County's only Mexican land grant. Although a large part of the Grant lies in Stanislaus County, the remainder is within Calaveras. Yet there is no modern road leading directly from any town within our county to the Rancheria.

When we visited the Grant on Easter Sunday, 1970, we went first from San Andreas to Copperopolis, then by O'Byrnes Ferry Road across the Stanislaus River to Tuolumne County. We drove westward along Highway "108" to Knights Ferry. We then recrossed the Stanislaus on the old covered bridge there and were soon close to Calaveras County again. We went out about a mile northwesterly from town on Schell Road to two prominent markers at the gateway of the Rancheria del Rio Estanislao. One was a plain white sign with black letters; the other, a California Historical Society plaque.

We enquired of a passer-by how to get to the rancho from there and were directed down a paved road leading over little hills and valleys to the present complex of rancho buildings located close to the Calaveras line, alongside Johnny Creek. A sign at the gate advised us to beware of cattle. Expecting to be surrounded by wild, black and horned animals, we were surprised to see a herd of big, fat and hornless cattle moving placidly down a hillside in our direction. Along the slopes were ditches or canals, all lined with concrete. A complex irrigation system had been installed by Abraham Schell who owned this portion of the Rancheria from 1863 to 1894.

The second surprise of the day was the appearance of the rancho buildings. There was no arched gateway nor adobe buildings to greet us as we had expected. Instead, the barns and stables were of wood frame and painted bright red with sparkling white trim. The corral fences were set precisely and were also sparkling white. We crossed two bridges and began to notice signs that we were trespassing. Where was the Spanish hospitality we had heard about! This appeared more like a prosperous Mid-western dairy than a Mexican rancho.

There were at least four dwelling houses in the group, of a diversity of architectural styles, and except at a very modern-styled house on a hill overlooking the cluster of buildings, there were few signs of life. However, because this was Easter Sunday and there seemed to be a reunion going on at the manager's house, we decided not to bother him with our historical quest.

On our way out we stopped at the ruins of a stone building and took some pictures. We saw no signs of a vineyard, although we knew this was the site of the Red Mountain Vineyard and Winery which operated until 1921. We saw no ruins which could have been the adobes of Francisco Rico or Jose Antonio Castro, early owners, nor of a power plant said to have existed on the Grant capable of supplying power for several communities. We returned home by way of Stanislaus and Tuolumne counties and then back into Calaveras. Upon our return,

