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Gold Mining -- The Area's First Chapter

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Recollections of early mining in Jackson county and other sections of southern Oregon have been stimulated by the recent appearance here of an article in The Ore Bin.

The article appeared in the June issue of the magazine published by the State of Oregon department of geology and mineral industries. It was written by F. W. Libbey, former director of the state department and now a mining engineer in private practice. The article reviews gold mining as the original mainstay of the economy of southern Oregon.

While Jacksonville, as the article relates, was location of the first gold lode and first gold pocket unearthed in Oregon, the Gold Hill mining era, less publicized, was equally colorful.

It was of shorter duration but the men who brought gold from the diggings, were frequently like the brief flame that burns brightest. The finds they made were spectacular and so were the things they did with their gold, as completely gone today as the ashes of the last flame.

Most Famous Pocket

"The most famous of all was the astonishing gold pocket, discovered in January, 1857, by Emigrant Graham and partners near the top of the hill two miles northeast of Gold Hill," according to Libbey's report.

It is said that this pocket produced at least $700,000.

Also featured in Libbey's history of mining is the Revenue pocket. It was mined out by the Rhoten brothers five miles south of Gold Hill on Kane creek. The Ore Bin report places the amount taken from the pocket at $100,000.

Al, Ed and Enos Rhoten were widely known for their ability to "smell a gold pocket," according to Floyd Lance of Gold Hill, recently retired from the Gold Hill cement plant and himself a descendant of early day miners.

Lance worked with the Rhoten brothers when the cement plant opened its quarries at Gold Hill, and on other mineral projects.

They were deft miners and many stories of their exploits were told by other mining men who coveted their finds.

Of Enos, The Centennial History of Oregon, published in 1911, said, he found gold "wherever his keen young eye and native miner's instinct directed him to prospective ground in stream or mountain gulch."

This Rhoten crossed the plains with his parents in 1852 and began his mining career at the age of 10 years. In addition to mining he operated a farm of 160 acres in the Applegate valley and maintained a general store.

Estimate Value of Pocket

The book estimated one of his gold pockets at $125,000 in virgin gold nuggets of various sizes.

The Rhotens were large men and they had large feet, which made large tracks, Lance recalls. Whenever ambitious pocket hunters saw their tracks they followed them, wherever they led.

The Rhotens were free spenders, too, according to Gold Hill legend. The gold flowed out of their pants pockets as fast as the gases and liquids rose from beneath the surface of the earth to form the much sought metal in its beginning.

A story told many times by people who claimed to be actual observers relates that the Rhoten brothers were in a Medford saloon one night when the bartender wanted to close and told them to go home. Determined to continue their night in town, they bought the saloon, laying the money on the bar and maintaining their rendezvous.

Lance's grandfather, George W. Lance, Sr., operated the Lance mine on Foots Creek, one of the older placer mines. He bought the original holdings in 1861 and kept adding on until it comprised the region from Miller's Gulch to Birdseye Creek to Foots Creek.

These holdings were part of the Able J. Champlin mine, owned by Medford Police Chief Charles Champlin's grandmother. The same property was dredged from 1928 to 1935 by the D. H. Ferry company which later moved operations to Graves creek.

Lance has retained about five acres of the mining property as a place for the family to vacation and "just dig around."

One of the recent gold stories of the Gold Hill area, recalled by Lance, involved the finding of a hole near the roots of a pine tree on the Chavner Thompson property. The imprints revealed that a kettle or similar container had obviously been removed. The theory was that it contained one of the missing gold pockets. Many were known to have been stolen from their Gold Hill discoverers.

Ashland Mine Location

Ashland mine, photographs of which also appear in the Jacksonville museum, was located in 1886 by William Patton, according to Libbey's research. It was active almost continuously until 1902 when the shaft reached a depth of 900 feet. It was closed down because of litigation with owners of adjoining claims and was not reopened until about 1932, when a 10-stamp mill operated by electric power was installed.

Total development is approximately 11,000 lineal feet and includes two shafts, an adit, raises and drifts. Several veins have been found but only two have been explored. Mill concentrates assayed about $100 a ton and "milling" averaged about $13 a ton. Up to 1933 total value of production was reported as $1,300,000.

Back to the Jacksonville scene, Libbey tells of the so-called Hicks Lead found on the left fork of Jackson creek. Sonora Hicks, the discoverer, working with his brother, took out $1,000 in two hours, according to the Jacksonville Sentinel. Walling, recognized Oregon historian, reports in his history Hicks sold his claim to Maury, Davis and Taylor, who then built the first Arrastra in Oregon in order to treat the Hicks ore.

