

# The Impact of the Media on the Formation of the Cultural Landscape of the White Pine Mining District

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Documents not only reflect human action but influence it. The written word is a form of material culture that is in a recursive relationship with human behavior. Documents are not only the product of human action but also have the ability to transform social organization (Moreland 1992:116–117) and the cultural landscape. The active role of words is shown in contemporary American society by the discourse over how the media affect our actions and values. The media have been accused of inciting violence, propagating sexually “liberal” attitudes, inflating economic fears and influencing the outcome of our political process. The present debate over how the press affects the structure of society is also applicable to the past. The influence of the media on our history is readily apparent in the study of mining boom towns of the American West.

Historical archaeologists traditionally use documents to assist them in building a framework from which to interpret their archaeological resources. In this instance however, the documents themselves are not passive description but active material culture that influenced the cultural landscape and affected class relations. This paper will argue that the “rush” to the White Pine Mining District in nineteenth-century Nevada was to an extent media induced, particularly as nineteenth-century trade journals and regional newspapers read more like booster sheets than objective narrative. Further, an analysis of the material culture reveals how the district’s inhabitants perceived their opportunities based on descriptions in the print media of the day. These perceptions in turn influenced the distribution of material culture across the landscape. For example, small dugouts and foundations with few associated artifacts are prevalent throughout the mining district. A traditional class interpretation would be to classify these property types as lower class habitations. However, when one takes into account the press as an active medium it is possible to develop a more sophisticated interpretation for these features.

A group of miners from the Reese River region established the White Pine Mining District in 1865. Small reports from the district began to make the mining papers by 1866. The first item to appear in the *American Journal of Mining* was nothing more than a paragraph listing a few ore assays. It lacked any hint of the sensational reports that were to appear two years later. In 1867 a local Native American showed a prospector named A. J. Leathers an outcropping of rich silver ore. As rumors of a big find spread by word of mouth, groups of prospectors began working the White Pine district.

By June of 1868 the rush was on, and the towns of Hamilton, Swansea, Treasure City, White Pine City, Eberhardt and Shermantown sprang into existence (*Daily Reese River Reveille* 1868). In July of that year the *American Journal of Mining* devoted a long article to the district describing the mines as remarkable for their richness and for a quantity of surface

ore unparalleled in the United States or possibly the world (*American Journal of Mining* 1868, 6[1]:4). The *Mining and Scientific Press* wrote in September of that year that the mines of the district were yielding ores of fabulous richness: “parties from that section say it is by no means uncommon to see large lumps of ore that are so nearly pure silver, that by placing a half dollar on them and striking a blow with a hammer, a perfect impression of the coin is left in the metal” (*Mining and Scientific Press* 1868, 17[13]:199). By October the *American Journal of Mining* reported that the district would prove to be one of the richest mineral districts in the state. In December of 1868, in its first edition, the *White Pine News* proclaimed “We have never before seen a mining community pervaded by such feeling of satisfaction as is this; nearly everybody being content with what they have got or expect in a short time to be able to get...with patience and labor the chances are good for a very large proportion of those here to realize a competence and perhaps even a fortune...” (*White Pine News* 1868, 1[1]:3).

The 1868 media frenzy assisted in turning the district from an area of small scale speculation into a large scale investment opportunity. The peak of the rush came in 1869. In March of that year the Pacific Railroad Company reportedly sold 10,000 tickets from Chicago to White Pine. They were forced to stop ticket sales due to an inability to transport more than that number (*Daily Reese River Reveille* 1869, 11[85]:1). Newspapers from the *New York Times* to the *San Francisco Times* wrote of a place that rivaled the Comstock lode of Virginia City. Every day new stories were told of people striking it rich. In 1869 The *New York Times* reported that White Pine was crowded with people but many rich and important discoveries had been made along with fortunes in mines, mining locations, city property and speculations (*New York Times* 4/14/1869:2). The media extravaganza, combined with the opening of the railroad which allowed easy access to the district, sent people pouring into the region. The town of Hamilton, later the county seat, exploded into a community of 10,000 in just two years.

