

Nuggets from the Past

By Norman McLeod

Light of historical reflection shines on Sunny South site

On Saturday morning, June 13, Gene Markley, leading a troop of history buffs, motored into Foresthill with another historical marker to be installed on the Foresthill Divide, this one at the site of the former gold-mining settlement of Sunny South.

As the granite marker weighed 350 pounds, an ingenious carrier was fashioned by Jim Power of Foresthill. It was a wooden box large enough to hold the marker, with four long handles extending from each corner. Underneath the box were fastened two small rubber-tired wheels in tandem, enabling the bearers to push the carrier along the ground where feasible. Unfortunately, the trail into Sunny South was not sidewalk-level, so considerable heaving and lifting was required over ditches and rises.

Also, numerous cement bags and water jugs, plus various tools, were required "baggage" for mixing and pouring the cement to form a solid concrete base for the marker. Although the marker, equipment and supplies were transported by truck most of the distance from the highway, the remaining quarter-mile along the old Breece-and-Wheeler miners' ditch presented quite a challenge to the sweating volunteers.

Once at the site, some of the party members proceeded immediately to dig the base hole for the marker. This wasn't easy. The soil was dry and hard-pressed. Others in the group of about 35 began to explore the townsite that once supported a population of 250, miners and their families.

Mike Moffett, current president of the Foresthill Divide Historical Society, with others soon disappeared into a nearby ravine seeking the tunnel entrance to the famous Hidden Treasure Mine. Remarks were heard from inquisitors as to why and how the town was erected on such a steep slope. Old photos reveal that flats were dug into the slope for building construction, flats that can be seen today. No concrete was used for foundations. Many of the buildings were erected on wood stilts.

Sunny South lay on the Foresthill Divide's south slope overlooking Bullion Creek Canyon, deriving its name from its year-long southern exposure to the sun. It was located at 3,500 feet elevation, about five miles northeast of Michigan Bluff. Today the road into it begins off the Soda Springs Highway at the Chicken Hawk turnoff approximately four miles east of Baker's Ranch.

Sunny South's considerable amenities included a school, two hotels and two stores. In 1882, the school had an attendance of 20 students.

The area was first prospected in 1870 by William Cameron, whose claim embraced 254 acres. He dug a tunnel 602 feet into the slope without success. Then, in 1874, he claimed another 160 acres adjoining on the east and began a second tunnel. This was the mine that later became the Hidden Treasure.

Cameron was an experienced miner and a working partner in the Mountain Gate Mine located on the north slope of the Foresthill Divide. He joined with another miner from Damascus, M.H. Power, and together in 1875 they surveyed a line from the Mountain Gate to the Hidden Treasure location on the south slope. Following their survey, they continued boring the Hidden Treasure tunnel, and eventually they connected skillfully with the Mountain Gate drift.

The Hidden Treasure developed into a lucrative mine, ultimately producing \$4 million in gold. It ceased operations in 1916 due to underground hazardous earth movements. Its owner at the time was Harold T. Power.

With the Sunny South marker at last installed in concrete, the entire June 13 group gathered around Markley while he briefed us on the settlement's history and read aloud his self-authored dedication poem.

It was well-received. It is Markley's wish to conduct a public dedication of the marker one year after its installation, in June 1993, to which all interested Foresthill Divide residents will be invited.

Through Markley's efforts, this was the third historic marker in three years installed at a former townsite on the Foresthill Divide. The first two were at Damascus and Red Point. In 1991, he also led a group into the old Star Town site near Last Chance for the installation of a fourth historical marker.

Also in 1991, the Conference of California Historical Societies honored Markley with its Individual Award of Merit. Mark Fowler, a high school science teacher and a longtime Markley associate, had this to say:

"Gene Markley has committed the last 15 years of his life to the promotion, preservation, education and contribution of the historical events and landmarks within Placer County, California, and the western United States.

"No single person has had such a significant impact upon the local population within Northern California than has Gene Markley. This recognition for an Award of Merit would truly reward an unsung leader in the historical field."