

Hillside Ghosts

by Bob Schroth

For years I have driven past a spot on the hillside right off the Interstate 15 freeway near Minneola Road. This area interested me for many reasons, the biggest one being the large concrete foundations up on the hillside and the area being so close to the Calico mining district. Being winter and the weather being poor in the mountains where I work I decided to take a day and explore this small part of the California desert. I loaded up my trusty motor cycle and headed out to the area. The sun was shining out here and the the air was brisk but not too cold. I drove up a small dirt road and unloaded my bike, put on my exploring gear, and headed off into the hills. When I arrived at what I thought to



be a mill site, all that was left to see were concrete foundations and above them was a concrete liner for a large water storage tank. This was interesting as I was almost sure that I was at a mining mill site but there were no tailings to show where they processed any ore. Tailings are the waste left from the processing of hard rock ore through the crushing the rock down to tiny particles and then washed through a chemical process. Usually a fine dusty powder is left in large piles or rivers depending on how long the mill was in operation. The common practice of calling the waste rock or the dump in front of a mine a tailing pile is a misnomer.

Above the mill I saw a faint dirt road leading up into steep canyon, I headed up that way and soon after about 2 ½ miles came to what was left of a old mining camp. This was very odd, because I have many maps of this area and this site was not marked on any of them. I explored all around the canyon, little was left of a major mining operation. I climbed up the very steep cliffs in the area and did not see any other mines in this area. The mine dump here was odd also, as the dump did not have the common hard rock and small boulders... everything was very fine rock and dirt. I have been to several mines in this area and I gathered that this was a Borax mine, not a silver mine and that also answered my question of why there were no tailings at the mill. They did not need to stamp crush this type of ore to get the mineral out of it. I still had several questions the large dump pile was above the remains of what I thought to be the mine hoist. I could not find the mine entrance as it was evident that the hillside had washed down over the years covering it. This helped me deduce that the mine was fairly old, the nails I found in the wooden structures I could find were round so this was built after the 1890's. The more I explored the more questions were answered but several more came up, I found high up on a hillside a very odd mine that ran straight through the mountain it was only about 100 yards long and perfectly straight with a fairly steep incline, it was more like a tunnel, then I noticed that the tunnel was in a straight line with a notch cut away from a hillside and this was in line to what I thought was the mine hoist, I had discovered what was left of a old tramway, or incline railroad. Now I was really wondering! No one would go to all this trouble to build this type of transport system without investing a lot of time and money. I wondered why this was not mentioned in any of the books I had ever read on the area? As I checked out the tramway sure enough it went straight as a arrow to the mill site, and I could now see the traces of old ore bins. They even had to build several large tressels to support the railway over a few canyon washes.

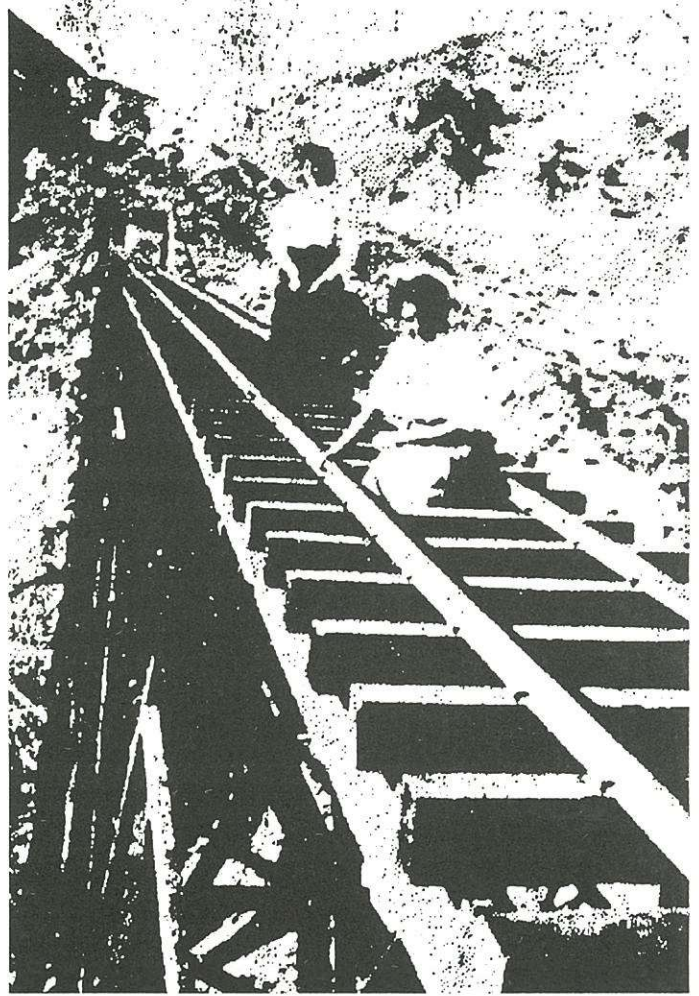
I headed out to find the answers to my questions and went right to the Mojave River Valley museum. I asked a few of the workers there for help, no one knew anything about the mine or the area, they *did* point out an interesting