The local newspapers at White Pine generally wrote about two types of individuals: the prospectors who were looking to strike it rich and those who saw the district as a permanent capital investment. Although prospectors are generally depicted as highly mobile lower class single men, both the trade journals and local papers reported that some wealthy and middle class individuals were also prospecting in the district. In 1868, when the community was just forming, a correspondent for the *American Journal of Mining* wrote that the people coming into the district ranged from bums to millionaires (*American Journal of Mining* 1868, 6[25]:387). In March of 1869 the *Daily Reese River Reveille* reported that “capitalists, merchants, farmers, miners, adventurers, bummers; men of all trades and men of no trades; women of all kinds...all flock to White Pine” (*Daily Reese River Reveille* 1869, 11[105]:1). Earlier, in 1868 a correspondent for the *Mining and Scientific Press* advised people who were planning on traveling to White Pine to be prepared to dig a suitable hole for sleeping accommodations (*Mining and Scientific Press* 1868, 17[23]:354). A later article reported that even the better class of men were having trouble finding a place to stay and that the industrious fellow who dug himself a ditch and spread boughs over it to use as his sleeping quarters was considered lucky (*American Journal of Mining* 1869, 7[2]:18–19). Not all prospectors who located claims were bothering to work them. The mining laws of the district, which were established in 1865, declared that only two days work a year was needed to preserve a claim. By the summer of 1868, the earlier prospectors who already possessed

salable property were merely waiting to be bought out by capitalists (*Daily Reese River Reveille* 1868, 10[48]:1). Some of the “mines” consisted of little more than two stakes and a recorder’s notice (*Daily Reese River Reveille* 1868, 10[140]:4).

Although the majority of the prospecting community probably did fit the stereotype, the trade journals indicate that housing conditions, at least for awhile, may not have been class related. Thus, structural remains may simply reflect different levels of permanence and expectation. Susan Kent has hypothesized that sites at which occupants anticipate a short stay will contain less material than those of people who are planning a longer residence (Kent 1993:58). People who are highly mobile tend to have fewer possessions. This means that the prospector would be expected to have fewer items, and fewer fragile items, than those viewing themselves as permanent residents. Furthermore, a high percentage of “disposable” material culture is expected at sites believed to be related to either the prospector or transient worker.

By describing the large group of individuals who moved around from mining district to mining district, the media generated a feeling of nomadism occurring across the American West. Besides physical mobility, it also established that there was the potential for social mobility. By promoting tales of those who had arrived poor and left wealthy, the mining journals, local newspapers and national newspapers helped generate and maintain a national hope of class fluidity otherwise known as the American Dream. As of the summer of 1868 the *Daily Reese River Reveille* began referring to White Pine as either the “poor mans diggings” or “poor man’s paradise.” Therefore, it could be argued that the cultural landscape of the White Pine Mining District is partially a reflection of both the social and physical aspects of anticipated mobility, which is the length of time people expect to occupy a site.

The result of anticipated mobility would initially be reflected by temporary structures followed by the arrival of a shift to long-term interests. The cultural landscape at White Pine represents the dichotomy between itinerant prospectors and long-term oriented business interests. In August of 1868 the *Daily Reese River Reveille* reported that the majority of the residents of Hamilton were living in tents. In fact before the town was named Hamilton it was known as Cave City (*Daily Reese River Reveille* 1868, 10[66]:1). By 1869 the mining district was in the process of becoming a permanent arrangement both physically and socially. In July the Shermantown newspaper reported that during the previous month numerous buildings had been enlarged and renovated, turning them from small wood shacks into substantial structures (*White Pine Evening Telegram* 1869, 1:26). Large, elegant residences were also being erected. This indicates that by the second year of the rush a qualitative change to the built environment was taking place at Shermantown. The trend towards architectural elaboration and expansion suggests that business owners saw the nature of the district changing from speculation to long-term prospect. In September of 1868 the *American Journal of Mining* stated that Treasure City reminded them of the early days of California with its cloth houses, log cabins, and saloons, but that it was already showing signs of permanence in the character of some of the buildings (*American Journal of Mining* 1868, 6[12]:179). This pattern follows Margaret Purser’s findings at Paradise Valley where she suggests that the move towards modified town stores and houses was used to reflect social status and financial gain (Purser 1991:116–123). The towns of the White Pine district all retain archaeological features and material culture that represent this increasingly perceived permanence including the development of complex mills

and smelters, construction of permanent dwellings and the use of fragile material culture such as porcelain.

