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Why Silver Was Never Smelted At Mineral King

by Joe Doctor

Enos Barton was one of the several sons of Mr. and Mrs. James Barton, pioneers of Eshom Valley and Three Rivers. He and his brother, Orlando, worked for the New England Tunneling and Smelter Company in Mineral King in the mid 1870s. Both Bartons were great and good friends of J.A. Wallace and as young men the two spent time together with Wallace in Mineral King and the mountains beyond. Wallace went on to study law and became prominent as Tulare County's Superior Court judge.

In his papers in the county library, we found the following letter from Enos Barton to his friend, dated Three Rivers, August 15, 1905; a second letter from brother Orlando followed a week later.

Friend Wallace:

I received your note yesterday. Was glad to hear you were enjoying yourself at Mineral King as of old.

In regard to the New England Tunneling and Smelter Company's fiasco, I know all about it for I was there working for them all the time they were operating.

In the first place they had a man named Bevens construct a smelter and smelt the ore, and I think he was a man with a lot of experience and good sense. We all had a lot of confidence in him and I believe if he had been let to have his way he would have made bullion easy enough, but he wasn't allowed to have his way.

He said that the White Chief ore could not be smelted without first roasting it, so they built a small furnace they called a golmodore to roast the ore in but it was a failure. The material they had would not stand the heat and every time they heated it up the top would melt and cave in. It looked somewhat like a rotten pumpkin that had been stepped on.

Well then, Bevens said he could make bullion out of it by running it through the smelter twice, the first time just to burn the sulphur out of it and make it into slag, to just roast it in the smelter, as it were. Then we started up the smelter and ran the raw ore through for three days. We ran some 30 or 40 tons, enough to give it a good, fair test. Then we shut down and cleaned out the slag and had put it in good shape for making bullion.

Bevens then told the boss, a man by the name of Baker, that we needed about a half ton of lead to start with, but Baker would not get it for him. Then Bevens said he could make bullion without it but it would be harder to get the bullion to separate from the slag. So when Bevens said everything was ready we built a fire in the smelter and started up. We were going to make bullion in Mineral King in a few hours.

But we reckoned without the boss. He did not want bullion just yet. He knew if we made bullion, the value of the stock would rise immediately, and this is what he did not want as he wanted to get a lot more stock for himself. Well, when we got the thing all warmed up and ready, Bevens told me to turn on full blast and we could go to feeding in the ore.

So I turned on the blower and then went back to the smelter, but I had hardly turned around when Baker came and turned off the blower. Bevens said if we were going to do anything we would have to do it right then, so I went and turned on the blast again. Then Baker came and ordered me to turn it off again, that he didn't propose to burn up coal for nothing.

Well, of course it was the same as a discharge for Bevens so he took his coat and left, but before he left he said that if he could not make bullion inside of 15 hours he would not charge them anything for his summer's work, and they were paying him \$10 a day. When Bevens and his assistant were gone, Baker came in all smiles and said, "Now boys, we have gotten rid of those fellows, let us turn on the blast and see if we can make some bullion." Well, there wasn't a one of us knew anything about smelting, only what Bevens had told us, so we had a fine large chance to make bullion but we had had three days of making slag.

So we turned on the blower and went to feeding in coal and ore and flux as near as we could remember how Bevens had told us was right and soon we had the slag running as nice as could be. Then we got ready to tap the bullion pan. It was working so nice that Baker got afraid we were going to make bullion, so he rushed up to the man who was feeding and told him to put in more ore and not so much ore and flux, and he picked up some chunks of ore as big as his head and chunked them in the smelter and it was only a few minutes until it froze up solid.

Then he came down smiling and said, "Well, boys, you tear open the smelter and clean it out all good and get it in good shape and I will go down to San Francisco and get a good man who knows how to run this thing."

Then he lit out for San Francisco. He came back in about two weeks with a man I don't think knew anything about smelting. Anyway he started up and run our roasted ore through and dumped it down the bank without ever getting a particle of bullion. He never got it to separating at all and that was the last effort ever made to smelt the ore by the New England Tunneling and Smelter Company.

But John Crabtree, Joe Palmer and some others built a small furnace with a blacksmith bellows and smelted several pounds of bullion out of the slag the fellow threw down the bank. So you see the NET&S Company never made a fair test to smelt the ore of Mineral King.

The letter is signed, E.P. Barton. When the Mineral King road was built in 1879 by John Crowley, Enos was employed to determine the route of the road, which was completed in about three months with Arthur Crowley as time keeper for his father.