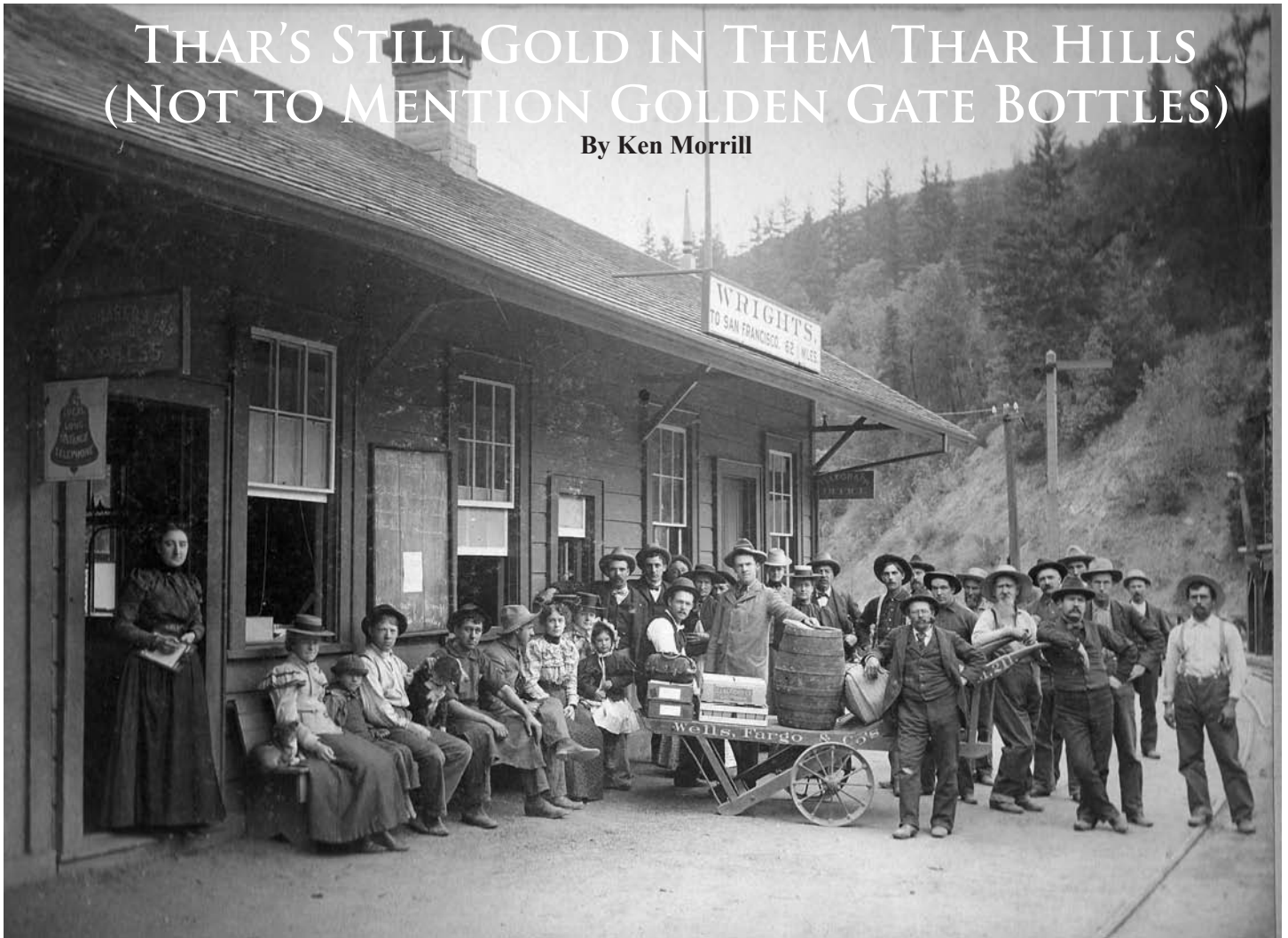


# THAR'S STILL GOLD IN THEM THAR HILLS (NOT TO MENTION GOLDEN GATE BOTTLES)

By Ken Morrill



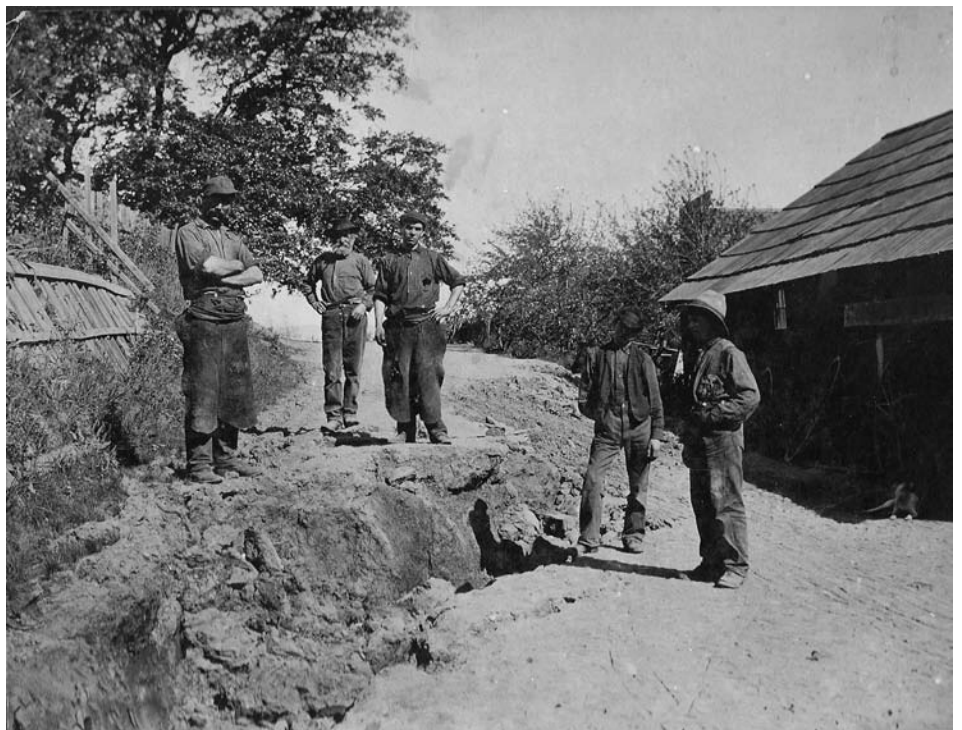
Depot at Wright's Station Oct.7th 1898

**W**rights, California, now a ghost town, was a small settlement centered around a depot located at the northern end of the Summit tunnel on the narrow gauge Southern Pacific Railroad.

In the 1890s, the company developed a park upstream from the depot, hoping to attract tourists from the Bay Area. Known as Sunset Park, it became wildly successful and on weekends attracted thousands of picnickers who left a staggering number of beer, whiskey and soda bottles scattered about in the woods.

In the late 1960s, a telephone company lineman was the first to gather the old bottles. Other collectors soon followed and dug the outhouses as well as surface dumps located behind the large redwood stumps. Few bottles remained when I discovered the park, but it still became one of my favorite haunts.

One day as I walked along the park's



Fault line in Summit Rd. in front of Blacksmith shop after 1906 earthquake

outskirts, I spotted the tops of two bottles among the clover-shaped leaves of redwood sorrel carpeting the ground. I pulled the first bottle out from the redwood needles and saw an embossed bear holding a beer mug, surrounded by the words, "GOLDEN GATE BOTTLING WORKS / TRADE MARK / MCGRATH AND MAHONEY / SAN FRANCISCO."

Condition of the bottle was flawless as was the wire bail, rubber gasket and porcelain stopper, printed with the bear and GOLDEN GATE BOTTLING WORKS, S.F." The other bottle was a mint, beautiful green, whittled quart beer embossed FREDERICKSBURG BOTTLING CO. / THIS BOTTLE NEVER SOLD." The bottle also retained in working condition its original wire bail and porcelain stopper.

