

# Mammoth

By Walter Chalfant



party led by James A. Parker, experienced miner, and including B. N. Lowe, N. D. Smith, and B. S. Martin took the field in 1877 in the perennial hunt for the lost cement ledge. They found nothing in the area over which many others had diligently hunted. Perhaps the ledge continued on south and some trace of it might be found in the next canyon, later named Mammoth. Parker and company extended their search to that canyon and on June 20, 1877, came upon a promising ledge which they located as the Alpha claim, "on the mountain east of Summit Lake [now Lake Mary], about opposite the center thereof." The adjacent forest meant to them only timber and fuel, and the stream promised water power. The find was modestly announced as "the largest bonanza outside of Virginia City."

A report made in 1902 stated that A. J. Wren and John Briggs had located the Mammoth mine in 1875, while working on a grubstake furnished by Folk and Steward. If so, they did no more than post location notices. Discovery of the Alpha reminded them of the fact, and on July 30, 1877, Wren and Briggs located the Mammoth, east of Summit Lake."

Presumably the handful of miners organized a district, for on the records of Mono County the two locations are noted, by authority of James A. Parker as Mining Recorder of Lake District, which remained the official name. While it was later claimed that three hundred locations were filed in the district, official records account for only these two. The county has the original records of several other districts, but of the existence of Lake District there is no other trace. Probably, as in Virginia City, the original record book lay around, subject to anybody's amending, until it was lost.

Lake District received little attention that year, but was well spring advertised before the next spring. Among those who came to see the new bonanza was General George S. Dodge, of Union Pacific railroad-building fame. Little work had been done; specimens shown and the vein stretching for two miles along the hill impressed Dodge as "good enough for a stock deal." He bought the Mammoth group, five claims by then, paying \$10,000 cash and \$20,000 in stock in the company which he immediately organized. It was incorporated as the Mammoth Mining Company, June 3, 1878, with Thomas Bell president, George S. Dodge, J. F. Haggin, George W. Grayson, and M. Sambeth, all of San Francisco, as directors. Other owners were not slow in organizing, and it was not long until nineteen companies were represented in the camp. Soon after the Dodge deal, the Alpha claim was bonded to Virginia City people.

News of the deals and enthusiastic reports started an immigration, and in June the place reported a population of 125. Many of the men traveled over the neighboring country, and soon other districts came into being. They included: Mountain View, ten miles north of Mammoth; Prescott, a little farther north, and southwest of Mono Lake; North Fork, across the summit, on the San Joaquin River headwaters; Minaret, in the same region; Laurel, south and west of Lake; and Minnietta, seventeen miles south.

Three townsites in the canyon bid for favor: Pine City, near the shore of Lake Mary; Mammoth, centrally located; and Mineral Park, to the east. Mammoth outstripped the others in growth and became the central point, taking its name from the company. The name now applies to the general region.

A. C. Webster built a wagon road across from Benton, and a more direct route southerly was provided by the enterprise of Dickinson Bros. and J. L. C. Sherwin in constructing a toll road on practically the route now followed by U.S. Highway 395 over Sherwin Hill. This made it possible to drive, a report said, from Round Valley in northern Inyo County to Mammoth, a distance of less than forty miles, in a day. Stations for wayfarers were built at two different points, furnishing "refreshments for man and beast." The roads were not smooth boulevards, and afforded some degree of adventure to travelers. A lady riding as a passenger between Mammoth and Pine City, a mile or so apart, happened to come opposite a tree which was being felled, just as a heavy gust of wind blew it over. One of the horses in the team was killed, while the lady "with great presence of mind," as a reporter put it, "sprang in the opposite direction and escaped with a sprained ankle." When the huge flywheel for the mill was being transported in sections by a freighting team it fell from the top of the Sherwin Hill road and crashed to the bottom of the canyon, eight hundred feet below.

