

GUIDE TO THE EMPIRE MINE STATE HISTORIC PARK PHOTOGRAPHIC COLLECTION

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Park History

Empire Mine State Historic Park contains 856 acres of historical resources. Located in Nevada County, the park resides in the western foothills of the Sierra Mountains, is transected by State Route 174, and borders the southern edge of the city of Grass Valley. The park is accessible by car via East Empire Street.

Prior to producing one of the largest, richest, and longest-lasting gold strikes in history, 1850-1956, the land containing the present-day park housed the Foothill Nisenan for roughly 10,000 years. Residing around the Yuba, American, and Bear rivers, the Nisenan were hunter-gatherers who subsisted on fish, local game, acorns, and seeds. Displaced and decimated by the flood of Euro-American miners, farmers, and loggers into the Sierra Mountains in the mid-nineteenth century, today the Nisenan live on nearby rancherias and work to sustain their lifeways and preserve their culture.

In 1850, George D. Roberts staked a small claim at Ophir Hill Ledge which ultimately burgeoned into the Empire Mine. The next year, Roberts sold the claim to Woodbury, Park, and Company which consolidated that parcel with others into the Ophir Hill Mine. In 1852, John R. Rush and the Empire Quartz Hill Company purchased the mine at auction; within two years, the company bought out Rush, becoming sole owner. That same year, the mine was consolidated with other adjacent claims into the Empire Mining Company. In 1864, Captain S.W. Lee and A.H. Houston purchased the company and sold half of the interest to San Francisco investors Conrise, Lake, Homer, and Associates, three years later. By 1868, Conrise, Lake, Homer, and Associates gained controlling interest in the company but relinquished control the following year to prominent San Francisco investment banker William B. Bourn Sr. Bourn ran the company until his sudden death in 1874, at which point his son, William Bourn Jr., took over management (**Figure 1**). In 1879, Bourn reorganized the company into the Original Empire Mill and Mining Company. Five years later, he gained controlling interest in neighboring North Star Mine, which he later sold to James D. Hague in 1887, along with controlling interest in Empire Mine the following year. Bourn repurchased the Empire in 1896 and reorganized the company to form the Empire Mines and Investment Company.

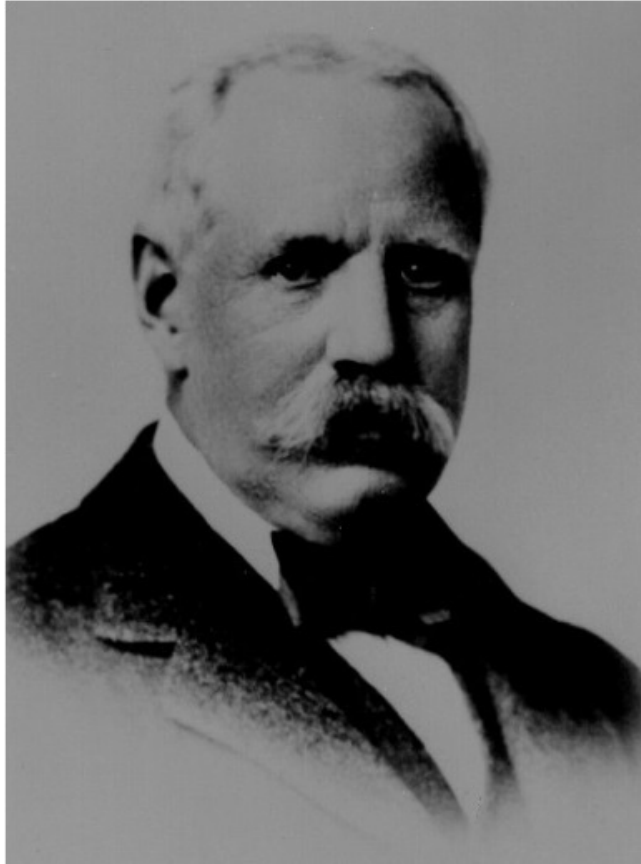


Figure 1. William B. Bourn, Jr., before 1936. Catalog # 090-16442.

Profits soared under William Bourn Jr. In addition to Bourn's savvy business sense, Empire Mine's success also owed to the mass migration of skilled miners from Cornwall, England to the Mother Lode (**Figure 2**). Beginning in late 1849, Cornishmen transplanted over a thousand years of hard-rock mining experience, as well as the latest innovations in equipment and technologies, to California. By the 1890s, Empire Mine's labor force was roughly 90 percent Cornish. The Empire also succeeded thanks to Bourn's cousin, George W. Starr, who began as a humble "mucker" in 1881; by 1887 he was appointed mine superintendent. In this role, Starr introduced new mining techniques such as compressed air drills, which dramatically increased the rate of development.



Figure 2. Cornish miners changing shifts, ca. 1898. Catalog # 090-16163.

In the opening decades of the twentieth century, Empire Mine was considered one of the premier gold mines in the United States, attracting geologists and engineers from across the globe to come and marvel at its efficiency and innovation. In 1928, Bourn reorganized the company again to form Empire Mines before selling it off to the Newmont Mining Corporation. Newmont then combined Empire Mines with the recently acquired North Star Mine to form the Empire Star Mines Company, Ltd., which owned and operated over 60 mines in Nevada County. That same year, Fred W. Nobs succeeded the retired George Starr as mine manager.

