

BELMONT MILL, UPPER BOARDINGHOUSE
(Nevada Belmont Mill)
Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest
Approximately 7 miles south of U.S. Route 50 on USDA Forest
Service Road No. 623
Ely vicinity
White Pine County
Nevada

HAER NV-46-N
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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240-0001

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Location: Approximately 7 miles south of U.S. Route 50 on USDA Forest Service Road No. 623, Ely vicinity, White Pine County, Nevada.
U.S. Geological Survey, Seligman Canyon, Nevada, 7.5 Quadrangle (1992), Township 16 North, Range 57 East, Section 1.
UTM Zone 11, Easting 2060506.18, Northing 14267193.77 (southwest corner of north wing) (NAD 83).
Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest Feature No. F9.

Significance: The Tonopah Belmont Development Company (TBDC) was one of the most important companies created during Nevada's early twentieth-century mining boom. As ore deposits in its central Nevada mines were depleted, the company sought new claims to resurrect its fortunes. In 1926 TBDC built the Belmont Mill near Hamilton to process lead and silver ore from its recently acquired claims in the White Pine mining district of eastern Nevada. The small pilot mill employed the most recent advances in table concentration and flotation mineral processing techniques, and the company erected numerous other buildings and structures to support the mining and milling work. The site was largely abandoned by TBDC after a few years, but later owners used the mill and associated structures for smaller operations. Today, although most of the equipment has been removed, the Belmont Mill site is one of the only intact early twentieth-century mill complexes in eastern Nevada. Importantly, many of the domestic buildings and structures remain to provide a glimpse of daily life there, including the upper boardinghouse. The mill complex is a tangible reminder of the decline and failure of a once-powerful company and, thereby, of the boom and bust cycle so common in the mining industry. The subsequent modification and reuse of the site for small-scale operations typifies the ceaseless hum of optimism that sustains the mining industry.

Description: The upper boardinghouse is located on the hillside northwest of the mill (NV-46-A), along the access road that begins in the canyon bottom and winds up the small drainage on the north end of the site. The building sits squarely in the roadbed and became the terminus for the graded road that originally contoured along the hillside and probably provided access to the water tank (NV-46-S) during its construction. The hillside rises steeply behind the building to the north and drops away quickly to the drainage on the south. Associated buildings and structures include the upper outhouse (NV-46-O), the shed (NV-46-P), and the upper charcoal and lumber pile (NV-46-R).

The upper boardinghouse comprises two parts: a two-room residence on the west half that dates to 1926 and a large, single-room addition on the east half that dates to the mid-1970s. The original residence measures about 19' north to south and 20' east to west

while the addition measures about 23'-0" north to south and 29'-6" east to west. Both sections have collapsed in recent years.

The foundation of the original residence (the west half of the boardinghouse) comprises a system of wood posts, crossbeams, and diagonal braces; these extend from grade on the north side and down the slope to the south. The largest posts measure 8" x 8" and are less weathered than the other members; they were probably added in the 1970s to provide further structural support when the building was re-inhabited. The wood-framed walls, lightly constructed with 1" x 2-1/4" members, are clad in 12" vertical boards and battens. The gable roof is covered with asphalt roll roofing and is framed with triangular trusses with diagonal braces and the occasional queen post. The east and west gable ends have fly rafters and rakeboards while the north and south sides have exposed rafter tails and frieze boards between them. A metal stovepipe originally extended through about the center of the north side of the roof. It appears that there were originally at least two windows each in the north and south walls and one door each in the east and west walls; doors and windows are missing and their original appearance is unclear. The west doorway opened onto a wood porch that was constructed on the continuing floor joists of the house and was supported by 5" x 5" posts set on grade. The two-room interior had tongue-and-groove floors, later covered with particleboard, and walls and ceilings of particleboard with battens at the joints. The remnants of knob-and-tube wiring remain on the roof trusses.

The foundation of the east addition is similar to the original, with 2" x 12" floor joists set on grade at the north end that are supported by 6" x 6" posts as they extend over the hillside. The walls are framed with 2" x 4"s but nearly all of the exterior cladding has been removed. One section of 12"-wide vertical boards remains and the addition may have been clad in boards and battens like the original building. The roof framing comprises simple triangular trusses with queen posts and a ridge beam, with sheathing of 3-1/4" tongue-and-groove boards and a covering of green asphalt roll roofing. The east gable end eave is finished with fly rafters and rakeboards while the long north and south sides have exposed rafter tails. The west end of the building was apparently butted directly against the east exterior wall of the original residence. No openings for a chimney or stovepipe were observed in the roof. All windows and doors have been removed, but there were originally two horizontally oriented windows in the south wall and one vertically oriented window in the north wall toward the west end. There were also two doors, one each at the far west ends of the north and south walls where they abutted the original residence. A porch extended the length of the south side of the addition; wood decking was laid across the projecting floor joists and a wood fence with pickets served as a railing. The interior was finished with 3-1/4" tongue-and-groove floorboards. The double-layered walls apparently comprised plywood sheathing nailed to the exterior studs, a second layer of studs to create a 1" airspace, and then a second layer of plywood to form the interior wall surface. The interior was painted white, although at least one plywood panel was reused as it bears large letters in black and red paint.

