

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

ERA AND MARTIN

Number 157

May 1980

Not far from Goodale's cutoff--an Oregon Trail emigrant road which ran near Arco, Carey, and Fairfield--lead silver lodes brought miners to an area close to Craters of the Moon. James B. Hood, who participated in making the 1879 mineral discoveries there, spent several years convincing potential investors that he had anything of value. After the Wood River rush of 1880, he had less trouble. A Blackfoot-Wood River stage and freight road ran along Goodale's route, making his potential mining camp more accessible.

Two years after he began working there, eight lead silver veins were subject to development. One had a twenty foot shaft which exposed a lode that tested as high as a hundred ounces of silver per ton, enriched slightly with two dollars more in gold. Outcrops from other veins assayed up to one or two hundred ounces, and two camps began to grow up there. James Hood's location came to be known as Era. Frank Martin's valuable horn silver mine supported Era even more than Hood's property did. About four miles away another, longer lasting community named for S. D. Martin (Frank's brother) grew up and flourished some of the time.

Development proceeded slowly at Era. Hood drove a 240 foot tunnel in 1882 and began to build an ore reserve. By the middle of 1884, two loads of Era ore reached Hailey for testing. These yielded 485 and 633 ounces of silver a ton. Then Frank Martin's four ton shipment to Salt Lake produced 814 ounces a ton. Eastern capital was attracted by these encouraging values, and Frank Martin--whose horn silver ore did so well in Salt Lake--decided to employ twelve miners to develop his property. On August 1, 1885 he managed to sell his famous horn silver mine for \$62,500. Era began to thrive. A townsite had been established for Era in the spring of 1885, and another townsite at Martin followed late that year. (Martin, in fact, had a post office from June 21, 1882 to April 30, 1940, while Era had one from August 26, 1885 to July 5, 1894.) Additional discoveries eight miles away on Antelope Creek in May of 1885 soon created still more interest in that promising area. By August, Era had a dozen tents and four or five cabins, with some frame buildings under construction. A general store, a boarding house, a restaurant, a blacksmith shop, a barber shop, a hotel, and three saloons occupied those tents and cabins. All these services were available to potential miners who, as yet, had no possibility of employment. forty people spent the winter there in hope that operations eventually would commence.

In 1886, Salt Lake investors provided Era with an economic base that had been needed so badly for a year or more. A twenty stamp mill, capable of expansion to forty stamps, was built that summer. Around eighty freight teams, many provided by Mormons based in a camp

of their own two miles away--were employed to haul in 750 tons of mining equipment. With a hundred thousand dollars invested in a five level mill and recovery plant that utilized a roasting process, and another hundred thousand devoted to development of their horn silver mine, Salt Lake capitalists installed a fine modern facility. Their mill had a handsome electric light system a year before Boise had electric power, and by the fall of 1886, twenty-five miners and another twenty-five mill workers were employed. For a while that winter they produced \$7,000 a week. The next summer, they managed to ship \$1,600 to \$1,800 on alternate days. Forty-eight miners worked underground by that time. About \$250,000 was realized in 1886-1887 from their horn silver mine. Generally, though, their milling experiment failed. Sometimes they managed to operate as a custom mill, but by 1888, about \$5,000 worth of Era ore from a major new 1887 discovery was hauled to Nicholia for smelting. Then an 1888 price collapse created additional problems. After Nicholia's smelter shut down, Era had an inactive, slightly used stamp mill and no good processing plant capable of handling local ore available within a reasonable distance.

In spite of recovery problems, J. W. Ballentine managed to sell his galena mine at Era--the one which had shipped to Nicholia--for \$90,000 to Alexander Majors of Kansas City, who was joined by a group of Wyoming investors in the summer of 1889. They employed thirty-five or forty men to bring in new machinery and to sink a 275 foot shaft from their 175 foot tunnel on that promising new lode. They leased Era's existing twenty-stamp mill, but could not perfect a recovery process either. Although they tried twenty-five per cent wage cuts (an expedient that lost them only a fifth of their employees), they still could not operate profitably. By November of 1889, their operation was shut down by judicial injunction because they failed to pay \$40,000 of their purchase price. Lessors on Martin's horn silver mine kept up a little activity at Era, but litigation kept the other major property inactive for two years. Finally one of the Ketchum sellers bought that property back at sheriff's sale for the \$40,000 overdue payment, November 7, 1891. But little else resulted from that transaction.

Resumption of milling at Era, July 1, 1893, was undertaken with a force of seventy miners, but by fall, that operation had failed also.

An end of costly litigation in 1894 helped revive the major mine there. Some modest small-scale activity went on until 1897, when major development resumed. Additional efforts in 1901 helped encourage that camp. A small amount of lead was recovered there in 1908, and subsequent brief revivals came in 1913 and 1928. In spite of repeated obstacles and recovery problems, that region finally managed to produce about \$400,000 in the nineteenth century.