



## Novato Underground: Mining in Novato

By John A. Trumbull

### Is there gold in them there hills?

To anyone arriving in Novato in the past quarter century there doesn't appear to be much subterranean activity. Certainly the idea of seeking one's fortune by exporting our soil seems foreign to us. However, at various times in the past our residents felt differently.

Our earliest records in the valley relate to the late 1800's. Easterners began invading the Spanish land grants about 1850, and for the most part these new comers (and the residents they encountered) were attracted by the benign climate and fertile land. However, to the East in the Sierra Nevada mountains the attraction was gold, and San Francisco was a major port of entry for the hard rock miners. In 1863 something in Marin caught the attention – and imagination – of the gold seekers. Within two days (June 19, and June 20, 1863) no less than eight mining claims were recorded for the Novato area.

[Marin County Records for 1863 pages 531 through 538]

The common denominator for these filings seems to be one G. F. Van Hollen, [1] who is listed as the "discoverer" of four of the veins and who owned shares in three others. It is interesting that Peter Smith (who partnered with our first postmaster, Henry Jones, in both a Deer Island cattle operation and in "Our House," Novato's earliest retail store and bar) was a player in this mining bubble. He was credited as the discoverer of the "Smith ledge" on Deer Island which was claimed by the *Smith Gold and Silver Mining Company's* 16 shareholders. Smith was one of the 16 shareholders in the *Black Canyon Silver and Copper Mining Company*, wherever in Novato township that was located. (Some notices do not specify the geographic location, they only refer to the location of the claim as being in the Novato Township, Marin County.) Smith's partner Henry Jones also partici-

pated in the Black Canyon venture as did J. G. Haven, another well known local. Smith held shares in the *Indian Valley Silver and Copper Mining Company*, as did one "Thomas Sweezer" and one "William Atherton" among 11 others. (We don't know whether these men were connected to the Novato pioneer families.) Finally Smith joined Van Hollen, Adolphus Scown and four others in the *Peacock Silver and Copper Company's* claim somewhere in the Novato township. Mr. Scown also invested in the *Schweisau Gold and Silver Mining Company*, along with 16 others to exploit a ledge of quartz discovered on Deer Island by Ernest Schweisau. The *Novato Gold and Silver Mining Company* only had six investors for their Deer Island vein, including Schweisau and Joseph Angolloni. [2] Mr. Schweisau did not participate in the *Deer Island Gold and Silver Mining Company*, but he was the person responsible for the recordation of these last three notices. The seventh company was the *Blue Ledge Gold and Silver Mining Company*, owned by 13 shareholders including V. D. Doub, John Sweetzer and Andrew Sweetzer, whose claim location is not geographically identified. The *Novato Gold and Silver Mining Company* had 5 shareholders including Schweisau and Joseph Angelloni.

The *Marin County Journal* of June 27, 1863, in its "Local and Miscellaneous" column on page 3 lists 15 mining claim recordations under this comment: "STILL THEY COME ! – The following mining claims have been recorded since our last issue." In addition to the above companies the *Journal* lists the *Hog-eye* in which Peter Smith was an investor; the *Crosby* in which John Sweetzer and J. G. Haven held shares; the *Von* in which A. Sweetzer and A. Scown held shares and the *Store Oak* all of which were in the Novato area. These last three



claims were also part of Van Hollen's mining empire.

Novato was not the only area of speculation. Claims were being filed in Sausalito, in Bolinas, in San Rafael and on Mt. Tamalpais as well. Witness the optimism expressed by the Journal on May 30, 1863:

OUR MINES – The “San Rafael Gold and Silver Mining Company” have [sic] commenced work on their claim. During the past week they have shipped five tons [sic] of rock to San Francisco to be crushed and worked as a further test of its quality. If this shipment proves as rich as that heretofore worked, the company will proceed immediately to the erection of the necessary machinery for crushing the rock on the ground. The prospects heretofore obtained by this company from their rock were from \$12 to \$17 ½ to the ton, [sic] in fine gold, worth \$21 to the ounce.

“Can any good come out of Nazareth?” was once said in derision of an obscure and unpretentious district in the land of Judea; yet its name became famed, and connected with the most important event in the history of our race. May not the capital of our obscure and unpretending little county yet become famed among her gorgeously gold and silver bespangled sister counties who flout their wealth and fame to the four corners of the earth.

A Journal follow up on August 1, 1863, reads:

SAN RAFAEL MINES – What has the San Rafael mine come to? We have heard no results of the labor that has been expended upon them, further than that five or six tunnels were being pushed into Tamalpais, one of which had reached the ledge and the rock was satisfactory. If they are as rich as all the specimens we have seen indicated, and one-tenth so much so as the San Francisco assayers made them to be they are certainly worthy [sic] the attentions of miners and capitalists. We would be glad to have some report of those who are working their claims.