For as long as I can remember, I spent most of my free time searching for beautiful and/or interesting objects. Throughout my childhood, I collected rocks and minerals, arrowheads, coins, stamps and insects. The instinct for hunting-gathering, first attributed to our prehistoric ancestors, lives on in today's collectors and we are fascinated by the objects we find.

Early on, I roamed the fields and woods near my grandparents' home in rural northern California in search of treasure. Often I came down with a bad case of poison oak, but could still enjoy hours inside the home, rummaging through closets and musty smelling steamer trunks filled with books, stereoscopic cards, fabrics, jar upon jar of odd colorful buttons and strange 19th and early 20th century American and foreign coins, letters and stamps. These experiences set the stage for a life of collecting.

In 1970, at the age of 15, I moved to the Santa Cruz Mountain and there I discovered colorful pieces of old bottles scattered about in the woods. It was an unforgettable day when I found part of an aqua-colored bottle, with words blown into the glass that read, "DR. KILMER'S SWAMP ROOT, KIDNEY, LIVER AND BLADDER CURE." Who would have believed such a claim and taken this concoction? What ailment did they really suffer from and did this "medicine" help or hurt them?

After school, I promptly caught the bus carrying us "mountain kids" 15 miles from Los Gatos to our homes in the hills. Located within 20 feet of my bus stop was a small creek containing many old broken bottles and pieces of rusted metal. (I later learned a blacksmith's shop and grocery store stood at this location). As much as I wanted to explore the creek, first I had to walk home, drop off my books, change clothes and then I could head off to crawl and dig through poison oak in search of antique bottles. These bottles told stories about the lives of the first mountain settlers who came here to fulfill their dreams.

Prior to my move to the mountains, most of the ravines behind old farm houses had been scoured by earlier bottle collectors. With a little luck and a lot of persistent digging, I found bottles they overlooked and on a rare occasion I stumbled onto an undiscovered dump.

Throughout my high school years, I searched for bottles in the hills around my home, but by the time I graduated, few were left to discover. On a positive note, years of scratching the itchy, oozing patches of poison oak that covered my body ended – not because I had given up bottle digging, but because I had finally developed immunity to the irritating plant.

However, my passion to find treasure did not subside with the scarcity of bottles to dig. Needing more excitement, an article in the magazine "California Geology" prompted me to go gold hunting. Hunting for gold could be combined with fishing trips and for years, I had been fishing a gold-bearing stream – the middle fork of the Feather River.

My first prospecting/fishing trip to the river was made in the summer of 1973. Downstream from our campsite, below the old lumber mill



**Golden Gate Bottling Works and Frederickburg Bottling Co. found at Sunset Park**



**Moving a boulder in the Feather River**

at Sloat, the river flowed around a large flat expanse of bedrock. Near the bank, in shallow water, I found a crevice tightly packed with rocks and gravel. After prying out the rocks, I put on my face mask and with my hand began to fan the water to wash the finer gravel and silt downstream.

As the silt disappeared, the unmistakable color and shape of a tiny flake of placer gold revealed itself at the bottom of the crevice. I picked it up with tweezers and carefully placed it inside a 35mm film vial. Later, I tried my hand at gold panning. In front of camp, at our dish-washing spot, I scooped up some gravel and placed it in my gold pan. I held the lip of the pan under water and swirled it in a circular motion until all the gravel washed away. The remaining black sand was removed by repeated dipping of the pan's lip in and out of the water, revealing many "colors."

Each summer for more than 30 years, I made trips to the middle fork of the Feather River. Everything needed for a four- to five-day trip, including wet suit, fishing and mining equipment, food, utensils and clothes I packed several miles into and out of the river canyon, which had a vertical drop of up to 2,500 feet.