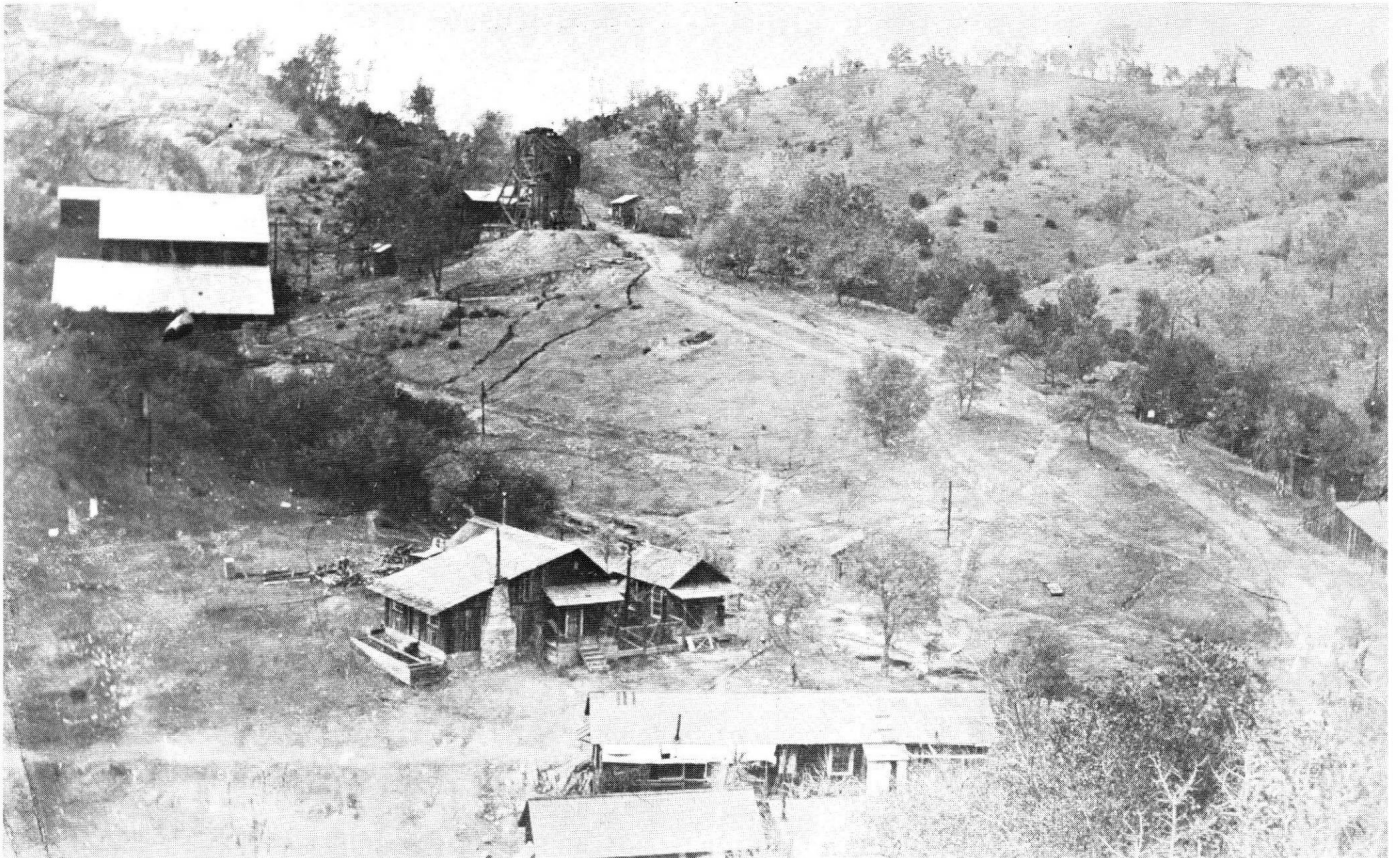
I went to the library to find more information on this interesting ranch.

On March 2, 1853, Francisco Rico and Jose Castro filed a petition with the Board of Land Commissioners, under the Act of Congress of 1851 to ascertain and settle private claims in the State of California, for a tract of land known as El Rancheria del Rio Estanislao, containing eleven square leagues, founded on a Mexican grant made on December 29, 1843, by Manuel Micheltorena, then Governor and Commandant General of the Department of California. This grant was equal to some 48,886 acres!

For some years this grant had been in question because the signatures of Governor Micheltorena and his secretary appeared to be forged. Finally, in 1855, the Land Commissioners rendered a decree of confirmation in favor of the claimants. This was subsequently appealed. Finally, the patent was issued in December, 1862. It was not actually recorded in Calaveras County records until 1914.

It is well-nigh impossible to try to locate the boundaries of the Grant from the description in the patent. It is bounded on the west by a line running north from the Rio Estanislao to the Lomaria (low hills) so as to include the lands on said Rancheria on the north by the said Lomaria, on the south by the said river and between the same and the Lomeria until the quantity of eleven leagues is obtained. This is followed by a "survey description" which is almost as vague as the first. It mentions the borders of the town of Knights Ferry, so there must have been people living there in 1853 when the survey was run. Further documents recorded in Calaveras County reveal that there were several placer mines on the Rancheria along the Stanislaus, as well as an underground mine (the Alta) on Scorpion Gulch.

