

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

FLORENCE

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Gold discoveries at Florence followed E. D. Pierce's successful 1860 prospecting expedition to Orofino Creek about sixty-five miles farther north. A major Northwest gold rush to Pierce led to a far greater excitement at Florence after a 23-member Salmon River prospecting party found rich placers there, August 19-20, 1861. After going out to Elk City for supplies, a small band returned and organized a new mining district at Florence, September 16. Then they began to prepare for a short fall mining season before operations would have to be suspended during a season of deep winter snow and cold weather. At an elevation of more than 6,000 feet, Florence had severe winters and cool summers.

Fully aware that Florence had far more promise than Pierce or Elk City for those who sought to get rich quickly, the discovery party suppressed the story of their new find as long as was possible. Before the middle of September, though, miners around Elk City were aware that the Salmon River mines were something really special; stories of claims that went \$20 to the pan, that produced \$79 from eighty shovelfuls of gravel, or that went \$100 to the day, set off intense excitement. Confirmation of the rumors in Elk City, October 4, led instantly to a frantic mining stampede to Florence. Another wild rush followed from Pierce, October 11. The new region turned out to be exactly what those who had come to the Clearwater had been looking for all the time: a district where a small company of miners could recover gold worth thousands of dollars in only a few weeks. To the average miner, that seemed better than working all summer long, even for high wages.

Reports of exceptional gold yields at Florence began to circulate over the northwest late in the fall. Small companies at work on Miller's Gulch and Babboon Gulch in particular, were boasting unheard of profits. T. H. Mallory reported the earliest of these at the beginning of October: "Miller's Creek is perhaps the richest. From the first pan of dirt washed, taken out of the first hole sunk in this creek, \$25 was obtained. Miller washed out with the pan [in one] afternoon \$100. Claims were immediately staked off on this creek and the party went to work. Each claim has since averaged, with the rocker, from \$75 to \$100 per day to the hand. Babboon Gulch is next richer. I have seen \$75 washed out in 10 hours by one man, using the pan alone. Nasan's Gulch pays well. Five men have just cleaned up \$700, the result of 10 hours work with the rocker in this gulch. Hall's Gulch, Smith's Gulch, Pioneer Gulch, and Healey's Creek will each pay at least 3 ounces to the hand." By the middle of November, 350 men had reached Florence and many were reputed to be making \$100 to \$500 a day with rockers. (Water was so scarce it had to be used

over and over; miners actually were trying to operate their rockers with something pretty close to mud). In the latter part of November, a \$45,000 gold shipment from Florence--with \$7,000 from one mine alone--reached The Dalles and Portland. Stories of production of \$1,000 an hour and \$1,600 a day began to surface: wild exaggerations naturally gained currency during the fantastic Salmon River excitement, and none of the really astonishing reports could have been regarded as typical, in any event. When Jacob Weiser's Babboon Gulch claim--worked by four men with two rockers--provided the happy return of \$2,680 (or in another account forty pounds) on November 19, and \$3,360 (sixty pounds) on November 20, the peak of the first season had been reached. This exceptional claim produced \$20,000 in eight days and Weiser sold his interest for \$10,000 two or three weeks later. Then he retired from mining after two months work "with a large fortune" by the standards of that period. Babboon Gulch was named after Peter Bablaine, who discovered rich placers in the gulch. Bablaine, noted for his striking "resemblance to his simian ancestors" reached Walla Walla, December 12, with sixty pounds of gold and Jacob Weiser followed with another "mule loaded with dust" a few days later.

Enormous production figures--especially those of Jacob Weiser's company--attracted great attention over the entire Pacific Coast. The fact was, though, that there were only a very limited number of really big finds. And the exceptional production figures made them sound better than they actually were: to recover fantastic sums in a day, Weiser's men--and the others also--had to spend a week or two getting ready for a big clean-up. It was not as if they could go on regularly with thousands of dollars in gold each day. Yet even the ordinary claims around Florence were doing surprisingly well during the initial fall season. Some thirty to fifty claims were active late that year, and many--perhaps most--of them were good for at least \$25 to \$50 a day. But the big producers got all the attention, and miners would hardly speak of claims worth only \$50 a day at Florence.

Severe hardships afflicted those who were bold enough to attempt a trip to Florence during the exceptionally bitter winter of 1862. The Columbia froze solid for several months, interrupting communication between Portland, The Dalles, and Walla Walla. An unusual number of travelers froze or were lost from exposure, and those who did manage to get through to Florence ahead of the bad weather found themselves short of supplies. Miners who had come in early had prepared for the winter, but when their limited resources had to be stretched to keep latecomers alive, the peril of starvation faced the camp. Worse still, those who had arrived late could accomplish little or nothing, since prospecting had to be suspended entirely until deep winter snow could melt. A very limited amount of mining went on despite extreme difficulty during some of the winter although most of the miners spent most of their effort fueling big fires necessary to keep their claims thawed out, and not much could be accomplished in a day's work. Only the exceptionally rich claims were productive enough to induce anyone to work under such adverse circumstances.