The White Pine Smelting Works and other large mills in the area point to a direct connection between the cultural landscape and the media. The White Pine Smelting Works in Swansea, designed by a metallurgist named Joseph Mosheimer is one representation of the types of large industrial complex structures financed by outside capital. Joseph Mosheimer was based in San Francisco in the 1860s and 1870s, running a metallurgy business and mining school. He can be tracked to various mining districts around the American West, where he set up new enterprises or conducted an initial prospectus for an area. Although the White Pine Smelting Works ran for a little over a year, the size and complexity of the structure suggest that the investors were calculating on a long term return on their investment. In the summer of 1869, in *The San Francisco Times*, Mosheimer questioned the previous valuations of the White Pine ores. He was seriously attacked for his views to the point of having his credentials questioned in the *White Pine News* (*White Pine News* 7/20/69, vol. 2[6]:2; 7/23/69, vol. 2[9]:2). Analyzing the late controversy over Mosheimer's valuation of the White Pine ores and then comparing it to the massive size of the smelter suggests that if not Mosheimer, then outside investors were as taken by the White Pine hype as were the people actually there. Within two years it became obvious that the geological deposits of the district could not support the investments that poured into the region. The only possible reasoning behind building these large processing works that ultimately could not support themselves would be that outside investors had fallen victim to the wild speculations published in the written media.

Archaeological surveys at the White Pine district found several examples of signs that some residents anticipated only a short stay (Brooks 1989). Scattered in an unorganized fashion along the hillslopes in Shermantown and Swansea one finds dugouts and tent cuts with a limited artifact assemblage consisting predominantly of tin cans and bottle glass. The dugouts averaged 2.8 x 2.8 meters, were cut into a hillslope and had often had side walls and possibly a retaining wall constructed of local limestone (Brooks 1989). At seven dugout locations outside of Shermantown nothing more than tin can remnants and wine bottle glass shards were located. At Site 131, another dugout which judging from the remaining wood poles was covered by some type of canvas, the only ceramics were stoneware sherds which may have held beer. Based on the nature of the artifacts at the dugouts the consumption practices of their inhabitants never strayed far from the acquisition of tin food cans and wine bottles. The five dugouts recorded at Swansea followed this artifact assemblage pattern. Dugout three contained bottle glass, dugout four had one hole and cap can and three can lids while dugout five had a few hole and cap cans but a broader range of bottle glass. At White Pine City, more substantial structures, other than dugouts, were erected for the labor overflow from Treasure City. However, the artifact assemblage is still a preponderance of tin cans, bottle glass fragments (the majority being wine and condiment), tin plates and heavy utilitarian ceramics that again, imply a feeling of impermanence. Considering that most prospectors saw themselves outside of mainstream society and as short-term residents this behavior, conforming more to medieval communal eating practices than Victorian, is not too surprising. There is another aspect to the types of artifacts recovered at dugouts and that is their disposable/temporary nature. Prospectors, who were anticipating a short stay expressed this mental template and ordering of their world through the acquisition, use and discard of only a

small range of very disposable artifacts. Daniel Miller contends that commodities can be used as a signifier in group identification (Miller 1987:119–121, 167–177). In the case of prospectors, it is more likely the lack of items and the minimal variation of those acquired that signifies this mobile population.

The dugouts at Shermantown and Swansea are in direct contrast to the larger structural foundations that have a much broader associated artifact range. House sites, such as site 106, correspond to local accounts of more elegant dwellings being established. This appears to have been a frame building with a partial stone foundation. The artifact range goes beyond tin cans and glass and includes ceramics such as porcelain, a pipestem, and other domestic items not found at any of the dugouts. Site 125 is a collapsed rock building constructed of white tuff blocks. Surface collections and test units placed outside the house foundation located a range of domestic artifacts that included 175 personal artifacts, 40 rims or bases from a minimum of at least fifteen white earthenware plates and 26 rims, bodies or bases from a minimum of five bowls. At least one plate and one bowl were decorated with pressed flower and leaf designs (Hardesty 1990, 1991). This site is also notable for the amount of glass stemware and tumblers identified. Although the assemblage is not expensive it is indicative of an attempt on the part of many Shermantown residents to transplant a Victorian middle-class lifestyle to White Pine. The consumer behavior of this group, particularly in terms of the acquisition and use of tablewares and teawares follows the pattern set by those on a similar socio-economic level in other urban centers (Wall 1991, Beaudry 1991). The presence of ceramic sets at Shermantown, which are not present at White Pine City, Swansea or the scattered dugouts may correspond to Wall's conclusions that middle-range priced ironstone was used by both the upper and middle classes in urban environments to symbolize the separation between the workplace and domestic life (Wall 1991). The occupants of the households at White Pine City, Swansea and the Shermantown dugouts may not have felt the need to partake in this symbolic ritual as there was no separation in the minds of short-term prospectors between work and lifestyle. Although the occupants of the permanent site types did not stay more than one or two years (Shermantown was practically deserted by the early 1870s) the types of artifacts recovered suggest that at these habitations the occupants were anticipating a long-term residence where they could reconstruct Victorian society. Although there were occasional rumblings that White Pine was not as lucrative as it was made out to be, these cautions were usually followed by even more proclamations of the district's rich and endless ore supply. It is not then surprising that there are archaeological remains suggesting that some White Pine residents anticipated long-term occupations.

