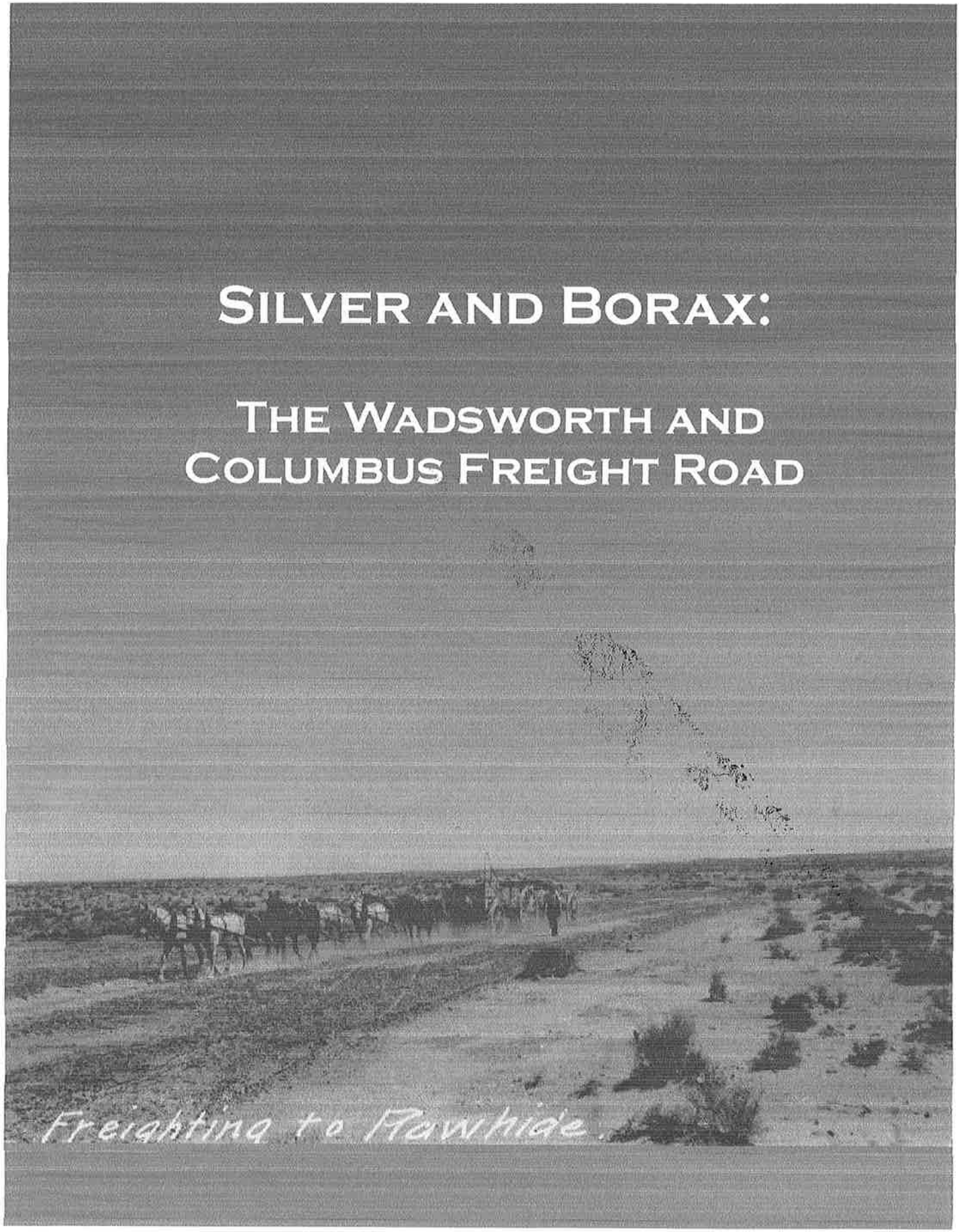
Silver and Borax:

The Wadsworth and Columbus Freight Road



Silver and Borax: The Wadsworth and Columbus Freight Road

2007

Silver and Borax: The Wadsworth and Columbus Freight Road is funded by Vulcan Power Company, Inc. in association with Tetra-Tech, Inc. It is produced by MACTEC Engineering and Consulting, Inc., under supervision of the US Department of the Interior Bureau of Land Management, Carson City Field Office, and in consultation with the Nevada State Historic Preservation Office.

Text by Erich Obermayr
Maps and Graphic Design by Shannon Hataway

Cover: Freight team on the way to Rawhide, Churchill County, circa 1907-08 (Nevada Historical Society).

VULCAN POWER COMPANY TETRA TECH MACTEC

Silver and Borax: The Wadsworth and Columbus Freight Road

2007

Silver and Borax: The Wadsworth and Columbus Freight Road is funded by Vulcan Power Company, Inc. in association with Tetra-Tech, Inc. It is produced by MACTEC Engineering and Consulting, Inc., under supervision of the US Department of the Interior Bureau of Land Management, Carson City Field Office, and in consultation with the Nevada State Historic Preservation Office.

