



# SOCIETY FOR INDUSTRIAL ARCHEOLOGY

## NEWSLETTER

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### FOREST SERVICE SAVES 1886 CHARCOAL KILNS



In the expansive Birch Creek Valley of eastern Idaho stand three of the four brick charcoal kilns remaining from the original 16 built in 1886. Nearby is the fourth (*below*), showing some of the deterioration that the current stabilization project is designed to retard. *Photos courtesy U.S. Forest Service.*

Work began this year on a U.S. Forest Service project to stabilize four brick charcoal kilns [1886; NR, HAER] in the Birch Creek Valley of Targhee National Forest in eastern Idaho. They are the only remnants of a short-lived but significant 1880s mine and smelter that once had 16 kilns. Also known as the King charcoal kilns after their builder-owner, they were erected in response to a local demand for smelter fuel. They were used less than three years in a lead-silver operation of dubious long-term return.

Each of the 20-ft.-high, parabolic, wire-rope-tied domes held about 30 cords of local douglas fir and produced 2,000 bushels of charcoal in a two-day burn. Loading was done through lower front doors and upper, ramp-

accessed doors in back. Rows of vents circling the base controlled air to the fire, and were sealed with clay and pieces of brick or stone. The bulk of the new work involves reinforcing sections of the foundation with concrete footings to prevent further roof and wall deterioration.

The Birch Creek mines were less well known than similar mines at Wood River and Coeur d'Alene, but equally important. The most productive was the Viola Mine, which yielded about \$2.5 million worth of lead and silver between 1883 and 1888, although the mine was more valuable for its lead than its silver. Following its discovery about 1881, relatively small quantities of ore were shipped to Omaha, Neb., and Kansas City. The nearest rail line was the Utah & Northern Rwy. at Camas, 65 miles away, making it far more economical to ship metallic lead and silver than ore, so a two-furnace smelter with a daily capacity of 80 tons was added in 1885.

Initially the smelter's charcoal fuel was made in pits, but beginning in 1886 16 brick kilns were built by Warren King, charcoal supplier to the mining company. About 50,000 bu./mon. of charcoal was produced, and the kilns provided work for some 150 people living in the nearby town of Woodland.

The mine's projected output proved overly optimistic, and initially high dividends were deceptive. It all emerged as a pattern to bilk English investors. In Nov. 1888 the smelter was shut down and the last dividend paid. The investors, who recovered only a third of their money, were not the only ones surprised. An 1890s photo shows a lot of wood stacked behind King's kilns, some of which remains today. Over the years, local farmers dismantled 12 of the kilns to salvage the brick.

For more information on the kilns, contact the Dubois Ranger Dist., P.O. Box 46, Dubois ID 83423.

*P.D. with J.McD.*

