



THE AMADORIAN

VOLUME 4, NUMBER 4

Quarterly Publication of the Amador County Historical Society

Autumn 2011

Clay and Coal: Amador's Other Golds Part II — Methods of Clay Mining

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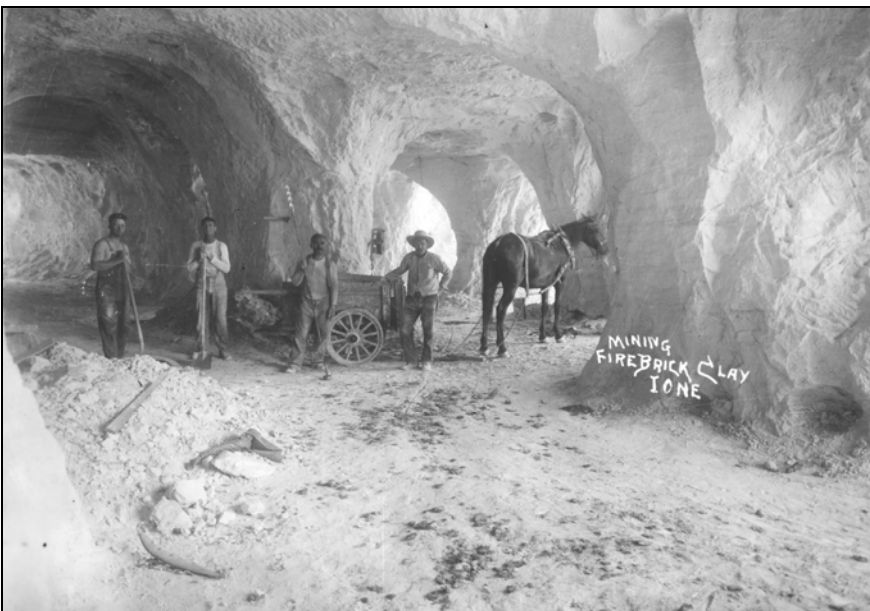
Miners that flocked to Amador County during the gold rush found that not only could they make their living by panning along creeks and streams for that precious metal, but that their labor was also needed in the clay and coal mines in the western region of the county. They also found that extracting clay from the earth was practiced with a methodology much different than gold mining.

By the 1860s a number of clay mines were in operation along the Ione-Buena Vista formation, a geologic deposit that extends from Carbondale on the north, southward across the Ione and Jackson valleys, and crosses the Mokelumne River drainage into Calaveras County, covering a distance of about 12 miles. The clay beds formed near Ione are not continuous throughout the formation but are rather found in pockets. Mining operations used several methods for extracting the clay from these pockets, including the hand method, the room and pillar method, and open pit mining.

The most simplistic method was of course the first, whereby a pick and shovel were used to remove the clay. It was then loaded into wheelbarrows, wagons, or ore cars, and the transported to the processing area. The second method, the room and pillar, was employed at several clay mines around Ione. With this method, a tunnel entry is created into the hillside by blasting with dynamite. The clay is then mined by deepening and expanding the tunnel into open areas that are known as “rooms”.

Between the “rooms” pillars of the clay are left intact to support the roof of the mine. With this method, there is a limited need for timber support as found in most underground mines. Timber framing was only used to support weak areas of the ceiling. Shovels and picks were used to remove the clay thus allowing the miners to leave a pillar where necessary. The photo at left shows the results of early room and pillar mining.

The open pit method was employed extensively to extract clays from the Ione formation. Typically, the overburden is stripped from the site, and then the clay is removed and processed. As a rule, a vertical bank is worked with the height of the bank corresponding to the thickness of the deposit. In contrast to the



A view of clay miners and their horse-drawn ore cart at a clay mine near Ione (photo courtesy Amador County Archives)