

SOULSBYVILLE, AN ENCLAVE OF COUSIN JACKS AND JINNIES IN A HARD-ROCK MINING TOWN

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ABSTRACT

The buildings, mines, and material culture remains in Soulsbyville are much the same as in other mining towns in the California Mother Lode, but its culture, religion, lodge, celebrations, and traditions are different from other such communities. It is only through research in a variety of intangible resources, i.e., newspaper accounts, diaries, ongoing celebrations, and interviews with residents, that one is able to interpret the lifeways of this Cornish enclave, or many other such ethnic enclaves in the New World. This paper, based on research conducted for a Historic Resources Inventory, will explore the use of those resources and their results.

The research for this paper was conducted under a grant from the State Office of Historic Preservation, administered by the Tuolumne County Planning Department, to prepare a Historic Resources Inventory of Soulsbyville. Entitled *Historic Resources Survey, Soulsbyville, Tuolumne County, California*, the report is available from the Tuolumne County Planning Department, Sonora, California.

Soulsbyville, a small hard-rock mining community in the Sierra foothills, was born in the waning days of the Gold Rush, boomed in the 1870s and again in the 1890s, withered in the 1910s after its mines closed, and experienced another small boom after World War II, occasioned by the opening of a lumber and planing mill and the operation of several small orchards. These industries and their attendant work force and support systems have left the community with a legacy of winding streets, frame buildings, crumbling foundations, and the gaunt remnants of

the mines and mills which once supported this Cornish enclave.

At first view the community, now a suburb of Sonora, appears much the same as other mining towns on the East Belt of California's Mother Lode. The historic architectural styles represented are, in most instances, vernacular interpretations that do not necessarily conform to pure academic categories, combining elements from several different design types or historical periods, a fashion common to most Gold Rush towns.

The first structures to be built were one-room miners' cabins, larger boarding houses, and some commercial establishments, all constructed with the readily available supply of cheap lumber from the nearby hills. The town grew quickly, without any plan or direction, with most of the buildings erected on mining claims and along the Soulsbyville-Confidence Road.

Only the cabin of Ben Soulsby, for whose family the town was named, and now totally engulfed within a modern home, remains from that earliest era of cabin building. Most of the few extant buildings from the 1860s and 1870s have also been remodeled.

Another mining boom that began in the late 1890s and continued through the 1910s produced the greatest number of remaining buildings within Soulsbyville. Included among these were several Queen Anne homes and many vernacular Classical Revival houses.

Businesses within the community catered primarily to local inhabitants and consisted of a few stores, saloons, hotels, a dance hall, butcher shops, and blacksmith shops, most of them built in a simple vernacular Nineteenth Century commercial style.

Buildings related to social activities made up the remainder of the structures in Soulsbyville. They included the Good Templars' Hall, the Foresters' Hall, the Methodist Episcopal Church, and the school.

The largest and most significant structures in the town, however, were the gallows frames, water wheels, hoist buildings, tramways, and stamp mills of the Soulsby Mine group. All have long since been torn down, leaving only gaunt stone and concrete footings as reminders of the time when mining was "king" in Soulsbyville.

The legacy of mining in Cornwall had provided California and the world with many technical advances, including the Bickford slow-match fuse, the Cornish stamp mill (a square metal stamp shoe, affixed to a square wooden stamp) and the Cornish pump for dewatering the mines. No remnants of any of these systems are extant in Soulsbyville; the only unusual mining features were the large stone footings of the overshot waterwheel which operated the Davidson hoist.

Thus the extant mining and milling features in the area were analogous with those in other

mining communities in the Sierra foothills: adits, tunnels, and shafts were driven and sunk into the ore-bearing veins; the Soulsby Ditch brought water from the Tuolumne County Water Company's main canal from the South Fork of the Stanislaus River, providing power to operate the hoists and the mills; hoist and mill footings were built of stone, affixed with lime mortar, and, later, of board-formed concrete; and mills were erected on hillsides, taking advantage of gravity feed.

The remnants of these mines and mills comprise the main archaeological features within the community, although a few stone foundations, artifact scatters, and flowering shrubs and bulbs mark the locations of abandoned homesteads. Artifacts observed there included the ubiquitous assemblages of black, green, amethyst, and aqua glass; shards of white improved earthenware and transfer-printed vessels; cut and wire nails, barrel hoops, bolts, strap metal, and tin can dumps.

Thus nothing in the architectural or archaeological record provided any clue as to the nationality of the miners and their families. A search of historic records, however, provided abundant information on the ethnicity and occupations of the inhabitants of Soulsbyville.

