Baeten on Swent, 'One Shot for Gold: Developing a Modern Mine in Northern California'

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When I think about gold mining in California, my mind immediately travels to the mid-nineteenth century, when during the construction of a saw mill along a creek in the Sierra Nevada, a now nameless worker stumbled upon a bit of placer gold, setting off the ensuing gold rush of 1849. From here I think of the devastation that this rush caused, ranging from the genocide of indigenous communities, to the exploitation of immigrant laborers, and finally to the extensive damage done to streams and riparian zones from hydraulicking. However, California’s gold mining history did not end with the ban on hydraulic mining in 1884. Instead it grew and advanced, moving from placer deposits in creek beds, to lode deposits in ore bodies, and finally to low-grade deposits. Just over one hundred years after the ban on hydraulic mining in California, a new mine began processing low-grade ores just north of San Francisco. Eleanor Herz Swent’s *One Shot for Gold: Developing a Modern Mine in Northern California* provides a detailed account of the birth, growth, and death of the Homestake Mining Company’s McLaughlin Mine, operating between 1985 and 2002.

*One Shot for Gold* is not your typical mining history. I mean this not so much in the contemporary nature of the study but more so in the sources Swent used in constructing the narrative. As a senior researcher with UC-Berkeley’s Oral History Center, Swent directed an oral history project on western mining, amassing an expansive and extremely rich dataset from interviews she conducted with miners, geologists, environmental engineers, and others involved with mining in the West.[1] The stories told in these interviews make up the primary text in *One Shot for Gold* and provide a unique perspective into mine exploration, environmental planning, development, mining technology, and reclamation, all from individuals who either worked for the McLaughlin Mine or were intimately connected with it. The interviewees contextualize the story of the mine and illustrate the myriad challenges they encountered when opening a new mine, including navigating environmental regulations and community relations during the modern environmental movement. Swent’s acumen in mining processes and technology surely aided in the richness and detail in these interviews.

The book is divided into five parts. Swent begins with an overview of the Northern California landscape pre-McLaughlin Mine, which was historically dominated by mercury mines. Next, Swent details the history of the Homestake Mining Company’s interest in California and the discovery of gold mineralization within the Manhattan Mercury Mine (the location where the McLaughlin would eventually be sited). From here she explores the challenges, or lack thereof, associated with
permitting a gold mine with modern environmental policies. Next, Swent details the construction and operation of the mine, including a fascinating chapter on the use of autoclaves to extract gold from refractory ores, a process that uses high-pressured oxygen to reduce pollution during ore processing. The final section of the book examines the mine shutdown and its transformation to a nature preserve. Just over twenty black-and-white images are included in the middle of the book, showing the mining landscape, various workers, and some of the reclamation steps. The inclusion of additional maps would have helped situate the story for the reader. Notably, there is no map that shows where the McLaughlin Mine is sited within the state of California (I needed to Google this to see that it is located north of San Francisco just outside of the Mendocino National Forest), as the only map in the book provides little spatial reference with the exception of Napa, Lake, and Yolo County lines.

One Shot for Gold is certainly to appeal to those interested in mining history, mining technology, and oral history, and economic historians at large. However, owing much to the subjects of the oral interviews, the book is constructed in a way that comes across almost as if it were commissioned by the Homestake Mining Company as a corporate history, as there is little critique toward the corporation or mining as an industry in general. Environmental historians will find the last chapter of the book on restoration of interest, but here too the mining company is also framed in a positive light. Furthermore, due to the abundance of interviews included in the text, it is often difficult to identify the thread that ties the story together. Swent’s voice is sometimes lost among pages of quotations, making the signposting that is necessary to guide the reader difficult to locate. The richness of the interviews is both a blessing and a curse for One Shot for Gold, as the interviews provide great detail into the McLaughlin Mine but leave much to be desired in terms of storytelling.

Swent’s One Shot for Gold is an impressive account of the economic and technological development of the McLaughlin Mine and serves as an excellent contrast to the discovery story of Sutter’s Mill. Serendipitous discoveries are common tropes of mining history, ranging from a donkey kicking a piece of gold-laden quartz, to a downtrodden prospector stumbling upon a nugget in a dry creek bed, to Jed Clampett errantly firing his muzzle loader, missing dinner but striking oil. While these discovery stories appeal to our collective interest in the thrill of discovery, they fail to account for the expertise that often is at the root of mineral discovery, geological science. One Shot for Gold highlights the expertise, personal decisions, and political capital that allowed for the McLaughlin Mine to become California’s most productive gold mine of the twentieth century.

Note

[1]. These interviews are included in Western Mining Oral Histories, Berkeley Library Digital Collections, University of California, https://digicoll.lib.berkeley.edu/search?ln=en&cc=Western+Mining+Oral+Histories.


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