book to me and I bought it. After careful reading, I found the answer to my questions, this is what I found out.

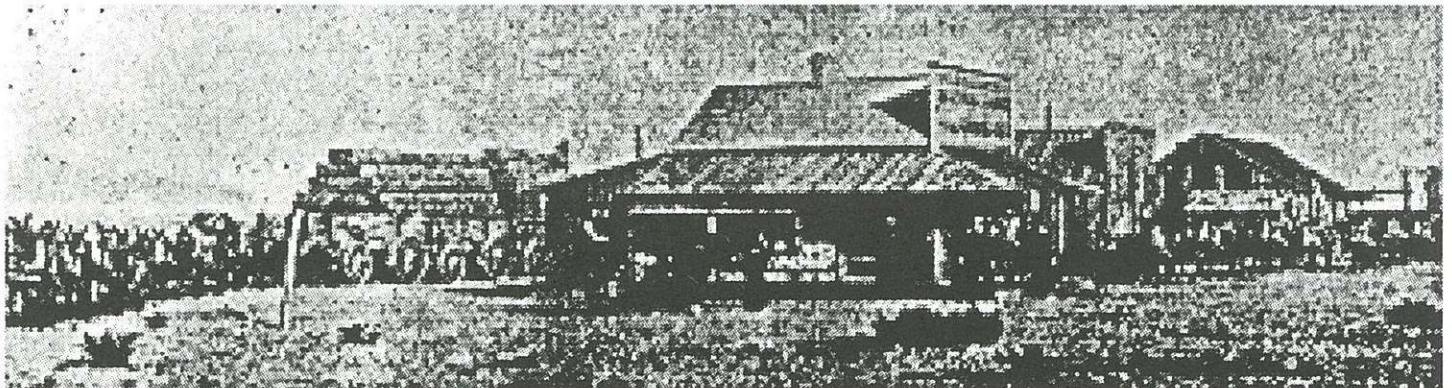
In the book titled Calico and the Calico mining District 1881-1907 By Alan, "Lefty" Baltazar page 33, "In 1906 and 1907 the Borax Properties Ltd. Company built a mill at the head of a branch of Sunrise Canyon on the eastern side of the Calico mountains. It also constructed a gravity railroad complete with tunnel, several bridges and a bucket hoist to bring the raw borax from the company mine about three miles up Sunrise Canyon to the mill. Due to the sudden fall in borax prices due to the financial panic of 1907, the company ceased operations in late 1907. A watchman was kept at the property for a period, but the price of borax did not rise to a point where operations could be restarted. The company removed all of its operating equipment including the railroad and hoist. The ruins of the company mill and tunnel this railroad went through may still be seen from interstate 15 near Minneola road.

By early 1908 borax mining in the Calico Mining district had come to a end and passed into history. This area which had meant so much to the developing western borax industry as a turning point from the early marsh-type operations to the latter, more profitable, hard-rock mining operations and which had, from the mid-1880's until after the turn of the century, produced huge amounts of mineral wealth in the form of raw borax has been largely ignored or forgotten by the writers of the western borax history. The Calico Mining District between late 1883 and early 1908 produced approximately 45 million dollars of raw borax. The ghosts of its largely unknown or ignored pioneers linger on, in time they will receive the credit they deserve."

Well my little adventure turned out to be more interesting than I had ever thought. I was thankful that someone had taken the time to research this area and I will return soon to do some more exploring and digging around in the mining past. Oddly, some of my best underground finds have been made in these old borax mines not the hard rock silver mines just over the hill.



The Borax Properties Ltd. Railroad, the first bridge on this railroad going from the company mill. to the tunnel. (Mohave River Valley Museum).



This scene in Baggett, before the days of Calico, shows the changing of mule teams. Borax is from Death Valley.