



“FIRING THE ANVIL”

By Bonnie Miller

Miners loved entertainment and the more boisterous the better. Any excuse for a celebration was fine, but probably the most lively (and loudly) celebrated events were the Fourth of July, or the Ninth of September. The Ninth of September? Oh that's right, California Statehood, in case you have forgotten. Regardless, no proper celebration was complete without a lot of noise. Choirs sang, children screamed, guns were shot, cannon discharged, and anvils were fired.

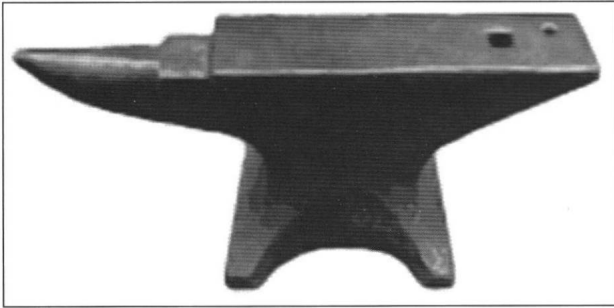
In our last issue of *Las Calaveras* we explored one of the more gruesome aspects of entertainment that came from early California, the Bull and Bear Fights. There is no question that the early Californians and miners loved any type

of competition or entertainment. Fandangos, horse racing, rooster grabbing, monte, you name it. But fired anvils? Just what was that all about? It was a tradition that traced its noisy roots back to the blacksmiths of England.

Let's look at this unique sport. Blacksmiths give themselves a well-earned holiday, Saint Clement's

Day. It is celebrated after the harvest but before Christmas to honor their patron saint of metal workers and smiths. Some say he was the first to refine iron from ore, and thus to shoe a horse. The day was marked on old calendars with an iron cauldron, one of the tools of the smith. The other tools of the trade were the tongs and the hammer, which were paraded about town during the celebration.





Anvils come in many shapes and sizes, but this is the classic shape. This 150 year old forged, 100 lb Peter Wright model is particularly favored by anvil shooters.

But the most precious of the blacksmith's tools was his anvil. The climax of the day's celebrations was the firing of an anvil, whereby a new anvil was packed with gunpowder and shot into the air. Yes, the heavy anvil was actually shot up into the air like a cannonball. Such firings tested the strength and durability of the anvil. A weak one would shatter under the explosion (producing, one would assume, much injury in the event). The resulting explosion would also produce a wonderful celebratory bang for the occasion.

Historically in the United States

The tradition came to America with the immigrant blacksmiths. Black powder, or gunpowder, being a precious commodity, was probably not squandered, so firings were rare. But as the adventurous miners flocked to California, the fun of the anvil firing was not far from their minds. Weight and space were important factors in items carried in wagons, so only items that served more than one purpose were carried in the great overland crossings. The anvil was a necessary tool on many accounts in any community, so it worked its way west with the pioneers. The fact that it could be used for entertainment as well was an added bonus. It is documented in the diary of Keturah Belknap who made the overland crossing in 1848, that when her wagon party crossed the Green River, the anvil met this purpose:

"The men, have got out the anviles and are celebrating the fourth"

The Fourth of July was traditionally celebrated in a noisy fashion in all western

towns. Firing an anvil became an indispensable component of the day's raucous entertainment. Fireworks were rare, so an anvil was an excellent substitute. An 1852 diary of an attorney trying his luck in California breathlessly described the noisy parade scene in nearby Jamestown:

"A wagon with flags and streamers and drawn by four white horses in which was seated the Committee on Arrangements, the Reader of the Declaration of Independence, and the Orator of the Day, headed by a brass band and followed by hundreds of miners who amidst the boon of anvils, for we had no cannon, the strains of music, and the patriotic shouts of the crowd marched up, down, and around the town, and finally halted in the large open space in front of the speaker's stand."

One wonders if he meant that the anvils were booming, or if they were an added boon to the celebration.

The Fourth of July was perhaps too passionately celebrated in nearby Fiddletown, Amador County in 1854. The anvil firing was so enthusiastic and noisy that one resident reported being convinced that some sort of battle was underway.