Following a hearty breakfast of pancakes, bacon and eggs, I donned my wetsuit and work began in the river. Overburden of rock and gravel was removed by hand, while breath-hold diving to reach the gold lodged in crevices of the bedrock. Small pieces of gold were sucked up in a device called a "snifter" made from a short length of Plexiglas tubing inserted into a rubber bulb. The tubing extended halfway into the bulb so the gold will not fall back out. If I found a nugget too large to suck through the tubing, I'd pick it up and put it inside the bulb.

After six or seven hours of mining an enjoyable float downstream to camp was topped off by pouring the contents of the snifter into the gold



**Golden Gate Medical Syrup bottle, Gold and gold coins all found at the Feather River**

pan. Watching gold emerge was as thrilling as pulling a good bottle out of the ground. Finding gold was never disappointing, unlike pulling out a bottle and finding it broken.

My labor was occasionally rewarded with finds of a historical nature – coins once used by Gold Rush miners. A great flood that began on Friday, the 10th of January, 1862, destroyed many of the mining camps and literally washed the town of Feather Point down the Feather River. Here are excerpts from a newspaper report:

"About 5 o'clock on Friday morning last, the Feather River sent a huge log into the rear of Cunningham's store, carrying away a shed that was attached to the main building with such a crash as to awaken the sleeping inmates of the store in double quick time. This was the first greeting of the freshet at Nelson.

"The day dawned on a crowd of very busy men packing contents of the store to a place of safety. Meyers, the proprietor of the saloon, now deemed it expedient to remove the wares from the exposed tenement, and a busy scene struck up on that side of town also.

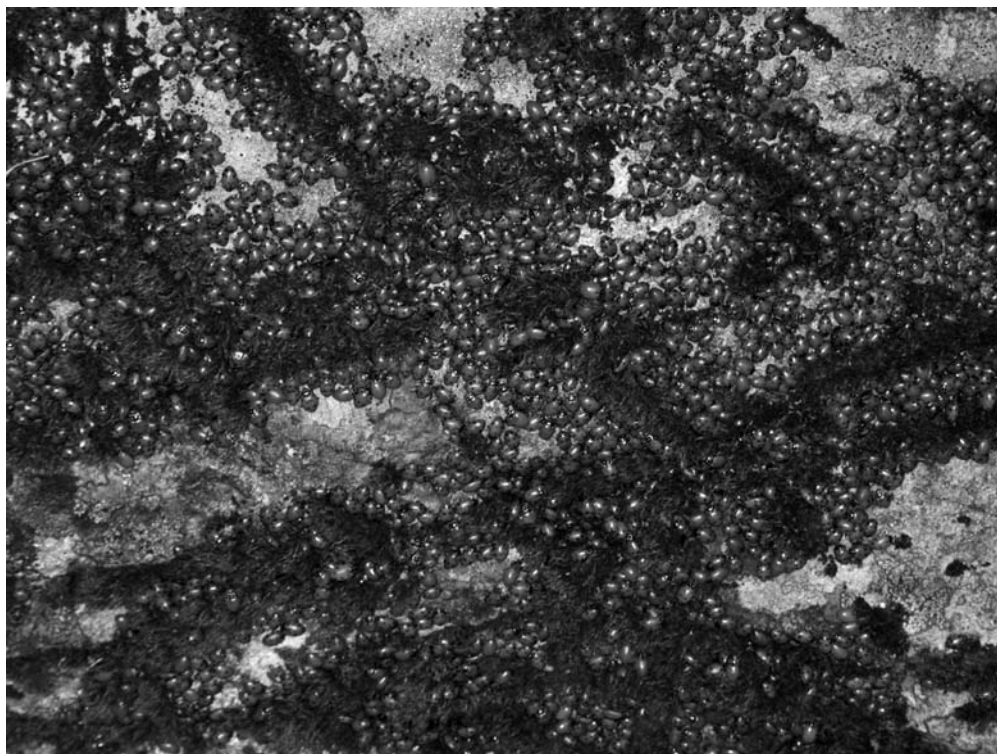
"At 4 o'clock on Saturday morning, the waters of Feather and Nelson were

at the culminating point. Cunningham & Co.'s store now rose, swung gradually around and went gliding rapidly down the river for several hundred feet. It then turned into an eddy at the side of the stream, came back close to where it had started from. The boys gave three hearty cheers. The store then shot out into the middle of the river and was soon out of sight.