At White Pine City it is the disposal practices, as well as the artifacts, that imply that the inhabitants of the community did not see themselves as long-term residents. At many of the structures the artifact assemblage, consisting of tin cans, wine bottle sherds, condiment bottles, tin plates and a few undecorated white earthenware sherds, is routinely scattered outside the entranceway of the houses. This "back to nature" approach to disposal and the lack of a better class of items, such as fine china and chamber pots, leads one to believe that the inhabitants viewed themselves as temporary residents. Throwing items out the front door did not follow traditional nineteenth-century sanitation practices that had been established in other urban areas (Geismer 1993, Beaudry 1993). Once again, this type of cultural landscape could be considered partially media generated as it was the newspapers and journals, redubbing the

district a “Poor Man’s Paradise,” that led masses of individuals to believe that they could find their fortunes at White Pine and move on to enjoy their riches elsewhere.

In the case of western mining communities, anticipated mobility, mostly derived from newspapers and journals, was a factor in the cultural landscape of mining districts, and also conditioned the nature of their social relations. In 1868 the *American Journal of Mining* reported that White Pine was a quiet and good-natured mining camp where there was room and profitable work for all (*American Journal of Mining* 1868:392). As, due to financial constraints, some of the prospecting community were turned into a wagers at the mines, not only was a sense of logistical freedom lost, but also the quest for social achievement. By the fall of 1868 the local and regional papers were reporting numerous stories of robberies, random shootings, wife beatings and various assaults. The *Daily Reese River Reveille* reported 119 fights in fifteen minutes in Treasure City (*Daily Reese River Reveille* 1868, 10[142]:1). Another conflict that incited violence was the problem of claim jumping. The original locators were faced with later arrivals attempting to take previously located prospects for themselves. This problem not only had effects in an increased amount of litigation but often resulted in the threat of personal violence or actual bloodshed (*Daily Reese River Reveille* 1868, 10[87]:1). The feeling of lost opportunity that evolved as the simple working of claims gave way to large scale capital investment may partially be responsible for some of the excessive violence that permeated the district. One could draw a parallel to the present where violence that continues in our inner cities is blamed on a lack of jobs and economic stability leaving the underclasses feeling powerless to control their own social and financial destinies.

In the case of the White Pine mining district, newspapers and journals cannot simply be considered a passive medium. The media actively led the public to believe that the geological deposits of White Pine would bring them financial success. These reports set off a wave of mass migration into the district. The California Gold Rush of 1849 established the underlying purpose of prospecting to be the accumulation of property which could be transferred elsewhere. The move to a new mining region was considered temporary, and once sufficient money was acquired the prospector returned home (White 1991:193). The media’s part in boosting the White Pine district resulted in different levels of permanence and expectation that left distinctive impressions on the landscape: short-term prospectors with their small habitations and few artifacts, the merchant and managerial class who came and built residences designed to transplant their Victorian lifestyle, and capitalists with their large industrial complexes. The impact that the media’s boosterism had on the landscape is not confined to mining districts such as White Pine, but can be found all across the West. In particular, the media and booster literature distributed by the railroads had a profound influence on altering the natural environment during the homestead era.

Historical archaeologists often use documents as passive description from which to develop an interpretive model for their archaeological data. In the history of the American West, documents were not passive description but active material culture that played a role in the formation of the cultural landscape. Therefore, they should not be examined separately from the artifact but should be analyzed in a broader context as a part of the archaeological assemblage in its entirety.

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