

MINING AND THE MINERS

The Green Valley Hiking Club's club hikes so often come across abandoned mines and mining sites. Just what activities took place at such locations and what were the miners like? The Mining Camps Speak, by Beth and Bill Sagstetter (GV Joyner Library), offers us useful and fascinating vignettes of life in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries in the western half of the United States.

HARD-ROCK MINING

So where does hard rock or underground mining come in? Remember, the prospector takes his gold pan and, having "mined out" his placer claim, advances up the stream to where the gold ultimately might have come from. He pans all the while, and when he no longer finds gold in his pan, he has passed the spot where the gold originated. Then he backtracks and identifies the likely spot of the gold's origin. Or he simply moves up the stream's banks, looking for a likely gold-bearing outcropping, typically of quartz. When he finds this place, he files a claim on it. He tries to sell his claim to a mining company. Technically at this point, hard-rock mining begins.

Once mining went underground, it was no longer a one-man operation. Developing a mine became an extremely expensive proposition. Roads had to be built to the site and buildings constructed. Boilers had to be hauled in. Shafts needed to be dug and hoists installed. Maybe a mill was needed and a power source to be arranged for. A small town had to be built, and usually in a remote place (as witness Total Wreck Mine or Kentucky Camp). This called for big money, for capitalists and investors from the East or Europe. Thus the prospector found the site, which he then patented with the federal government. Then his job became selling that claim to a capitalist (which is a story unto itself...maybe as per a used car salesman!).

Hard-rock miners were a different breed from most prospectors. In hard-rock mining, the gold and silver are encased in rock, as opposed to placering, where the gold has been weathered away from the surrounding rock. A hard-rock miner was a man at the top of his profession. He was highly paid, and although he worked for a mining company, he probably had a claim or two of his own. He was an expert with explosives. He could recognize the difference between valuable ore and barren rock at a glance in flickering candlelight. With a three hundred pound Burleigh Drill, he was as skilled as a sculptor.

He wore a felt hat called a hard boil, a hat boiled repeatedly in a resin so that it would become as hard as a modern construction helmet. A loose shirt, clothes would be spattered with candle drippings.

He carried his ingeniously designed lunch pail into the mine. The lower section was filled with coffee or tea; the middle compartment held his dessert and pasty, a concoction of meat/potatoes/vegetables inside a pastry shell; the top of the pail was a lid, with a tin cup inside. Upon arriving at the shaft, he would hang up his pail and place

a lighted candle underneath, which heated the coffee and steamed the pasty. Ingenious.

Mostly Europeans worked the mines. Native-born Americans made up only 20% of all the miners. Austria, Ireland, Finland, Italy and other continental nations provided the majority of hard-rock miners. Americans were known as "tramp miners," those who fled a current work place to find a new job at a recently discovered strike in another district.

Mining was dangerous. The leading cause of death in mining camps was silicosis, caused by inhaling the dust kicked up by drills. Later a stream of water was directed at the drill bits to lessen the exposure to dust. Actually, the most dangerous part of a miner's day was coming and going. He was lowered by hoist on a bucket down to the main mine shaft and raised after his shift was over. He had to be alert to the bucket's hitting the sides of the shaft while he was standing on the bucket's rim.

Mule-drawn trams on very narrow-gauge tracks moved the ore from horizontal shafts to the main vertical shaft. Mules were lowered down the shaft, blindfolded and bound by rope, so they wouldn't fall off the bucket. They stayed in the mine for life. They went blind but were cared for in stable areas, with oats and straw lowered down to them and manure raised out from the shaft.

Miners would drill a series of holes with hand-held drills powered by four-pound hammers. The holes would be about three feet deep. The holes would then be filled with sticks of dynamite, with fuses of varying length corresponding to the detonating sequence the miners wanted the explosions to create. It could take an entire ten-hour shift to drill the holes. This was dangerous work because an undetonated stick of dynamite from a previous blasting sequence might be awaiting an unsuspecting drill. BOOM!

To help supplement their salaries, miners in mines with rich and visible gold ore would sneak out small nuggets in their lunch buckets or clothes. This "highgrading," as it was called, was done mostly in very large mines run by big corporations and absentee investors. Given the danger and extremely physical labor of hard-rock mining, highgrading was condoned in the miner's community. The nuggets were used as payment for a variety of services and goods.

(Compiled by Frank Surpless, 03/05)