Nev. silver history comes to life in backcountry

The bullwheel from the Comstock era is still near Incline Village. Photo/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

INCLINE VILLAGE – Listen closely; echoes of the past seem to whisper through the pines. Is it the call of men hauling up timber from below? Or perhaps the sound of lumber splashing into the flumes?

Tucked in a remote area above Incline Village are remnants of Lake Tahoe's storied Comstock era.

Nevada State Parks Ranger Jay Howard last month led a group of about 20 people on a excursion that was part 4-wheel drive,

part hiking to see what remains of life during the mid- to late 1800s. This was when the trees of Tahoe were felled to build the mines of Virginia City.

The V flume took logs through the mountains for the mines in Virginia City. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Conservation and environmentalism weren't part of the vernacular. Clear cutting and greed were the norm. But so were innovation and entrepreneurship.

Where the old Ponderosa Ranch was, next to Tunnel Creek Café and where the parking lot for new bike trail is being built was a mill. This is where the logs were cut into appropriate lengths that would be used in the silver mines, some of which were 3,000-feet deep.

This process started before railroads were in the basin and long before motor vehicles.

While the timber and water companies were separately owned, they worked in conjunction. An elaborate flume system transported the wood to the Washoe Valley, which was then hauled first by oxen to Virginia City and then by the V&T rail line.

Views in the area are stunning. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Virginia City was bustling with 30,000 people; today the population is less than 1,000. It didn't have water until Aug. 1, 1973, when the flume system brought it.

Through ingenuity the whole process became industrialized – at least as much as it could for the time period and location.

From the Incline mill two sets of tracks were laid going straight up, nearly 1,400 feet. A bullwheel built by Sierra Nevada Lumber Company in 1880 at the top spun the cable to bring up the carts of wood that could each hold about a half a cord.

Wood and steel from the 12-foot bullwheel are still in the

forest. The wheel, while rusted, looks like it might still work.

Debris from the logging operation is scattered in the woods. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Until recently this was on private land owned by David Duffield. Now the U.S. Forest Service owns it. Duffield paid for a study to be done on the bullwheel so when the government has money it can be properly restored. Only a handful of photos exist of what it looked like during operation.

Just below this, at an elevation of 7,670 feet, is where the V flume started. This is where the wood was unloaded.

Water for the flumes was diverted from nearby creeks and natural springs. Between 4 and 6 inches of water was needed to float the logs. The V shape was used so if there were a jam, the water would rise and naturally free the logs. (Box flumes were used just to carry water.)

Gravity allowed the logs to float to and through a tunnel that had been built not too far away.

Part of the tour was seeing where this nearly three-quarter mile long tunnel once was. It collapsed in 1957. Today it would be hard to know it was there without a guide to point to it.

While Howard touched on the Marlette and Hobart water systems, state park rangers give separate tours specifically about water.

Throughout the trek Howard was throwing out dates, names and locations, plus he had old black and white photos from the era. It’s a fairly thorough lesson in Nevada history that he delivers in a matter of a few hours.