IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

SHEEP MOUNTAIN, GREYHOUND RIDGE, AND SEAFOAM

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While out looking for Indians during his 1879 Sheepeater Campaign, Colonel Reuben F. Bernard noticed an interesting lode prospect on Sheep Mountain, June 8. When Manuel Fontez and some army packers returned that way on August 31, they hauled a number of samples back to Boise. Obtaining good assays from some of his test specimens, Fontez set out with a small prospecting party in the spring of 1880. They found several good leads on Greyhound Ridge, creating enough interest that several hundred miners showed up to prospect there each summer after that. John Early had particular success locating galena with Fontez on Greyhound Ridge the next summer, and Fontez found attractive outcrops on Sheep Mountain in 1882. Within another two or three seasons, about forty-five claims had been recorded in these adjacent mining camps. Jesus Urquides, Boise's most prominent packer who had come out with Fontez and taken up a productive Greyhound claim with John Danskin, spent the summer of 1885 hauling ore out to a smelter at Clayton. Plans to extend a road from Cape Horn to Greyhound Ridge and Sheep Mountain were contemplated as a means of developing isolated prospects retarded by their location remote from transportation in rough country high above the middle fork of the Salmon River.

By 1886, additional discoveries along the Cape Horn-Loon Creek trail a dozen miles southwest of Sheep Mountain had extended even more exciting mining prospects to Seafoam. That summer, a series of scattered new lodes offered considerable hope of major production. A twenty-foot tunnel in the Summit mine at Seafoam exposed a twelve- to fourteen-foot vein with ore running as high as a thousand dollars a ton. Samples there of sulphide and chloride ores had to be smelted at Clayton, where reasonably close facilities made testing convenient. Another Seafoam property had samples processed in the Custer mill with extremely flattering results ranging from one hundred to six hundred ounces of silver a ton. Still another pack train lode went for $325 at Clayton's smelter. Discovery of the Josephus mine at Seafoam in September, 1886, offered still more hope. An "immense body of float," distributed along a lode pattern a thousand feet long and twenty feet wide, substituted for an outcrop. Assays ranged from four hundred to seven hundred ounces of silver a ton. Before silver prices suffered a spectacular collapse in 1888, these properties induced substantial investment and activity.

With still more dramatic lead and silver price declines in 1892 and a national economic panic the next year, Seafoam, Greyhound, and Sheep Mountain failed to prosper. Extensive Salt Lake investment brought more serious development there toward the end of the century. When A. C. Bomar visited there late in 1899, he reported to the Salt Lake Tribune that at the best developed mine at Seafoam:

> We saw over 1000 tons of ore on the various dumps, some running up into the hundreds of ounces in silver and as high as $20 in gold.
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> An open cut is made on the lode twenty feet wide, with the ore assuming better value every foot driven.
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> Another cross-cut tunnel was being driven 800 feet east of this which, when completed, will be 350 feet long and will cut the vein 350 feet deep. At the entrance of this work is a natural millsite and an inexhaustible amount of splendid timber. It is estimated that between these tunnels (800 feet) there will be opened up $5,000,000 to $7,000,000 worth of ore, which with the facilities offered can be worked (mined and concentrated) for $1 per ton. Various open cuts and shafts are made the entire length of the claims (6000 feet), all of which show ore that will be profitable to handle.
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> Four lakes touch the side lines of the group and two small streams cross them, insuring ample water for power and domestic purposes. It is estimated that within 100 feet of the surface of this group there is 1,000,000 tons of ore, worth $20,000,000.

Another Seafoam property had six hundred sacks of high grade ore ready to be packed out as soon as possible in 1900. With assays as high as ten thousand, fifteen thousand, and even nearly twenty-five thousand dollars a ton (but only for small samples), and with other "fabulously rich ores" nearby, Seafoam held great attraction. Rail transportation was needed to ensure all this wealth could be recovered. Even that requirement might have been satisfied. Construction of the Idaho Midland--a Boise line headed for Butte--commenced at Boise on May 8, 1900. Once that line reached Cape Horn, Seafoam no longer would suffer from isolation that retarded mineral development there. Somehow the Idaho Midland never really got started. Extension of rail service from Mackay to Challis might have helped, but that project failed also. A decade later, after the Gilmore and Pittsburgh reached Salmon, an expansion of that rail system up Salmon River was contemplated.

Extensive prospecting directly west of Greyhound Ridge and Seafoam, incidental to the Thunder Mountain gold rush of 1902, broadened that area's interesting lode possibilities. J. W. Speeks, who had discovered a middle fork lode just below Soldier Creek in 1894, shoveled snow from trails to Thunder Mountain in 1902 in order to return there before someone else could take over his prospect. He located four promising veins on his second attempt. None became productive in that rough country, although one twenty-foot ledge carried assays of twenty dollars a ton in gold, augmented with twelve ounces of silver. Later that summer, W. B. Patten, who had operated mines in Colorado, Utah, Idaho, and Montana, spent ten weeks exploring a lode on Indian Creek. When he returned to Boise, October 5, with almost fifty pounds of a variety of mineral samples including wire gold, he set off still more excitement. His efforts to introduce Denver and Pueblo capital failed to produce important Indian Creek mines, and only some very nominal returns came from middle fork placer efforts below Greyhound Ridge and Seafoam.

Major investment returned to this area in 1926 when the Hecla (a major Coeur d'Alene corporation) acquired mines at Sheep Mountain and Seafoam. Seventy miners at Josephus Lake deepened a shaft there to 250 feet before work was suspended. More development work resumed a year later. A sawmill, a 230-horsepower hydroelectric plant (with a four-and-a-half mile power line), a 350-cubic-foot compressor, 3,400 feet of flume, six houses and two large bunkhouses, and a fifty-ton mill were constructed. Yet major transportation improvements did not arise from this activity, so Seafoam remained isolated.

Aside from severe transportation difficulties, recovery problems hampered development of Seafoam's great potential as a mineral empire. Even though limited production came from additional prospects on Pistol Creek ridge west across the middle fork of the Salmon from Greyhound Ridge, that area disappointed a substantial group of enthusiastic investors. A small smelter finally was installed on Greyhound Ridge, but less than $400,000 out of an anticipated $20,000,000 came out of Seafoam, Sheep Mountain, Greyhound Ridge, and Pistol Creek Ridge. Out of sad experience there, mining engineers learned to distrust rich lead veins in granite formations.