Rico and Castro became so indebted to their lawyers in the long litigation for the Grant that they paid them off in land. Thus Albert Packard and Manuel Castro (Jose's son) received substantial portions of the original Ranch-



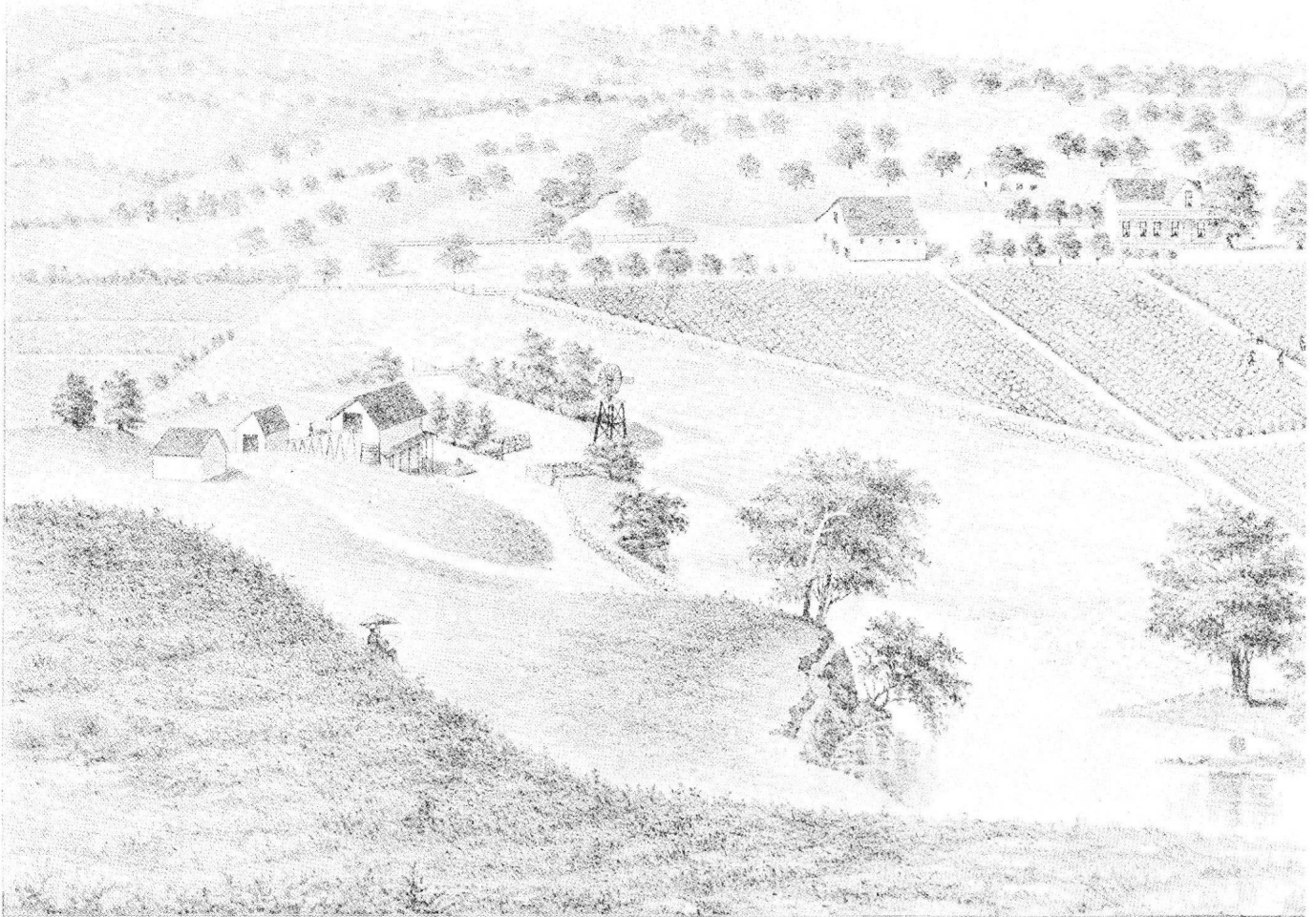
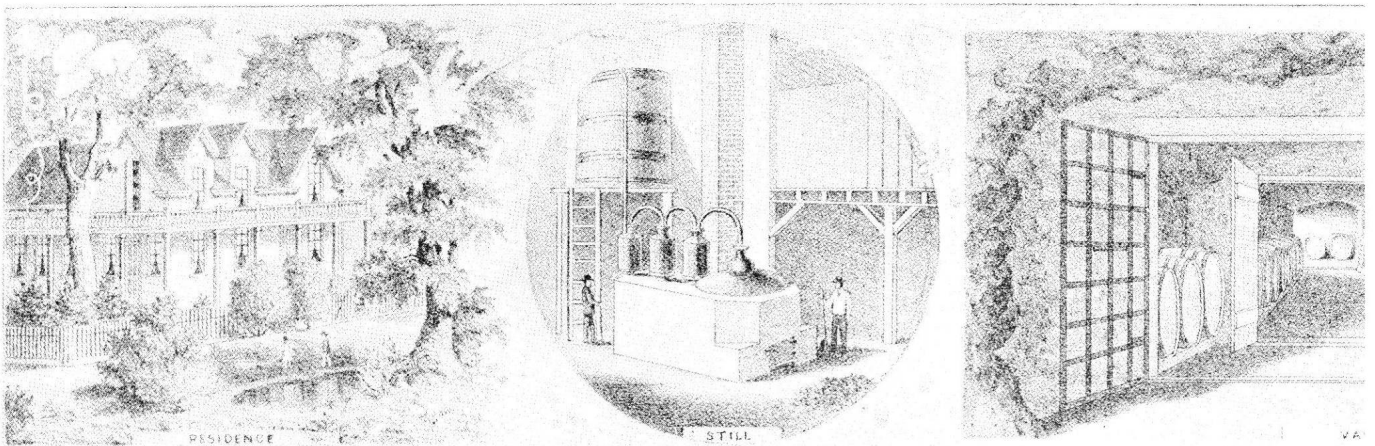
### SCORPION GULCH

