

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

SITE REPORT - YANKEE FORK-ROBINSON BAR

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Historic-site reports contain information designed to assist in two preservation functions. One is preservation planning at the local level. The other is the work of federal agencies in carrying out their responsibilities to comply with historic-preservation requirements prescribed by federal statutes and regulations. These reports summarize local archaeological, historical, and geographical contexts; existing surveys of historic sites; architectural, engineering, industrial; and other cultural resources; and available maps and literature concerning each area. Natural geographical, rather than governmental, boundaries have been used to identify seventy-two areas that vary greatly in size. Site reports reflect a broad cultural and geographical disparity characteristic of diverse regional components found in Idaho, but the areas are designed to incorporate cultural elements of immediate local significance that need to be taken into account for preservation planning.

1. Geographical context: Yankee Fork and Basin Creek enter Salmon River above Robinson's Bar, while Warm Springs Creek comes in opposite them. With some lesser streams, these drainages take in a bloc of mining, logging, and range land adjacent to one of Salmon River's many canyons. Roads up Yankee Fork and Warm Springs Creek connect with a highway along Salmon River through this area. Elevations rise from at Robinson's Bar to
to .

2. Prehistory and significant archaeological sites: People have inhabited southern Idaho for fourteen thousand years or more. Until about eight thousand years ago they were noted primarily as big game hunters. Since then, they specialized more in camas, bitterroot, and other natural crops and seeds, as well as in smaller game. But they continued to hunt large game that remained after earlier elephants, camels, giant sloths, and other ice age creatures left as climatic conditions changed. Snake River Plains big game hunters came into the Salmon River Mountains to fish and to hunt mountain sheep and other local game. Evidence of their activity there goes back for eight thousand years or so.

3. Cultural resource surveys and archaeological literature:

4. Historical summary: Yankee Fork got off to a surprisingly slow start. Joel Richardson and a party of Yankee prospectors examined Yankee Fork while traveling through that part of the country in 1866 to 1867. Aside from bestowing a name on the stream, they left little imprint before retreating to Montana. By 1868, a few men were washing out gold at nearby Robinson's Bar, and after the rush to Loon Creek in 1869, mining was underway on both sides of Yankee Fork. Prospectors radiated out in all directions from Loon Creek. D. B. Varney and Sylvester Jordan brought a group of miners over to Yankee Fork in 1870, where most of their claims proved a disappointment. Only one of the new Jordan Creek claims yielded enough (in this case, \$20 per man a day) to justify working. The next spring the decline of Loon Creek inspired two more gold hunters to cross over to Yankee Fork. They had a hard time of it. According to Clitus Barbour, "Arnold and Estis [Estes] the discoverers of Yankee Fork camp, toiled in the snow and storm twenty-five days transporting their supplies in there on sleds from Loon Creek, a distance of only twenty-five miles, over a divide thousands of feet high." On the strength of opening some discovery claims good for \$8.00 a day, about twenty miners organized a district and went to work. By the end of July, five companies were preparing their claims for mining. Fifty or sixty men, mostly from Loon Creek, were on hand. Some of them "were busy opening their claims, while others were running up and down the river, uncertain what to do, and waiting for the turn of events." Not until the new claims turned out profitable did the doubters go to work. Even then Yankee Fork attracted little outside interest. Only fifteen men spent the winter there, and no grounds for a stampede materialized in 1872. Lode discoveries, in fact did not come on any important scale for three more years.

Searching on a Sunday afternoon in June, 1875, for the lodes from which Jordan Creek's extensive--but otherwise unimpressive--placers originated, W. A. Norton came across the kind of vein that every prospector dreamt of finding some day. Very few ever had this kind of luck. In a high grade vein he noticed a seam of exceptionally rich ore only two or three inches thick. With the help of a partner or two, he was able to pound out \$11,500 worth of gold in a hand mortar in thirty days. That was enough to pay some oppressive debts and to start development of the mine. No rush to Yankee Fork attended Norton's discovery of the fabulous Charles Dickens, however. His find went by almost unnoticed. Then, when winter struck early, Yankee Fork was depopulated almost entirely. Packers had no opportunity to supply the high mountain camps; Yankee Fork, therefore, boasted a population of only three, while neighboring Loon Creek declined to only four.

