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Ghost town still tells stories

By Joanna Dodder

No doubt people worked hard at the Howells smelter site several miles south of Prescott back in its heyday of the 1880s and 1890s.

But more than 100 years later, although the people all are dead and Howells is a ghost town, it's still clear the residents mixed in some fun with their labor.

Pieces of thick brown and olive green glass dot the Howells landscape. The brown glass was a common container for beer and whiskey. Some of the thinner green glass likely held beverages such as wine, with even thicker green glass probably originating from hard liquor bottles.

Since the old-time miners weren't really known for drinking champagne unless they hit it big, the presence of another piece of green glass with a deep impression in the bottom – indicating it was a champagne bottle – is a good indication that women were around, too.

Another hint of a womanly presence comes from an octagonal aqua blue piece of glass that probably was part of a fancy liqueur or fancy medicine bottle.

Of course, the fact that Howells had saloons is an indicator that the women in the area may have been the “working” kind.

Roads still weave throughout the site, which probably served as a stamp mill and smelter for mines throughout the region. Passersby today can tell these roads are quite old by knowing the way people built them back then, simply pushing the spoil pile of rocks and dirt to the side. Miners hauling their loads weren't the only ones to use the roads; a stage and express route linked Howells to Prescott.

Metallurgist John Howell founded the community. At one time, at least 50 and as many as 200 people lived and worked here.

Some ghost town books report that it had a two-stack smelter, quartz mill, sawmill, several saloons, a general store, assay office, blacksmith, boarding house, stage station, and a post office that was in operation from 1883 to 1893. Henry Goldwater, Barry's uncle, reportedly operated one of its stores.

It's hard to believe all those buildings just disappeared like a ghost, but they did.

Today, the most obvious remnants of Howells are the fortified foundations built to support the stamp mill and smelter. Littering the ground around the foundations are chunks of bricks and rocks of slag, or smelter waste material heavy with iron. Threading rods, used to mount the heavy machinery, jut out of the ground.

Shards of crucibles are nearby, too. Smelter workers poured their final product of molten gold and silver into these small, coarse ceramic vessels.

Archaeologists often learn the most about such ghost towns by sifting through their dumps, hoping that thieves haven't robbed them of their wealth of information. At Howells, they'll find various-sized metal cans that were used for everything from syrup to fuel.

But the rest of us may learn more by just sitting in the midst of Howells and listening, by closing our eyes and envisioning what it once was.

No time could be more perfect for such an exercise than Halloween, a time each year when the ancient Celts believed the spirits of the dead return to visit.