Looking up the gulch at the Alta mine buildings. Many of the employees lived here at the camp, part of which is visible in the foreground. The glory holes are in the

extreme upper left hand corner. This picture was probably taken in 1907, shortly after the mine was shut down.

*Loaned by John Brigham*





RED MOUNTAIN VINEYARD, A. SCHELL & CO.





PROPS. KNIGHT'S FERRY, STANISLAUS CO. CAL.

eria. Rico's remaining land was purchased in 1863 by Captain George S. Wright, and title passed subsequently down through David Adams, the Frankenheimer brothers, W. M. Petitfils, to the present owner, the Gaylord family.

The Packard land was purchased by Abraham Schell in 1863. It was on this tract that Schell and a partner named Krause started the Red Mountain Vineyard. During this period it was said that any of this land could have been bought for fifty cents an acre. Abraham Schell lived for a time at Knights Ferry, and then moved to the Red Mountain Vineyard, where his house still stands.

Schell had come to California by ship in 1849 and was a merchant in Stockton. He became interested in a rich placer mine at Knights Ferry. He took over the ditch that was used in this mining, and later employed it for sawmill purposes. This was known as the Tulloch ditch, was subsequently acquired by the Stockton Irrigation Company, and is now part of the Oakdale Irrigation District system. Abraham Schell died in 1894, leaving the property to his nephew, Herrick R. Schell, who continued to operate the winery until 1921. Mrs. Abraham Schell left her share of the estate to her nephew, Charles Bellinger. Mr. W. M. Petitfils, in 1931, consolidated much of the former Schell property with the Frankenheimer tract.

The main portion of the Grant, about 9000 acres in Calaveras County, and a similar acreage in Stanislaus County, is owned by the Gaylords, a family corporation of which Mr. Robert Bruncker is the managing owner. About 5000 acres of the original Rancheria, adjoining the Gaylords, belongs to the Rodden family of Oakdale, as well as another portion that is owned by the Gabels.

Margaret Gaylord Ruppel, in her book, "El Rancheria del Rio Estanslaus," lists the rancho buildings as follows:

Eagle's Nest—the original Red Mountain Vineyards and winery headquarters

Bunkhouse—built about 1890

Cottage—built about 1920

Ditch Tenders Cabin

Superintendent's House—built in 1941

Also barns, corrals, windmills, and ruins of old buildings.

