

# IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## REFERENCE SERIES

### SNAKE RIVER PLACERS

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Snake River gold mining preceded some more celebrated discoveries at Pierce in 1860 and in Boise Basin in 1862 by a number of years, but was conducted on such a modest scale as to attract almost no attention whatever. As an indirect consequence of the Ward massacre of 1854, placer mining at Fort Boise (located adjacent to the junction of Boise River with the Snake River) had provided recreation for men of the military force under Major Granville O. Haller sent in the spring of 1855 in reprisal against the Boise Shoshoni Indians. While camped at the fort, soldiers noticed interesting placer ground in the immediate vicinity. (A generation later a dredge operated on the Idaho side of the river right next to the fort site.) In the six weeks they were there, these men mined a pretty display of gold. But the deposit they were working on certainly was not commercial by their methods, and no one followed up their limited discovery. This episode passed unnoticed until John H. Scranton, who had seen the product of the early Fort Boise placers, remembered the find a few years later and recorded it in Lewiston's Golden Age (for which he was editor) after the rush to the Boise mines got under way in 1862 and had attracted attention to the locality.

Interest in the possibility of mining on the Snake River revived with the Boise Basin excitement, and an unfortunate rush of some two thousand miners to the upper Snake late in the summer of 1863 led to a great disappointment that discouraged prospecting of the river. An account of prospecting problems appeared in the Boise News (Idaho City), October 20:

That there are good mines on the head waters of Snake, is altogether likely. Yet we can see no positive evidence that any thing has been struck to warrant the mighty rush of people that are now on their way pursuing--as far as their own knowledge of the county, or the existence of any mines in that direction--a phantom, a mere myth. If it should turn out that there are good placer diggings out there, it will all be well enough, and their trip with its hardships and privations will not have been in vain, but if--as is most apt to be the case--it should prove otherwise, there will be no such thing as estimating the amount of suffering that will be undergone by those of small means and no preparation for Winter. We have been informed by a party who has returned from a fruitless search in that country, that those who have reached the

Blackfoot fork of Snake are utterly confused and have no other goldometer to guide them than horse tracks, every one of which is taken as a sure indication of the existence of gold, and that the Snake river mines are in the direction to which they point, but after following them until they run out or turn back, they have thus far had to retrace their steps and seek similar indications in other directions. Some have abandoned the hunt and gone in quest of fortune in the Stinking water region, while others persist in a determination to find it on the Snake. That gold does exist there we have no doubt and that it is coarse and heavy, is almost equally certain; at any rate we have been shown some very large pieces and assured that they came from the base of the Wind river mountains, and have no reason to dispute the fact. The mines may be of that character and be at the same time extensive and good, yet in our mining experience, we have observed that coarse gold is not always the best to mine for--it is apt to be spotted, and a few may make a fortune while the masses almost starve.

Yet some Snake River placers, like a number of Salmon River bars, employed limited parties of miners near Lewiston far to the north in 1863 and 1864. Efforts to expand Snake River operations farther upstream continued also. On July 15, 1870, a correspondent informed the Daily Evening Bulletin (San Francisco):

In the summer of 1864, a well-appointed company left Boise to prospect the upper Snake and its tributaries; but, meeting with resistance from the Indians, they were obliged to abandon this purpose, having only ascertained that there was at least a show of gold all along the streams in that region. Ever since these attempts have been annually renewed, only to end for the first two or three years in similar results.

Aside from the difficulty in finding bars rich enough to return a profit, Indian resistance continued to discourage efforts to search the Snake until General George Crook managed to bring the Snake war to a halt June 30, 1868. Then in 1869, a severe regional water shortage left a host of unemployed miners who found prospecting along the Snake less expensive than paying room rent in Boise or in Idaho City. Many who did not go to Loon Creek examined many Idaho locations. The Snake River offered a superior opportunity that season because low water levels facilitated channel prospecting which could not be undertaken during a normal runoff.

The discovery of workable placers on the Snake River in the

neighborhood of Shoshone Falls resulted from careful and systematic prospecting by an old associate of E. D. Pierce--a man named Jamison. "Being satisfied that gold existed on Snake River," in the summer of 1869, Jamison started "up its banks from near its mouth on a general prospecting tour, but did not find gold in sufficient quantity to work until he reached the vicinity of the three islands on the Bruneau River." He did not regard anything as really profitable until he got to Shoshone Falls. There he had a good base for operation on a major new road. Construction of the Central Pacific railroad had led John Hailey to commence a stage line over a new route from Boise to Kelton in June 1869, and his coaches crossed the Snake River at Clark's Ferry near these new Shoshone Falls placers.

For a time, Jamison's company worked in a rich eddy about three hundred yards above Shoshone Falls, where it was possible to make \$40 a day for awhile. Then they moved six miles below the falls to a point near the mouth of Rock Creek, where they continued to work early in the spring of 1870. By February, reports of Jamison's discoveries led quite a few prominent prospectors to look at the Snake River; they found, though, that there was not much to get excited about. Three men were making \$8 a day at Shoshone Falls with a rocker, if they were not exaggerating. Even by mid-March, there were altogether only four companies (a total of twelve miners) with five rockers making average wages in the entire Snake River placer operations. Some of those who went out to examine the new mines decided that the main reward for their trip to Clark's Ferry was the spectacular view they got of Shoshone Falls, which they regarded honestly as making the whole effort worthwhile. The recovery of Snake River fine gold scarcely had begun at all in the discovery year of 1869, but in 1870, new placers were found in many stretches of the Snake.

