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Treasure Hill and the Archeology of Shermantown

The discovery of the famous Comstock Lode in 1859 brought mining with a boom to what was then Utah Territory. Soon afterward, prospectors searched for precious metals further east into the Great Basin. In the fall of 1865, a group of prospectors found silver in the White Pine Mountains of eastern Nevada and promptly organized the White Pine mining district (Elliott 1938; Jackson 1963). Two years later, in the summer of 1867, Napias Jim, a local Indian man, showed miners a rich silver ore ledge near the summit of Treasure Hill near the eastern edge of the district. Word spread quickly about the new strike. "Going to White Pine" became the rallying cry of miners throughout the American West the following year. New towns and outlying camps grew up almost overnight on Treasure Hill. Of these, Hamilton, Treasure City, and Shermantown soon boasted populations of several thousand people, many of whom came in 1869 by stage from Elko, the nearby railhead of the newly completed transcontinental railroad. However, the Treasure Hill mines proved to be elusive and the "White Pine Excitement" died within a couple of years. Miners rapidly abandoned the settlements on Treasure Hill. Shermantown became a virtual ghost town in the early 1870s, Treasure City in the late 1870s, and Hamilton in the late 1880s. Still, British investors continued to pump capital into the mines until 1893, when the last British mining company left the district.

Shermantown Archeology

Shermantown is a microcosm of the "White Pine Excitement" on Treasure Hill. The town began as a land development around a spring in a canyon two miles below the mines at the top of Treasure Hill. First named Silver Springs, later changed to Shermantown after its principal developer Edwin A. Sherman, the well-watered town soon attracted several mills and smelters. The 1870 federal population census records 961 people in the town, but it probably reached a peak size of three or four thousand the year before. No photographs or sketches of Shermantown are known. Contemporary newspaper accounts, diaries, and mining assessments provide some descriptions of the town. Within a couple of years, the Treasure Hill boom burst, Shermantown's mills and smelters either closed or moved to the nearby town of Eberhardt, and the people left. Only 26 individuals remained in 1880.

Today, Shermantown exists only as an archeological site with a few ruins of buildings and structures still standing. The short life span and well-preserved archeological remains of the townsite make it ideally suited to interpret to visitors and to provide archeological information about the mining community at Treasure Hill. Visitors can easily observe the general layout and special use areas of the town. Even though extensively vandalized over the years, the downtown commercial area retains the most visibility. In addition to the more spectacular architectural remains of the downtown are the well-preserved foundations of several outlying residential buildings that reflect differences in the wealth, prestige, and power of people living in Shermantown. Furthermore, clusters of house foundations around the ruins of mills and smelters illustrate and interpret the importance of work-related settlement patterns in the town. Foundations and other archeological remains of working class houses upon prepared terraces in the less expensive land along the hillsides of the canyon further clarify the community's residential settlement patterns. Both house terraces and steep slopes provide visible symbols of the Shermantown working class even in the absence of standing buildings.

The value of the townsite as a repository of archeological information depends upon the research questions that are asked. Indeed, what questions are important? The comparative study of frontier mining towns is an obvious research strategy, but the scale of comparison must be considered in determining how the questions should be asked. Deetz (1991) makes the point that there should be a good match between the research question and the potential of the archeological site to answer the question. Specific research questions about local or family history, for example, demand detailed information about the provenance of archeological remains. Such information often is missing from sites in which house remains and associated features have been heavily disturbed or otherwise have poor integrity. In these cases, asking research questions about the community on a much broader and comparative regional, national,

or global scale gives a new importance to these sites as a repository of archeological information.

Shermantown is a classic example. The archeological study of the townsite began in 1989 with a cooperative agreement between the University of Nevada, Reno, and the Humboldt National Forest. Summer field school students mapped and excavated the townsite for three years. They discovered that some of the house remains at the townsite are relatively well-preserved, but many are not, making it impossible to learn much from the archeological record about individuals, families, or other specific household groups living in the town. On the other hand, exploring research questions about the townsite as a whole makes the site much more important. Therefore, the project's research strategy focused upon gathering archeological data to answer questions about mining town development, smelting technology, people without history, and the impact of globalization upon everyday lives.