In the early years of the Twentieth century there was a hydroelectric plant at Knights Ferry, furnishing power for the towns of Oakdale, Knights Ferry, Hodson, Copperopolis, and Modesto. In 1911, the water rights and power lines were sold to Stanislaus Water Company, and eventually to P. G. & E.

Sources of water on the ranch, utilized over the years, include: Stanislaus River, Littlejohn Creek, and several small tributary streams and springs.

A brief history of Knights Ferry is added here, even though the town lies in Stanislaus County, because it was part of the original Grant. It was founded by Captain William Knight who had joined Fremont in 1844, and was one of the men that arrested General Vallejo in the Bear Flag Rebellion. The ferry was established in 1849 at the site of a natural ford in the Stanislaus River. The first bridge was built in 1860. The present bridge was constructed in 1863 to replace the first one that was washed away in the great flood of the previous year. U. S. Grant, who visited his brother-in-law there in 1854, is said to have designed the first bridge. At that time the first sawmill and flour mill in the area were erected there. The ruins of a later flour mill, built after the big flood, can still be seen near the river at the north abutment of the bridge.

Mrs. David Tulloch planted the first orange trees in the vicinity in 1885. We saw orange trees at the Rancheria on our trip.

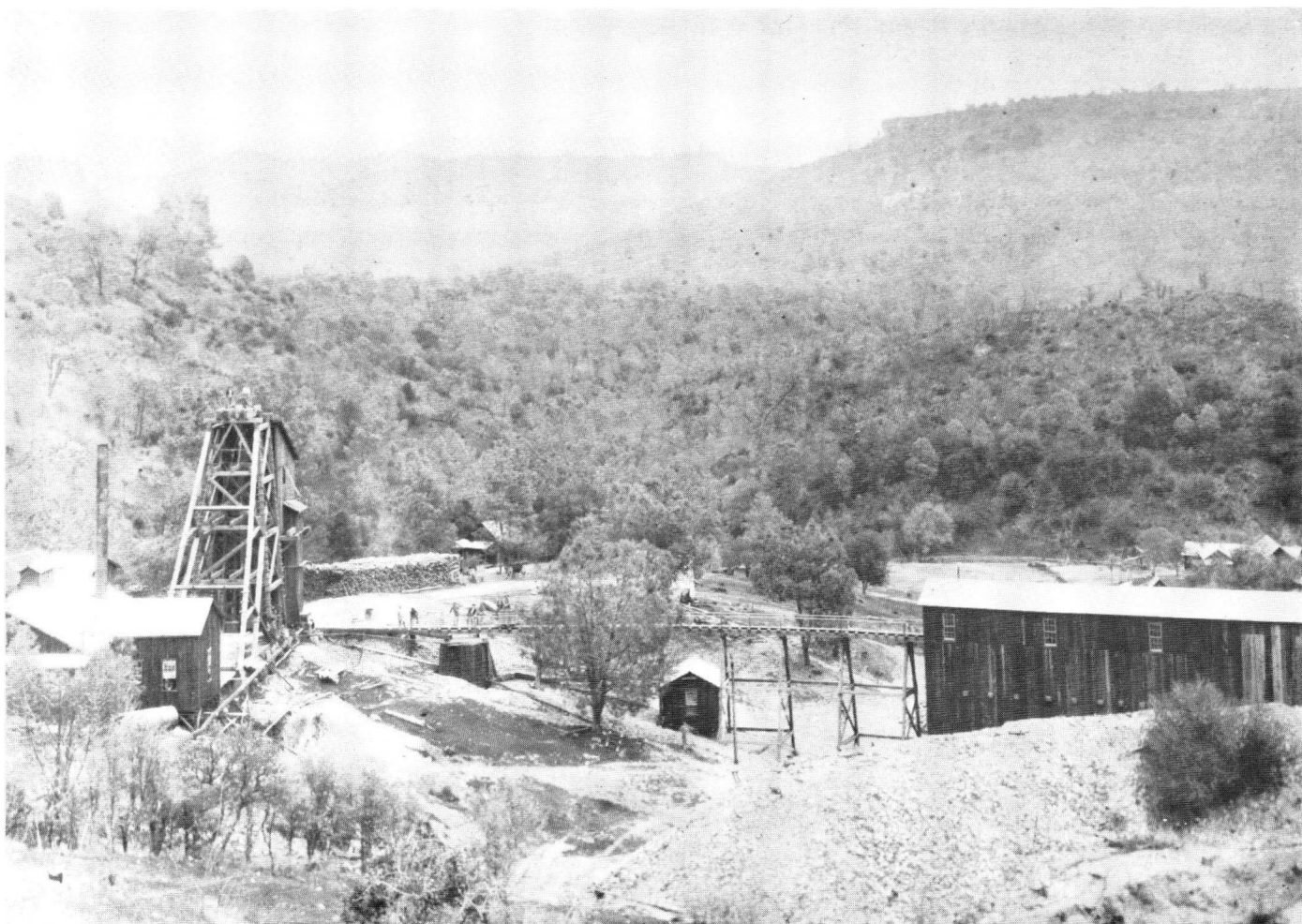
## THE ALTA MINE

There was only one real hardrock mine on the Rancheria del Rio Estanslaus, in the upper northeast corner of the Grant, and it was appropriately called "Alta" or "Alto."

During the gold rush, and before the rights of the Mexican land grants were properly recognized, miners prospected and placer-mined without regard for the owners of this large acreage. Gold mining was actively pursued not only along the "Rio Estanslaus" but also in the Scorpion Gulch and Ramsey Flat area. In 1853 the owners petitioned for their rights as grantees, and after a decade of hearings, appeals and frustration, they received a patent for the large acreage. Abraham Lincoln, when signing the patent, is said to have expressed surprise at "such a big farm" of eleven square leagues (nearly 50,000 acres).

