

While reading my great grandfather's diary several years ago, I noticed an entry for 1868 describing a trip he made to Nortonville, California. There were scarcely any clues that revealed what prompted him to embark on the 5,800-mile journey from Plymouth, Pennsylvania, to California. I concluded that the lure must be the obvious: gold or silver. At least that was the consensus among several people I asked. Although the California gold rush had all but expired by 1868, why couldn't some enterprising, and potentially lucky, miner still hit it big by tapping some undiscovered mother lode?

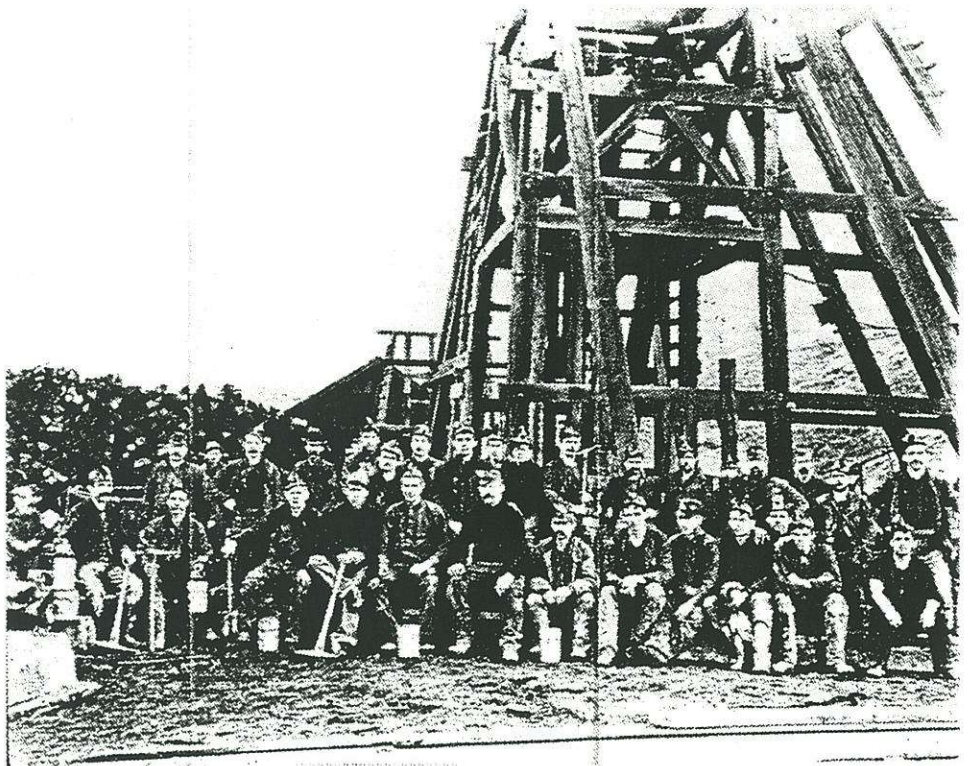
After a little more probing and corresponding, I discovered, much to my surprise, that the Mt. Diablo mountain range 30 miles east of San Francisco, in Contra Costa County, fueled a local coal boom that lasted roughly 25 years from 1860 to the mid 1880s. Black gold attracted my great grandfather to California, not "traditional" gold or silver. Born in England to a mining family, my great grandfather worked in the coal fields of England, Wales, and Pennsylvania before striking out for California. Nortonville, which he wrote of, was but one of several California boomtowns that developed as a result of this "other gold rush."

Oddly, or maybe not surprisingly, coal mining in California has been a well-kept secret that has taken a back seat to other, more lucrative types of mining including the lore associated with those enterprises. This article attempts to shed some light on the importance of the Mt. Diablo coal field and to put it into some sort of context within the other contemporary coal-mining operations in the United States.