When prospecting could resume in 1876, other extremely rich lodes followed the Charles Dickens. Most notable of all was the General Custer which James Baxter, E. M. Dodge, and Morgan McKeim discovered August 17. In a manner somewhat different from the

Charles Dickens with its wealth of ore suitable for hand mortaring, the Custer also rated as a prospector's dream. In this case, most of the vein happened to lie exposed on the surface. (The way miners describe it, most of the hanging wall simply had slid off the vein.) Thus the mines could avoid a great deal of expensive development work (driving tunnels and raises or shafts deep into the mountain along a mineralized vein in order to verify presence of enough ore to justify bringing in a mill to crush gold or silver-bearing rock) ordinarily required before a prospector could sell out his discovery. Erosion already had done most of the development work here. Moreover, the relatively low cost of getting out high-grade ore from the Custer enhanced its value greatly. One man could pull down twelve tons of ore a day. E. W. Jones reported in 1877 "the owners merely break the ore loose . . . tumble it down in large masses to the dump, break it up, sort it and sack it." At that point, their ore was ready for packing to a mill in Salt Lake, where sixty thousand dollars was realized from the small open cut. Somehow even this marvelous discovery did not generate an old-fashioned gold rush to Yankee Fork. A complicated and somewhat peculiar claims litigation, involving the original owners as well as two or three sets of subsequent purchasers, held up development of the Custer for some time. The three original locators eventually received \$60,000, \$105,000, and \$121,000 for their claims, depending, apparently, on how expertly they held out.

During the delay, prospecting went on in the locality in general. D. B. Varney and some other old-timers from Loon Creek came across the Montana along with other promising mines high on Estes Mountain in 1877. Soon they were having high-grade ore packed out for milling. By this time, the Yankee Fork region had enough activity to justify building a town or two. Bonanza City began to grow up during the summer of 1877 near the Charles Dickens, and another community of Custer followed over near the Custer mine a year or two later. Many of the settlers came from Loon Creek, or from distant Rocky Bar. Utah mines also had a good representation in the new city of Bonanza, which showed more promise than growth during its first two seasons.

Lode miners generally hoped that rich surface deposits would help meet the heavy expense of developing a major quartz mine, so that they would not have to sell out or bring in large scale outside capital. Norton's Charles Dickens was one of the exceptional instances in which this was actually possible. From 1876 through 1878, after his highly lucrative initial season, the Charles Dickens yielded about \$60,000, mostly through hand mortaring the richest part of the ore. In the first summer, he had \$3,400 worth of rock hauled out on pack mules and then freighted to San Francisco. After his mine was better developed, he had another batch of ore packed out to a mill at Banner. Then in 1878, he sent out \$30,000 worth of rock (still by pack mule)

for milling in Salt Lake, another \$3,300 to Bannack, Montana, and \$7,000 worth clear across the Atlantic to Freiburg, where German experts could process it efficiently for testing purposes. In order to get around such expensive hauls, Norton put in two water power arastras which handled two and a half tons daily. Made of local rock and wood, these inexpensive arastras--old-style, Spanish mills--yielded \$33,400 in 1878 and produced \$40,000 more in 1879; in addition, over \$25,000 worth of better rock was packed out from the Charles Dickens that year. Norton's arastras were losing over one-third of the gold, but others were handling rich ore much more efficiently.

A belated--or else premature--gold rush to Yankee Fork finally brought thousands of miners in the spring of 1879. Bonanza City, which could boast only one store and one saloon in the summer of 1878, finally boomed. By the beginning of April, the *Salt Lake Tribune* reported the roads to Yankee Fork to be "lined with stampeders to the Salmon River mines. They are afoot or on horseback, in bull teams and shaky wagons, and to old timers it looks like Pike's Peak and White Pine rush." Writing from Idaho City, July 16, Milton Kelly noted that "Bonanza City is growing rapidly--as fast as building material can be obtained.

There is already a population of two thousand persons in the town and immediate vicinity, all anxious to build and locate permanently. There have been some seven or eight thousand people in those mountains in the present season. Many have left and others are leaving daily, but they are that class who went there to seek employment as miners, and finding the camps new and with little work going on have concluded that they came too early. I have talked with some of these men and they all agree that Yankee Fork is a very rich mining district, but that some time must elapse before developments have progressed far enough to make it a desirable place for those who have to depend upon their labor as miners." by fall, Bonanza's population had stabilized at several hundred, and times again were dull.