All mining at Florence had to suspend before the end of January, 1862, when it got so cold that rockers could not be kept thawed out. Dr. G. A. Noble's thermometer froze up completely more than once, leaving some embarrassing gaps in his carefully kept weather records, and even toward the end of February, very few could work their claims

at all. Those who did try to operate spasmodically through most of the winter met with indifferent success. More than 300 were unemployed altogether. Not until the big thaw, March 20, marked the end of the worst of winter, could mining resume on a scale that amounted to anything at all. But by then many of the miners had been beset by scurvy, and most of them had gone so far in debt to those with rich claims and provisions that their winter supply bill promised to leave them impoverished even if they should turn up some really rich ground to work in the spring.

Spring came slowly in Florence Basin in 1862. Some sluicing was possible immediately after March 20, when the temperature suddenly rose to sixty and three men made \$4,000 in a spectacular day reminiscent of the activity of the preceding fall. Some of the spring rush commenced to reach Florence during that break in the winter--a population gain matched by an exodus of those unemployed who had to leave for lack of supplies. An early April snow pretty well shut the camp down again: snow depth which had exceeded ten feet in February rose again to eight feet and mining was set back severely. By April 8 only a few could work at all, and those--limited to two or three hours a day--mined under extreme disadvantage. By April 29, conditions improved sufficiently that rockers and sluices could operate six to eight hours a day. Then another ten days of rain and snow in early May brought another setback. Snow depths were still an awkward 3-1/2 feet deep May 10, and mining still was difficult. Much effort had to be diverted into packing supplies sixteen miles through deep snow to that remote high mountain basin until pack animals finally could reach the camp, May 16. After that happy event, the spring mining season could get underway.

Water--either too much or too little--constituted a major problem at Florence during most of 1862. Within a month or two after the spring deluge subsided, water shortages began to curb mining activity there. Some operators, lacking water to keep their sluices going, had to go back to rockers by the middle of July. To rectify that situation, a lot of effort went into building a ditch to serve the claims with water shortages. But by September 20, hard times at Florence were reported for lack of water. By that time the big production at Florence was over.

One grand season in 1862 proved sufficient to work out most of the better ground at Florence. More than 10,000 miners found their way to that remote camp during the big year, but there was so much coming and going that the maximum population scarcely ever exceeded 8,000. And even at the peak of the season, not more than 3,000 to 3,200 men could engage in actual mining of their thousand or so claims that were staked. While many found employment as carpenters, merchants, blacksmiths, packers, hotel keepers, bartenders, gamblers, or even as road agents, thousands of others could find nothing to do except to leave to prospect new areas. But those who were lucky enough to have claims--or even to work at high wages--did very well indeed.

Production in Florence during the height of the 1862 season very likely reached \$50,000 a day, and although statistics to show the year's total yield were not kept at the time, the figure very likely exceeded \$6,000,000. At the peak of the season, about one-fourth of the claims paid only expenses, five-eighths were good enough for \$20 to \$40 a day, and the other eighth were thought to have ranged from

\$40 up to \$1,500 daily. Yet many claims, especially those which made astonishingly high production, did not make great yields daily; fabulous returns came only after considerable time was spent in essential (but not immediately productive) work. Since a lot of effort went into opening a claim--building cabins, wood gathering, whipsawing lumber for sluices, or even ditch digging--and since much time even on an active claim went to preparatory work--stripping overburden and hauling gravel to a rocker or sluice--high daily production rates could be realized in many cases only on a limited number of days.

Winter snows at Florence commenced October 1, 1862, interrupting work that was still going on in spite of the water shortage. After a shutdown for a cold October, mining was not impeded during the mild days of early November, and completion of a much needed ditch in November made recovery from lower grade deposits possible. By the end of November, though, the 1862 season was over. Much good mining remained in Florence for 1863, although the big paying claims had nearly all been washed out. About 500 men expected to spend the winter of 1862 and 1863 in camp; although snow depth did not compare with that of the year before, the weather was cold, and there was little incentive for difficult winter production. Those who did spend the 1863 mining season in Florence--not to exceed 500 or 600 men--had good paying claims or worked for good wages. Florence now stood second in population to Warren's, and although the figure reached 575 for the September census, only eighty-nine votes were cast in the October election. The district by the end of 1863 was "principally worked out," and not more than fifty people remained for the winter of 1863 and 1864. Florence, which had been rivaled only by Cariboo in 1862 now sank into a second or third rate district: "no mining camp flared up more suddenly or more intensively than Salmon River or flickered more quickly."

Although there was a flurry of excitement over quartz mining at Florence by 1866, and although some placer mining continued there for the next twenty or thirty years, the district largely was given over to the Chinese until a general gold mining revival during the panic of 1893--including a major quartz revival in 1896--made for considerable excitement. But Florence never did remotely match the big season of 1862 during the later years.

Altogether, approximately \$9,600,000 in gold came from Florence--a total value that increased to about \$1.54 billion in 1985 gold prices.