By 1870 although the majority of Idaho miners were Chinese, they did not meet a good reception near Shoshone Falls. A white miners' convention on May 18, 1870, resolved to exclude Orientals from their camp. As in Boise Basin by 1870, whenever Chinese miners invaded a district, placers remaining there were already regarded as too low grade to interest whites. Chinese miners willingly worked these poorer claims, primarily because they earned far more than they would have made in China. Even though they were usually denied by the white mining districts an opportunity to profit from any of the better mines in the West, the Chinese planned to retire to their homeland with enough wealth to improve their lot substantially. By 1873 the Oriental miners got a public welcome to return, for the economic reason that the white miners could find no one else who would buy these inferior claims.

As in 1869, the Snake River ran at a low level in 1870. In normal years, high water made prospecting difficult or impossible until the middle of August. So in 1870, when low water again

forced large numbers of miners to leave their regular jobs, the Snake could be examined again. On July 15, a San Francisco Bulletin correspondent reported that extensive prospecting had shown considerable promise:

Through these persistent [prospecting] efforts, prosecuted both from the east and the west, the main stream has been traced and examined quite to its source, in the Wind River Mountains, while most of the upper tributaries have also been pretty effectually explored. On nearly all the bars, both on the two principal forks, as well as the confluents, gold has been found--always excessively fine and generally only in limited quantities--nowhere in very great quantities.

In the Shoshone Falls area, only a few elevated bars could be prospected or worked successively during high waters. So facilities were limited. A camp at Dry Creek (just below Caldron Linn near later Murtaugh) had four stores, a restaurant, and about six residential tents. Shoshone Falls had a store. At Twin Falls (on the river above Shoshone Falls), "Shoshone City, the largest hamlet on the river, consists of four canvas shanties and a tent, all used as trading posts."

In the spring of 1870, enough prospectors had swarmed up and down the Snake River to locate workable placer ground in many scattered places. Aside from Shoshone Falls, miners found enough gold to justify permanent camps near J. Matt Taylor's bridge (at the site of Idaho Falls) as well as around Salmon Falls in Hagerman Valley. Other marginal locations were examined also. On July 25 a Boise miner reported a fairly typical situation:

I will now endeavor to tell you what I have seen and know about Snake river. First, for rattlesnakes, scorpions, mosquitos, gnats, sage brush and hot sand, it is the best country I have ever seen; but as for gold and a mining country, I cannot say as much, although there is scarcely a place on the river that a man cannot get a prospect, but not in sufficient quantity to pay; the gold is so fine and light that a miner from other countries, is very easily deceived here. We located a claim, after prospecting about twenty miles of the river, on a piece of ground that we thought would pay \$8 per day to the hand but after working it we find it will pay only \$3 per day, and this is liable to chop on us any time. There are hundreds of men running both up and down the river that cannot find a place to make grub. They say they don't know what to do or where to go. Some say here that rich mines have been found in the Wind River mountains:

others say they have prospected there for the last two years and found nothing.

Some prospectors had better luck. Ralf Bledsoe noted on August 14 that his rocker yield had reached \$167 (or \$6,400 or so in 1980 prices) in one week and \$114 the next. In 1870 prices his return would have set off a major gold rush if more claims of that caliber could be found. Enough miners had come to the Snake that a stage line from Corinne, Utah, began regular service in the summer of 1870 at a modest rate of \$15 for a 180-mile trip to the mines.

By 1878 and 1879, when interest revived on the Snake River, new districts below Raft River--at Cold Springs, at Reynolds Creek and Munday's ferry on the Boise-Owyhee road, at Goose Creek (near later Burley)--joined Eagle Rock (renamed Idaho Falls a little more than a decade later), Salmon Falls, and towns along the later Hansen bridge-Shoshone Falls segment as active mining camps. Early in the spring of 1879, a new mining district included the course of the Snake from Raft River to Goose Creek.

Another major area at Bonanza Bar, west of American Falls, gained prominence then. By 1882, Boise Valley's New York canal was projected to bring a large volume of water to Snake River placers near the site of Fort Boise, scene of the original Snake River gold discoveries in 1855. When finally constructed, this canal served only for Boise Valley irrigation. Even then, interest in fine gold had led to the design of a large canal system that since 1900 has provided water for most of the Boise project.

By 1880, careful observation of Snake River fine gold had identified very small particles, so small that five hundred had to be collected to obtain enough gold to equal one cent. Yet at that time, much of the even finer gold--for which three thousand to four thousand particles had to be gathered to recover a penny's worth--could not be recognized at all. Considering that a \$5 gold piece was only about the size of a copper penny, those particles had become very fine indeed.

Although perfectly enormous possibilities for the production of Snake River fine gold seemed to exist, if a suitable recovery process could be developed, the whole proposition was entirely too much like salvaging incredible amounts of gold from the world's oceans. Serious efforts were devoted during the next several decades toward finding an economical recovery process for Snake River fine gold.

Unfortunately for the miners, no one ever seemed to be able to solve the problem entirely, although in various stretches of the river, mining operations continued for many years. Altogether, more than 66,000 ounces of fine gold came from the Snake.

**(This information has not been edited.)**

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