

RECREATION
REPORT

CAMPFIRE RE-
STRICTIONS
EASED ON THE
WALLOWA-
WHITMAN

The campfire restrictions in place for much of the summer on the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest in Oregon were eased starting today.

Campfires are no longer restricted to designated recreation sites and wilderness areas.

However, the seasonal fire restrictions will remain in place through Oct. 31. Those require that fires be confined to a metal or rock ring, with debris cleared at least 3 feet away from the ring.

Chain saw use is allowed only between 8 p.m. and 1 p.m. Driving motorized vehicles off designated roads and trails is not allowed, except when traveling to a campsite within 300 feet of a road or trail.

HIKES PLANNED
TO EXPLORE WILD,
SCENIC RIVERS

The Powder Basin Watershed Council is celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act with a pair of hikes this fall.

Both are free.
• Saturday, Sept. 22, 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., along the North Powder River on the east slopes of the Elkhorn Mountains northwest of Baker City. The trip includes shuttle service from Baker City, moderate hiking and a catered lunch, all free.

• Saturday, Oct. 13, 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., along the Powder River below Thief Valley Reservoir. The trip includes strenuous hiking. Hikers should bring water and a lunch.

To reserve a spot for either trip, call the Watershed Council at 541-523-7288 or email pbwced@qwestoffice.net

FOREST
DOCUMENTARY
TO BE SHOWN AT
WHITMAN

WALLA WALLA, Wash. — A special viewing of Blue Mountain Television's "Secret Life of the Forest: The Northern Blue Mountains" is set for Wednesday, Sept. 19, at 6 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. at Maxey Auditorium on the Whitman College campus. Admission is free, but registration is required. To save a seat, go to www.bmt.tv/forest or call 509-529-9149.

The film explores the natural world of the northern Blue Mountains. Daniel Biggs is the editor/photographer and Mike Denny the writer/narrator. Blue Mountain Television is available as a live stream at www.bmt.tv and on ROKU devices (search for Blue Mountain TV).

EXPLORING BAKER COUNTY'S
GOLD-MINING LEGACY

Hiking History

■ The Argonaut mine near Sumpter offers a glimpse into the region's rich history of hard-rock gold mining

I saw the tattered remnants of a chair inside the abandoned cabin, and if a wind gust had caused the chair to emit a single squeak I'd probably have shrieked like the first victim in a slasher film.

Old mines are spooky places by their very nature. The very idea of tunneling deep into the ground, far beyond the reach of the sun, seems frighteningly foreign to anyone who hasn't been lured by the prospect of a glittering vein piercing the rock.

But the sight of that single chair, scraps of pale blue fabric dangling from its arms like flaps of skin decorating a desiccated corpse, made goosebumps erupt on my forearms even though the late summer sun was quite warm.

This is a visceral sort of history.

Here you smell not the pleasant scent of old paper in a book but the dank stench of neglect, a miasma of mouse droppings and moldy mattress foam and dirt that has gone unswept for decades.

The place is the Argonaut mine, high in the Elkhorn Mountains about 8 miles north of Sumpter.

The mine's name is not an uncommon one, as "argonaut" once was a common synonym for miner, much in the way that hunters were often called "nimrods."

The word's source, of course, is from the ancient Greek mythical story of Jason and the Argonauts and their quest for the Golden Fleece. (The original argonauts were sailors on Jason's ship, the Argo.)

Among the dozens of mines in the Cracker Creek district — the richest of the hard-rock zones in the Elkhorns — the Argonaut is among the easier to get to.

It is, foremost, on public land.

Many of the mines in the district were patented a



ON THE TRAIL
JAYSON JACOBY

century or longer ago and so are private property.

(The Argonaut is, however, an active mining claim, which means you can walk around the site but you can't do any prospecting or mining.)

And although the road that follows Fruit Creek up to the Argonaut is typical of roads that lead to mines — rocky, rutted and steep in places — it makes for a relatively easy hike.

(And it's open to vehicles, if you prefer to get around on an ATV.)

Besides being accessible — at least until winter's snows begin to accumulate, as they surely will at this elevation of around 7,000 feet — the Argonaut is pretty safe. A stout piece of metal grating blocks the entrance to the tunnel, which ought to discourage anyone foolhardy enough to even consider doing something as dangerous as entering a mine.

The admonition "stay out, stay alive" is excellent advice, and a model of brevity as well.

I like to read about local mining history.

But actually visiting a mine, standing where miners once stood and imagining what it was like to hack into the ground, is for me a much more gratifying experience than even the most accomplished author can provide.

Besides which it gets me out in the good clean air of the high country.

I had assumed that the Argonaut's origins must date back before the First World War, to the heyday of the lode mining era in the Cracker Creek district.