Down south, San Diego was particularly keen to anvils and fired them wholeheartedly at any excuse. On August 31, 1857, the first overland mail arrived in their city from San Antonio, Texas in only thirty-four days. This event kicked off a



Keturah Balknap, Oregon Trail pioneer of 1848 who noted anvil firings in her overland diary. Shown with her family circa 1910.

Photo courtesy Oregon Pioneers Photo Gallery.

day long celebration which required much noise, of course. Deeming the local cannon unsafe for firing, anvils were used instead. Anvils were used so regularly in San Diego that the local paper got tired of discussing it and began to report it with a sour note. When an anvil was fired in response to favorable news about the railroad, instead of embracing the good news the The Union of San Diego acidly reported on February 14, 1875:

“Some very smart practical jokers got out an anvil last evening and fired a salute, the object being to humbug the community... but as a joke it was about the biggest failure of the season. It was a performance that cannot be safely repeated.”

Sometimes even the military got into the act. One would assume the military to be the best outfitted when it came to gunpowder and iron things that go bang, but it was not always so. In the early days of our California Volunteers, the volunteers were pretty much responsible for outfitting themselves. In 1864 when Abraham Lincoln was re-nominated, Fort Miller in the San Joaquin Valley felt it necessary to fire a salute in his honor. [Fort Miller was one of the earliest military posts in California’s interior, located under what is now Lake Millerton near Fresno]. One officer stationed there wrote to his friend lamenting their lack of proper armament:

“We fire a salute at this post tomorrow... using anvils for want of something better—anything to make a noise and let the Copperheads know we are here... “

Gunpowder was a rare commodity in the west, even though it had been around for a long time. It had been around for hundreds of years in fact. It was invented around 850 AD by the Chinese accidentally as an elixir for immortality. Regardless of its potent past, firing an anvil gave gunpowder salesmen a nifty way to demonstrate their product. Producing a big bang and tossing an anvil gave a much more exciting display of the powder’s value than just firing it out of a standard gun.

Firing more than one anvil at a time was great fun as well. One report from San Diego claimed that

100 anvils were fired at one celebration. In fact, two anvils were fired fifty times. There are, however, photographs (of which *Las Calaveras* was unable to obtain a copy) which depict eight anvils being simultaneously fired in Texas in 1911.

Some sources say that anvils were fired as a way for the Union armies to destroy southern metal works, and claim that this is the origin of the sport. This is unlikely as the practice precedes the Civil War. What we do know is that it is enthusiastically practiced still today in many southern states.

How it’s Done

How the anvil is actually fired is a precise science. First, consider the anvil. An anvil is a solid piece of metal that should give a good solid ring when struck soundly. Historically anvils were forged from metal, and not cast as they are today. That is to say that they were formed by repeatedly pounding the hot metal into the desired shape. This pounding gave the metal both its shape and strength. In order to work the metal, a small hole was left in the bottom of the future anvil. This hole was used to turn the anvil through its forging and shaping process. (This hole in the bottom should not be confused with the “hardy hole”, which is the hole intentionally formed in the top of the anvil, used for mounting tools). This resulting bottom hole left a dandy spot to fill with gunpowder.

It takes two anvils to fire one. The first, or bottom anvil, called the shooter, forms the base. It is turned upside down and stands as level as possible, on dirt ground, and its forging hole is filled with black powder. A lot of black powder. Maybe three pounds of black powder. The second anvil, called the flyer, stands on top in the upright position with a fuse between them. The two anvils are now standing base to base. The professional anvil shooter knows exactly how to place the anvils against each other so that just the right amount of energy from the blast is transferred between the two masses so as to optimize the flight of the top anvil. In other words, it is desirable that the top anvil fly as straight up and down (and high!) as possible so that no one is hurt in the explosion, but also so that it falls clear enough



from the bottom anvil that it doesn't strike the bottom anvil upon its fall back to earth. Handling the black powder is delicate at this point as the powder is vulnerable to a spark and static electricity. It would not be a good idea to slam the two anvils against each other. It is also imperative that no loose metal parts be near the black powder that can become projectiles, yet a seal must be formed between the two anvils to take up any gap. The space is removed with the traditional precision gasket material: playing cards.