Enthusiasm must have waned, however, because on November 7, 1863, the Journal reported on page 3:

OUR MINES – Some few months ago quite an excitement was manifested in our midst by the astounding intelligence that gold, silver and copper rock had been found in the hills adjacent to San Rafael. Claims were taken up and recorded, and for a short time the Recorder done [sic] a “land office business” in that line. But little work was done on the

claims taken up, and with unsatisfactory results. The whole matter, in our opinion, was the scheme of sharpers, which has resulted in a “grand fizzle.” That mineral does exist in our county, there is no question, but not in sufficient quantities to pay for the expense of obtaining it.

On February 6, 1864, notice was printed in the Journal that the Stock of the Cassiopeia Mining Company would be sold at auction on March 10 to pay assessments due thereon. Val Doub and J. Angelloni [2] are two of the named shareholders.

The interest was not over entirely, however. On June 11, 1864, the Journal reported:

COPPER MINES – We hear encouraging reports from the Bolinas and Novato mines. At the former place two companies are pushing forward their tunnels with vigor, and are sanguine of success. At Novato the company are [sic] sinking a shaft, and we are informed their prospects are highly flattering.

[Editor's note: If any of our readers can locate this shaft for the Guild's records, we would be both interested and grateful for your assistance.]

On July 2, 1864 the Journal confirmed Major Hughes was still hopeful:

SAN RAFAEL GOLD AND SILVER MINING COMPANY – On Tuesday last Major Hughes shipped a ton of rock, taken from the tunnel of the above named Company, to San Francisco, for the purpose of testing the value thereof. As yet no returns have been made.

There is evidence of continued tunnel mining in Nicasio in articles appearing in the Journal on March 28, October 31 and November 28 of 1878, and February 27, 1879, but interest in Novato's resources seems to have subsided.

#### The streets of San Francisco

This is not the end of the story, however. According to data developed by Al Pariani and Bill Palmer in an article published by the Guild in 1994 based on information from the California Journal of Mines and Geology, Mt. Burdell was the source of hundreds of thousands of hand shaped andesite paving blocks. Since paving blocks were often used for ballast on sailing ships, when next you admire a cobblestone street in Europe, check to see if there is a country of origin stamp crediting Novato as the source of the materials. Some of the retaining walls and foundations in San Francisco prior to the 1907 earthquake had their origin on Mt. Burdell. The blocks were brought down the mountain on the east side by horse drawn sleds and wagons to about where the Novato Motel is today. (The wagons had a heavy pole inserted through the rear wheels to prevent



their rotation and then they followed a zig-zag route down to retain control.) From there they were floated down Basalt Creek to Black John Slough for transfer to the schooners that plied the Petaluma River. The south side operation lowered the blocks by means of a funicular type railroad (gravity) to a point near the present Partridge Knolls area where they were loaded on wagons for the trip to the loading dock on Novato Creek that connected to San Pablo Bay.

Richard E. (Bud) Rush Jr, explains that the advantage of this mountain for cobble stone production lay in the fact that the hard blue rock was found in layers separated by water intruded clay material, rather like a stack of Oreo cookies. The layers could be peeled apart, washed clean and broken into cobble stones for transportation as above noted. The Bali Hai Motel complex is built on years of this rinse residue. Evidences of this quarrying operation are still visible to the energetic who walk the road to the microwave towers at the summit.

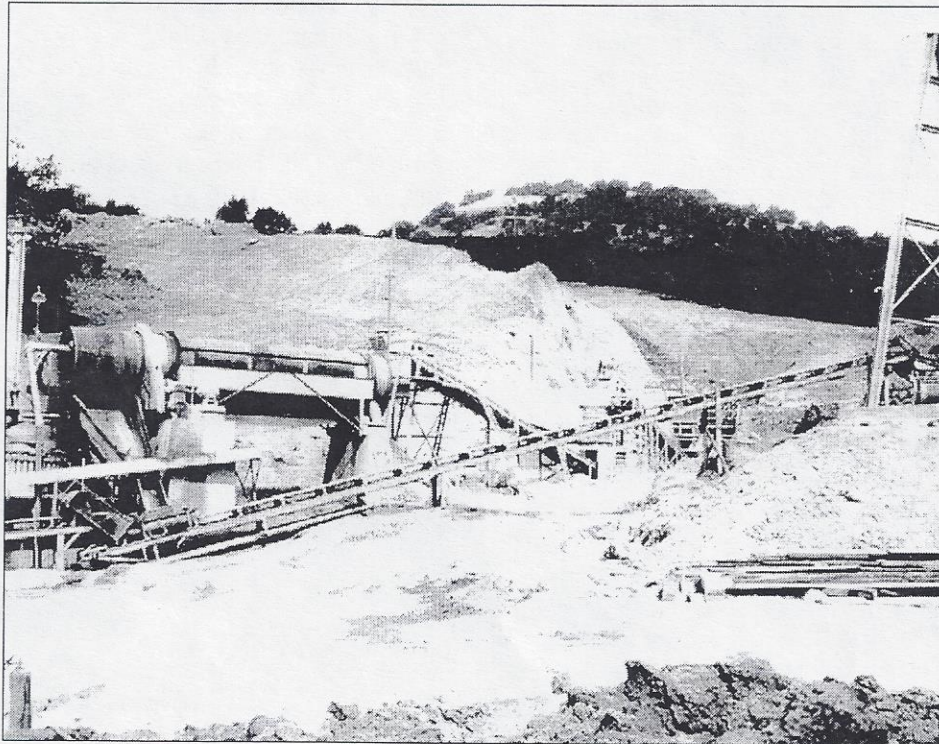
There were at least three other sources of paving blocks. The F.C. DeLong Quarry was on the land of the Novato Rancho, although its precise position was not revealed in the article. It was noted as being in operation as late as 1894. A certain John Taylor had a quarry which was employing from eight to ten men in April 1894, and it was near Novato. The Gallagher Quarry, three miles north of Novato reportedly produced 125,000 paving blocks during 1895, which was the last year in which this product was recorded.