Very shortly after receiving the patent, one of the impoverished owners sold his remaining share (two leagues), comprising most of the acreage lying within Calaveras County, to Captain George S. Wright of Red House Ranch in Salt Spring Valley. It is probable that copper was sought by prospectors on the Grant during the Civil War boom, but we have no information on this point.

Some thirty years later, about 1895, George Fitch and his son-in-law Oliver Britt, obtained an option or lease from Captain Wright to prospect and mine on his part of the Grant. With George Blazer, a miner and rancher well acquainted with the area, they prospected on Ramsey Flat



#### THE ALTA MINE

This view, looking down Scorpion Gulch, was taken shortly after the turn of the century when the mine was in full operation. The Blazers' house is at the right of the

big woodpile. Mrs. Prowse's boarding house may be seen just over the mill building.

*Courtesy of Earl Blazer.*

and in Scorpion Gulch and came across the Alta lode, and then began to develop it for mining. This is reputed to be the same lode that George Hearst examined in the early 1860's, but who had found it too low grade to be of interest to him (Demarest ms.).

It wasn't too long before Tommy Lane, one of the sons of Major Lane of Knights Ferry, became associated with Fitch and Britt, and a 10-stamp mill was installed. In 1902, Lane bought out Fitch and Britt, presumably with the help of his brother, Charlie Lane, manager and part owner of the Utica mine at Angels Camp. Going into partnership with Captain Wright, he continued to manage the operation and to install a 40-stamp mill built for them by the Angels Iron Works.

The new mill had a capacity to treat about two hundred tons of ore a day, and included a No. 3 Gates gyratory crusher, 40 stamps of 950 pounds each, and eight Standard concentrating tables. The mill was operated by electricity brought in from the new Tulloch power plant at Knights Ferry (later the Sierra & San Francisco Power Company). This line continued on to Hodson, tying into the Union Electric Company's line from Angels. The Alta mill, in 1906, its last full year of operation, milled some 75,000 tons of ore.