A pound of black powder or gunpowder takes about 700 grains. A .44 caliber bullet requires about 30 grains. Thus a 125 pound anvil requires the fire power of about 70 bullets from a Colt .44.

A fuse must be lit. Wisely, traditionally the fuse was lit with a hot poker. This allowed the lucky fellow who got to light the fuse the added benefit of a few more feet of extension on to his arm's length. Once lit, the traditional blaster's call of "Fire in the hole!" is yelled as warning for all to be aware of the pending blast. From the tremendous cloud of smoke improbably rises the top anvil. Traditionally no one tries to catch it on its descent. The resulting blast is not only heard but felt as a gentle thud to the chest, and sometimes as a good whollop to the ears.

One of today's more accomplished anvil shooters is Deke Sonnichsen of Menlo Park. His love of the sport almost borders on reverence. He describes a shot with adulation:

"To see the loading, gasketing and lighting, using fuse or forge-heated iron rod, to witness the explosion, and floating top anvil amid the billowing cloud of dense, white smoke, while the concussion of the low level shock wave hits your chest with a friendly thump as you try to listen for the humming ring of the 'flyer', is indeed inspirational, if not singularly stupendous!"

Anvil Firing Today

The sport of anvil firing remained popular at celebrations during the gold rush era. With the advent of the Chinese firecracker in the mid to late 1800's, the boom of the anvil began fade to the rapid fire of its Chinese explosive cousin. By the early 1900's it had become an obscure event practiced mostly in California, Arizona, and a few parts of Nevada. Today it is practiced in only a few humble locations. In California private events held today in Mariposa, Arroyo Grande and Coaling

Station-A (Coalinga) may stage a good anvil bang for their guests. In Hamilton, Texas, American Legion Post 222 shoots anvils every Veteran's Day holiday at dawn. The public is invited to join in and stay for breakfast. They've enjoyed this tradition for almost ninety consecutive years.

Anvils are still regularly shot at blacksmith conventions. The contemporary anvil firer still uses forged anvils, which are probably well over 100 years old, as the modern anvils are cast today and not up to the demands of blasting away with them. The "sport" is not only a show



Fire in the hole! An anvil flew in Sheep Ranch recently, entertaining (most of) the town. The arrow points to the anvil.

Photo courtesy of Bob Leitzell, July, 2008.

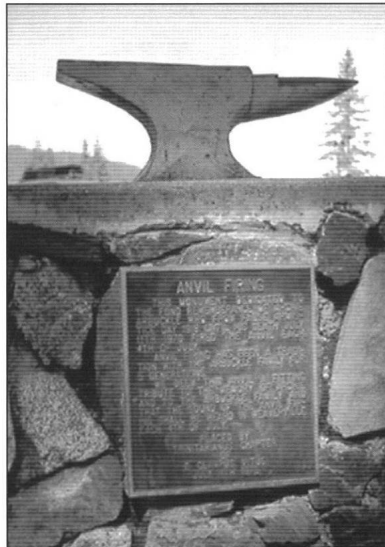
but can be competitive. Anvils are fired for height (range) and accuracy in the descent. Anvils that top 200 feet in height are considered stupendously accomplished shots. Anvils may be drilled out or modified to accommodate more powder, but these techniques often offend traditionalists. Modern surveying equipment is used to determine the height of a shot, and some anvils have been determined to go higher than 500 feet, with only a few feet of “drift”, or sideways movement. These incredibly accurate shots owe to the professionalism and experience of the shooter.

An anvil firing today requires significant pre-planning. The blaster must contact the local fire department and the sheriff’s department to advise them of the blast. The firing should not be undertaken lightly, and only an experienced or apprenticed blaster should attempt a firing. Despite all of the fun surrounding the event, there is much potential for injury.

Recently the local cultural resources firm Foothill Resources celebrated their twenty-fifth anniversary. To mark the occasion in a style appropriate to the celebration, the owners arranged to have an anvil shot at the event at the Pioneer Hotel in Sheep Ranch. Donn Marinovich, a contractor from Sonora is an accomplished anvil firer and conducted the shot. So that the spectators do not lose the steel-gray anvil in the smoke, Donn paints his shooting anvil with yellow and black stripes like a bee and calls it “The Stinger”. He gave a brief talk on the history of the sport, lit the fuse and properly yelled “*Fire in the hole!*”, and away flew his bee. It was a smashing success and a wonderful spectacle.

