

Mr. Iron Mines

by Pat Jones

Bill and Nancy Merle are thoroughly enjoying their ranch-style retirement home on a hilltop near Christian Valley. "We built it for a fun house,"

Bill says.

He earned the title of "Mr. Iron Mine" by locating, supervising the building of and serving as the superintendent of Iron Mine Conservation Camp for the entire 22 years it existed.

The honor camp program began with an agreement signed in 1949 between the California Division of Forestry and the department of Corrections. The CDF needed firer fighters, the CDC needed space to put men.

"I first came to California from New Jersey as a member of the CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) in 1935," Bill explains. Later he was a crew leader then went to work for the Division of Forestry in 1937.

Shortly after Pearl Harbor he enlisted in the U.S. Army. An injury while serving in Italy resulted in the loss of his lower right arm. In 1944 he returned to duty with the CDF.

When he was transferred to the camp program in 1950 Bill was an associate ranger in Placer County. His new job was to locate sites for honor camps in Placer and Nevada counties.

"The first two sites I considered in Placer county were not approved because of the concern of the community," Bill says.

Then he found the old

Hotating mine location. "It was known as the Cold Springs or Murphy Ranch at that time and was owned by two Bay Area doctors."

"The property was leased then later purchased." Several tons of slag from the old smelters were used in building the road into camp, now a part of Christian Valley Road.

The Iron Mine Conservation Camp opened in April of 1951 with 60 inmates from San Quentin. After four or five years Folsom inmates were stationed there.

"The men accepted authority and there were few disciplinary problems," Bill recalls. "We treated them like men and they appreciated that." Later a different breed of inmate was housed there and problems increased. More and more houses were being built in Christian Valley.

"Iron Mine fire crews put in hundreds of thousands of manhours from the Mexican border to the Oregon border. We had a reputation for having the best fire crews in the camp program."

Bill recalls one fire in the Klamath area that they were on for almost six weeks. Another big one was the Foresthill fire of 1960.

"In addition to fighting fires we were authorized to tackle any resource project in conservation. We developed an outstanding fire break system -

one hundred miles of fuel break in Placer County, 300 feet wide."

The honor camp program was so successful that it expanded to 32 camps in California involving 2500 to 2600 inmates. There were also four California Youth Authority camps.

When Mr. Iron Mine retired on July 1, 1973 the camp was changed to the Placer Ecology Center with ranger Jesse Brower, the present superintendent, in charge.

Earlier this month Bill and Nancy attended a conference of the California Division of Forestry 25 Year Club at Fresno. It was preceded by a golf tournament open to all CDF personnel. Bill was low net retiree out of 90 entrants.

While at Fresno he met a man who is currently in charge of fire crews. When the man heard Bill's name he said, "You're a legend!" "That tickled my wife," Bill chuckles. It is obvious that it tickled him too.

Following retirement from the CDF he continued working with Nancy in their real estate and other business interests.

Bill is a member of Western States Amputee Golf Association. He will be one of three hosts for the Amputee Tournament May 6 and 7 at Lake of the Pines.

HOTALING (Iron Mine)

Hoover and Rensch, Hitoric Spots in Calif., p. 130.

On bars of lower American R. early miners from Penn. noticed that many boulders contained iron ore. In 1857, chief center for ore was found to be on ranch of S. W. Lovell, near Clipper Gap, 6 mi. N.E. of Auburn. Although tests proved ore to be of high quality, no mining of mineral done till 1869, when firm of Brown and Company began shipping ore to San Francisco. In Dec. of that year, the Iron Mountain Company organized to develop the mine, but nothing accomplished. Property remained undeveloped until 1880 when smelting works were erected and town of Hotaling (named in honor of one of the owners) founded near by. Old buildings still stand at Hotaling, although mining operations have long since ceased.

History of Placer and Nevada Counties (Lardiner and Brock), p. 197.

Hotaling situated 3 or 4 mi. west of Clipper Gap. Iron ore discovered many years ago. In 1880 Messrs. Egbert Judson, Anson P. Hotaling, Irving M. Scott and P. Fitzhugh purchased iron ore land here. town called Hotaling.

Thousands of cords of wood cut in Placer and Nevada Counties. Many kilns and ovens constructed and wood burned into charcoal. Corp. called Calif. Iron Co. formed. All necessary furnaces and works erected for making pig iron and co. soon made thousands of tons as good as No. 1 Swedish iron.

Southern Pacific R.R. bought all that was made. A town built up. Stores and a post office in service. A school dist. organized and a school opened. Co. owned 7620 acres of woodland near works. From approx. 1881 to Sept. 1881 4,414 tons of pig iron made. Employees: 50 furnace hands, 40 miners, 75 charcoal burners and teamsters and 12 others., total 177 workers. 68 votes polled by employees.

Works closed in fall of 1881; with understanding that would be reopened in spring in an improved manner. Never reopened; however, not known why. Maybe a quarrel among directors and stockholders, or a failure of ore. "Placerites still wondering". Works, in any event, dismantled and property sold.