

Chinese Derrick Ground:A gold dredge history

Part one: The story of the “Josephine”, southern Oregon’s first gold dredge

The story of how the first gold dredge in southern Oregon (Amstead, 1904) found its way to Illinois Valley starts with the story of the Chinese Derrick Ground. This was a mining operation located on the flats at the bottom of Sailor Gulch, the place where a group of sailors discovered gold in 1852 and sparked a gold rush that resulted in the establishment of the town of Waldo.

The upper part of the gulch was mined extensively in the 1850s and it was suspected that the flats at the base of the canyon contained substantial gold. However, the work of moving rock proved too labor intensive and the area was left untouched as miners moved on to easier diggings.

Around 1890, a Chinese miner by the name of Wong Back Fong, was awarded a 99 year lease to mine the Sailor Gulch flats. Generally, Chinese were not allowed to own claims but the many years of disinterest in this area made it possible for Fong to own the mining rights (RRC, Aug. 24,1899).

The machinery used in Fong’s mining operations was almost entirely made of wood and was constructed by the Chinese who operated the mine (Street, 1973). With this crude equipment, Fong was able to excavate a 40 foot-deep pit and separate gold from the gravel hauled out of the pit.

Fong faced some challenges to make his mining operation work. The pit was located next to the river so water seeped in constantly, and did so at a much higher rate during winter months. This restricted Fong’s mining work to the summer months

when the river was low and two pumps powered by water wheels were used to remove water during the dry season. Getting a supply of water for his water pumps during summer months was a challenge because the stream in Sailor Gulch was seasonal and had no water in the summer. Fong constructed a small reservoir above his claim to collect water during the rainy season and to operate the water pumps during the summer (Williams, 1900; Street, 1973).

A third water wheel was used to power a small derrick to lift buckets of rock and gravel out of the pit. On account of the limited power of the wheel, Fong was unable to raise rock from a depth more than forty feet and, consequently, could not mine below this level (Williams, 1900).

In an effort to determine the depth of the claim’s gravel, a shaft was excavated in the bottom of the pit to a depth of fifty feet, which gave a total depth at this point of ninety-one feet. At this depth, quick-sand was encountered and the shaft abandoned. (Williams, 1900).

Fong and his crews worked on this claim for about 7-9 years and through that time the extent of their operations amounted to a pit about one acre in size and forty feet deep (TMO, July 27, 1900).

As Fong excavated through the gravel beds, he found values of gold that ranged from ten cents per yard to \$2.75 and higher depending on the depth and strata (Williams, 1900; TMO, March 19, 1900). Considering that in the 1890s, dredges in New Zealand were able to make a profit in dirt with only two cents a cubic yard, the possibilities of a dredge at Sailors Gulch were substantial (TMO, March 19, 1900), especially in a pit that

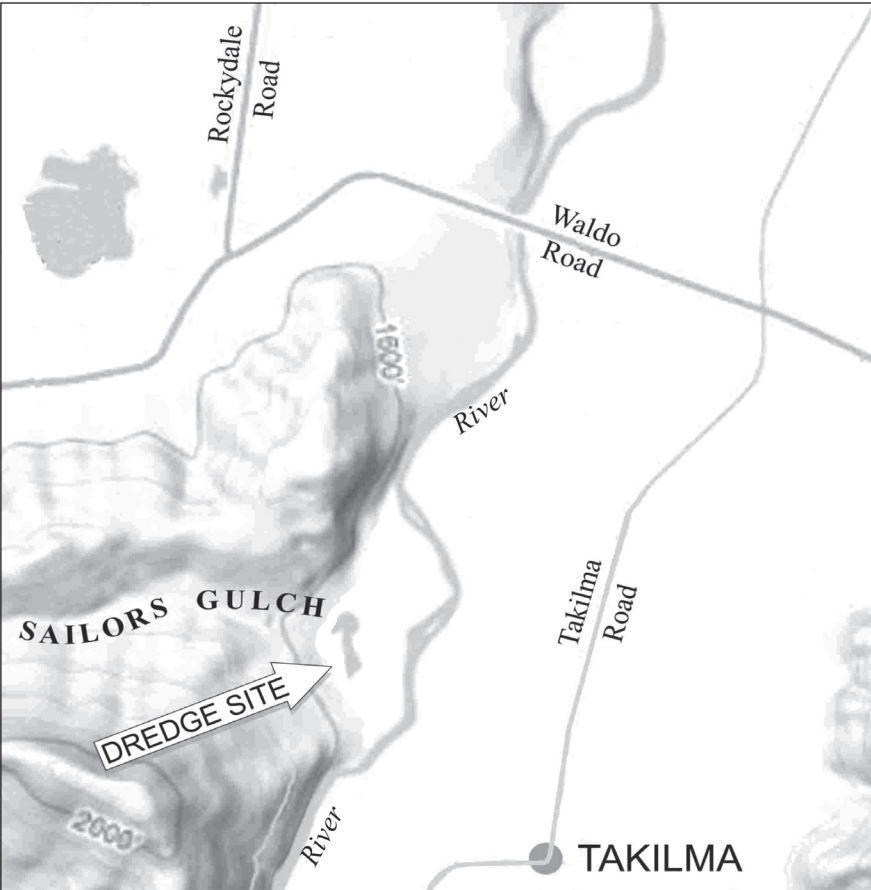
naturally filled with water.

As the value of the claim became apparent, Fong was in continual fear of having his ground jumped or lose it on some legal technicality. Chinamen were in disfavor throughout this part of Oregon and on several occasions some of them had been run out of the country by mobs, when it was known that they were making profits out of placer ground (Williams, 1900). Fong’s nightmare came true around 1898, when a group of three men formed the Blue Gravel Mining Company and filed a claim to his mining operations (Ninth Circuit, 1911 p422)

At about the same time, Fong was approached by businessmen of the English-Canadian Company with a proposition to purchase his mining rights. Fong initially asked for \$20,000 but concerns about legal battles with the claim jumpers played a role in his decision to reduce the price to \$14,500 (Ninth Circuit Court, 1911 p378 and p615).

What Fong made from his claim during the nine years he worked on it, no one can tell but after returning to China he became a banker in Hong Kong reputed to be worth \$250,000, all of which likely came from the flats of Sailor Gulch (Williams, 1900).

Fong’s mining venture made him a rich man. Soon, a mining dredge named the “Josephine” would take his place and begin a story with a less than happy ending.



An arrow shows the location of the pond at the base of Sailor Gulch, part of which may have been excavated by Fong. Another small pond can be seen between the L and C in Sailor Gulch and may have been the small reservoir built by Fong to store water to run his water wheels. Both sites are on private land and are not accessible to the public.

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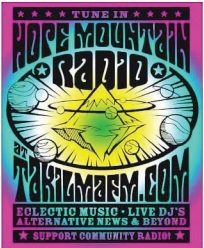
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