

FROM THE PAN AND ROCKER

to the Largest Gold Dredge in the World

A historical account of the Sailor Bar dredge



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When the first settlers came to Fair Oaks, then called Sunset colony, they saw, about a quarter of a mile from the east line of the tract laid out for the townsite, a small indentation on the American river containing about forty or fifty acres and known as Sailor Bar, on which there were a few Chinamen, who were mining over the ground that the '49ers had worked, and a sheep corral with a band of about two thousand sheep.

This bar was owned by Clarke & Cox. The heaps of rocks and gravel on which the California poppy was growing, with here and there a small plot of grass-covered ground, were good signs that it had been a lively place in early times.

Nearly four years passed in this way, when, in the spring of '99, the Ashburton Mining Company sent two drills to Sailor Bar to see whether or not it would pay to put in a dredge.

The gravel was found to be quite rich, and the company soon decided to put in a large dredge, which would work the gravel down to bedrock.

The Ashburton Mining Company leased the land for twelve years and began at once to prepare for the construction of the dredge.

Bids were advertised for and the job was let to the Buchyrus Company, and Mr. Stanton, who was one of the firm, was sent to superintend the work.

The boat was launched in June, 1900, and christened the "Hercules," but it was not until the following year that the machinery was all in and the boat in working order.

Building the Hercules

At first buckets of eight hundred pounds weight were put on, but as they were altogether too light for the work they were taken off and buckets weighing sixteen hundred pounds each were put on in their place. Afterwards, finding that these were somewhat too light, plus two hundred pounds in weight were put

on, making the entire weight of a bucket eighteen hundred pounds.

The buckets, sixty-three in number, are fastened together forming an endless chain.

The dredge is run by electric power, which is supplied by the plant near Folsom. Five thousand volts come from Folsom, but as so much could not be used it is run through three large transformers and reduced to five hundred volts. There are four motors on the dredge, and the largest one, which runs the bucket line, is of five-hundred horse power.

How the Dredge Worked

The dredge sits on a large pond of water about 200x300x28 feet in dimensions, and is supplied with water by a pumping apparatus which will be explained later.

The buckets come up full of water, rocks, and gravel and empty into a large revolving steel cylinder called a "grizzly." This is full of holes of various shapes and sizes. Over the mass of rocks and dirt on it is poured a powerful stream of water, which washes the gravel off of the rocks and carries it down the flume, where the gold is caught by quicksilver.

The stones keep going down the "grizzly," which is on an incline of about five degrees, until they reach a hole large enough for them to go through, when they drop through a chute into the pond. In this way the rocks and dirt fill up the rear end of the pond as excavations are made ahead.

The pumping station consists of a small house, in which there are two motors of forty horse power each. These suck the water out of the river through two pipes, which empty it into an eighteen-inch pipe that carries the water to the dredge.

The dredge takes a swath of two hundred feet in width and takes out 89,600 cubic feet of dirt every twenty-four hours' run. Lengths are added to the pipe as the dredge moves ahead from the station and taken out as it comes back.

The dredge is cleaned up every time a run of one hundred hours is made.

— C. O. S.

Editorial note

The article is reproduced as a historical source. Paragraphing, typography, and headings have been modernized for readability, but the account's original terminology and factual claims have been retained rather than updated or reconciled with later historical research.