Like the 1875 San Diegans, even some Sheep Ranch residents today take exception to having had the anvil fired. Despite living in an historically rich community, some residents just couldn’t see fit to join the spirit of an historic re-enactment. They felt compelled to complain rather than just enjoy the fun.

On July 4, 1976 (appropriately), the Trinitarianus chapter of the E Clampus Vitus placed a monument in Weaverville, California. There is a lovely anvil



Monument dedicated to anvil firing placed by E Clampus Vitus in the town of Weaverville on July 4, 1976.
Photo courtesy ECV.

on top of the stone monument, and it is dedicated to the fine art of anvil firing.

Anvils have reached other heights of entertainment as well. A ringing anvil is used to accompany several classical, operatic, and popular compositions. Visually an anvil is used as the heavy object to drop (comically) on the unsuspecting victim, such as between cartoon characters Wile E. Coyote and the Road Runner. In the Broadway musical *The Music Man*, the bad guy is an anvil salesman. “It takes a real salesman, I can tell you that,” he says. “Anvils have limited appeal, you know.” The early pioneers

would be justified in seeing their precious anvils serving so many duties today.

There are many examples on the modern cyber highways of anvil shots gone awry, should readers wish to view a shot in action. Regrettably there are more films of bad shots than good. Apparently a lot of people have attempted to do an anvil shot without knowing what they’re doing, and proudly filmed themselves in the act. As if that weren’t bad enough, they’ve had the further foolhardiness to post the film onto the world wide web where anyone can now witness their stupidity in action. Just like children with fireworks, readers are cautioned to not try this at home without proper supervision.

Once you witness a shot yourself, and the smoke clears, and the applause and laughing subside, you’ll agree with Deke. Watching an anvil firing can be “... indeed inspirational, if not singularly stupendous!”



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The Calaveras County Historical Society is a non-profit corporation. It meets on the fourth Thursday of each month in various communities throughout the County. Locations and scheduled programs are announced in advance. Some meetings include a dinner program, and visitors are always welcome.

The Society operates the Calaveras County Museum which is open daily from 10:00 to 4:00 in the historic County courthouse located at 30 Main Street in San Andreas; and the historic Red Barn Museum at 891 Mountain Ranch Road, also in San Andreas, which is open Thursday to Sunday, 10:00 to 4:00.

The Society's office is located in historic San Andreas, the Calaveras County seat. Visitors are always welcome to stop by the office for assistance with research, and are encouraged to visit the museums while in the area. The office is open Monday through Friday from 8:30 to 4:00, and the telephone number is (209) 754-1058, or contact us at: CCHS@goldrush.com; Red Barn Museum (209) 754-0800.

New Members

The Historical Society welcomes the following new members:

June, 2008

Fred Baker, Sheep Ranch
Jim Fletcher, Angels Camp
Joy Roberts, San Andreas
Dominic "Nick" & Diane Guidici, San Francisco
Robert Lawton, Valley Springs

July, 2008

Sherrie Sperry, Angels Camp
Dona Queirola, Murphys
Charnette Boylan, San Andreas
Harmon Shragge, San Francisco

August, 2008

Rudy Garcia, Stockton
Megan Aguilar, Angels Camp
Mario & Teresa Marian Boggiano, Linden
Mark Francis, Berkeley
Charles Cady, Stockton

Donation

June, 2008

Door from the original Auditor and Recorder's Office, with a glass window and mailing slot—Howard Little, San Andreas

Correction

Our last issue of *Las Calaveras* quoted numerous sources, including census data, that apparently incorrectly have perpetuated a belief that the "last native grizzly was shot and killed... in Fresno in 1922." Reader and retired San Joaquin Delta College Biologist Steve Stocking knew otherwise and sent a correction to the Historical Society. The true location was in Tulare County, about 60 miles east of Fresno. Further, grizzlies were believed to have been sighted as late as 1925 in Sequoia National Park. *Las Calaveras* regrets the error and thanks Steve Stocking for his input.