Before large scale production could be achieved at Yankee Fork, a road had to be built and a major mill installed. More than any others, the Custer mine (together with its neighbor on the same vein, the Unknown) justified erection of a large mill. During the litigation over title, a series of high-priced transactions for portions of the lode absorbed what capital was available. One Salt Lake commentator suggested, quite reasonably, when one of the purchasers had spent \$60,000 for a disputed title to a two-thirds interest, that "Sixty thousand dollars is a big price to pay for two-thirds of a law suit; but otherwise the property is cheap at a few hundred thousand, and they may compromise the matter all around." But by the spring of 1879, Joseph Pfeiffer of Rocky Bar had brought in San Francisco engineers and capital, and had arranged purchases enough to enable work and production at the Custer to resume. "People generally thought him crazy" to be investing so heavily in an

underdeveloped prospect located hundreds of miles from a railroad and on a practically unimproved pack trail "in a wild, sparsely-settled country, surrounded by hordes of hostile Indians"

Yet Pfeiffer had recovered his initial \$60,000 investment by shipping ore to Salt Lake, and his California associates supplied the balance (over twice that amount) to straighten out title. The next step was to stop hauling ore by pack mule to distant mills in Atlanta or Salt Lake; a road to Challis--over which stage service to Bonanza commenced October 3, 1879--made it possible for Pfeiffer's San Francisco capitalists to bring in a thirty-stamp mill for the Custer. In spite of all the excitement, production of Yankee Fork mines amounted to only \$420,000 in 1879. Then, "after many unavoidable and tedious delays," the Custer mill was completed at the very end of 1880. Production in 1881 rose immediately to over a million dollars, and the Yankee Fork mines at last were showing their great potential.

Once the large Custer mill got into operation, production there quickly surpassed the total realized from the Charles Dickens--previously regarded more highly--and eclipsed the Montana as well. Managed by competent mining engineers backed by adequate capital, the Custer ran steadily for over a decade: around eight million dollars came from the most notable property in that part of Idaho. Both the Charles Dickens and the Montana had a very different experience. Their extreme richness enabled the original prospectors to retain control and to go ahead mining the better ore according to a procedure known as gouging. Most of the ore, while still high grade by ordinary standards, was not rich enough to take out by primitive methods and to pack over the mountains to a distant mill. Here, as in remote mining camps throughout the West after 1866--and especially during the long depression that followed the panic of 1873--large reserves of gold and silver bearing rock were discarded by the gougers, who did the best they could with limited capital and facilities for processing ore. W. A. Norton obtained a half million from the Charles Dickens before he died in Salt Lake July 15, 1884. Then his mine was closed pending settlement of the estate. Now it was too late for satisfactory development, and Norton's successors ran into debt trying to make the Charles Dickens pay. The Montana mine on Estes Mountain met a similar fate. Open to a depth of five hundred feet, with only the truly high-grade ore gouged out, the mine had to close in spite of the large blocks of ore remaining. "This considerable development was all done by a horse whim and produced ore to a value of \$350,000, every pound of which was shipped to market by pack train at a great expense and still paid a margin of fully forty per cent profit." The original locators who managed the enterprise "spent their profits with a lavish hand while they were coming easy and were unable to properly equip the mine with necessary machinery when it was too deep for hand work." So they had to shut down and look for a

buyer who might try to go ahead with major investment for development. (The original locators spent until 1904 making a satisfactory deal.) In contrast to these failures, the Custer--which had not been injured by a little early gouging in getting started--could continue to produce regularly as long as its ore held out. Actually, about 80% of the Custer's ore turned out to be in the exposed part of the vein, and the best part of the rock was crushed by 1886.

Financial collapse of the Charles Dickens, marked by a sheriff's sale in Salt Lake in June 1886, came at a fortunate time for the otherwise unlucky creditors who had to take over the old property. By 1886, expansion of railroad transportation and economic development of southern Idaho had made possible a great revival of lode mining in various camps--such as Rocky Bar and Silver City--that had gone through the same kind of experience during the gouging era. British investment in mining properties in southern Idaho expanded greatly in 1886, and in July the Salt Lake creditors of the Charles Dickens managed to unload that appropriately named mine onto a new British concern "organized under the leadership of a rear admiral in the royal Navy." Capitalized for 250,000 pounds in the beginning, the new British company expanded to 412,000 pounds the next year so that the Custer mine and mill could be acquired. That way the efficient, thirty-stamp Custer Mill could be used to handle Charles Dickens ore as well. After this merger, the new Dickens-Custer Company, Ltd., had exceptional fortune in the London market: the stock issue was over-subscribed and one pound shares were going for a premium of two shillings in February 1888. Later that year, though, the British investors learned that company officials were engaged in some unsavory manipulation of their Dickens-Custer stock. Worse still, the company operated at a loss totaling 37,000 pounds over the next four years. The problem was not failure to keep operations going: in 1890 the company had one hundred and fifteen men at work freighting, cutting wood and mining on Yankee Fork. After two years of trying to find some other mining region to transfer their investment to, the Dickens-Custer Company shut down in October 1892. That ended the initial lode mining boom on Yankee Fork. Stockholders in London, however, were fully as disturbed by the disaster as were the miners of Bonanza. According to Professor W. T. Jackson, "Through ignorance and mismanagement of this enterprise, the British investing public had squandered thousands of pounds of sterling." Once again, some large but played-out western mines had been unloading on an unsuspecting London market.

