

## The Area of North San Juan

The small community of North San Juan is part of Nevada County - an administrative subdivision of the state of California - and is located on the San Juan Ridge, a geographic feature extending between the South and Middle Yuba Rivers in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada, a mountain range in the Western United States.

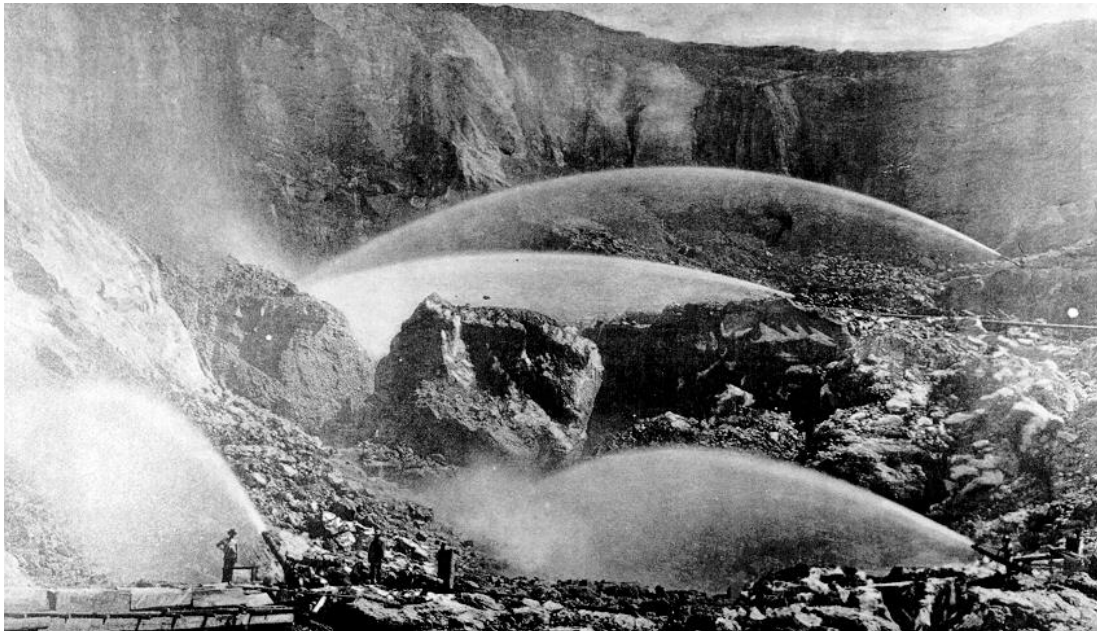
North San Juan! Part hippie, part isolationist-conservative. A little community in Nevada County that is very far removed from town. It's about a 20 minute drive from downtown Nevada City, but since you have to drive up and down the heavily forested, windy river-canyon road, it feels like quite a journey. When you get there, it consists of less than ten businesses scattered around the mountains, a bushel of dreadlocked hippies, a bunch of potfarms, a vineyard, and LOTS of empty, undeveloped wood, making North San Juan a really beautiful place, surrounded, as it is, by forested mountains and rivers. (localwiki 2011)

### Historic Background

The community's beginning dates back to the California Gold Rush in the 1850s, almost contemporaneous to "California entering statehood with the official motto, 'Eureka', solidifying its place as the land of discovery and opportunity" (Ho 2015, 305). With the 1849 California Gold Rush, North San Juan became part of the historic region called the 'Gold Country', which was known for its rich mineral deposits and gold mines that attracted waves of immigrants called the 49ers (cf. Wikipedia 2017).