Mining Town Development

The Shermantown research strategy asks questions about the historical development of mining towns in the American West. Mining camps typically grew up overnight in an explosive and haphazard fashion. Land speculators often played a key role in their genesis, imposing a preconceived plan or layout such as the checkerboard grid system that many camps held in common (Reps 1975). In many cases, the development of the town initially followed the plan, but later changed in ways determined by such things as landforms, the rise of industrial places such as mills around which workers housing clustered, or new transportation corridors. Variability and change in the historical trajectories of planned mining towns in the American West can be documented by combining archeological and documentary research.

The Shermantown project is one example. In 1868 Major Edwin A. Sherman, a Mexican War veteran from the nearby mining town of Austin, together with a small group of other investors, acquired land on Treasure Hill with favorable water and climate for the purpose of developing a town (Brooks 1995). They platted the townsite with a checkerboard grid (Cadwallader 1869) and sold lots at high prices. However, mapping of the archeological remains of the Shermantown townsite revealed that the town developed into something quite different. The town center more or less conforms to the grid plan, but the surrounding residential and industrial areas do not. During its short history, Shermantown appears to have evolved into a geographical pattern organized around several settlement clusters or nodes. One node is the commercial center of the town. Two other nodes are smelters surrounded by worker's housing. Yet another node is a sawmill in a side canyon also surrounded by worker's housing. Landforms and transportation routes also clearly played an important role in structuring the growth of the town. The town also expanded along the major road up Shermantown canyon toward the Treasure Hill mines and into a side canyon along a road that led to the sawmill node.

Industrial Archeology

The archeology of smelting technology offers another research direction. Water at Shermantown made it a natural place for processing the ore coming from the Treasure Hill mines. The June 8, 1869, *White Pine Evening Telegram* reported that 4 mills with a total of 31 stamps operated 24 hours a day in and around the town and that another mill with 15 stamps was under construction one-half mile to the south. Treasure Hill ore, after the initial recovery of a small amount of almost pure silver, required smelting technology to separate the silver from a lead-based compound (Jackson 1963). Mining companies built several smelters at Shermantown for this purpose. However, the Treasure Hill miners knew little about smelting technology, bringing about a period of intense experimentation. For example, in the June 11, 1870, issue of *The Mining and Scientific Press*, Joseph Mosheimer reported that the miners built "at least 40 smelters" in the White Pine district

Remains of Adobe Smelter at Shermantown.

during the last 12 months. The experimental Treasure Hill smelters ultimately provided the technological know-how to establish the smelting industry in the nearby town of Eureka, a world-class silver producer in the later 1870s and 1880s.

Archeology offers one pathway to learning more about the details of the smelting experiments on Treasure Hill. University of Nevada, Reno, students mapped the remains of two smelting works. One consists mostly of a standing adobe smoke stack and a scattered slag dump. The other at the north end of Shermantown includes a large slag dump, an oval-shaped basin situated above the slag dump and next to the remains of a furnace, the furnace itself, areas of blackened and reddened soil discoloration, and various other features found on four terraces cut into the hillside. Both places potentially contain archeological information about the architecture and metallurgy of Treasure Hill smelting. Gathering architectural information about the smelters requires excavation. The archeological study of metallurgy at the two smelters requires archaeometry and materials analysis of the slags. Both methods are planned for the immediate future.

The Shermantown Forgotten

In his archeological study of the early industrial town of Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, Paul Shackel (1996: 18) makes the point that "it is the laborers, craftsmen, women, and minorities who are often mute in our interpretations of the past." Archeology gives a voice to these forgotten people. At Shermantown, it offers glimpses of the everyday lives of these more or less invisible groups on the early industrial mining frontier of the American West. Who were they? The 1870 federal population census portrays the Shermantown dwellers to be mostly working class Euro-Americans born in the United States, but with significant ethnic enclaves made up of immigrants from Ireland, England, and Wales. Some came from China, Mexico, Germany, Scandinavia, France, and Yugoslavia. One African-American family lived there, and a few Native Americans lived just outside the town.