The Mammoth Company tunneled into Mineral Hill (now known as Red Mountain), the mountain in which the claims were situated, to cut the vein at depth. Four tunnels were run, each of which either directly or by drifts cut ore, but not the great vein that outcrops on top of the mountain "to a width of over 100 feet in places." Occasional bodies of very rich ore were encountered, some running into incredible values. An item in a Mammoth paper in October 1879 said: "M. J. Parks, night foreman, brought in about twenty pounds of ore, gold mixed with quartz. Besides that lot, huge chunks were found, 10 15 or 20 pounds, and one 50 pounds, all alive with gold. The ore will assay \$50,000 to \$120,000 a ton." Such pockets when found were frequently the prey of highgraders - ore thieves, in more precise language-who were said to have carried away thousands of dollars worth of the rich stuff and worked it on the San Joaquin as being ore from some claim of their own. There were scoffers who believed the rich ore was brought from Bodie, but this view was not general. Probably the highgraders were willing to encourage this Bodie idea as a means of helping to cover up any inquiry into their operations. Items in the

Mammoth papers from time to time, and Mammoth correspondence to other publications, reported other bodies of rich ore. For example: "The last run of 200 tons taken out 200 feet below the croppings yielded \$11,000, at an expense of \$5 per ton for mining and milling." "A clean-up of 44 tons yielded from pulp \$53 a ton. They cleaned up the mortars and got a bar of bullion of 180 ounces at \$13 an ounce." "Over 100 men can be kept constantly at work in the Mammoth, while the ore is so easily worked that each miner can knock down about five tons per day." "Estimated width of ledge matter is 75 feet. It is estimated that 80,000 tons of ore are in sight." "The Mammoth company has opened the ore body to a vertical depth of 600 feet. Twenty feet next to the footwall mills \$40 per ton, the remaining 57 feet milling about \$12." "Amount of bullion shipped about \$10,000, 30 per cent gold, 70 per cent silver." Other assays of \$23,000 to \$40,000 per ton were reported. The experienced reader need not be reminded of the prospector's tendency to feature the richest-looking piece of ore though it be no larger than half a golf ball in size.

The Mammoth Company was as energetic in putting up a mill as in mining. "Every idle man wanting work has it furnished by the Mammoth company," remarked the *Mammoth City Herald*. The plant comprised a series of buildings, covering about a quarter-acre of ground. Some 800,000 feet of timber were used in its construction. The main timbers were about a foot square, to withstand the heavy snows of the region. Notwithstanding the seemingly strong construction, one section caved in under the snow of the winter of 1878-79, and the next summer the structure was strongly reinforced.

Originally the mill contained twenty stamps, each of 900 pounds weight. It was driven by a six-foot Knight wheel under a 175-foot head of water. The following year, 1879, twenty more stamps and a steam engine of the largest size in use were added; but a state report in 1888 expressed doubt that steam power was ever used.

A 3,500-foot covered tramway led from the tunnel mouths to the 2,400-ton ore bins in the mill, a donkey engine being used to control movements of cars up and down. After its construction, the tram was remodeled so that ascending empty cars controlled the descent of loads. On the more level part of the trip a brakeman handled the cars, five at a time. One day snow had blown in on the track and covered it with ice and the train got out of control. A great smash-up was the result, the brakeman being badly injured. Thereafter a mule was used to haul the cars on that section. A high-speed zephyr came along and blew his muleship from the track. This did not end his service, but after that, whenever a strong wind roared through the structure, the sagacious animal lay down until the gust had passed.

To run the mill water was taken from Lake Mary, at the outlet of which a dam was built to insure a satisfactory supply.

The mill shut down early in 1880. A newspaper report said lack of quicksilver and chemicals was the cause. It never started again, and a San Francisco report said that disagreement among the stockholders had much to do with the suspension. During the years of neglect the dam reached a condition which caused it to be condemned by the state as a matter of safety. It was then taken over by the Forest Service and replaced.

This shutdown was the final blow to Mammoth City as a place of residence at that period. A saloon keeper, whose place was called the "Temple of Folly," had smoothed the side of a pine stump near his place and on it painted a big "IF." If more ore were found in the tunnels, if the mill started up again, and if various other contingencies were met, the camp would come back. His doubt was prophetic. A news report said: "Men are leaving every day, in twos, sixes, dozens, on snowshoes, barley sacks, anything. A train of wagons and sleds was fully a week making twenty-six miles. In Rock Creek canyon the advance averaged only two miles a day, at incredible cost of labor and much swearing. The livery business has been knocked in the head since Bennett had to sink a double compartment shaft to locate the ridgepole of his stable." When spring came and the snow had gone, buildings were torn down and their lumber hauled away to other places.