The diversity of the population of North San Juan has its roots in a long history of human settlement beginning with the Nisenan tribe, a tribe of hunters and gatherers, who are also known as the Southern Maidu. "While the label 'Maidu' is still used widely in Native American academia, 'Maidu' is actually a gross over simplification of a very complex division of smaller groups, Tribelets and Bands of Indians" (Wikipedia 2017). These smaller groups are divided into the Nisean or Southern Maidu (that occupied e.g. the North San Juan region), the Northeastern or Mountain Maidu, and the Konkow (cf. Wikipedia 2017). Until the beginning of the Gold Rush, the Southern Maidu were the main inhabitants of the North San Juan region (cf. Nevada County Planning Department 2010). „In the spring of 1853 prospectors Jeremiah Tucker and Christian Kientz developed two acres of rich gold diggings on the west side of San Juan Hill. As the first settler in the area, Kientz named the village 'San Juan Hill', after a town in Mexico where he'd fought as a soldier. Miners swarmed to the area and the camp that grew up around the hill was called 'San Juan'. In 1853 the first frame house in NSJ was built, and in 1857 the town was

granted a post office, adding 'North' to the town name to differentiate it from San Juan in Benito County" (ibid.). The group of men that gathered on the hill above Nevada City "turned a stream of water from what resembled a very large fire hose upon the hillside, and watched the ground melt away before their eyes. [...] In one operation, and with very little effort on their part, these men found themselves able to mine and wash in a very short time quantities of gravel which until then could not have been moved without hours of backbreaking labor. They had devised a new mining process which in the course of the next forty years would yield up many millions in gold; it would also produce a mud flow of tidal wave proportions which would fill mountain canyons and spill out upon the flat Central Valley to bury thousands of acres of farm lands under vast sheets of infertile sand, rock, and hardpan" (Kelly 1954, 343).



North Bloomfield Mine (Malakoff Diggings) in 1890 (cf. Wikimedia Commons 2015)

Hydraulic mining, the new mining process they devised, "provided the key to the puzzle presented by vast tertiary gravel deposits in the central Sierra which until then could not be efficiently worked" (ibid., 343). With the growing infrastructure and the construction of dams and reservoirs began a decade of great prosperity for the newly developed town of North San Juan and its inhabitants. In the 1860s "North San Juan became the prettiest town on the San Juan Ridge" with beautiful residences, hotels and shops being built (cf. Nevada County Planning Department 2010, 7). Because water was the main element of hydraulic mining more and more water companies that supplied the mines settled in the area as well. Most of the hydraulic mining took place at the 1965 established Malakoff

Diggins State Historic Park located 40 km from Nevada City. “In the late 1860s the towns of Marysville and Yuba City were buried under 25 feet (7.5 m) of mud and rock and Sacramento flooded repeatedly. The farmers in the valley complained about the tailings that flooded their land and ruined their crops. Thousands of acres of rich farmland and property were destroyed as a result of hydraulic mining” (Wikipedia 2017). In 1884 a Judge by the name of Lorenzo Sawyer declared hydraulic mining as illegal, which led to the abandonment of many mining sites. After that North San Juan’s flourishing era came to an end, and the town became quiet (cf. Nevada County Planning Department 2010, 7).

### **North San Juan Today**

Today “the miner forty-niners are gone, but a ride along the aptly named Hwy 49 through sleepy hill towns, past clapboard saloons and oak-lined byways, is a journey back to modern California’s founding. Between the quaint antique stores and sprawling wineries, historical markers still tell tales of Gold Rush violence and banditry” (Ho 2015, 105). The gallery below includes impressions of the incredible Highway 49, taken as we drove along the long and winding road during our stay in the summer of 2015. As of July 1, 2016 the town’s population – according to demographic data – consists of 269 people covering an area of 6.2 square kilometers (cf. Wikipedia 2017). The closest city with more infrastructures is Nevada City, which is about a 20 minute drive away.

### **Vegetation and Climate**

North San Juan has a warm-summer Mediterranean climate and is about 2,600 feet above sea level. During winter it will get cold and snow (0-10°C), and during summer it can get very hot and dry (around 30-40°C). With this rather hot and dry summer climate the area of North San Juan and Nevada County has been subject to many dangerous and devastating fire seasons: “Many fires are started each year by well-intended people doing the right thing at the wrong time or the wrong way” (North San Juan Fire Protection District 2017). During our trip in 2015 we experienced one of these wildfires from afar, with the air full of ashes, and firefighting planes in the air.

**References:**

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