Lode mining on Yankee Fork did not revive on any important scale until a new company acquired the British holdings in 1895.

Known as the Lucky boy, this concern utilized the Custer mill in working a major vein parallel to the Custer; before operations finally halted in 1904, the Lucky Boy had turned out about a million dollars. Modest in comparison to the Custer, this total

was double that of any of the other Yankee Fork lodes. The Lucky Boy had ore that kept its value as miners worked down the vein. Cost of hoisting up a steep inclined shaft increased with every foot of greater depth, and finally became great enough to consume all the profits. At that point, operations naturally ceased. Hopes that the company would drive a new low tunnel in order to resume work sustained the camp at Custer for a time. Moreover, in 1904 when the Lucky Boy quit, the original locators of the Montana lode at last sold out to a group who drove an essential, new 1,800 foot tunnel to strike their vein at greater depth in 1906 and 1907. Nothing much more came of this enterprise however; perhaps the old owners were just as well off having spent their profits for their own enjoyment instead of developing their mine any further in this profitless way. Across from the Montana, the Sunbeam Company brought in a new mill in 1904. Attaining significant production in 1907 and 1908, the Sunbeam gained distinction as the major producer of Custer County in 1909. Enlargement of the mill and installation of the hydroelectric plant at Sunbeam Dam in 1910 was intended to enable the processing of enormous reserves of low-grade rock similar in many ways to the mineral deposits of Thunder Mountain. The next year the Sunbeam had to shut down and forget about their low-grade mountain; thus their expansion and power plant came too late to be of much use. Attempts at dredging Yankee Fork also were undertaken in these years, but major production of this kind was reserved for future use.

Even though Custer and Bonanza gained the noble status of ghost towns over the years after 1912, mining on Yankee Fork still had a future. Some minor operations occurred intermittently until the depression improved the situation for gold miners. Finally the extensive low-grade placers which discouraged the original prospectors after 1870 were dredged with success from 1939 to 1942 and 1946 through 1951. This operation grossed \$1,800,000--larger than any except for the Custer itself.

With this final boost, Yankee Fork was responsible for some twelve to fourteen million dollars total production in gold and silver. Well over half of this total came from the Custer alone.

Additional information: W. Turrentine Jackson, "British Capital in Northwest Mines," Pacific Northwest Quarterly (July 1956), 47:75-85, and Esther Yarber, Land of the Yankee Fork (1963).

5. Historical documentation and literature:

6. Historic sites inventory:

7. Industrial archaeological and engineering sites summary: Surface evidence of placer mining in this area offers opportunities for study of industrial procedures utilized in historic production. Hydraulic pits, patterns of dredging

operations, or tailings that distinguish hill claims from stream claims--or that identify Chinese services--provide information of historic importance. Prospector's pits disclose gravels that were searched unsuccessfully for gold. Ditches, flumes, stream diversions, and similar evidence of water sources also are important.

Lode mining operations left a variety of indications, many of them relatively permanent in nature. Disturbance of surface outcrops includes trenches and exploratory shafts. In other places, tunnels and raises or stopes that reached surface outlets reveal important aspects of mining activity. If accessible, underground workings have still greater importance for industrial archaeology and engineering analysis. Abandoned tools and equipment, along with items like timbering in tunnels and stopes, add to this record.

8. Architectural resources:

9. United State Geological Survey Maps:

Boulder Chain Lakes	1964	Livingston Creek	1964
Casino Lakes	1963	Mt. Jordan	1964
Challis Creek Lakes	1963	Obsidian	1963
Custer	1963	Robinson Bar	1964
East Basin Creek	1964	Sunbeam	1964
Elevenmile Creek	1963	Thompson Creek	1964
Knapp Lake	1964	Washington Peak	1964

10. Cultural resource management recommendations:

(This information has not been edited.)

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