As is to be inferred from the last paragraph, a time of heavy snow had come. The *Mammoth Herald*, which still survived, remarked: "As Mose Brockman was taking some snowshoe exercise on his way home to Bishop some days ago, a grizzly came down from the mountains with an apparent desire of interviewing him. The bear was without snowshoes, but made satisfactory progress between frequent rests. Never was the same space of Long Valley covered so quickly by any pedestrian. When reaching Bart McGee's his bearship decided to go for some cattle, which he did. Mr. Brockman says he w-w-asn't frightened."

The Mammoth Company's end came in a sheriff's sale in September 1881. The property brought almost nothing in comparison with the outlays. Enthusiastic reports of rich strikes had sent the stock up to \$18 or \$20 a share during the summer of 1879; the next year it was worthless.

Not all the mines followed the example of the Mammoth. Some thousands of dollars were taken out by arrastras and small mills afterward, and there were occasional attempts to work the claims of the Mammoth group. One of the most promising, the Monte Cristo, on which a tunnel of 1,540 feet had been driven, reached the paying class, reporting high assays and proving values by returns from its ores.

The Mammoth Company was said to have spent \$160,000 on its mill, \$125,000 in its mines, and \$100,000 on roads and buildings. There are great differences in estimates on what it recovered from the ore it worked. The *California Journal of Mines and Geology* in 1888 placed the total output at \$200,000. An engineer who examined the property in 1902 credited one stope with \$300,000, and said the company had produced \$2,000,000. Reports on the whole property are such as to indicate a possibility that important deposits there are practically untouched. The *Journal* said: "It is the opinion of some expert miners who have visited Lake

district and examined the condition of things there that the mill never ought to have been shut down and that under a proper management it could even now be started up and run with profit. They do not hesitate to declare that in their judgment the Mammoth Co. abandoned their enterprise too soon. Much ore that would not pay eight or ten years ago could now be worked with remunerative yields." The 1902 report said: "This is a large and valuable property; it has been badly managed, and with proper development will make a big mine .... No provision was made for cyanide or for saving the pyritic materials, which outside of the oxidized ore carried nearly all the values .... The sulphides were thrown over the dump as being of no value. Several of the old mining men in the district found this out and caused a stampede on stock-buying in Bodie, which boosted the stock of this property from 19 cents to \$19 in less than ten days ...." These opinions from disinterested and presumably expert sources give some color to the belief that in some day yet to come Mammoth may again be heard from as a mining camp of note.

Let us consider the mining life of the camp disposed of and take a look at Mammoth's social side. Two newspapers made their appearance: The *Mammoth City Herald*, semiweekly, was started in the early part of 1879 by W. W. Barnes, one of the itinerant class of publishers who set his own type, ran the press, kept the books, and delivered the papers. He had published papers at Columbus, Nevada, and Benton, California, in the two years preceding. In July, when his paper was but two or three months old, he sold a partnership to R. D. Bogart. Two months later the partners disagreed and the concern split up. Bogart withdrew, and thereafter used much energy in expressing his not too complimentary opinion of his late associate. In August one McCluskey, from San Francisco, launched the *Lake Mining Review*, which two months later changed its name to the *Times*, semiweekly. In December the paper passed into possession of John Gilson, with Bogart as editor. In another month Hugh Glenn and B. H. Yaney took over the paper. Both papers weathered the heavy winter of 1879-80 and closed shop only when the general exodus began. Sample details reported by newspapers and in letters are as follows:

The Fourth of July, 1879, was celebrated among the trees of Mineral Park. A sawmill, blacksmith shop, stores, saloons, feed stables, hotels, etc., are here in running order.

Business houses in Mammoth include six general merchandise, flour and hardware stores, two clothing houses, three variety stores, two drug stores, two breweries, two livery stables, six hotels, five restaurants, twenty-two saloons, six lodging houses, not counting places at Pine City and Mineral Park; three physicians, three police, jail, school superintendent.

The hotel conveniences at Mammoth will provide for all visitors.

In an election in May 1879 Mammoth polled 188 votes, of which 1170 were against the new constitution [of California], and 18 for it.

A dancing platform was built on the west side of Lake Mary, and a large boat carries passengers across the lake to and from the scene of revelry.

The permanent population of Mammoth City is estimated at from 300 to 400; this spring there were 1,000 to 1,500 people in and around town.

