1999 Mining History Association Presidential Address

By Donald L. Hardesty

A few months ago in the Newsletter's "Presidential Page," I commented that we encounter mining's past by traveling along three quite separate roads. We visit mining's past by traveling along a paper trail, through written accounts, photographs, maps, and other documents. We also travel through the stories and memories of old-timers. And we visit the past through the landscapes, buildings, structures, artifacts, and other physical remains left behind by past miners and mining. Today I want to talk about how we experience mining's past on the road of physical remains, how we preserve the road, and how we communicate the importance of the road to others. All talks need a title, of course, so I tried to think of a few possibilities. I first thought of "ruinous pathways to mining's past" and then of "trashy exposes of mining's past." On further reflection, given my job as a university professor, maybe the title should be "how I spent my summer vacations."

Traveling the HAER Road to Preservation

The most obvious and visible remnants of the road are still-standing buildings, structures, and landscapes. Clearly they convey to the visitor images of mining's past that in size and closeness cannot be matched in paper. Preserving these magnificent places is something that all of us have been involved in and feel deeply about. We know, however, that these images are rapidly disappearing despite our best efforts. What can be done? One approach to preserving the physical remains of mining's past is through protection and restoration; another approach is through their documentation with field surveys, architectural drawings, and photography. The Historic American Engineering Record (HAER) is a good example. My first exposure to this approach to historic preservation in the American West began in 1980 as part of a HAER (actually NAER the National Architectural and Engineering Record at the time) team documenting historic buildings and structures in the Virginia City National Landmark District. The team documented not only mines and mills but also commercial, residential, and institutional buildings and structures as well as landscape features in the district. Most recently, I participated in another HAER Project at the Mariscal Quicksilver Works in Big Bend National Park in West Texas. The site included the ruins of one of the last Scott furnaces to be used along with a substantial worker's settlement, most of whom came from Mexico.

Preservation Through Dirt Archaeology

HAER-type documentation, however, leaves out the record of what is buried in the ground, the physical traces of miner's lifestyles and technology. Yet what some facetiously call "dirt archaeology" is clearly another way of experiencing and, by documenting these voices from the underground, preserving mining's past. Dirt archaeology at historic mines sometimes is done for purely academic reasons but more often today, and especially in the American West, is conducted to comply with governmental laws and regulations. One such "compliance dig" that I was involved in several years ago took place at the townsite of Riepetown, a "satellite" of the copper company towns of Ruth and Kimberly in eastern Nevada's Robinson mining district (Hardesty *et al* 1994, Hardesty 1998). The work took place to help mitigate the environmental impact of constructing a new mill on the townsite. Much of the excavation

took place in the winter of 1992 and 1993, much to the agony of the field personnel who worked under heavy snow cover and subzero temperatures. Wintertime methods included the use of propane-fired heaters to melt snow and thaw out the frozen ground and tents to cover the excavation units, both built-to-order by local companies.

What did we find? The dig found a large number of buried building foundations, cellars, wells, privy pits, trash dumps, and the like. In many places, they were arranged into several "building levels," one above the other, that reflected fires and subsequent rebuilding. Debris from burned-out buildings appeared to have been intentionally pushed into cellars and then covered with a deep layer of mine waste rock. New building took place on top of this. Clearly, landscapes changed dramatically from time to time in the town. Many of the abandoned and filled-in wells and privy pits reflected the construction of water and sewer lines to the town in 1937 and 1939, respectively.

Dirt archaeology, of course, is only one road into Riepetown's past. Ultimately, we told a story of Riepetown that reflected our travels along all three roads of documentary history, memory and archaeology. The story goes something like this. In the 1890s, German immigrant Richard Riepe started a building stone quarry and small worker's settlement at the locality. Riepe sold the land after a few years. Copper mining in the vicinity began in earnest after 1904, and a housing development named Riepetown grew up on the land. Riepetown soon became a cheap alternative to nearby company towns. The town rapidly emerged as a center of saloons, gambling, brothels, and labor union radicalism. Copper mining declined in the district after World War One, but Riepetown thrived once again during the Prohibition Era as a liquor bootlegging center. The town sank into depression again with the repeal of the Volstead Act and much of its population left, abandoning residential and commercial buildings. The copper industry revived in the late 1930s and the Second World War started another boom in the Robinson district. Riepetown once again overflowed with miners unable to find housing in, or unwilling to live in, the company towns. Life in the town retained its traditional wide-open and rough character. The end of the war, however, brought the town to a close, and the last resident left in the 1970s.

As a "satellite" of company towns, Riepetown society and culture appear to be rather unique. The company towns of Ruth, Kimberly, and McGill, for example, evolved classic industrial social structures with well-defined occupational and social classes reflected in domestic architecture, town layout, wealth differences, and prestige. In contrast, however, archaeological evidence showed no evidence of a class structure, especially in architecture and household belongings, in Riepetown. Nor is there archaeological evidence that the many ethnic groups and nationalities in the town lived in different neighborhoods or had significant lifestyle differences. The town appears to have been very much like a mid-nineteenth century mining camp in its patterns of social organization, especially in the variety of ways in which domestic households were organized. Dietary patterns also appear to be more diverse than those in company towns.