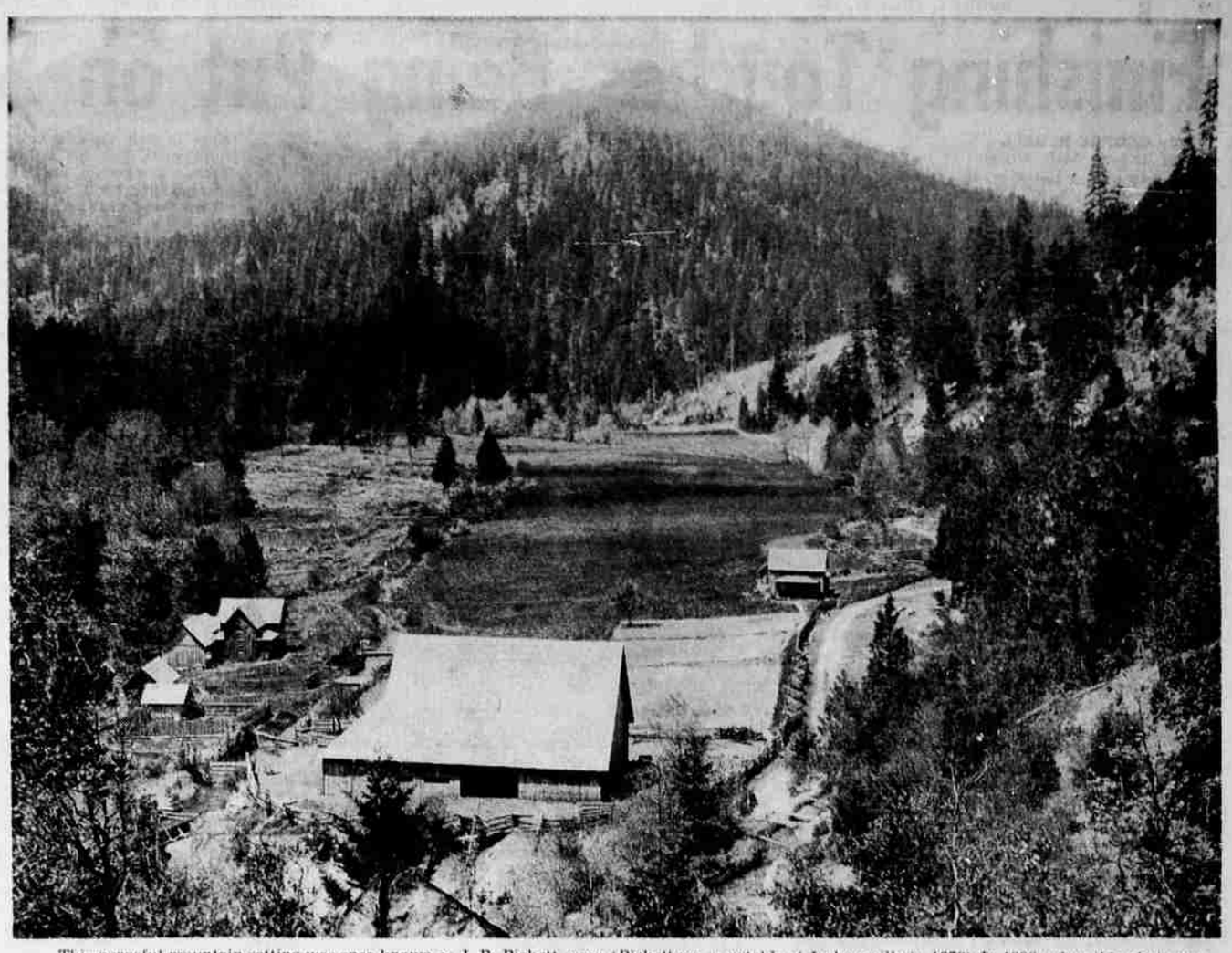
Roaring Gimlet Pocket

A rich deposit known as the Roaring Gimlet pocket was discovered in 1893. It was found at the mouth of China Gulch, about 2½ miles south of the Gold Hill pocket. Several small pockets were extracted just east of the large Gimlet. Libbey does not state who made the discoveries, but places the yield at $40,000.

