

Light to Wash Away Mountains

by Jack Ramsdell

Hydraulic mining began in California in 1853, and reached its peak in 1880, total gold values of approximately \$300,000,000 were produced between 1853 and 1909.¹ The decline of hydraulicing was due mainly to the irate farmers' demands that muddied rivers and streams which were burying good farm land under tons of silt and sand be controlled. This was accomplished by the formation of the California Debris Commission.

Hydraulic mining was an around the clock outdoor operation and in the beginning the only source of night light was the crude pitch-basket, i.e. the Cresset, (Fig.1). The amount of light generated must have been minimal, but the odor of burning pitch and pine logs surely kept pesky mosquitoes and gnats away. These crude devices were soon replaced by locomotive kerosene lanterns, then arc lights of up to 12,000 candle power, electricity being generated by a water wheel powered by a hydraulic nozzle.¹

Several of these pitch-baskets have survived the scrap heaps and are shown in Figs. 1, 2, and 3.



Fig. 1 Cresset 16" X 12" Jack Ramsdell collection.

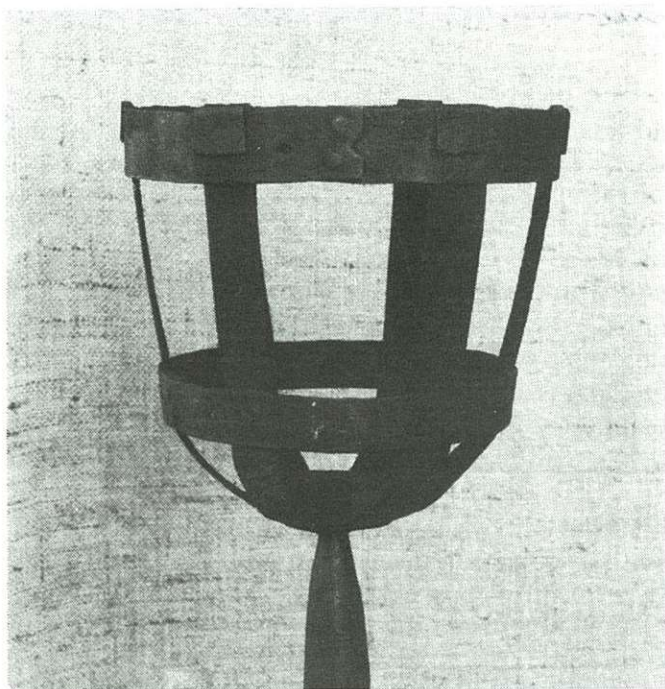


Fig. 2. Cresset 8" X 14" Tony Moon collection.



Fig. 3. Cresset 20" X 20" North Star Mine Power Plant Museum, Grass Valley, CA. (Photo by Tony Moon.)

Reference

Andrew J. McGuckin, Golden Bonanza Lost in Courts, *Frontier Times*. Oct.-Nov. 1965, p. 10-13.