Household archeology gives the loudest voices to the Shermantown forgotten. Households reflect both history and adaptation to local environmental conditions (Wilk 1991). House sites are the cumulative material expression of the history and adaptation of households. When field school students excavated several house sites at Shermantown, they found that the archeological remains showed significant differences in architecture and artifacts attributable to class, ethnicity, and gender. What appear to be the remains of affluent "middle class" households, for example, include well-made white tuff stone houses and expensive personal belongings and furnishings. Recovered artifacts include crystal glass stemware, porcelain and decorated tableware, teaware, brass calendars, carpet fragments, drapery hardware, and other markers of wealth and prestige.

The best archeological evidence of ethnicity appears to be several Chinese households clustered together on one terrace. Newspapers occasionally mention the Shermantown Chinese but mostly to poke fun at their customs (e.g., *White Pine Evening Telegram*, July 1, 1869). The material remains of the Chinese households include ethnic markers such as rice bowls (Four Season and bamboo wares), soy sauce pots, brownware food jars, tea cups (celadon ware), "tiger whiskey" liquor bottles, and Chinese coins, along with canned and bottled food and beverages of western origin.

More women lived in Shermantown than in any of the other Treasure Hill towns, but they comprised only about 18% of the population in 1870. Most kept house; however, some worked as dressmakers, laundresses, owners or managers of businesses (e.g., theater, ice cream parlor, millinery store), school teachers, and nurses. The best archeological visibility of women comes from what appear to be the material remains of affluent households. Some of the white tuff houses at the north end of town include corset stays, buttons from women's and children's clothing, hairpins, glass beads, jewelry, hair combs, perfume and other women's toiletry bottles, and toy doll fragments.

Globalization

Finally, the archeological record of Shermantown documents an early period in the economic and political globalization of the American West. William Robbins (1994: 147) observes that "the late nineteenth century was a remarkably tumultuous period in the development and expansion of worldwide capitalism" that transformed the American West "from a region dominated by preindustrial societies to a fully integrated segment of the modern world capitalist system." For example, most commodities harvested in the region were shipped out of the region with prices set in the global marketplace (Robbins 1994). In the years following the Civil War, the accoutrements of industrialism appeared everywhere, including industrial technology, the labor question, ethnic enclaves, and corporations (Robbins 1994). Industrial mining first emerged on the Comstock. The building of transcontinental railroads quickly developed the industrial infrastructure of the American West and attracted global capital investment. British investment played a key role in developing the mining industry (e.g., Jackson 1963). By the turn of the century, large scale corporations and monopoly capital con-

Partially excavated stone dwelling of one of Shermantown's affluent households.

trolled most industries in the American West and strongly integrated the region into global markets and the modern world system.

The Treasure Hill mining boom occurred at the beginning of the economic and political transformation of the region. Shermantown provides a good archeological glimpse of what was happening. Consumer behavior is the key. In his archeological study of the Spanish presidios of Tucson, Williams (1991) used Wallerstein's (1974) concept of "essential goods" to make archeological data workable for the study of peripheralization. Essential goods are the things used in everyday life such as tableware, food, and clothing. Wallerstein (1974) argued that the relative percentage of essential goods used in everyday life reflects the process of peripheralization. Fully integrated peripheries should have high percentages of essential goods coming from core regions. The archeological record of consumption at either the household or the townsite level provides the information needed to estimate the percentages of essential goods coming from core regions. Shermantown archeology clearly shows that essential goods consumed at the townsite mostly originated in the core regions of America and Europe. Canned or bottled food and beverages came from such places as San Francisco, Chicago, New York, Boston, Baltimore, Norway, China, France, Portugal, and the Nassau district of Germany. Ceramic tableware mostly came from the Staffordshire potteries of England. Very few essential goods appear to be locally manufactured. The peripheralization of Treasure Hill came on the heels of the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869, making it possible to transport commodities cheaply to Treasure Hill. Comparative studies of other townsites in the American West are needed to more fully document this transformation process.

Notes

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