The mine was developed with a shaft 400 feet in depth, operated with a steam hoist. The ore was mostly mined from "glory holes", where miners drilled and blasted it into these large openings. It was pulled out on the 300-



foot level, hoisted to the surface, and trammed to the mill. This was a very inexpensive method of mining, but much waste from the sides of the glory hole got mixed into the ore and diluted its grade. The best values were in the vein itself, but some values in gold extended well out into the wall rock. It was said (Demarest) that Tommy Lane was able to hold his direct mining and milling costs down to as little as fifty cents a ton of ore, a remarkable achievement. Tom Blazer, who worked in the mill, maintained that about one million dollars of gold was produced at the Alta mine (at a gold price of \$20 per ounce.).

In 1903, Captain Wright unfortunately fell off his jackass and this untimely accident was the cause of his death that year. Mrs. Wright continued the Wright-Lane partnership for another three years, but in 1906 decided to sell the mine, grant and all.

John Hadaway, who lived for some years up on Ramsey Flat, told Mrs. Margaret Gaylord Ruppel that, "Sure, there was quite a town here once (at Frog Springs). When the Alta mine was being worked . . . Johnny Greenhold's mother\* kept a boarding house and there was a school, post office, church and a dance hall. That was when Captain Wright owned the Alta mine. He wouldn't allow no saloon, but the oldtimers say the dance hall was really something."

John Greenhalgh was the mine superintendent for Lane. Lane's son, Frank (Edna Lane's husband) also worked at the Alta. Tom Blazer worked in the mill under his father, millman George Blazer. This mine was a great boon to Copperopolis, when the copper operations there

\*Actually Johnny was the second husband of Mrs. Prowse who ran the boarding house.

