

BELMONT MILL, 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-I
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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 2060730.27, Northing 14266633.67 (southeast corner of building) (NAD 83).
Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest Feature No. F4.

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, including a boardinghouse for working men at the mill site. The property 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. 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 rectangular, gable-roofed boardinghouse is located in the canyon bottom about 20' south of the supervisor's office (NV-46-H) and 180' south of the mill (NV-46-A) at the base of the steep hill that rises immediately to the west. It measures about 72' north to south and 26' east to west (see Figure 10 in HAER No. NV-46 for a sketch plan). A small addition on the south end measures about 6' x 6'. In the winter of 2009-2010, the roof of the building collapsed and access was correspondingly difficult for documentation and interpretation.

The boardinghouse sits on sloping ground such that the south end is level with grade while the north end is about five feet higher. The building has no visible foundation; instead, five long rows of posts running north to south support parallel beams above, which in turn support the east-west oriented floor joists. A crawl space between the first and second rows of posts on the east side runs nearly the length of the building and is

accessed by a doorway on the north end. The remainder of the crawl space on the north end was walled off into a low-ceilinged storage room measuring about 17'-6" east to west and 14'-6" north to south. This room has double walls of horizontal boards set 27" apart and filled with sand, presumably to create an icehouse or cold storage. Hinged double doors provide access on the north side, as does a window-like opening to the east.

The wood-framed walls have horizontal board sheathing on the interior face of the studs while the exterior is finished with 9-1/2"-wide vertical boards and 4"-wide battens, painted grey. The wood-framed south addition has a board floor set directly on the ground, horizontal board sheathing, and cladding of miscellaneous pieces of sheet metal and corrugated metal.

The main roof is framed with queen post (or fan) trusses and covered with board sheathing; remnants of the original asphalt roll roofing are visible. The eaves on the gable ends comprise plain rakeboards and fly rafters notched and seated on the projecting ends of the rafter plates. The east and west walls have exposed rafter tails finished with short frieze boards between the tails and, on the west side only, a plain board fascia nailed across the rafter ends. These elements were originally painted white. The shed-roofed south addition also has exposed rafter tails finished with a fascia. Two metal stovepipes project from the south end of the roof, on the east side above the kitchen. A ca. 1940 photograph also documents a third stovepipe in about the center of the west side of the roof, over what would have been a bathroom or common area (see Figure 4 in HAER No. NV-46).

Most of the boardinghouse windows are heavily damaged or missing and those on the west side could not be viewed due to the building's collapse, but it appears that most or all windows were wood-framed, six-over-six-light, single-hung windows with plain board trim, canted sills, and aprons, all painted white. These are similar or identical to those used on the mill and the power house (NV-46-B). The south gable end has one window east of the door while the north end has one in the center of the wall and one to the west. Beginning at the south end, the east wall has a pair of windows lighting the kitchen, two single windows lighting the dining room, a pair lighting a lobby, then a doorway, and finally three single windows lighting individual rooms. Each gable peak also has a side-hinged door of vertical wood paneling to ventilate the attic; the doors were painted white with red strap hinges. The south addition has a square, simple window opening in the south wall but no window remains.

The boardinghouse originally had three doors: one in the center of the east wall, one in the center of the south gable end, and one at the north end of the west wall. None of the doors remain, although a portion of the stile is still attached to the hinges of the east door. From this it appears that the door was an unglazed five-panel wood door and it bears traces of red and later white paint. A ca. 1940 photograph of the south door shows an unglazed wood door (again probably five-panel) and a wood screen door (see Figure 4). (Five-panel doors were also used at the mill and the power house.) Presently there is a three-panel wood door with single light glazing on the ground just inside the south

doorway; this is a replacement. The door to the shed is missing although the metal strap hinges remain in place.

The main entrance to the boardinghouse was through the east door, which opened onto a common area with a bathroom along the west wall. To the north was a central corridor with three rooms on each side. To the south, a doorway opened onto a dining room that spanned the width of the building, which in turn opened onto a kitchen with a storeroom or cook's room at the west end. The floor was finished with 3-1/4" tongue-and-groove boards oriented north to south. The exterior walls were finished with a layer of building paper over the sheathing, followed by pressed wood board walls (painted turquoise most recently in the kitchen. The interior partition walls were composed of vertical beadboard paneling. The ceilings were also finished with pressed wood board. In the south addition, the walls were finished with plywood on the south side and corrugated cardboard on the east and west sides. Very few furnishings remain other than shelving in the kitchen and the remnants of plumbing in its southeast corner. Remnants of knob-and-tube wiring (with cylindrical knobs) and porcelain light fixtures indicate that the building was electrically lighted.

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

Operations like the Belmont Mill employed a largely transient male work force that had to be fed and housed. This could occur in two separate buildings, a dining hall and bunkhouse, or combined in a single structure, a boardinghouse, like the one found at the Belmont site. In mining towns, boardinghouses could be multi-story affairs having kitchens, dining rooms, and occasionally sitting room or lounge for the workers on the ground floor, with small sleeping rooms above. More often on isolated work sites the building was a single story with a long, rectangular plan and broad gable roof. The boardinghouse at the Belmont site in many ways is a classic example of this latter type of western boardinghouse. Though often overlooked because attention at such sites is directed toward the mill buildings, boardinghouses like it are crucial to the understanding of daily life at these isolated pockets of industrial activity.