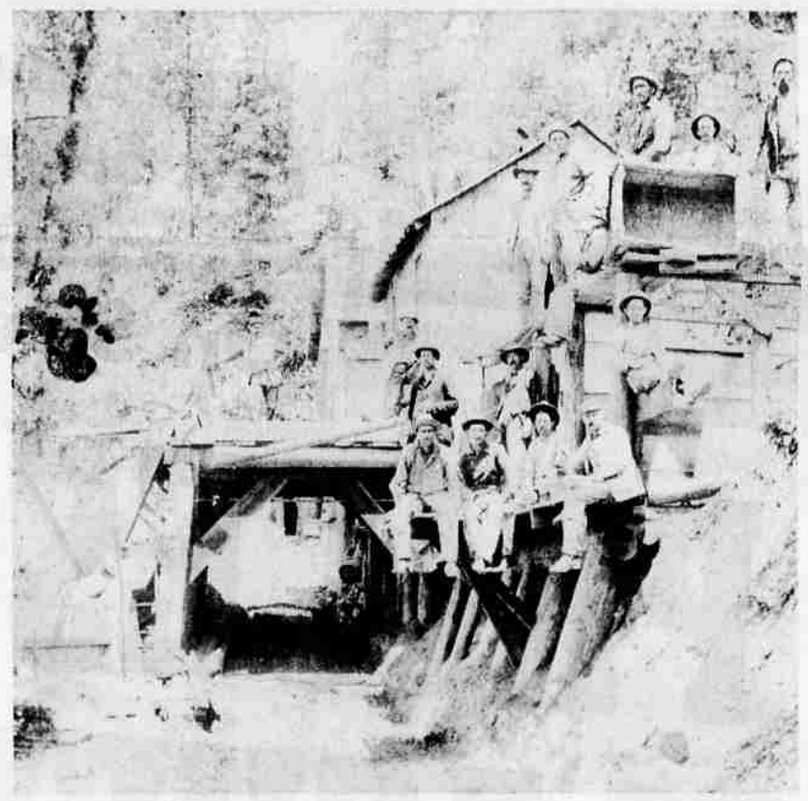
Early-day statistics of gold production in Oregon were meager and, for the most part, based on records of agencies such as Wells Fargo, banks and post offices which handled gold shipments to the San Francisco mint.

Figures for annual production of gold in Oregon, beginning in 1881, are believed to be reliable. However, production statistics segregated by counties were not publishd until 1902.

As a result, stories will remain the basis for many reports and as long as they come from many quarters they will contain many differences. But it is to be hoped they will always be as interesting as those told by the first finders of southern Oregon's gold.

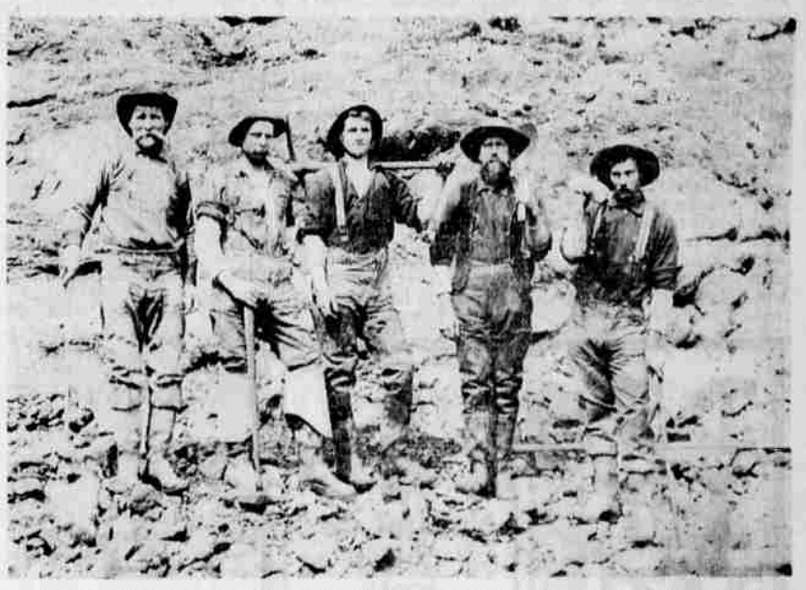


This peaceful mountain setting was once known as J. B. Pickett camp (Pickett was constable at Jacksonville in 1879). In 1900, when this photo was taken, it was home of Albert W. and Henry Shearer. Steve's peak and Iron mountain are in the background. The Steamboat mine produced a network of quartz veins in andesite in 1860. A yield from the Steamboat pocket was reportedly $350,000.