#### The hole that Buck bought

In the 1950s, pursuant to a grandfathered permit, a San Rafael man was operating a quarry on Mt. Burdell where the Buck Institute now sits. In 1956, Richard E. Rush Sr. saw the potential of the quarry for supplying material for the Novato freeway bypass and its extension through the "Novato Narrows" to Petaluma. Rush had extensive experience providing base rock and asphalt

quarry material for construction projects in Washington state and throughout California. He had operated the crushing plant in Orinda used for the highway 80 extension from the Bay Bridge to Richmond, a commercial quarry at Rockaway Beach in Pacifica, a plant in Merced for runway renovation of Castle AFB, one in Riverside for the runway renovation of March AFB, and one in Marysville for the runway renovation at Beale AFB. Rush brought his family and several families of men who had moved with him to these various jobs to Novato, and with a partner formed the Marin Rock and Asphalt Company which purchased and expanded the marginally

economic Burdell operation. Under the management of Rush, extensive modern equipment was installed to produce crushed rock of all sizes and uses: drain rock, aggregate for concrete and asphalt, and roadway base rock. Production of base rock was increased from about 500 tons per day to a rate of between 2000 and 4000 tons per day, and asphalt production was increased from around 200 tons per day to 1000 or more tons per day.



*A view of the Burdell Quarry in the 1950's*

The Burdell Quarry became a significant source of construction aggregates for the road building industry. In 1960, the operation was sold to the Basalt Rock Company Inc. who presided over the gradual termination of activities there by 1964. It is ironic that the freeway projects for which Rush acquired the quarry were not even begun by the time the quarry was closed or even by the time of his death in 1965. In fact the Novato Narrows widening has not started as of the time of the writing of this article.

Bud Rush relates the story of a local tragedy that occurred during the most active period of the Marin Rock and Asphalt era at the quarry. One of the families that had traveled with the Rush family from project to project as friends and coworkers was the Culwell family, and they moved to Novato to work with Mr. Rush. Mike Culwell and "Bud" Rush were best friends. In August 1957 Bud was a sophomore and member of the first



class at Novato High School, Mike was a freshman and member of the Novato High football team. Both boys worked at the quarry part time. To make asphalt a series of metal hoppers or boxes containing various sizes of rock and the washed sand were lined up over a long conveyor belt. As the belt proceeded to the plant where the oil was added, the exit doors of the various hoppers were adjusted to provide the desired combination of ingredients. Since the sand had been washed prior to going into the hopper, there was a tendency for it to clump or stick to sides of the hopper bin. One of the jobs the boys performed was to stand at the top of the sand hopper with 20 foot long poles, and poke the damp sand to keep it from clumping on the sides of the feed funnel or from forming a block in the exit at the bottom of the funnel. In August 1957, while doing this job without using the restraining harness, Mike lost his balance and fell into the hopper. The downward sliding action of the damp sand sucked him into the pile at the bottom of the funnel, and he died of suffocation. This loss hit Novato hard because it was the first high school death here, and for the Rush family it was the first fatality in over 30 years of quarrying. This tragic loss was compounded when the following year Mike's father died by being crushed in a rollover accident while running a skip loader at the quarry. Rush says those were the only two fatalities during the thirty years his father managed quarrying operations.

Bud's brother-in-law, Len Genetin of Novato, was the last heavy equipment operator at the quarry when it was finally closed.