Much of the future of the new mining center was shaped by events in a small section of southwestern England known as Cornwall. There an ancient tin and copper ore production center had been struggling in the face of depleted mines and the massive, cheaper foreign production of these ores with which it could not compete.

By 1860 thousands of Cornish miners had already lost their means of livelihood as the mines closed. They were skillful miners, however, the world's best, and many of them left their homeland to go where their services were in demand in the development of virgin copper deposits abroad, and after the middle of the century not a few answered the call of gold from California. The majority of the Cornish miners settled in the Northern Mines, around Grass Valley and Nevada City, but a small group elected to go to the Southern Mines, in

Tuolumne County.

In 1860 there were perhaps 25 Cornish miners employed in the newly opened hard-rock gold mines at Soulsbyville, and nearly all of them were single miners, living in boarding houses or with partners. A decade later, it was hard to find miners of any other ethnic group working there, and nearly all of them had family ties or cultural and religious backgrounds that welded them into a singularly homogeneous community (U.S. Federal Census Records 1860, 1880).

Land and federal census records revealed that over 80 per cent of the population had Cornish names: Barron, Bluett, Bunney, Carne, Crocker, Curnow, Floyd, Glasson, Hender, Martin, Nichols, Odgers, Oliver, Peters, Richards, Rundell, Sharwood, Simmons, Trewartha, Tulloch, West, and numerous others. Almost all of the men worked in the mines, from the superintendent, engineer, amalgamator, and millwright, to the miners and day laborers; by 1880 nearly all were Cornishmen.

Although there is a dearth of published materials regarding Soulsbyville, the saga of the Cornish miner in America has been related in several books and accounts. In great demand in the mines because of their experience in the tin mines of Cornwall, according to mining engineer and author T.A. Rickard, these Cornish shifters or shift bosses "knew better than anyone how to break rock, how to timber bad ground, and how to make the other fellow shovel it, tram it, and hoist it" (Rickard 1932:24).

About the town itself, only two accounts were available: a history of the school and one of the church, both written by longtime inhabitants of the community. Information on the lifeways of the town was available, then, from only two sources: the newspapers and oral interviews. Newspaper accounts primarily chronicled mining news, vital statistics, building construction, and festivals. It was the oral interviews, then, that provided information on the lifeblood of the town.

Two members of the pioneer Nicholls family,

Wendell Nicholls and his sister Ruth Rundle, the grandchildren of one of the four Nicholls brothers who came to the United States in the late 1850s and early 1860s, provided a brief look into the lives of a typical Cornish Soulsbyville family. Times were tough in Cornwall, and, at the behest of relatives and friends, they left their native land to search for work. Two of the Nicholls brothers, William and James, arrived in California in 1854 from Redruth and Camden, settling near Springfield in El Dorado County. Two other brothers, Seymour and Alfred, followed them in 1864 and settled in Nevada City, the bastion of the Cornish miner in California.

By the mid 1860s, the three surviving brothers, William, Seymour, and Alfred, with their wives and children, had moved to Soulsbyville to be near a relative. There they worked in the Soulsby mine and settled into the community, joining the church and the Good Templars. Their children married into other Cornish families in the town, and within a generation one of their members became a well-respected County Supervisor. He and his brother brought the first electricity to Soulsbyville, constructing a dynamo powered by water from the Soulsby Ditch, and provided free service to the church and the school.

According to information related in oral interviews, the Cornish families brought no large material goods with them from their homeland, only a small bag with personal possessions. Thus, they left nothing from their native land in the archaeological record. They did, however, retain, even to this day, many of their traditions and lifeways, providing a glimpse into the collective past of Cornwall (Nicholls, personal communication, 1992).

The Cornish were exceptionally fond of music, with a tradition of male singers who handed down the songs through generations. The cornet band was also a Cornish tradition; in 1912 there were so many players that a junior cornet band was organized. There is a men's chorus in Soulsbyville today, with the men of the community practicing in the church and singing at con-

certs throughout the County.

The Cornish also retained their foodways. The pastie, a meat and vegetable pie, was the staple of the diet, with the men carrying them into the mine and warming them up next to the skin before lunch. All the families kept cows, and in addition to milk and cheese, they made the traditional scalded cream of Devon and Cornwall to put over berries and other desserts. A typical Sunday dinner in the 1920s, served after church, consisted of a dinner roast, usually beef or pork, and saffron cake. A snack was served in the evening hours, often potato salad with shrimp. Meals during the remainder of the week usually included kidney pie, scones, raised buns, and raisin buns. Breakfast consisted of cream and syrup on bread.