It was during that period, after the placer ground had yielded the initial surge of wealth, that miners gouged



Lisa Britton / ForWesCom News Service

A dilapidated cabin stands near the Argonaut mine in the Elkhorn Mountains.



Lisa Britton / ForWesCom News Service

A tattered chair inside a cabin at the Argonaut mine.

sometimes many hundreds of feet into the mountains, searching for the ribbons of ore on which fortunes were made.

The five mines that tapped the North Pole-Columbia lode — an area near Bourne also known as the "mother lode of the Blue Mountains," according to Miles F. Potter's excellent history, "Oregon's Golden Years," published in 1976 — produced an estimated \$8 million in gold between 1894 and 1916.

But though the Argonaut is less than two miles north of the North Pole-Columbia lode, records from the Oregon Department of Geology and Mineral Industries — the agency's historical mining records online database truly is a treasure trove — show that the major work on the site happened after most of the district's big gold-producers had shut down.

The documents also suggest that the Argonaut was a comparatively small-scale and short-lived operation.

Not that you'd guess that from contemporary newspaper accounts.

According to a story in the Baker Democrat-Herald (known today as the Baker City Herald) from March 23, 1940, the Argonaut "is a new property, not the re-opening of one of the old mines."

The story was headlined "Big strike of gold made at Argonaut Mine," with a subhead of "Discovery one of the most important in years."

These grandiose media claims though typical of the era, quite often didn't pan out.

Indeed, newspaper stories that predate the 1940 article, as well as the scarcity of follow-ups after that year, suggest that the Argonaut was not the bonanza that credulous readers might have

supposed it to be.

Less than three years earlier, on Sept. 21, 1937, the Oregon Journal published an Associated Press story, with a Baker dateline, that read "one of the richest gold ore strikes in Oregon during 1937 was reported Monday by operators of the Argonaut mine."

Yet the mine's owners in 1937 — Bascom Parker Sr. and Bascom Parker Jr., both of Baker, and F.N. Bonine of Michigan — had by December 1938 sold their interest in the Argonaut to H.C. Wilmot and associates, according to another newspaper account.

This strongly implies that the 1937 report was more than a slight exaggeration, since it strikes me as unlikely that the Parkers and Bonine would have so quickly disposed of a property as fabulously productive as the article purports.

Yet the Parkers' involvement with the Argonaut didn't end when they sold the claims.

A one-paragraph note from an unexpected source, the Arizona Mining Journal, dated Aug. 16, 1941, states that a 60-ton car of ore was shipped from the Argonaut mine in late June of that year. The source for this information was Bascom Parker Jr., who is described as the mine's operator, but was not, apparently, its owner.

I find it passing strange that none of the several claims at the Argonaut was ever patented — that is, converted to private property.

All of the mines on the North Pole-Columbia lode were patented, and with a map showing public and private land you can pretty accurately trace the route of the gold veins solely by the extent of the private holdings.

America's entry into World War II in December 1941 all

but ended the hard-rock mining era not only in the Cracker Creek district but in the Blue Mountain gold fields overall.

A geology department report from 1968 notes that gold mining in Oregon almost ceased due to a 1942 federal order. After the war, the state's gold production reached a peak, in 1947, of 18,979 ounces — just 17 percent of the output from 1940. And 93 percent of the gold reported in 1947 was from placer mining — plucking gold from streams, usually with dredges such as the one that operated in Sumpter Valley until 1954 — rather than underground mines such as the Argonaut.

Other than the Arizona Mining Journal item from 1941, the geology department has no records documenting actual activity at the Argonaut later than 1940. One report refers to plans for a proposed mill at the mine in 1946, and a 1947 update to an assay map, but neither document is available.

A 1967 annual report from the department does contain an intriguing reference to a federal loan granted that year "for certain programmed subsurface exploration scheduled to begin this season (1968) on the Argonaut Mine."

But there are no other subsequent documents to indicate whether this exploration happened, and if so what the results of the work were.

The 1968 report is silent on the federal loan for the Argonaut, saying only that "small shipments" of ore were made from the mine from 1937-41.

Even before I went through these historical documents, though, I wondered just how old the mine might be.

The bullet-ridden remains of what appears to be a refrigerator is rusting outside the dilapidated cabin, and the presence of that modern appliance made me question my assumption that the Argonaut was actually a contemporary of the more productive mines along the North Pole-Columbia lode.

One of the geology department's records notes that a power line was extended to the mine from the Eastern Oregon Light and Power line about a mile to the south. That main transmission line brought electricity produced at the Fremont Powerhouse near Granite through the Cracker Creek district and continued over the spine of the Elkhorns, thence down Rock Creek to a second power plant west of Haines.

You can see the right-of-way for the power line, as well as the stumps of several poles, on a straight stretch of the road that leads to the Argonaut.