Engaging the Public

The preservation of the physical remains of mining's past, however, involves more than just restoration or documentation, whether it be dirt archaeology or a HAER-type project. It also involves engaging the public in a dialog about mining history to communicate the "value" of surviving physical remains as a pathway into the past. What has become known as "public archaeology" is an example, and a program called Public archaeology on the Comstock illustrates the approach. The program began with the recognition that archaeological sites in the Virginia City National Historic Landmark District have been destroyed at an alarming rate in recent years. In response, the Nevada State Historic Preservation Office launched an initiative in 1991 to encourage better management of archaeological remains in the Landmark. It involved a partnership among the residents of the Landmark community; local, state, and federal agencies; scholars interested in the history of the Comstock; and commercial interests.

The initiative used grass roots programs focused upon public education. One of these, public archae-

ology on the Comstock, made up an essential part of the program from the beginning. The public archaeology program used public lectures, multimedia publicity, museum exhibits, opportunities for volunteers from the community to work on the project, student training, and guided tours to increase public awareness of the value of archaeological remains in the Landmark. The program was driven by a research agenda focused upon the social life and culture of the Comstock as an industrial community in its boomtown period from 1860 to the 1880s. Starting in 1993, archaeological field schools sponsored by the University of Nevada, Reno, provided the vehicle for the public archaeology program. The field schools studied the archaeological remains of two saloons.

The public archaeology on the Comstock program advanced both the public education and the research goals of the Virginia City NHL initiative in several ways. The local community, tourists, and the public at large were given a number of opportunities to learn the value of archaeological resources. First of all, the field site itself was an arena for public education. Signage at the site explained what we were doing to visitors and people just passing by. Field staff and students engaged visitors in conversation about the project whenever possible. As a result, students in the field school were given an opportunity to learn not only research methods in archaeology but also the philosophy and methods of public education. Just being in the middle of Virginia City in the peak tourist season led to the incorporation of the archaeological project into the tourism agenda. We found ourselves, for example, becoming part of the talk given by a commercial tour operator driving by the site several times a day. Secondly, a field laboratory was set up in the Fourth Ward School Museum, giving visitors to the museum an opportunity not only to see students processing artifacts but also to ask questions. An exhibit on Comstock archaeology was prepared and installed at the museum as well. Thirdly, newspaper, radio, and television coverage of the project reached out to the local community. A Reno television station, for example, carried an interview with the field supervisor on a Saturday morning Teen Talk program. Local newspapers carried reports of the project, and one columnist tracked down and published oral history information about the saloon from old timers. The Nevada SHPO published an article on the project in *Historic Preservation Forum*. Finally, we incorporated volunteers as well as students into the program. A young Michigan teenager visiting her Carson City grandparents, for example, worked at the site each time she came west.

Mining Landscapes

Finally, the archaeological road to mining's past is paved with landscapes such as California's Malakoff Diggings or the tailings flow from the Consolidated Cortez Mill in central Nevada. Mining landscapes convey and contain information about a variety of historical events and processes. Perhaps first and foremost, however, they are primary documents of mining-related environmental change, as Duane Smith amply illustrates in his wonderful book *Mining America* (Smith 1987). Mining landscapes, in addition to being diverse and abundant, are high resolution "historical analogs" of environmental changes taking place in a time period as short as a few days or months to as long as decades or centuries. They occur in geographical places ranging in size from small localities to regions covering several square miles. Such landscapes often can be viewed as conceptual "islands" and studied using comparative methods. Each mining landscape is, in effect, a case study of the sensitivity of geographical places as a habitat for human occupation. The scale and boundaries of the landscapes ebb and flow with the technology, its social and cultural context, and its history. Some are long-lasting with dramatic signatures, others are fleeting and leave barely a trace.

Hattori and Thompson (1987) provide a good example in their study of the impact of charcoal making activities, a critical source of raw material used to fuel roasting furnaces and smelters, upon the pinyon-juniper forests in central Nevada's Cortez Mining District. Conventional wisdom, folk history, and photographs of areas around the Cortez mills held that the pinyon-juniper woodland had been clear-cut for a radius of about sixty miles around the settlement of Cortez. Hattori and Thompson used

the methods of dendrochronology and archaeology to date and otherwise analyze tree rings from cut stumps, stacked cordwood, wood remnants at charcoal pits, remains of buildings and structures, and wooden artifacts. They found that the first mining period between 1863 and 1883 was "marked by localized, nonintensive logging to meet the demands of the numerous small mines in the area" (Hattori and Thompson 1987: 70). More intensive mining between 1884 and 1891 removed many more trees but left many. With the importation of mining fuels and materials from outside after 1897, the pinyon woodlands returned more or less to their former condition. Overgrazing by cattle beginning in the late 19th century and the consequent replacement of grasses appears to have played an important role in the 20th century expansion of the woodland into the valley floor.

Conclusion

In conclusion, then, traveling into mining's past takes place on many roads, not the least of which is the one paved with the physical remains of mines, camps, and landscapes. All of us have the responsibility of maintaining these roads for others to use. Preservation is a moral obligation of the present to keep open the pathways between the past and the future.

Literature Cited

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