



MONTE CRISTO

CABIN



An ancient river channel discovered in 1851 extremely rich in gold became the town site of Monte Cristo. It happens to be the same river channel that the Telegraph and White Bear mines tap into. Situated on a precipitous ledge between Fir Cap and Oak Ranch up the Saddleback Road, Monte Cristo was one of the wealthiest mining camps in the entire region. Despite the riches, nothing remains of Monte Cristo today. You'd go right past the old townsite and never even realize a town of several hundred people once existed.

Tunnels were bored into the side of Fir Cap where prospectors recovered the placer gravel, then sluiced the gravel to recover the gold. The camp continued into the early 1900s, but a devastating fire in September 1859 torched 35 buildings in less than an hour. Despite this massive setback, Monte Cristo endured, fueled by continuously rich finds of gold.

As evidence of how rich the camp was, Downieville local and avid bottle hunter Rick Simi wrote of Monte Cristo in his book, Gold Rush Camps and Bottles of Sierra County:

"Monte Cristo was virtually a time capsule of gold rush history and the amount of bottles, gold rush belt buckles, early American face pipes and other artifacts recovered from this site is staggering. Examples of Patent Whiskeys, London Charles Gin, Voldner's Schnapps, and Chestnut Grove Whiskey, Wistar's Clubhouse, black glass Hostetter's Bitters and other important gold rush bottles have been recovered from this site. Even after fifty years of being excavated, Monte Cristo still produces bottles and artifacts documenting the size and importance of this early gold rush town."

Its location on the steep shoulder of Fir Cap also made Monte Cristo prone to fatal avalanches, as evidenced in James J. Sinnott's book, Downieville, Gold Town on the Yuba, recounting a March 11, 1911 article in the The Mountain Messenger:

"In a snowslide at Monte Cristo, Tuesday morning, March 7th, John Deal was swept to his death, and Tony Peckwith, John Noland, Ira Olds, L.P. Hansen and Jake Brand, narrowly escaped. The men had gone from Monte Cristo to the White Bear mine to shovel snow from the buildings of the White Bear mine, and after completing this work they were returning to Monte Cristo and were crossing a sag in a small ravine just south of the Monte Cristo diggings when the snow

broke away just above them. Deal, Hansen, Brand and Olds were caught in the slide but Peckwith and Noland managed to escape being engulfed.

The last any one of the boys saw of John Deal he was standing almost on his head in the sliding snow with half his body buried. His feet stuck straight up in the air with his snowshoes still on them, and his body was being carried along down towards Whiskey Creek like the wind. Peckwith rushed back to Monte Cristo to get shovels and help, and Noland went to the White Bear to get help from the men there. Hansen and Brand were carried down 350 feet and Olds not so far, but all three were only partially buried.

They all worked at searching for Deal's body, working until well after dark, but were unable to locate him although they found his snowshoes near the bottom of the slide. After trenching about 25 feet Deal's body was found under about four feet of snow and being 400 feet below the point of origin of the slide."

And when the snow was stable, miners in the off-season took part in snowshoe races – the original form of downhill ski racing invented here in the Lost Sierra. This colorful excerpt from the Sierra Democrat on March 10, 1863 talks of the winter activity:

"MR EDITOR: I've been waiting for a long time for something to 'turn up', and lo and behold! we have it. Snowshoe racing is in vogue every Sunday. I think there are a few snowshoe engineers at Monte Cristo who can distance the Alturas champions all hollow. The boys have two kinds of dope which they use on their snow-shoes. One kind is termed the 'inclined, up hill dope', and the other is known as the "Monte Cristo telegraph lightning down hill dope." The first trial of the latter kind (to those few who are in possession of the secret), was made two weeks since by one of the boys. He started from the top of Know Nothing peak, which is about one third of a mile back of town, and on an angle of about seventy degrees, and all that the spectators could see was a black streak coming down the hill. Time 9.5 seconds. It certainly was the swiftest running my eyes ever beheld....

Yours, etc. OH! JOE"