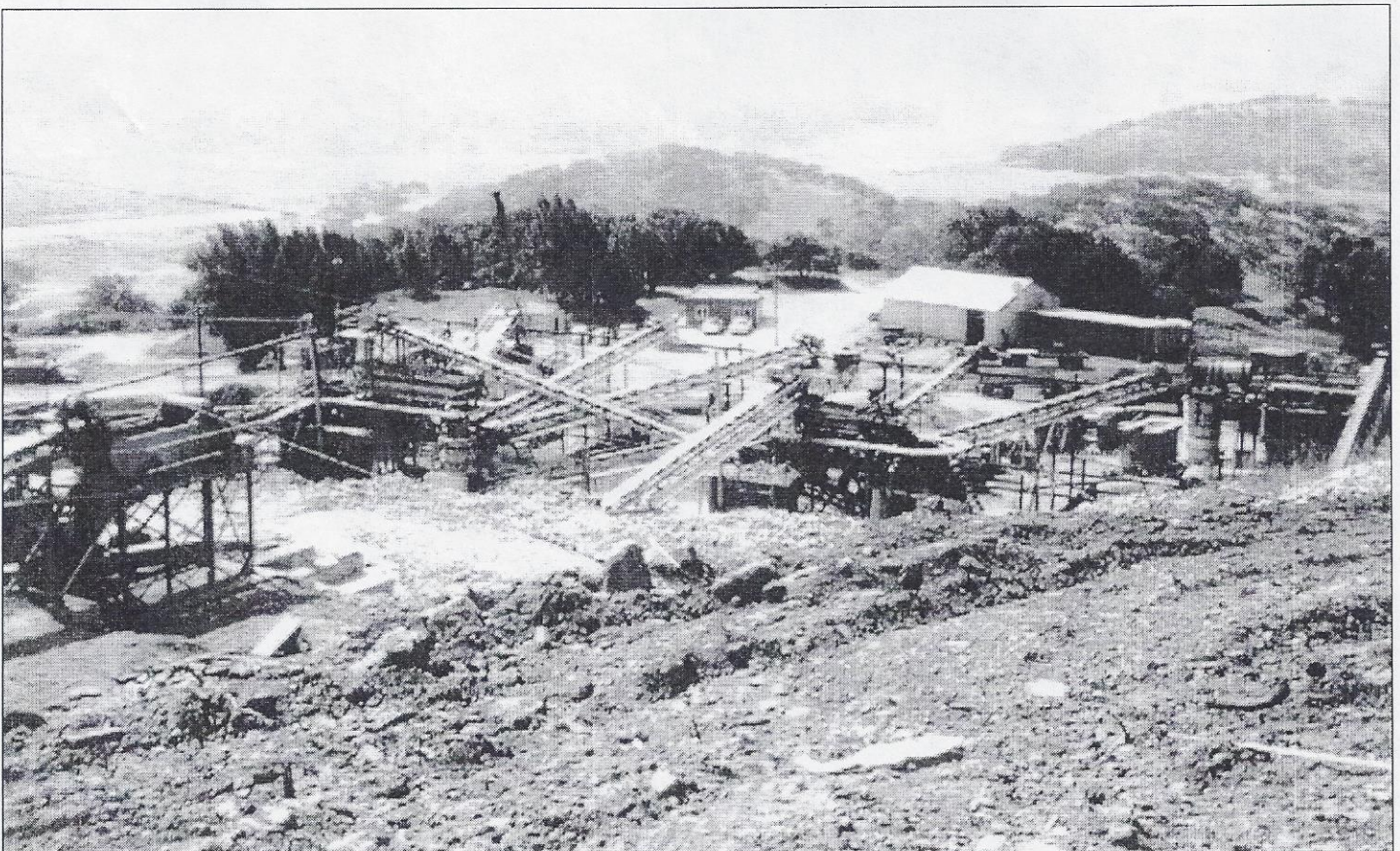
Other sources of construction aggregate and fill material from Novato during the go-go days of the 1950's and 60's were from the Palmer gravel pit on Novato Creek and the Pozzi Pit on San Antonio Creek. The Black Point Aggregates company worked a site in Black Point in the 1950's, and on the west side of Mt. Burdell there was a quarry that operated until the 1990's.

#### The mine at the top of the hill

There is one more mining operation of which I have some information that will be of interest to those of you who live in the vicinity of Hayes Street and Monroe Court. The flattened hilltop between Novato High school and Rancho School was during World War II (1942 - 45) the Knutte manganese mine, owned and operated by L.R. Knutte, husband to the late Teresa Knutte and father of Esther Knutte Berthinier. It was not a tunneling operation, but rather an "open pit" mine on what was then called Red Hill. The ore was taken to Tracy to be smelted.

[1] The name in the Marin County Journal is "Geo. Van Holland".

[2] This name may be "Angellotti"



*Another view of the Burdell Quarry in the 1950's*