

The Great Hydraulic Race (Excerpt)

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Page 19

The apparent success of Roberts and Ferguson encouraged others to try their hand in hydraulic mining. The names of Matfield, Crow, Higbie, Ford, Caley and Justice appeared on the register sheet of the county mining recorder, all bent on duplicating the efforts of Roberts and Ferguson. But the most noteworthy of the later hydraulic ventures in the canyon was the famous fiasco of "Uncle" Dave Buell. Buell secured a hillside claim just downriver from Roberts, but could not gain water rights to the East Fork. So after some weeks he decided to convey water to his claim from the untapped North Fork of the San Gabriel. He hired a young engineer named Simpson to survey his ditch line. To get water from the North to the East Fork, Simpson proposed a 700-foot tunnel through the ridge separating the two watersheds. Buell agreed to this plan and work commenced on the ditch and tunnel.

Canyon pioneer Jim Roberts, son of Henry Roberts, described the results: "Great preparations were made for the opening of the works and visions of unlimited nuggets of gold crowded Buell's mind. Then the intake gates were opened and watchful waiting was the order of the day. But night fell and still no trace of water had appeared. Buell betook himself up along the conduit and walked through the dry tunnel. A few hundred feet from the upper portal he heard the sound of rushing waters and he discovered that Simpson had lost the grade." The tunnel had been bored uphill! Simpson left in disgrace and Buell went broke and departed for Mexico.

The long abandoned tunnel, partly caved in and both portals hidden in brush, still lies high above the Forks of the San Gabriel.