Soulsbyville became particularly noted for its celebrations of the Christmas season. As the dominant national group in the town, the Cornish residents set the general tone of the observance based on traditions brought over from the old country. Christmas day was spent in visiting friends and attending social affairs. The miners, who had fine singing voices, followed the old English custom of going from house to house singing Christmas carols.

The Christmas celebration of 1877 received local press notice. Held in Tom West's new dance hall, it was attended by everyone in Soulsbyville with guests coming from as far away as Sonora. A representative of the *Tuolumne Independent* newspaper noted that it was "one of the grandest events that ever gladdened the hearts of that place since it has been a camp." The hall was decorated with cedar boughs from which were suspended oranges and bags of popcorn, and a large Christmas tree graced one end of the hall, its branches weighted down with presents for the youngsters. Music was provided by the newly formed Soulsbyville Silver Cornet Band, which became very popular and was in demand at other communities in the county.

The Reverend A.C. Hazzard offered a brief

prayer which was followed by a carol rendered by the Rablen family. The joyous mood of the occasion was then briefly broken by an oration on "truth in the abstract," but quickly restored by a series of skits, charades, and tableaux presented by the school children and others with theatrical talent. In due time Santa Claus made his appearance and distributed the presents to the children. Not neglected were the old bachelors in attendance, among whom was circulated a traditional grab bag which contained the "usual assortment of night caps and China dolls." The planned festivities concluded with vocal selections by the children of the Sunday school (*Tuolumne Independent*, January 5, 1878).

Why, then, did this small mining camp, which quickly sprang up along the banks of upper Curtis Creek in 1858, experience relatively little of the turbulence that was a characteristic of the history of most of its sister gold mining camps? Apparently because of the change in demographics brought about by a change in ownership of the rich Soulsby group of mines. By the early 1860s the individual mining claims in Soulsbyville had been consolidated by Donald Davidson, a well-known mining speculator in California and Nevada. In 1862 he put the Soulsby Mine under the supervision of Richard Inch, a Cornish engineer, who brought with him wide experience in hard-rock mining gained in both Cornwall and California.

Inch actively recruited experienced Cornish miners, and by the mid-1860s the Soulsby Mine was almost entirely manned by his fellow countrymen, the "Cousin Jacks." He recognized the value of a stable, hardworking labor force and encouraged his miners to send for their wives and families as soon as they could save enough money to pay their passage. Like he who sent for them, those who followed traveled by steerage, and soon their presence gave stability and meaning to their new community.

This was reflected in the development of Soulsbyville, which never supported more than three saloons at any one time, and as far as is

known, no gambling houses, or places of prostitution of note. The community never had, nor required, a full-time police officer or a jail.

A local correspondent, who visited the town in May 1877, wrote a glowing account of what he observed:

Soulsbyville is entitled to rank as the model mining camp of this county. Soulsbyville people are pious, and go to church regular. They are prosperous, hence their piety. Marriageable girls are no longer a curiosity there. [*Tuolumne Independent*, May 5, 1877]

The Cornish miners of Soulsbyville and their families were of staunch Methodist persuasion, and the tenets of that church had much to do with the correspondent's notice of the development of a stable, civilized, law-abiding early Soulsbyville. Almost all of the miners and their families attended church and Bible classes without fail. They refused to work on Sundays, so that there was a dependable weekly pause in the drilling, blasting, tramping, hoisting, and the rhythmic fall of mill stamps that proclaimed a healthy mining community the other days of the week.

These Cornish people had strong clan ties, and whenever possible gave their families, or others of their ethnic background, every preference. The men were commonly called "Cousin Jacks", and their opposites "Cousin Jinnies". It is said that whenever there was an opening in a mine's labor force, one of the Cornish miners would immediately appeal to the foreman for the employment of "me Cousin Jack". Such pleas were often heeded, not only because many mine foremen were Cousin Jacks themselves, but also because the hard-rock Cornish miner was generally acknowledged to be the world's best. Steady, dependable, sometimes stubborn, but always a professional with hundreds of years of experience bred into his bones, he was almost without an equal in his craft.

Such preferences were resented, of course, by miners of other ethnic groups who watched the

Cornish miners come in droves and were wont to wonder just how many "Cousin Jacks" each Cornish family had.

Inch operated the Soulsby Mine under a management system which had been developed and used in Cornwall for generations, with some modifications to fit conditions found in the California gold mines. Miners were employed under one or more of three arrangements: (1) For ten hours of labor at a fixed wage, usually \$3; (2) by "tribute", or lease, under which they received an agreed-upon percentage of the value of the millable ore they extracted; and (3) by contract to perform such underground work as sinking a shaft, running a drift or similar skilled labor at so much per linear foot.