McFarland & Fraser's lumber mill cut, up to July 1, 650,000 feet of lumber and the shingle mill had turned out 400,000 shingles. It is located in a dense forest of large-sized firs and yellow pines.

In the fall of 1879 an appeal was made by the Methodist church at Bishop for assistance in building a church, and the Mammothites sent down a donation of \$500.

Mammoth town lots are selling at \$1,500 for 25 feet frontage.

Mammothites believe in enjoying themselves. Two parties in a week speak well for their social proclivities.

Communication with the outside world naturally engaged much attention. A trail was opened across to Fresno Flats, on the west side, sixty miles away, making it possible to reach San Francisco by horseback messenger in twenty-eight hours. That route was open in summer only. A Fresno paper in April 1879 said there was a movement on foot looking to construction of a wagon road from Fresno Flats to the east side. It was estimated, the paper said, that it would cost \$40,000. The *Bodie Standard* commented on the project, saying that the first twenty miles would cost \$25,000, ten miles from North Fork District to Mammoth would cost little, and there were about twenty miles of heavy grading, which would cost \$75,000 to \$100,000

A Visalia paper said that J. L. C. Sherwin had filed in Fresno County the map of a new route from Fresno Flats to Pine City, Mono County. "Who will get the first road through will get the trade," it believed.

The *Mammoth Herald* prophesied: "Madera on the Southern Pacific Railroad, being the nearest railroad point to Mammoth City, is destined at no distant day to become the entire shipping point for these places. When the Mammoth mill makes one run on pay dirt the name of Mammoth City will be familiar to ten thousand."

The winter of 1879-80 was late in coming but made up in severity when it did strike. Snow began falling early in December and continued for two days. A short lull occurred; then storms raged without cessation for eighteen days. One old resident of the camp told the writer that a total of twenty-eight feet fell. The few printed reports tell of its lying eight feet deep on the level. Tunneling between buildings became necessary in some cases, while in other cases an entrance had to be dug near a door and thence steps to the surface of the snow.

The camp was isolated for considerable periods that winter. Small lots of mail were brought in when courageous carriers could make the trip out, usually to Bodie. The effort to meet this need cost the life of a carrier, William Haines. He left Mammoth on December 20, 1879. Two days later, when he had not returned as expected, two men set out on snowshoes to locate him. They found that after Haines had returned to within half a mile of Deadman Station, thirteen miles from Mammoth, the mule he rode had given out in its struggle to breast the drifts. Haines unsaddled the mule, put mail and saddlebags in a tree, and built a fire from the dry branches he could break off. His fuel had given out after two days; knowing that he was beginning to freeze, he had started on. His next day's journey was but ten feet. When found he was lying on a blanket, conscious, and said that he had prayed that he might go to sleep and never awaken. His feet were frozen to above the ankles, and his hands were frozen to the wrists. It took five days of hard labor to get him to Mammoth. The poor fellow objected to any operation, but one amputation after another was unavoidable. The death for which he had longed did not come to him until March. Mammoth people did what they could for him, without avail. One means taken to raise money was a performance by the Mammoth City Dramatic Club, playing *Miralda* and *The Rough Diamond* on the night of February 7, 1880, for his benefit. A crowded house greeted it.

The heavy storms and the discouraging turn of events in the mill and mine came at about the same time, while many of the residents stayed, hoping against hope. The newspapers still remained, and a considerable population was indicated by the dramatic performance and the audience which saw it, as late as February. The exodus was on, however. The *Mammoth City Times* remarked: "Twenty pairs of snowshoes, each with a man on top, left this morning," and that item might have been repeated time after time. The same paper was mildly fierce in denouncing a certain crime: "Some wretch or wretches stole two pairs of snowshoes from Sam Argall and his little boy last night. Anybody who would steal snowshoes would do anything mean."

Of the old forty-stamp mill there now remain only the huge flywheel of the engine, a massive built-up casting fourteen or more feet in diameter, and weighing tons; the cylinder, two feet inner diameter and four-foot piston stroke; and the heavy piston rod. Little else is to be seen except foundations and some retaining wall.

Thieving junk collectors cut up the boiler with acetylene torches and carried away the pieces and whatever else was loose before the Forest Service intervened to put the property under government protection as being of public interest.

Excerpt taken from *Tales of the Pioneers*  
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