

JAMES J. OTT, NEVADA ASSAY OFFICE

by Robert Gill

Although I am primarily interested in Obsolete Currency sheets, and write about them in my regular *Paper Money* column, "The Obsolete Corner", I do occasionally delve into other areas of paper. At some time in the past, I acquired a very interesting sheet of gold dust receipts. And as I started researching them, I found that they have a very interesting history. So now, let's look at the life of a pioneer of the gold rush that California experienced early in its statehood. And that pioneer was James J. Ott.

James J. Ott came from Switzerland with his brother. He had attended a prestigious Swiss University there, receiving a degree in metallurgy and chemistry. After first going to Wisconsin, where his brother remained, he moved on to California Territory. After arrival in 1850, he started taking part in the sensational gold rush that had just commenced in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. He settled down in one of the many mining camps, where he opened a general store, selling mining equipment and supplies. At the same time, he smelted gold dust and nuggets into bars for the miners.

Ott removed himself from Sierra County and settled in Nevada City in 1853 (although at this time the town was still known as Nevada), where he opened an assay office. By then, miners were faced with formidable problems of extracting gold from the hard-surrounding matrix.

Over twenty percent of the mined ore was being discarded into the tailing, although the residue was rich in gold and silver. It was Ott who came to the rescue. In 1853, he discovered a method of extracting the precious metals through the waste in a chlorinating process. He, subsequently, built the first "reverberatory" furnace next to a quartz mine in Grass Valley. His plant recovered eighty-eight percent of the sulphurous that had previously been thrown away. Ott managed to retrieve as much as \$400 of gold and silver per ton from the waste. Hard rock mining was instantly removed from the experimental stage, and became an industry-wide practice.

Ott's Nevada City laboratory and assay office stood in the rear of Number 30 Main Street, in the center of the business district. Later, after purchasing the entire structure, he moved from the rear of the building to the front. A gold-leaf sign appeared above the doorway, reading "J.J. OTT, NEVADA ASSAY OFFICE".

It wasn't much later that, because of the confusion in the names Nevada Territory and Nevada, California, that "City" was added to the town name.

Ott's reputation soared to new heights after he appraised some black-looking rock that several of his friends had brought in from what is now Virginia City, Nevada. Prospectors expected only to uncover ledges of glittering gold from snow-white quartz deposits. They mostly only found ledges and veins of the black-looking substance, which they cursed and threw away. Then, one day, when the friends of Ott brought in several of these specimens, they were thrilled that the samples assayed out at \$3166 in silver and \$1595 in gold per ton of ore. This discovery by him, in 1859, aroused the world! As the steady flow of ore samples ran through his office, it required only his word for prospects to be worked or abandoned.

Ott, with typical energy in the promotion of mining, seemed unbeatable. He became the principal owner in several lode mines. With all these holdings, he was still carrying on his work at the assay office.

Ott's son, Emil, eventually took over the business before James, living a very productive and rewarding life into his late years, died on March 25th, 1907.

So there it is. Just another glimpse into our nation's history, and what made it great.

As I always do, I invite any comments to my personal email address robertgill@cableone.net or my cell phone number (580) 221-0898.

So until next time, HAPPY COLLECTING.

NEVADA
Assay Office.
30. MAIN ST.

BY
JAMES J. OTT.

Nevada 186

Received of _____

Oz _____ Gold Dust for Assay.

No _____

Lith. Boston & Co. S.F.

Assayer

JAMES J. OTT.

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BY
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Nevada 186

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