Contracts were usually made for a month's period, subject to renewal or renegotiation at the end of that time depending upon any change of conditions which might have occurred such as encountering harder or softer rock, etc. The company furnished the necessary candles, powder, fuse, and tool sharpening, the cost of which was deducted at settlement time. Contract work was not always the most profitable way for the miner to work. In a suit brought in 1869 against the Soulsby Mine for unpaid wages, one miner, William Glasson, testified, "I know contract work. The term contract means to keep the men from earning too much" (*Robert Marshall vs. The Soulsby Mining Company*, No. 1287, Fifth District Court).

In Cornwall the struggle for survival had doomed most of the children, both male and female, to engage in mining-related work at an age when more fortunate youngsters elsewhere were struggling with the three "R"s. At Soulsbyville the miners' wages were sufficient to maintain a family in rude comfort without their wives and children working, and the Cornish were quick to see that their children received the basic education that had eluded most of them in the old country. In 1869 they formed their own school district and supplemented the meager annual terms it provided with additional privately financed instruction. In

reviewing the old Federal Decennial Census report one can almost sense the pride with which the enumerator was informed that the minor children of that family, of both sexes, were "at school".

In 1880 a vigorous chapter of the Independent Order of Good Templars (IOGT) was formed at Soulsbyville, and with its affiliated Band of Hope, devoted itself to the promotion of temperance. The group did much to give Soulsbyville the reputation of being the temperance capital of Tuolumne County. Although there was no apparent official connection between the Methodist Church and the IOGT lodge, most of the community's leaders were active members of both, and community life in Soulsbyville was centered around its church, lodge, and school.

Indeed, the first major public affair to receive wide notice was a benefit, or tea, given by the members of the Methodist faith to raise money for the erection of their house of worship. Thereafter such fundraising teas were a frequent and important part of Soulsbyville's social life, and were given not only for the support of the church, its Sabbath school, and the public school, but also for such worthy causes as the community's brass band.

The townspeople of Soulsbyville seemed especially prolific in the formation of organizations and small groups. In 1883 a library and literary association was formed with an initial enrollment of 25 members. Around the turn of the century numerous other groups were formed: the Ancient Order of Foresters; Soulsbyville Union No. 109 of the Western Federation of Miners; the Soulsbyville Minuet Club; Soulsbyville Ladies Minstrels; the Ragamuffins, a theatrical group; and the Soulsbyville Tennis Club, which gave a minstrel show in 1903 which featured the town's lady minstrels.

Although the life of the average Cornish miner was usually of short length due to the ravages of miners' consumption and other diseases and disabilities inherent in the work he followed, some of them survived to see the decline of

California's hard-rock mining industry that occurred in the pre-World War I period. It must have reminded them of their younger days in distant Cornwall when the rich ore bodies of tin and copper were exhausted, and the marginal mines, with their problems of water and depth, were no longer financially feasible to operate.

This time there was a different type of emigration; not to a distant continent, but to a new means of livelihood. By then the first American generation of Cornish people had acquired enough education to readily adapt to the changing times and enable most of its members to forever abandon the unreliable mining payrolls and earn their daily bread by other means. They became merchants and mechanics, school teachers and politicians, lawmen and engineers, and mastered a hundred other occupations unrelated to their long mining heritage.

At Soulsbyville the Cornish people did not remain an isolated group. Like other immigrants, they learned to accept and live with people of a dozen assorted nationalities. By the time the third generation was maturing, those associations, the facing of problems common to all, and the English language welded in the public school system had brought outside ties and friendships which were frequently cemented by marriage. Today, like most of the pioneer ethnic groups, Cousin Jacks and Cousin Jinnies are all part of the diverse yet common family of Uncle Sam.

NOTE

In addition to the references below, the following Tuolumne County Official Records were consulted in the preparation of this paper: County Assessor assessment rolls and maps; County Clerk district and superior court records, naturalization records, and probate records; County Recorder quartz claim books, preemption claim books, deed books, homestead books, land patent books, mortgage books, chattel mortgage books, patent books, articles of incorporation, death register books, and marriage register books; Board

of Supervisors minutes and road records; County Surveyor maps.

The following newspapers were also consulted: American Flag, Sonora; Daily Alta California, San Francisco; Democratic Banner, Sonora; The Mother Lode, Jamestown; Mother Lode Magnet, Jamestown; New Era, Tuolumne City; San Joaquin Republican, Stockton; Sonora Herald, Sonora; Tuolumne Courier, Columbia and Sonora; Tuolumne Independent, Sonora; Tuolumne Prospector, Groveland; and Union Democrat, Sonora.

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