According to some stories, coal mining in the Mt. Diablo region developed when a gold prospector stumbled upon an outcropping of coal en route to record the gold strike at Sutters Mill in 1848. Others attribute the discovery of coal to gold prospectors who lingered on in the area after the gold supply was exhausted, optimistic that something might still turn up. What did turn up was coal in a number of outcroppings on the slopes of Mt. Diablo. Coal would eventually be mined from three beds in this area.

California's Black Gold

by Jim Chapman



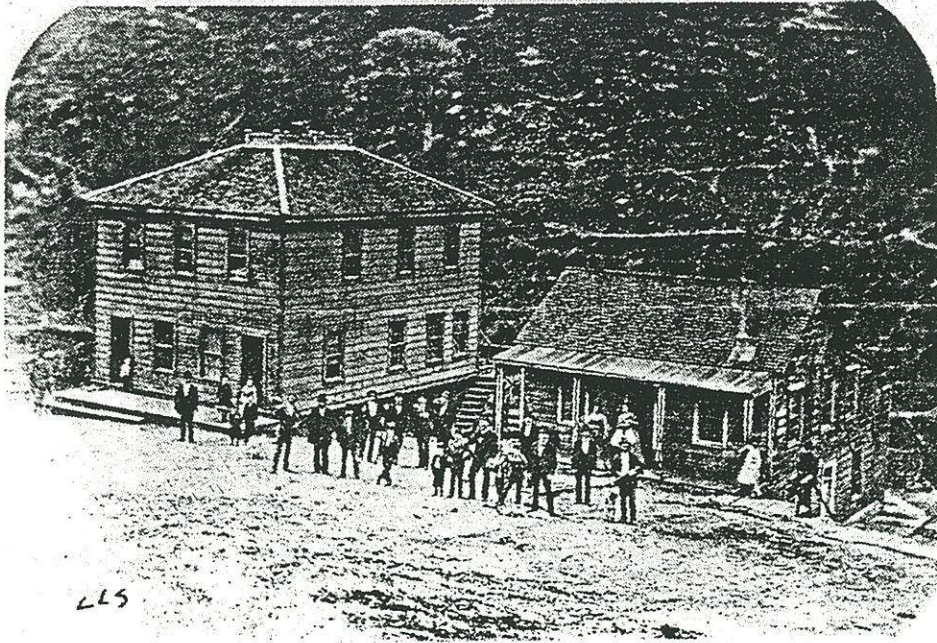
Somersville. Miners at Pittsburgh shaft, ca. 1898.

The first well-documented discovery of coal in the vicinity of Mt. Diablo was in 1859 by William C. Israel. Indeed, it was the ex-49ers who applied their prospecting savvy to this newly discovered field. They took samples, assayed the coal, and found that it had some commercial value. It should be noted that the grade of coal in the Mt. Diablo field was lignite, or sub-bituminous. Lignite was a much inferior coal compared to anthracite and true bituminous coals. To illustrate the differences among the three coal types: anthracite possessed the highest carbon content, followed by bituminous, and then lignite.

That same year, Francis Somers and James Cruikshank discovered a massive coal vein, which was to become known as the Black Diamond mine and later as the Manhattan and Eureka mines. Here the town of Nortonville was built. Sister towns soon sprang up near these outcroppings, among them Somersville, Stewartsville, West

Hartley, and Judsonville. Nortonville was the largest of the coal boomtowns in the district and became the center of California coal mining during its peak years of operation in the 1870s.

When it was apparent that coal mining in the area would take hold, the ex-gold prospectors were soon joined by a large Welsh, Irish, Italian, and American contingency, many of whom had arrived from the Pennsylvania coal fields. By the 1870s, Nortonville and Somersville had grown to sizes surpassing 1,000 residents. The towns had stores, hotels, churches, and cemeteries, not to mention being serviced by three railroads. The Black Diamond Company, which was the largest operation in the Mt. Diablo field, employed 315 men in 1870, including 110 coal cutters and miners, 31 car men and drivers, 3 underground foremen, 8 bunkermen, and 28 railroad workers. The rest included blacksmiths, firemen, and watchmen.