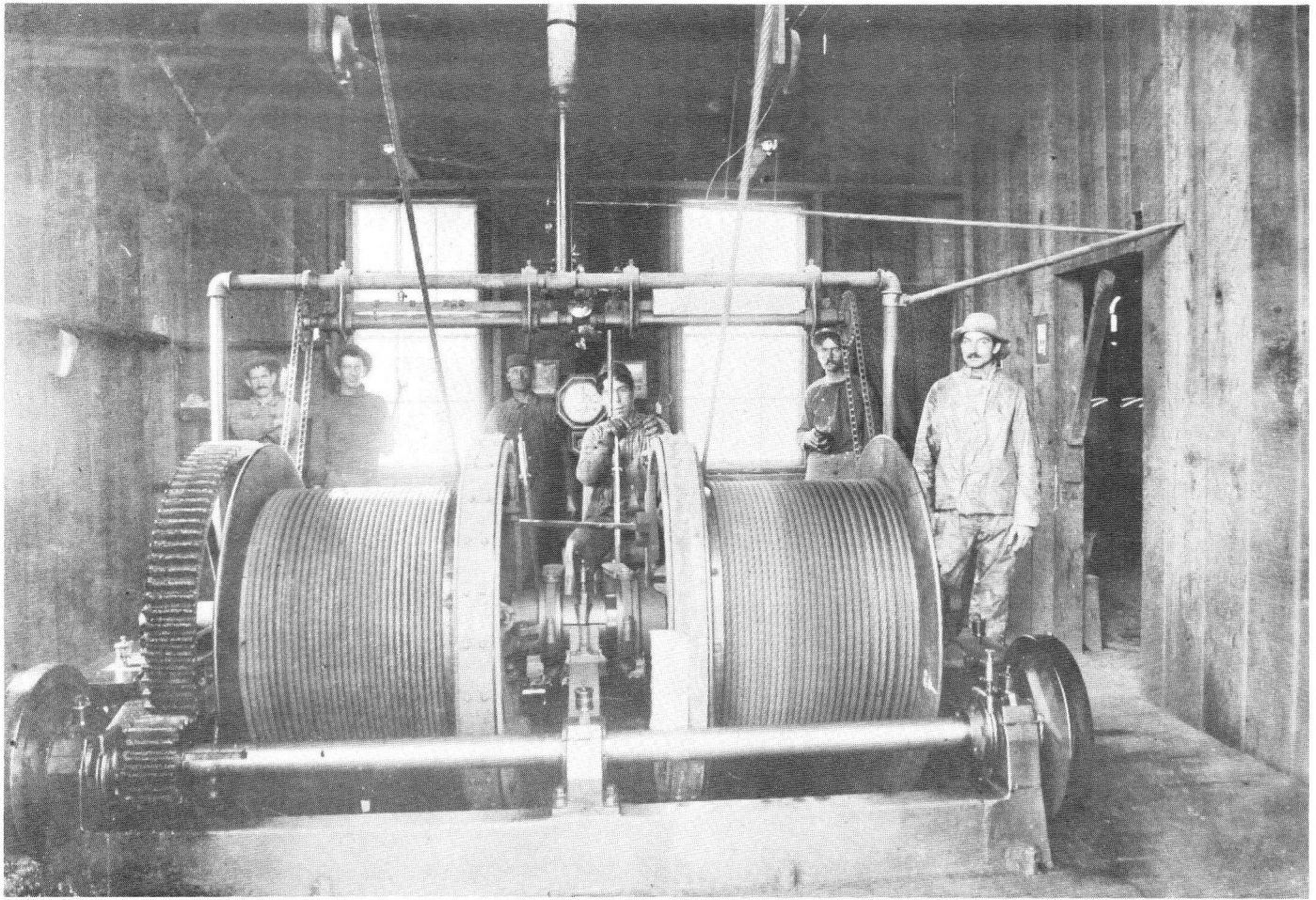


**THE ALTA MINE CREW**

From a picture taken in the early days of the mine's operation, when Frank Lane (extreme left) and Tom

Blazer (extreme right) were boys.

*Courtesy of Kathleen Supinger*



### THE ALTA'S STEAM HOIST

Taken about 1902, this view shows (left to right) in back of the hoist, Steve Box, Jack Shonoff, Johnny Green-

halgh (mine superintendent), hoistman (unknown), Gus Kennedy, and Ed Olsen. *Loaned by Earl Blazer*

were greatly curtailed, and to Knights Ferry, and provided a number of jobs for the local residents.

Late in 1906, W. O. Manson of San Francisco promoted the sale of Mrs. Wright's interests in the Grant, including the Alta mine, to a group of Chicago investors for \$250,000, of which sum \$150,000 was to be paid in cash to Mrs. Wright. The California-Calaveras Mining Company was organized in January of 1907, with David T. Adams as Vice President, and Edmund D. Brigham as secretary, and the \$150,000 was paid over to Mrs. Wright.

Mrs. Ruppel describes the subsequent events in her book as follows:

"It later developed that Mr. Manson had misrepresented matters regarding the purchase price of the property and the company brought suit against him. This

consumed approximately ten years. In the meantime most of the principals had died. During the time the company was engaged in this litigation, Mr. Adams provided the funds to carry on the legal matters, paid the taxes, and kept the property intact. After the conclusion of the litigation the company found itself in possession of the property but without funds and indebted to Mr. Adams for a large sum of money covering advances made by him during the years of litigation.

"In 1917 Mr. Adams foreclosed on the property and obtained possession. He then sold the surface rights of what he thought to be the 7200 acres (two leagues), actually 8137, to Samuel and Louis Frankenheimer of Stockton for \$72,000.00, retaining the mineral rights to certain portions thereof. He turned these mineral rights, together with the cash which he received from the sale of

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the surface in excess of the amount due him, over to a new company called Del Rio Mining Company, and the stock of this company was then distributed to the stockholders of the California-Calaveras Mining Company, so that the mineral rights now stand in the name of the Del Rio Mining Company (1946).”

The lawyer representing the California-Calaveras company in their prolonged litigation was the well-known Clarence Darrow. Years later, John Greenhalgh told the grandson of Edmund Brigham that he, Greenhalgh, had gone off to Alaska after the Alta shut down. Upon his return to San Francisco as he was walking down Powell Street in front of the St. Francis Hotel, he chanced to meet Mr. Darrow. The latter accosted him with, “Where have you been? We’ve needed you as a witness in court!”

In 1931, the Frankenheimers sold the property to W. M. Petitfils who in 1940 sold out to George S. Gaylord.

The mineral rights that had remained with the Del Rio Mining Company were more recently acquired by the Gaylord Estate.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS AND REFERENCES**

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The Society welcomes these new members:

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