"A cheerful fire was burning in the stove; the lights from the candles shown brightly out of the doors and windows, and a faithful watch-dog stood at the open door, looking out as composed as if nothing unusual had happened. In this manner, the store passed around the bend in the river and was soon out of sight. The saloon remained a few minutes longer and then prepared to take its leave."

Downstream from Nelson Creek, I found several silver and gold coins that predate the flood. My finds included \$2-1/2 and \$5 gold pieces, likely washed out of some miner's camp during the flood of 1862 and re-deposited into a crack in the bedrock 150 years later.

One summer, I discovered a spot on the river called "Hartman's Bar." This river bar had been worked by hundreds of hopeful miners throughout the Gold



**Lady Bugs at Willow Creek**

Rush. The bar is located at the tail-out of a pool running for hundreds of yards over solid bedrock.

Evidence can be seen on the bank where a flume had been constructed to divert the river around the pool. Miners had cut a channel in the solid rock along one side of the river in which they'd built a wooden flume. Above the head of the pool, a temporary dam had been constructed to divert the river into the flume, allowing miners to reach gold on the river bottom.

After establishing my camp, I wandered down river to look for bedrock. While walking through the forest, I noticed the neck of an aqua bottle on the ground in front of me. Reaching down, I pulled it from the leaves. The large medicine bottle was embossed "B.F. ROBERTS & CO. / GOLDEN GATE MEDICAL SYRUP / CALIFORNIA." It was the first old bottle I had found in years, but my desire to find gold called me back to the river before thoroughly searching the area for additional bottles. Very little gold was found and 20 years would pass before I would return.

I wanted to show my wife Hartman's Bar so we made plans to

explore the area on a one-day trip. We made the four-mile hike, with our two dogs leading the way, making good time despite the misfortune of disturbing a yellow jacket nest along the side of the trail. When we reached the bottom of the trail, a quick swim in the river was first on the agenda. Then we crossed a new Pacific Crest trail bridge and headed upstream to explore a beautiful little stream known as Willow Creek. (I was surprised to see the bridge I used on my first trip had been torn down, replaced by the new one).

At the mouth of Willow Creek, the cold, moss-covered boulders were covered with thousands of lady bugs. Continuing up the creek, we found a shallow pool surrounded by smooth flat bedrock, a perfect setting to enjoy our lunch. As sunlight crept further into the canyon and the air temperature rose, our lady bug friends began to stir. Soon the air was filled by a cloud of the red beetles flying as if they had nowhere to go.

After lunch, I decided to go downstream and search the area where I had found the medicine bottle years earlier. From the river's edge, I worked my way uphill and soon found pieces of old glass on the surface of

the ground. There were several broken "WALKER'S VINEGAR BITTERS," including a nice apple green example. The pieces appeared undisturbed so I was hopeful the site had been overlooked by other collectors. As I continued up the hillside, I entered a narrow ravine and began to find rusted tin cans. Further up the ravine, I found a large dump containing broken 19th and early 20th century bottles. Unfortunately, the dump had been dug from top to bottom recently, long after my first visit to the area.

I may never know what treasures were found in that ravine, but the medicine bottle and jar of gold, which I have accumulated over the years, will always bring back wonderful memories of the many trips made into the Feather River.

Finding shallow gold-bearing crevices in this river has grown harder and harder over the years and there have not been any floods to redeposit new gold. Losing enthusiasm for gold prospecting, I have resumed bottle collecting. Now, however, my hunting for bottles is usually done at bottle shows or through searches on the internet. Although purchasing a bottle on eBay cannot hold a candle to finding one in the woods, it does allow me to add bottles to my collection that I would never live to dig.

Who knows, maybe some day I will find a collector willing to trade the Holy Grail – a quart beer bottle with three standing bears on it (a Jacob Denzler) for California gold..