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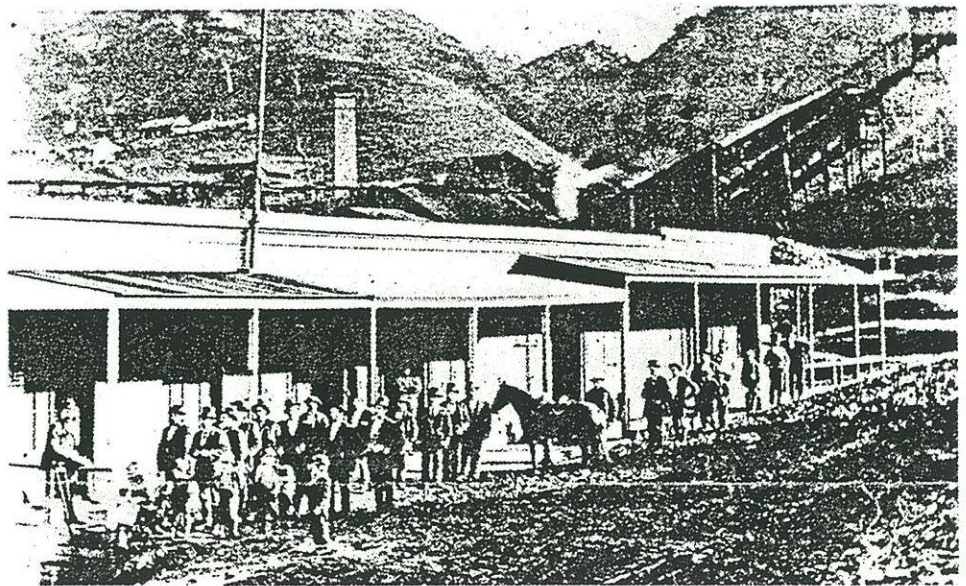
*Nortonville, The Davis boarding house and candy store.
Louis L. Stein, Jr. collection at Contra Costa County Historical Society.*

During the decade 1864-1874, the Mt. Diablo coal mines supplied nearly 50% of the coal received in San Francisco. There it was distributed for use to heat homes, stoke the fires of industry, and fuel steamships. Sizeable amounts also went to Stockton and Sacramento. It even found its way abroad to sugar refineries. Records show that in the period between 1867 and 1882, Mt. Diablo coal production totaled some 2,500,000 tons at an estimated value of nearly \$20,000,000. Compared to figures for anthracite and bituminous production in the eastern United States during comparable years, these totals seem unimpressive. However, one must consider that the Mt. Diablo coal was targeted for a very specific market and enabled burgeoning towns, like San Francisco, to rely less on imported fuels.

A series of factors led to the demise of coal production at Mt. Diablo. An explosion in the Black Diamond mine in 1876 heralded the beginning of the end. Also, better quality coal could be obtained in nearby Oregon and Washington, lessening the dependency on the lower-grade lignite. New sources of energy, such as oil and gas, competed heavily with coal as was the case in the coal fields of the eastern United States. Deep mining operations became more and more expensive to extract coal in the steeply

pitched Mt. Diablo seams. By 1885, the coal communities in the Mt. Diablo region were but shadows of their former prosperity. Due to these constraints, the Black Diamond mines were closed. Others soon followed until 1902 when the last mine, the Pittsburg, was closed.

Although the coal mined in the Mt. Diablo region was inferior to most other coals, especially those from the eastern coal fields,



*Nortonville, 1880. The Main Street with "Brick Store".
Louis L. Stein, Jr. collection at CCCHS.*

the mines, for a brief period in our nation's history, played an important role in supplying people and industry in California with a readily available fuel source. By the way, my great grandfather did return to Plymouth. In 1870, he recorded in his diary that he sustained an eye injury on the job in Nortonville which no doubt motivated his return. But that didn't slow his wanderlust. In 1878, he and two brothers moved to West Virginia, where they opened mines in the Kanawha coal field. Who knows, if he had remained in California, things may have turned out much differently for this side of the family.

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