The boardinghouse was one of the first buildings erected on the Belmont Mill site by TBDC in 1926: even before the mill was constructed the workers had to be housed. In April, foundations were laid for a "130-foot bunkhouse, looking to the enlargement of the present force of miners, which are now operating at the Nevada Lead property;" lumber for this and other buildings was hauled from Ely.¹ The organization and resources typifying an industrialized mining company were evidenced when the TBDC reported that, by mid-May, forms for the mill's concrete foundations were in place and that "the bunk house is practically finished as is the assay office [NV-46-G] and other necessary buildings." At about this time, W. I. Cowser, "who erected the Belmont Mill at Tonopah," replaced the ailing L. O. Bastian as construction supervisor.²

¹ Ely Daily Times, April 22, 1926.

² Ely Daily Times, May 19, 1926.

Construction work progressed apace, and in early June TBDC could state, “The boarding house is about completed, and it is expected that the working crew which has been boarding and lodging at Hamilton, will move to the new quarters this week.”³ At this time, about forty men were employed at the property and their prospective new residence was reported to have “nine bedrooms, a kitchen, lobby, and bath room, and [was] comfortably equipped.”⁴ This description matches the present floor plan of the building with the exception that there are six bedrooms rather than nine. Each room would have slept a varying number of men at any given time. Also, the boardinghouse is only 72’ long rather than 130’ as previously reported.

Two photographs from ca. 1940 provide views of the boardinghouse (see Figures 3 and 4 in HAER No. NV-46). The center part of the east wall is visible in the first, documenting the windows, eaves, and original asphalt roll roofing. The south gable end and a part of the west wall are visible in the second, depicting the original south door and screen door (and the absence of the south addition), the three stovepipes or flues in the roof, and the door and some of the windows in the west wall.

Shortly after these photographs were taken, as early as 1945, the mining engineer Andrew Dowd and his wife Ermyl lived at the site, perhaps as employees of the owner or as unofficial lessees, and also as caretakers.⁵ 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 boardinghouse kitchen, probably in the old storage or cook’s room. She had reportedly been a vaudeville performer in her younger days and also kept an upright piano in the building. 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.⁶

Several past and present Ely residents recall the period in the 1960s when Mrs. Dowd acted as the caretaker. Hal (Rod) Jensen, Jr., worked claims in the area between 1966 and 1969 with his father, and remembers that all six boardinghouse rooms were occupied by miners working area claims during the summer months, sometimes at double occupancy. A miner named Tick Doherty lived in the southeast room every summer for ten years, and Francis Waldy would come out from Ely and help Mrs. Dowd with her claims. No one roomed in the adjacent supervisor’s office (despite the fact that it had

³ Ely Daily Times, June 2, 1926.

⁴ Ely Daily Times, June 3, 1926.

⁵ 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.

⁶ Interview with Hal (Rod) Jensen, Jr.

been converted to a house in ca. 1953) or the assay office, but Mrs. Dowd maintained flowerbeds in their front yards.⁷

At the time, the boardinghouse had running water, indoor toilets, and a telephone but no electricity; kerosene was used for lighting, wood and coal for cooking and heating. The kitchen had a very large stove identical to a second one up at the mine boardinghouse (see Figure 9 in HAER No. NV-46 for a sketch plan).⁸ The boarders made use of the lower outhouse (NV-46-L) and Mrs. Dowd used the root cellar (NV-46-J) for food storage and the workshop (NV-46-K) for coal and wood storage.⁹ After the boarders left, Mrs. Dowd remained at the mill site through the winter. Ron Jordan, an Ely resident who worked for the county road maintenance department in the late 1960s and early 1970s, recalls clearing the road in the winter and stopping at the boardinghouse to use the telephone.¹⁰

In the 1970s Mrs. Dowd married Carl Tillman, the caretaker for a nearby property in Seligman Canyon and a man thirty years her junior. In the mid-1970s the couple moved from the boardinghouse to the residence behind the mill (NV-46-N), 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 reasons for the move are unclear, although it was postulated that ongoing difficulties with the water supply system may have played a role.¹¹ 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.¹²

After 1980, when a site caretaker was no longer employed, the boardinghouse was neither used nor maintained. Prior to the building's collapse, the loss of roof coverings allowed water into the building and resulted in extensive damage of interior finishes. All windows and doors were missing, or nearly so, and all furnishings and equipment had been removed. The building collapsed over the winter of 2009-10, although the gable end walls remain partially erect, and is presently in very poor condition.

Sources: See HAER No. NV-46.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid. The mine boardinghouse was also built by TBDC in 1926. Difficult siting demanded a more compact floor plan, but the one and one-half story, gable-roofed building also had board-and-batten siding, the same roof and eave construction, and six-over-six-light wood windows (see Figure 6 in HAER No. NV-46).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Interview with Ronald Jordan, 29 September 2010.

¹¹ Interview with Hal (Rod) Jensen, Jr.

¹² Ibid., and interview with Ronald Jordan. Tillman died in the early 1990s on the dance floor of the casino and Dowd probably died several years before that.

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 Tregeagle Photography under the direction of Steve Tregeagle and with the assistance of Heath Brown.