

REVIEW

ELDORADO! THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF GOLD MINING IN THE FAR NORTH

Edited by Catherine Holder Spude, Robin O. Mills, Karl Gurcke, and Roderick Sprague. 2011. University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln. Paper, 376 pages, B&W photos, maps, tables. ISBN: 978-0-8032-1099-8; \$55.00.

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The image that comes to mind, probably for most people, when thinking of a gold rush miner is a bearded old sourdough sporting a flannel shirt, suspenders and floppy hat. Implied in this picture are the affiliated characteristics: tough as nails, antisocial, and dependent on no one. *Eldorado!* attempts to change this image by demonstrating the extensive transportation and supply network that the miners were dependent on, yet at the same time contributing to. The book focuses on placer mining sites and is divided into five sections.

The first section grounds the reader in the history, theory, model, methods, challenges and opportunities presented by gold rush archaeology. Robert L. Spude hooks the reader with the story of stamper Mattie Wilson and calls for a revision of the current understanding of the gold rush promoted by sensational writers such as Jack London and Robert Service from a lawless male-oriented frontier to one that includes families, order and economic networks. Hardesty's theoretical chapter identifies frontier mining as a cross-cultural type of community characterized by rapid change and flexibility in social structures, ideologies and technology.

Catherine H. Spude shares a multiple linear regression method helpful in determining the type of site using its artifact assemblage and comparing it to collections from other representative sites, such as saloons, brothels and family homes. Although she acknowledges that complex statistics are easy to "use, abuse and misunderstand" (p. 74), her words of advice to archaeologists are that "complex statistics are here to stay. It behooves the

researcher to learn them and what they can do for him or her" (p. 53). Spude's method is used by several authors in the volume. Purser discusses how information gained through gold rush archaeology can contribute to research outside the state of Alaska and the field of archaeology by providing information about how gender, class, ethnicity and transience played out during the gold rush.

The remaining sections are divided into the site-type categories proposed in Mills' model of gold rush archaeological sites (Part I, Chapter 3). Part II starts with three chapters on what the model identifies as transfer and supply points, Skagway and Dyea. The main purpose of these types of sites is to move people and supplies through the network. Thornton begins by uncovering the story of Tlingit gold rush participation at Chilkoot Pass. When the stampedees arrived, the Tlingit were one of the wealthiest hunting and gathering societies in the world. They controlled a network of trails monopolizing trade with Natives in the interior. The Tlingit effort to maintain control of their trails resulted in the Packer War of 1888, during which a Tlingit chief was killed and control of the trails lost. Thornton also tells the story of Skookum Jim, the Native co-discoverer of gold in the Klondike, who straddles two worlds and is admired in each for different reasons. In the white-man world, he is appreciated for playing by their rules, wearing their clothes and living in their kind of house. In the Native world, he is appreciated for his traditional commitments to his family.

Cooper and Spude compare household collections in Skagway. Their findings include a priest who supported

Prohibition yet drank in secret; an interracial household that attempted to alleviate the stress of trying to integrate by consuming unusual amounts of “medicine”; a surprise military habitation revealed through multiple regression analysis, which instigated historical research confirming the archaeological evidence and demonstrated that the African American soldiers living there stole gunpowder from the military. The evidence from these assemblages points to people acting in accordance with their assigned gender and class roles. Huelsbeck uses a consumer-behavior approach to analyze eleven faunal assemblages from Skagway. He uses the type and amount of meat represented by the bones, price categories, and cooking methods to demonstrate that wealth and class played out as expected, at least in relation to beef consumption, and that people probably responded to price fluctuations by consuming more or less mutton.

In contrast to the discussion of coastal sites in Part II, Part III discusses interior transfer and supply links in the network. Griffin and Gurcke cover the thirty-year international effort to document the blanket of artifacts along the Chilkoot trail by archaeologists from Parks Canada and the U.S. National Park Service. They lament the paucity of prehistoric sites found in spite of the known history of Native use. Both agencies are trying to address the difficulties related to having two countries place their borders in the middle of a Tlingit trail that is an essential part of Native identity. “Canyon City,” by Hammer, is an analysis of a company town and how it controlled the resident employees’ lives whether on the clock or off. The layout of the town was highly structured, even to the organization of the wall tents, unlike other gold rush sites. The company maintained a monopoly over all available resources, causing the employees to be totally dependent on the company for food and shelter.

Part IV focuses on settlements that also serve as transfer and supply points but in addition provide essential services, such as shopping, medical, legal and recreational, to adjacent mining districts, identified in the model as Central and Secondary Distribution Settlements. C. Spude, Weaver, and Kardatzke look at five saloons and demonstrate how class and wealth are illustrated in the archaeological assemblages. Brand discusses how imported food was essential to the transient population living in tents on the hillsides of Dawson City because “there were insufficient natural resources in the Yukon to sustain a population the size of Dawson City during the boom years” (p. 215). Mills uses the example of Coldfoot

to demonstrate how one community changes through time and cycles through different site types of his model. Smith, Mills, and C. Spude analyze the small settlement of Tofty, significant because it was the first excavation of its model site type in either Alaska or Canada. The authors used Spude’s multiple linear regression analysis and found a midden composed entirely of liquor bottles and a cobbler’s home/workshop illustrating social and economic interconnectedness at this remote location.

The last section concentrates on actual mining sites. Saleeby analyzes over one hundred placer sites documented in a decade-long survey. No matter the type of dwelling recorded, whether a tent frame, cabin, or bunkhouse, her research found an amazing consistency in the types of artifacts at each site, illustrating the miners’ dependence on a recently industrialized economy with limited choices available. King’s contribution demonstrates that Alaska Natives, as well as whites, participated in the gold rush. He focuses on the Ahtna Athabaskans mining at Valdez Creek. Initially starting out as laborers for other miners, they acquired the necessary mining skills and eventually began leasing claims to mine themselves.

Higgs and Sattler illustrate how the differences between a prospector and a miner play out in the archaeological record at Fish Creek, an Extraction Camp site type near Fairbanks. The first site, a small roofless log structure containing rustic, hand-made furniture, is interpreted to be a prospector’s tent frame cabin that was only occupied for a season or less, during which time the occupant appears to have chewed more tobacco than food. The second site had a known occupant who lived there for possibly two decades. He constructed a slightly larger, more substantial cabin with additional features such as a privy, cold cellar, windows, and a porch. He participated in a wider variety of activities, from mining to baking. What the authors point out is that whether temporary or permanent, both cabin occupants relied on the industrialized food system for sustenance.

The authors succeed in their goal of pushing what is known about the gold rush out of the gray literature and into the mainstream. The book is widely available and accessible for someone without an archaeological background who is interested in the topic, although the authors could have expounded a little more on field-specific terminology without compromising scientific integrity. Aside from some redundancy regarding the model description, minor errors and some odd chapter placement, this book is overall an important contribution to the gold

rush literature. It will be a useful cornerstone for current and future historical archaeologists.

Like most characters who are mythologized, crusty sourdoughs did exist, but they were likely the exception rather than the rule. After reading *Eldorado!*, the image of the gold rush miner morphs into someone younger, better educated, and a bit wealthier, who had a fleeting presence in the state, simultaneously dependent on and contributing to a vast economic web.