

Do You Remember?



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Tesla: A Ghost Town

We drove about ten miles east on Tesla Road to a little valley that lay between steep hills and Corral Hollow Creek. The hills were brown—this year by February 21, we had not had much rain. There was little wind, but a red tail hawk managed to find a thermal and drifted overhead. It is difficult to imagine that not too long ago this area held a population of 1,500 and more than 200 buildings. Now a ghost town, not a single building or inhabitant remains except for the ground squirrels.

Our small group of hikers, led by Dan Mosier, author of *History of Tesla*, soon was able to imagine the busy coal mining town through Dan's enthusiastic presentation. Tesla became a town to service the earliest coal mines in California; it existed from 1896 until the post office closed officially in 1915. At its population height of 1,500 residents, the town was slightly larger than Livermore, which had a population of 1,493 in 1900. Miners removed one-half million tons of coal. The operation left two large piles of tailings in the midst of the valley. The mine shafts and operations were in the hill to the north of the town. Mine owner John Treadwell chose the town's name because of his admiration for the electrical inventor, Nikola Tesla. The Alameda and San Joaquin Railroad was built to transport Tesla coal and other products to Stockton.

We walked along the dirt remnant of Barnett Avenue, where a row of the earliest houses in the town was built. The first house was that of the mine owners, the Treadwell family. It was also the fanciest in the row of seventeen houses. The men in the families who lived here held important positions in the running of the mine. One of them was John McCormick, hoist engineer at the main shaft; another was mine superintendent John Henry Collier, who married Lulu Aylward of Livermore. As we strolled farther to the west,

Dan showed us the locations of two other residential communities—Jimtown and, across the creek, Frytown. These cottages were occupied by more ordinary married folk, for example, miners, blacksmiths, tracklayers, carpenters, storekeepers. Holes left by their root cellars were the only signs of their occupancy. Dan pointed out to us the old dirt road to Livermore: high over our heads on a steep hill we could see the wagon tracks. Even today, the hard-topped Tesla Road, as it drops down steeply toward the east, is a scary ride down Corral Hollow Canyon.

The farthest community to the east was called Harrierville. It consisted of 45 family cottages and smaller ones meant for single men. This area had the most diverse population, including some African Americans and Chinese. Most of the Chinese and Japanese, however, lived in Chinatown, an area on a hillside south of the creek between Harrierville and the town plaza, directly across from the mine workings. Chinatown included family homes, bunkhouses, a laundry, and even a gambling and opium den.

Besides the structures necessary to the mining operations, many public buildings were erected. One of my favorites was the library and reading room with its surrounding open porch. The Tesla School, built at the edge of Corral Hollow Creek in Harrierville, opened in 1898. Near the town plaza in downtown Tesla were the two-story Tesla Hotel, the hospital, the mine office, the bandstand with its flagpole, the bakery, dance hall, firehouse, general store, saloon, a number of bunkhouses for single men, and the barber shop. A large stable was built by the Ryan brothers of Livermore. They ran a stage line between Livermore and Tesla.

A substantial deposit of clay was discovered near the Tesla coal beds. In August 1903 a pottery plant was opened two

miles east of Tesla where the clay was used for the manufacture of sewer pipe, cornice tiles, figurines, and porcelain. A spur track called Walden was extended to the plant. A photo in 1905 shows three large chimneys and a number of kilns. Iver Frydendahl, like other many other pottery workers, lived in Harrierville. In the morning a railroad flat car left Tesla under its own momentum, going downhill from Tesla to the pottery plant at Walden, stopping along the way to pick up 50 to 60 workers. The brakes were wooden four-by-fours pressed against the wheels. To return, a small boy rode a harnessed horse down from Tesla. The horse pulled the flat car with the workers back up the hill.

Other plants to the east built by the Treadwells were the Carnegie Brick Plant and the Terra Cotta Plant. All of these industries came to a halt in 1911 when a tremendous flood poured down Corral Hollow Creek and destroyed the railroad and many buildings. A competing brick company bought the Treadwell businesses and hired a wrecking company to tear them down in 1917.

Property, including the sites of the Carnegie Brick Plant and the Terra Cotta Plant, was bought by the California State Parks in 1979; the Carnegie State Vehicular Recreation Area for off-road motorcycle riding was created there. In 1996 and 1997 the Off-Highway Motor Vehicle Recreation Division of the State Parks bought another large property to the west, which includes the sites of the Pottery Plant and of Tesla and its coal mines. The plans of the OHMV are to expand the motorcycle park into this new property. A number of concerned people have started an organization called Friends of Tesla. They are hoping to preserve these two important historical and natural sites in Alameda County.

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