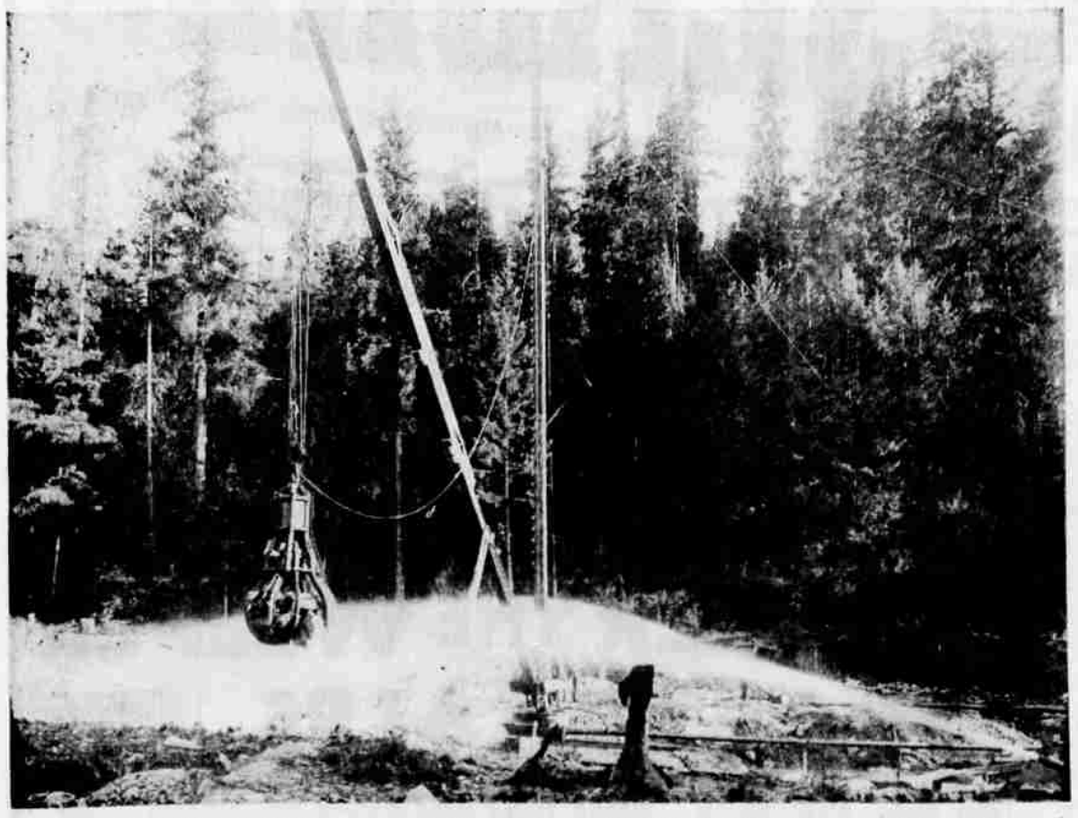


This photograph shows the Ashland mine soon after it was opened. Now the property of Fred and Dewey Van Curler, it comprises 276 acres of patented ground. The owners used the stamp mill for concentrating chrome ore during World War II.

The mine in this photograph, taken by Peter Britt in 1894 and now in the Jacksonville museum collection, is 1½ miles up Rogue River from the town of Gold Hill. The gold pans on the sluice boxes contain gold. The old gravel bar is still there but it is now barren rock. The mining men on the scene are Potter, Neff, McConnell and Diamond. (Their first names were not listed in the file.)



This crew is believed to have been photographed at the Blue Ledge mine, one of the larger operations in southern Oregon. The photo was given the museum by Mrs. Lyle Penny, the former Ruth Luy.



This operation was owned by General R. G. O'Brien and was located in Josephine county on Louise creek beyond Grants Pass. Josephine county miners, William Robertson and Virgil E. Hull, struck an "enrichment" in their quartz vein in 1940 and took out gold valued at $20,480 in four days, in what was formerly known as Bunker Hill mine.

This operation was carried on by the Squaw Lake Mining company. The basket opens claws to pick up quartz, closes them with its find and then carries the rocks to be deposited in another location, played upon by streams of water. The photo was donated to the museum collection by the late Miss Alice Hanley.