

## A Love Affair With Mining

Gold was discovered in Colorado in 1859, and drew over 100,000 men and women to the state in hope of finding their fortune. These became the gold rush days of Colorado; the days of the instant millionaire, like Horace and Baby Doe Tabor, the Glory Days of Colorado. My Dad followed in the footsteps of those pioneers.

The earliest gold deposits found were the placer deposits in the gravels along the streams. Gold was mixed among the stream alluvium and in some cases could be literally picked from the streambed. At first, the gold was washed from the gravels by using a shallow gold pan. Later, the sections of streams that yielded gold from panning were staked as placer claims under the Mining Law of 1872. To wash larger amounts of gravel and find more gold, water was diverted from the stream for use with sluice boxes. Large amounts of gravel were put into the upper end of the sluice box and water washed the gravels down the sluice box back into the stream. As in the smaller gold pan, the heavier gold settled out of the gravels into the bottom of the sluice box along boards on the bottom called riffles. Many of these placer deposits played out quickly.

Later, minerals like lead, zinc and silver, as well as gold, were discovered in mineralized outcrops, ledges and small surface veins in the higher peaks of the Colorado Rocky Mountains. These mineral outcrops were often the source of the downstream placer deposits, and when the miners found this out, the race to find the mother-lode was on. With each discovery, boom towns like Central City, Georgetown, Leadville, Cripple Creek, Chihuahua and Telluride sprang up overnight. Populations swelled and then rapidly fell as the veins were found and then played out.

Small mines and prospect holes dot almost every high peak in Colorado. Each one is the result of the dream of finding wealth under the ground. The work was often brutal and back breaking. Many were at high elevation, where the weather was both cold and snowy much of the year. John L. Jerome Hart notes in his 1931 booklet entitled *Fourteen Thousand Feet, A History of the Naming and Early Ascents of the High Colorado Peaks*;

"Miners will go to any place where they think they will find ore; A fact which is shown by the finding of prospect holes on almost every mountain in the state."

Many of these small workings and prospects were not accessible by road. Developed before automobiles, the miners used horses, mules or walked to their claims. Because of the transportation difficulty, they spent a lot of lonely hours at a small cabin or tent near their mines. Some of the more productive mines had the money to upgrade the transportation to allow wagons to access the mine and haul the valuable ore to a mill or smelter.

Despite the difficult working and living conditions at many of these small mines and prospects in the high peaks, the beauty was often spectacular. Shaped by wind, water or glaciers, these high mountain basins were very rocky, steep and rugged. The gray granite slopes are resplendent with red and yellow streaks indicating the presence of valuable minerals below the surface. The high mountain peaks shine in the sun under a clear blue sky. The air was crisp and clean and the silence was deafening. Many of these prospects were located above timberline or on very steep, rocky slopes and the views were incredible. In the spring, summer and fall, the high mountain meadows were alive with the color of mountain flowers like the Colorado columbine, Indian paintbrush and primrose.

As a geologist and mining engineer, my dad came to Colorado after World War II. Looking for mining opportunities, he and a partner discovered one of the many small mines in the Rocky Mountains which was discovered in the 1880s. This small mine was located at 12,000 feet in a small, glaciated mountain basin near the Continental Divide. The first year, Dad and his partner walked into the mine, just like many of the prospectors of Colorado gold rush days. They wanted to make sure the ore values were as described by earlier reports prior to spending limited capital resources on rebuilding the old wagon road. Once they reopened the old workings, they found a very rich vein of lead, zinc and silver and rebuilt the original wagon road so trucks could haul the ore to smelters in Leadville or Denver. Reopening the mine, Dad and his partner worked the Orphan Boy for 4 years amid some of the most spectacular scenery in the world.

My family and I visit this mine during the summer or fall each year. It is a way of reconnecting with a past generation as well as being an excellent day trip into the Colorado mountains. Looking out from the dump of the Orphan Boy, a camera just does not reflect the true beauty I see with my eyes and my soul.

I worked with my dad for over 20 years, and we visited the Orphan Boy numerous times. Our discussions about his days working at the mine conveyed his true love of mining. He visited most of the small prospects and mines in the area because of his fascination with mining. Dad loved life and the Colorado mountains, and like many before him, felt at peace in them. My dad and his partner, while working the Orphan Boy mine, were able to experience some of the same feelings, emotions and joys the first miners did who came to Colorado during the Glory Days of Colorado.

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#### About the Author

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