History: See the Narrative Overview in HAER No. NV-46 for a broad contextual history.

The west section of the upper boardinghouse may have been built by TBDC in 1926 as one of four residences originally on the site. The White Pine County 1928 tax record provides the most complete list of buildings during this period, stating that there were “4 residence buildings” at the mill site in addition to the lower boardinghouse (NV-46-I). Moving and reusing buildings was extremely common in Nevada at the time and some or all of the residences may have been moved to the Belmont Mill site from elsewhere, perhaps TBDC’s failed holdings in Tonopah. The light construction, rather makeshift foundation, and location of the original portion of the upper boardinghouse in the middle of the roadbed further support this possibility.

The locations of the other three residences are unclear, but they were probably sited north and west of the mill near the upper boardinghouse, providing a physical separation between the workers residing in the lower boardinghouse in the canyon bottom and the professionals and managers. In 1937, two of the residences were removed from the mill site; the reason is unclear, although it may reflect TBDC’s retrenchment efforts.¹ In 1939, a third residence was removed from the property.² Again, the buildings were probably loaded onto flatbed trailers and moved elsewhere rather than destroyed.

In ca. 1940, a photograph was taken facing roughly due north that provides a view of many of the mill site buildings, including a residence on the access road northwest of the mill and a smaller house or storage building to its west (see Figure 3 in HAER No. NV-46). The former appears to be the residence that became the upper boardinghouse (before the east addition was made); the latter is no longer extant. The list of taxable property remained about the same through the 1940s, although the lone remaining “residence” was reduced in stature to a “cabin.”³

As early as 1945, Andrew Dowd, a mining engineer, and his wife Ermyl lived at the site, perhaps as employees of the owner or as unofficial lessees, and also as caretakers.⁴ After Andrew’s death sometime after 1956, Ermyl continued to live at the site and worked as caretaker for the claimholder, Don Jennings. By the 1960s she made her home in the kitchen of the lower boardinghouse, where she also kept an upright piano; she had reportedly been a vaudeville performer in her younger days. Beginning at this time and perhaps earlier, she rented rooms and provided meals in the boardinghouse to miners working nearby claims, a practice she continued until the middle 1970s to supplement the limited income from her own mining claims.⁵ There is no indication that anyone used or lived in the upper boardinghouse during this time.

¹ White Pine County Records, Tax Receipts, 1937.

² White Pine County Records, Tax Receipts, 1939.

³ White Pine County Records, Tax Receipts, 1941-48.

⁴ Interviews with Hal Jensen and Hal (Rod) Jensen, Jr., 1 October 2010. Andrew Dowd was mentioned definitively in association with the Belmont mine in 1956. See L. E. Davis et al., “The Mineral Industry of Nevada,” in US Bureau of Mines Minerals Yearbook Area Reports, 1956, Vol. III (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1958), 761.

⁵ Interview with Hal (Rod) Jensen, Jr.

In the 1970s Mrs. Dowd married Carl Tillman, the caretaker for a nearby property and a man thirty years her junior. In the mid-1970s the couple moved from the lower boardinghouse to the residence behind the mill, and it was probably at this time that they built the east addition to the building. Given the size and open floor plan of the addition, it seems likely that they lived in the original residence and used the east addition for boarders. The upper charcoal and lumber pile (NV-46-R) marks the remains of the couple's coal and wood pile from this period. The junked cars and old trailer (NV-46-Q) that remain scattered along the road leading to the upper boardinghouse were reportedly moved there by Tillman. In the late 1970s or even as late as 1980 (perhaps when the property changed hands and Jennings no longer paid a caretaker's fee), Dowd and Tillman moved to Ely, where the latter worked at the Hotel Nevada.⁶

After about 1980, the doors, windows, and much of the siding were removed from the east addition. Both sections of the building collapsed before the USDA Forest Service assumed responsibility for the site in about 2008.

Sources: See HAER No. NV-46.

Historian: Anne Oliver, Principal, Oliver Conservation Group. Fieldwork for the project was conducted in the fall of 2010. Project documentation was accepted by HABS/HAER in 2011.

Project Information: See HAER No. NV-46 for complete details. In summary, this project was completed under a contract between the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest and a consulting team under the direction of ajc architects (Salt Lake City, Utah), in consultation with the Nevada State Historic Preservation Office. The project historian was Anne Oliver, historic preservation consultant with Oliver Conservation Group. Matt Wallace, intern architect with ajc architects, was responsible for the architectural measured drawings and completed all fieldwork and final drawings with the assistance of Oliver Smith Callis, draftsman. The photography was produced by Steve Tregagle Photography under the direction of Steve Tregagle and with the assistance of Heath Brown.

⁶ Ibid., and interview with Ronald Jordan, 29 September 2010. Tillman died in the early 1990s on the dance floor of the casino and Dowd probably died several years before that.