With the price of gold soaring and ultimately fixed at a relatively high exchange rate, Empire Star Mines Company, Ltd. and the neighboring city of Grass Valley weathered the Great Depression and even thrived as the rest of the country suffered through the 1930s. But in 1942, the U.S. War Production Board issued Federal Order L-208, which halted all nonessential industries including gold mining. Under federal mandate to slow production and losing manpower to military enlistment, Empire stopped operations during World War II. When it reopened in 1947, it was never as profitable as it had been before. By 1956, the fixed exchange rate for gold in conjunction with the Mine Workers Protective League wage strike compelled the company to shut down completely. The Newmont Mining Corporation maintained the buildings, grounds, and structures until 1975, when it sold the property to the State of California. It was classified a state historic park the following year.

California State Parks, coordinating with the Empire Mine Park Association, has preserved, restored, and reconstructed numerous historical resources at Empire Mine State Historic Park. In addition to the restored mining operations facilities—including the offices of the mining engineer, manager, and assayer, the refinery room, warehouses, welding shop, machine shop, blacksmith shop, compressor building, hoist house, and cyanide plant—the park also contains the fully restored Empire Clubhouse, greenhouse with formal gardens, and Empire Cottage, an English Renaissance-style mansion designed by San Francisco architect Willis Polk in 1897 (**Figures 3 and 4**). Also included are a Visitor Center and museum, picnic areas, and miles of hiking and horseback trails. The park is open seven days a week, offers guided tours, and provides RV-accessible overnight facilities.



Figure 3. Empire Mine offices, May 3, 2012. Catalog # 090-P77298.



Figure 4. Bourn Cottage with visitors, May 3, 2012. Catalog # 090-P77271.

Scope and Content

The Empire Mine State Historic Park Photographic Collection spans the years 1870-2012, with the bulk of the collection covering the years 1880-1911, 1917, 1930-1945, 1960-1968, 1975-1988, 1997-1999, and 2008-2012. There is a total of 1,085 cataloged images including 690 photographic prints, scans, and negatives, 231 35mm

slides, and 164 born-digital images. Photographs originated primarily from California State Parks staff as well as multiple private donors, including former mine manager George W. Starr.

The collection mainly depicts the park's historic built environment. Historic and contemporary images include interior and exterior views of buildings such as: the Stamp and Lumber mills; the Surface, Cyanide, and Slime plants; the hoisting works; the Powerhouse; the Blacksmith and Machine shops; the Draughting, Scale, Pump, Amalgam, Store, and Sulphuret Dry rooms; warehouses; the Refinery; the Empire Cottage with surrounding grounds and Formal Gardens; the greenhouse; the Superintendent's and Director General's residences; the Assay, Manager's, Engineer's, and Safety offices; the Empire Clubhouse with tennis court; and the Visitor Center. Interior views of the restored Empire Cottage, clubhouse, offices, and residences additionally document the house museums' period furnishings. Other features of the built environment include: the park entrance with stone hearth wall; head frames like Rowe Shaft with hoists; underground mule stables; waste dumps; sand and debris tailings; drain tunnels; and a reservoir. Also featured are landscape and aerial views of the park, including most of the above mentioned buildings and structures.

The collection also includes numerous interior views of the mines. Historic images include miners drilling rock, handling dynamite, leading mule trains, hauling ore bins, and changing shifts. Interior views also depict an array of mining machinery like hoists, pumps, the ore-crusher, concentrators, and steam-, gas-, and hydroelectric-powered engines. Identified mines include North Star, Prescott Hill, Sultana, Conlin, and Pennsylvania mines.

The collection likewise includes historic portraits of prominent people associated with Empire Mines. Individuals include William B. Bourn, Sr., William Bourn, Jr., George W. Starr, and Willis Polk. There are also several group and individual portraits of Cornish miners, often referred to as "Cousin Jacks."

Also depicted are various contemporary park workers. Images include park rangers conducting tours and docents leading "living history" programs in period dress. The collection likewise documents the 1997 restoration of the historic Compressor House as well as the 2011 construction of Magenta Drain at East Empire Street.

The collection also features several relevant documents. Items include gold bullion receipts, mining certificates, auction advertisements, schematic blueprints, and mill drawings.

Related Collections

Empire Mill and Mining Company Collection, California State Library: California History Room.

Empire Mine, Grass Valley, California [Graphic], UC Berkeley: Bancroft Library.

Empire Mine State Historic Park Collection, California State Parks Archives.

William B. Bourn Family Papers, UC Berkeley: Bancroft Library.

Catalog Subject Search Terms

Aerial view	Landscape view
Amalgam Room	Living history
Assay Office	Machine Shop
Blacksmith Shop	Machinery
Blueprints	Magenta Drain
Bourn Cottage	Mill
Central Mine	Mine(s)
Clubhouse	Miner(s)
Compressor	Mule(s)
Compressor House	Mule train
Concentrator(s)	North Star Mine
Conlin Mine	Ore bin
Construction	Ore crusher
Cornish	Park entrance
Cornwall, England	Park ranger(s)
Cyanide Plant	Pennsylvania Mine
Director General's Residence	Portrait
Display	Postcard
Docent(s)	Prescott Hill Mine
Document	Pump
DPR Employee(s)	Pump Room
Drawing	Refinery
Drill	Reservoir
Dynamite	Restoration
East Empire Street	Safety Office
Empire Cottage	School group
Engineer's Office	Shaft
Exhibit(s)	Shaft collar
Exterior view	Shaft Viewing Area
Formal Gardens	Slime Plant
George W. Starr	Stamp Mill
Grass Valley	Sulphuret Dry Room
Grass Valley Cooperative Rescue	Sultana Mine
Greenhouse	Superintendent's Residence
Group portrait	Tailing(s)
Head gear	Tool Sharpening Shop
Headframe	Tour
Hoist	Visitor(s)
Hoisting works	Visitor Center
Interior view	Volunteer(s)

Warehouse
Waste dump
Welding Shop
William B. Bourn, Jr.

William B. Bourn, Sr.
Willis Polk
Workshop