

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

GILMORE AND THE VIOLA MINING REGION

Number 209

August 1976

Lead-silver mining areas of substantial magnitude made the Lemhi range near the Birch Creek divide an important mineral region for a half century after 1880. Together with the celebrated Viola mine across Birch Creek near the Continental Divide, they accounted for more than sixteen million dollars of Idaho's metal production.

Interest in this area goes back as far as mining rush from Leesburg to Little Lost River, June 15-16, 1867. But lead-silver lodes offered little attraction for prospectors for more than a decade after that. Finally an upper Lemhi mining district was organized in the Gilmore area in 1880. Additional lead-silver discoveries eight or ten miles farther south on the same vein system brought prospectors to Spring Mountain. Discovery of the Viola mine the next summer preceded another major lead-silver strike on the Little Lost River side of the Towering Lemhi range in September 1882. Located upon a vein that eventually was traced back to Spring Mountain and Gilmore, this bonanza--like the much larger properties at Gilmore--could be worked only on a modest scale until improved transportation offered an opportunity for extensive mining.

Substantial capital investment, essential to develop all these new lodes, came to Spring Mountain in 1882 and to the Viola not long after. A thirty-ton smelter was installed at Spring Mountain in 1882 at a cost of \$135,000. A three day test run late in 1882 led to improvements so that ore could be processed the next year. But until 1888, miners along that part of the Lemhi range had to depend primarily upon smelting facilities eventually available at the Viola.

Colorado technology and capital provided for improved operations at the Viola. After 5,000 to 7,000 tons of lead ore had been hauled out to Kansas City and Omaha (1882-1885), a smelter was constructed at Nicholia to process the ore locally. About \$1,400,000 worth of lead and silver came out of Viola in 1886-1887. British capital was introduced in August of 1886, with 20 percent dividends paid annually at first. Stock in the London Viola company more than doubled in value by the end of the first year. After a 22 percent second year dividend, Viola stock values began to decline. Most of the proceeds of the mine (73 percent) now went to pay operating costs, and efforts to cut mine wages failed after a labor strike. A collapse in lead prices in

1888 made matters worse. Then a fire burned the hoist and shaft timbers. These adversities might have been overcome eventually.

By 1888 a 1,200 foot vein, worked to a depth of a hundred feet, had produced around \$2,500,000. At that point, however, mineral values were cut off by a fault. With no more ore, the company had to give up late in 1889. About a third of the Viola investment had been recovered in dividends, so stockholders who had hoped to continue to realize a 20 percent return each year wound up losing two-thirds of their capital and gaining no profit whatever. This disaster gave the region some bad publicity. The smelter was hauled away and London investors complained bitterly.

Gilmore and Little Lost River mines, which had been shipping a limited amount of ore to the Viola smelter at Nicholia, also were afflicted by the Viola collapse. After the Viola had shut down, Gilmore remained dormant until 1902. Little Lost River, which had provided a few hundred tons of high grade ore to the Viola smelter from 1886-1888, did not resume production until 1906.

Millions of dollars worth of Lemhi ore could not be handled, primarily because of transportation difficulties. Finally in 1902, F. G. Laver of Dubois, Pennsylvania got interested in the Gilmore area. An investor rather than a miner, he noted remarkable similarity between the Lemhi lodes and a highly productive mine in which he had an interest in Tintic, Utah. Acquiring a major Gilmore property for "a trifling sum," he joined some associates from Dubois in developing a paying mine. By 1904 his Gilmore mine yielded 2,000 tons of high grade (40 percent) lead and a fair amount of silver. A slightly higher production followed the next year, but limitations of wagon transportation for an eighty-five mile haul to a rail line at Dubois, Idaho limited the amount of ore that could be processed.

Freighting payments for the ore wagons alone ran \$10 a ton, so low grade ore could not be handled at all. Between 1902 and 1908 Gilmore shipped 325,000 ounces of silver and around 6,720 tons of lead bullion in spite of the transportation problem. In 1906 a large steam traction engine with four ore cars (60 tons capacity) was tried out. On the trip from Dubois to Gilmore, the engine hauled coal, leaving it at refueling stations along the road. Then on the return trip, coal was loaded back onto the steam engine at each of the stops. This imaginative system failed when the four ore cars wore out after a dozen trips. At this point the Pittsburgh mine (Gilmore's largest) suspended shipments and decided to build a railroad. Lack of freight teams cut metal production from the other properties in half the next year. Most of the ore wagons were about worn out, and low prices induced by a national financial panic almost halted production in 1908. A smelter capable of serving a number of smaller mines was erected at Hahn--next to Spring Mountain--in 1909. But that facility ran only seventeen days in 1909 and three weeks in 1910.

Mining at Gilmore finally became practical when the Gilmore and Pittsburgh Railroad solved the freight problem in 1910. A

production that year of 5,472,000 pounds of lead and 115,200 ounces of silver rewarded Pittsburgh investors who had induced the Northern Pacific to finance their rail line. In only twelve months of rail freighting, mine production equaled the total attained in all the previous years. In 1912 the two major Gilmore companies began a joint construction venture for a long tunnel to explore and develop their properties at depth, and the rail line was extended to the portal of their tunnel. This ambitious project resulted in a 6,000 foot tunnel by 1916. Their long tunnel attained a depth of 1,000 feet on their lode and made another ten years of mining practical. A camp of 500 people, Gilmore had relatively stable production until after 1919. Then a post-war financial and price collapse greatly restricted their output until 1924. By that time Gilmore had 20,000 feet of tunnels and shafts, and was ready to resume full scale operation.

Even in mines not favored by rail transportation, high wartime prices allowed profitable operation. Lead-silver mines in the Lemhi range on Little Lost River turned out around \$1,000,000 at a \$100,000 profit even though two million pounds of lead had to be hauled over a forty mile wagon road to a rail connection at Arco. A mill fire set this district back in 1918 prior to the general collapse of lead mining in those parts a year or two later. But in spite of these obstacles, the Little Lost River lead-silver mines reached a yield of more than \$2,000,000.

Until 1929, when a power plant explosion led to suspension of large-scale mining, Gilmore remained Idaho's largest lead-silver mining camp outside of the Coeur d'Alene region. Lead mining could not be resumed during the depression, and Gilmore ended up with a total production of \$11,520,852. The Gilmore and Pittsburgh railway continued to serve Salmon for more than another decade, but highway transportation eventually displaced that relic of mining at Gilmore. One of Idaho's better ghost towns remains there as a reminder of the days when Pittsburgh capital developed a major mining camp in the Lemhi range.