Text by Erich Obermayr
Maps and Graphic Design by Shannon Hataway

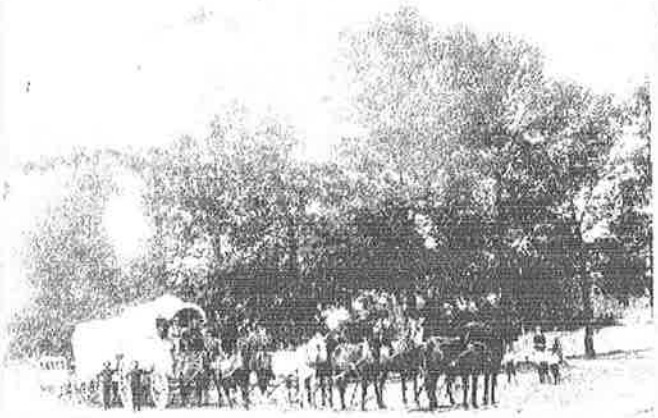
Cover: Freight team on the way to Rawhide, Churchill County, circa 1907-08 (Nevada Historical Society).

VULCAN POWER COMPANY TETRA TECH MACTEC

Wadsworth and Columbus freighting business as consisting of "twenty-eight sixteen-mule teams regularly employed." An August, 1876 article in the Nevada State Journal on Wadsworth mentioned twenty-five three or four wagon teams, each carrying from 25,000 to 30,000 pounds, hauling a total of over three hundred tons a month. A few years later, a February, 1881 article in The True Fissure (a weekly newspaper published in Candelaria between 1880 and 1886), listed 12 different freighters employing 48 wagons between Wadsworth and Belleville. The 1875-76 period probably represented heavy use of the road, since borax production was at a high, and the two Northern Belle mills in Belleville were under construction. The April 22, 1876, column noted "Two of the Olinghouse teams came into Belleville loaded with portions of the new Northern Belle mill."

Two to five teams typically came and went each week, and others possibly passed through unreported. Some articles described heavier traffic, with teams "lined up" on the Wadsworth road, although these may have been exaggerations, or written during exceptionally busy times. "Teams" reported no arrivals only twice, while the maximum number in any single week was 10, for November 27, 1875. Almost without exception, the teams took return loads of borax, mostly from Teels Marsh or the Pacific Works. Sometimes they waited a few days to find a load, and on rare occasions they returned empty. The "Teams" counts stayed consistent through the year, indicating the freight line was an all season road.

Figure 6. A typical mining camp freight team. This photograph was taken in Austin.

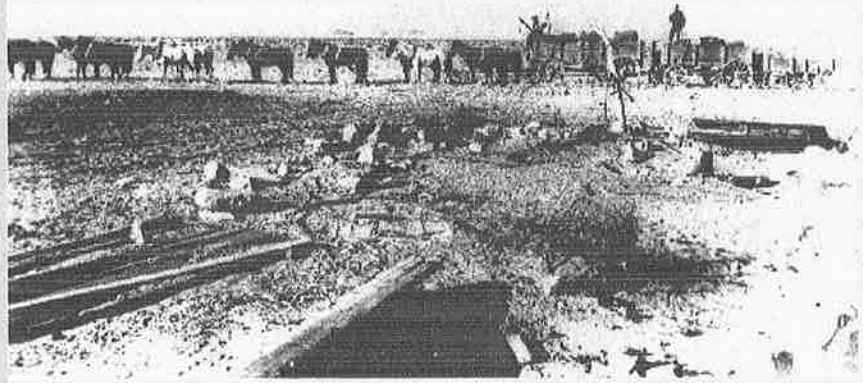


Nevada Historical Society

Freight teams averaged anywhere from 10 to 15 miles per day, meaning the 130 mile trip from Wadsworth to Columbus would take about ten days to two weeks. "Teams" mentioned one "heavily laden team" which made the trip in 10 days. In 1881, The True Fissure mentions that W. D. Epperson (the only freighter who also appears in the 1875-76 "Teams" columns) makes the trip monthly, hauling general freight and returning with borax. Given the

Wagons, Mules, and Teamsters

The teams plying the Wadsworth and Columbus Freight Road presented quite a spectacle, raising clouds of dust as they rumbled along, accompanied by jangling bells and cracking whips. The Nevada State Journal described the scene in Wadsworth, where "huge wagons—two and three chained together—and hauled by sixteen and eighteen animals are continually arriving and leaving." These were the largest wagons on the road at the time. Their enormous, canvas topped boxes were 16-18 feet long and four and a half feet wide. The removable side boards could form a box up to six feet deep. They carried three tons or more, including everything from basic supplies to heavy machinery. Entire stamp mills were often broken down and shipped to future mill sites piece by piece. With multiple wagons, the total tonnage could reach double digits, as the Borax Miner attested. The November 27, 1875, "Teams" column notes "Billy Pearson brought freight to Columbus and took 35,000 pounds (17½ tons) of borax from the Pacific Works, which, with feed and water, makes up a load for a pretty fair team at this season." In August of 1876 the Benton team "rolls out today with 28,550 pounds of borax." The whole aggregation—the oxen or mule team, plus double or triple wagons—easily stretched out more than one hundred feet (Figure 9). (Modern eighteen wheelers are about 80 feet long, depending on the type of trailer).



Nevada Historical Society

Figure 9. Freight team with triple trailer.

A number of companies manufactured the freight wagons which supplied mining camps throughout the West (Figure 10). The Studebaker Brothers Manufacturing Company, of South Bend, Indiana, was the most prominent, along with the Joseph Murphy company of Saint Louis. (The Studebaker Company developed into a well-known automobile maker in the twentieth century.) John Studebaker, one of the five Studebaker brothers, set up a wagon factory in Placerville, California, during the Comstock rush. It specialized in building the Washoe Wagon, a huge freight hauler with an extra sturdy, oversize frame and box, and powerful