

I know some people living off the grid, way off. I'm not going to say where, only that they go to Reno and sell jewelry-grade nuggets. And that you'd have a hard time telling where they worked rock and earth to liberate the gold.

Not all who mine are corporate, not all are destructive and not all are visible.

Gold and oil, two of our culture's most valuable goods, are often compared, oil being called "black gold." They both originate underground and exist in finite, nonrenewable quantities. There is a significant difference: Oil is burned away, but gold abides as does human reliance on it as the ultimate commodity. Our Constitution recognized this, saying "No State shall ... make any thing but gold and silver coin a tender in payment of debts."

Nevertheless, America was taken off the gold standard, and the ownership of gold was nationalized in 1934 when President Roosevelt attempted to save the banks from bad loans being recalled in gold. It is still illegal for private citizens to own gold bullion or coin, excepting for modest amounts held as collectibles.

Gold prices, set by the feds at \$35 in 1934, are now approaching \$1,000 an ounce in the real world and may rise higher as oil again escalates. Less regulated gold prices and the current depression maybe producing another rush for gold. Oregon's last gold rushes were during the Great Depression and after World War II, when many returning soldiers, unable to find jobs, went prospecting. The gold they sought began its own rush long before them.

In Earth's earlier ages, streams of molten quartz flowed in the nether realms. Unattached yet charged, the quartz magma drew gold and other precious metals to itself. Pushed upward by heavier flows underneath, it pulsed through hot fissures, cooling and solidifying as it flowed into the world's newly forming crust. Richly saturated, the magma rested, waiting for erosion and rain to break out the heavy, durable gold and re-concentrate it. Rain and gravity did their work, and humans discovered and separated the gold from its placers, often following it to the source lodes.

What remains of Oregon's heaviest worked motherlodes is found in the northeast and southwest areas of the state. Seeking this inner-world treasure will lead you into the roughest and most remote corners of these mineralized regions.

My favorite technique for finding gold, called "sniping," entails looking for coarse gold flakes and nuggets in freshly exposed bedrock or old placers. A large spoon, stout tweezers, a round file with a hooked end, a gold pan, perhaps a metal detector ... these are some of my tools. And, of course, experience and patience. Apart from getting to where the gold is, no fossil fuel required. Equating this to corporate mining would be like comparing cutting firewood with a bucksaw to industrial logging!

Old diggings can be intriguing places to search out. There are amazing piles of rock and metal buried in some really deep places. Depression era miners I've met were far more ambitious than myself. They dismantled trucks, tractors or even steam shovels and mills, packed the pieces into the backcountry, reassembled them and mechanized their dreams. One old-timer I knew hauled, by mule, an eight-burner wood stove and a full sized piano onto the crest of a desolate peak to warm his winter nights. Be advised that many old tailings and junk piles are either archeological artifacts or still parts of legitimate mining claims.



GOLD DREAMING

In search of the ultimate commodity

Miners occasionally set fire to the forests to expose minerals, a kind of Euro variation on earlier Indian subsistence fire setting. The Biscuit blaze in southwest Oregon, ignited by lightening, accomplished legally what miners were jailed for in the Great Depression: It burned thousands of acres of densely vegetated wilderness, flecked with precious metals, to bare earth. Afterwards it was easy to see mineral contacts and old workings. Gazing over exposed trails and diggings on fire glazed ridges, I found myself wondering, "Did they get everything?"

My partner and I once packed a 16-ft. wall tent and a folding stove into an old dig above an upper reach of the Chetco River. We stayed from spring's last snows till late fall. We sifted beautiful bits of fine gold out of a dry stream channel, drank pure water, breathed air enriched with forest oxygen, bathed and fished in turquoise pools below and negotiated a truce with pesky bears. Had it not been for a Forest Service flyover, we would have gone undiscovered by humans. When agency people hiked in to evict us, we advised them that we were prospecting under the 1872 mining law. We weren't bothered again.

The same mining law that lets corporations excavate yawning craters in the earth allows common folks to live on public land while seeking nuggets in bedrock seams. A Forest Service Regional Forester, testifying in favor of a large mining venture, said: "This law confers to a citizen a statutory right to enter upon public lands to search for and develop minerals." Though this includes noncorporate citizens, there are still efforts by the Forest Service and BLM to remove small gold miners, especially if they're living on their claims.

During the road building frenzy of the 1970s, folks living in federal forests, often without visible means of support, identification, address or car, were indeed disturbing to the management agencies. Some, like myself, were even more burdensome, resisting new roads and the then wide use of herbicides. The protectorates of our lands ignored the robber barons blasting mainlines through wilderness, leveling mountains and logging off forests. Instead, they went after bands of merry miners who neither contributed nor took tax dollars, paid no rent, did comparatively little damage and

occasionally ate the king's deer.

This ancient lifestyle, one still protected by an equally archaic law, takes on a new glitter in today's world. Imagine living off the grid, paying no tribute to landlords or money lenders and no taxes. Working each day with simple tools. Living on and with the earth. Staying amazingly fit and healthy. If enough of us little folks exercised this right, could we be stopped by the big corps or resentful bureaucracies?

Years ago I helped Len Ramp, who was then the mineral geologist for Oregon, search out a hidden spring and evaluate some old digs. We lingered, recalling other historic "pockets," isolated gold concentrations perched above downstream placers. Some had been hand-excavated to yield hundreds of thousands of dollars of gold at \$20 to the ounce. We speculated about the hidden crevices yet to be discovered.

Our musings spawned golden dreams that coursed through my consciousness for years, dreams that seem far more realistic in 2009 than they did in 1969. ■

Gold would have value if for no other reason than that it enables a citizen to fashion his financial escape from the state. — WILLIAM F. RICKENBACKER