

# IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## REFERENCE SERIES

### THUNDER MOUNTAIN

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Thunder Mountain received its name from the Caswell brothers (who prospected the district from 1894 on) at least as early as 1897 when the story of their find became known. The derivation of the term is uncertain. But a most reasonable explanation of the name is that when storms hit the region, Rainbow Peak (the high point in the area) attracts a good deal of lightning, and Thunder Mountain (a low, inconspicuous projection across the canyon) acts as an excellent sounding board; the ground does not actually tremble, but the thunder is so loud that it seems to; on that account, Thunder Mountain is aptly named, regardless of whether this is the actual explanation. There are numerous such thunder mountains in the Salmon River mountains, and possibly the name was applied earlier to others as well.

Slides of soft, disintegrated rhyolite which absorbs water in a wet year and begins to roll silently along slick faults, have occurred frequently: the one in 1909 which plugged Monumental Creek and flooded the town of Roosevelt is the most recent of many in the area. These slides are of some commercial importance, since they contain the gold that is found there. Prospectors and miners dug around in the mud flows, since the gold was precipitated rather widely over the surface in a manner most extraordinary for gold mining. These remineralized mud flows had some especially rich gold deposits on the surface--gold, in fact, and even precipitated on old (thousands of years old, that is) wood chips in really a most irregular manner. Prospectors there got the notion that Thunder Mountain (or at least the rhyolite mud slides on it) was a mountain of gold; there was enough solidification of mud slides from the action of silicic acid as to give these essentially placer deposits the appearance of soft rock which might be worked by quartz methods.

The gold (already precipitated by carbon through a process much like that of a ball mill) was easily recoverable, and the enriched surface concentration of the hillside mud placers gave an entirely false impression of the extent and richness of the district. Salting of samples ("salting" is the process of enriching a sample after it is dug by slipping some already mined gold into the test before assaying) was more than ordinarily common there: John Oberbillig, for example, assayed in there in 1904 and caught some of his clients salting their samples so thoroughly that even barren bull quartz would go \$20 to the ton.

The mountain of gold turned out to be a mountain with gold skin; there was a great rush there in 1902, but the entire district in the early days produced only about \$350,000--and most of that was out of the Dewey mine. There was a lot of gold at Thunder Mountain, but most of it came from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. By the time of the 1909 slide, mining there was almost entirely suspended, and as the town gradually flooded, there was not much to lose. By bringing thousands of prospectors into a wilderness, though, Thunder Mountain had genuine importance in leading to discoveries of new mining areas such as Marshall Lake and Stibnite, as well as reviving old ones such as Loon Creek. Later production finally raised the Thunder Mountain total to over half a million dollars. After a forty-year lapse, aside from a minor 1946 yield following closure in 1941, production at Thunder Mountain resumed in 1908 and 1981 with renewal of Dewey's old property there.

Prepared from information provided by Ernest Oberbillig.

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